



Peggy Peattie/Press-Telegram

Best friends across cultural lines: From left, Pini Nay, Brion Johnson and Sony Sot pal around together at lunch and recess breaks. Sometimes they get together outside of school to do

homework together, and they play on weekends with one another. All are students from Marge Hargrove's fourth-grade class at Willard Elementary School in Long Beach.

CAMBODIANS
IN LONG BEACH

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Third of six parts

Prejudice, fear greeted city's newest ethnic group

Slowly, though, racism breaks down

By Susan Pack

Staff writer

They're dour and unappreciative mental patients, she says, and they live off our tax dollars.

She can't understand why the city has welcomed a people "who don't speak our language, who tie up our legal system with their multitudinous dialects and who own every liquor store and mom-and-pop market in Long Beach."

Christine Jones, who expressed her opinion in a letter to the editor, is not the only Long Beach resident who resents the city's 40,000 Cambodians. A recent Press-Telegram survey found that almost one-third of the refugees have experienced racism in Long Beach, ranging from insults to beatings.

"Go back to your own country," is a

common refrain.

But racial barriers are breaking down in elementary schools, and racist incidents appear to be declining as old-timers get to know their new neighbors. The Press-Telegram survey found that 38 percent of the 206 Cambodian respondents have close American friends.

"Overall, the community has accepted the newcomers quite favorably," says Vora Huy Kanthoul, associate director of United Cambodian Community Inc., a social service agency.

It has taken time. When Cambodian refugees began moving into affordable housing in the predominantly black central district about 10 years ago, they received an uneasy welcome, acknowledges Councilman Clarence Smith, who represents the area.

CAMBODIANS IN LONG BEACH



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Some dress "differently," many have accents or speak English with difficulty, and a large number have faced taunts, threats and other forms of prejudice — not just the childhood teasing any student encounters in the schoolyard while growing up, but hate-filled, vicious, verbal abuse. Yet some Cambodians,

such as Linn Sim, Sokhom Sek behind her, and Sarin Roeum, at right, can mingle and play with others regardless of race. A small number are highly active in school programs. With the passage of time and greater involvement, some prejudices are being overcome or forgotten.

COMING UP

Sunday



The 40,000 Cambodians who have arrived in Long Beach in the past 10 years seek an island of safety and success in their new homeland while they cope with the ugly scars from their past. For many, it is a story of raw survival as they try to overcome language and cultural hurdles. For the younger ones, though, America offers opportunities they cherish, and they are exerting the will to persevere.

Monday



The climb up the ladder of success often has been rough for many of the Cambodians in Long Beach. Some, like the restaurant and market owners, have moved up quicker. Many others, however, who are economically paralyzed by lack of language and job skills, rely on public aid for their livelihood.

Today



Nearly a third of Long Beach Cambodians recently surveyed said they have been the victims of insults or physical

Tolerance tested in schools, shops

“Almost every student in our sample reported the first school year included incidents of being called names, pushed or spat upon, deliberately tricked, teased and laughed at because of their race, language difficulties, accent or foreign dress.”

—California Tomorrow study

FROM/A1

Longtime residents felt “thrust upon,” he says, fearful of “folks from other parts of the world coming over and taking over.

“They came in with entrepreneurial experience and started buying businesses and not hiring from the Afro-American community,” he says.

In an effort to eliminate prejudice on both sides, Smith began holding an annual multicultural conference, giving the refugees a chance to respond to community concerns. For example, Cambodian market owners said they hired their own people because their employees not only had to speak the language, but they also had to be familiar with native foods.

“You’ve first got to know the other person’s problem,” Smith says. “Your prejudice then subsides.”

Despite an apparent improvement in race relations, 31 percent of the Cambodians responding to the Press-Telegram survey last summer say they have been victims of racially motivated insults or physical attacks.

Some of the prejudice is subtle.

“Some people think I’m stupid,” says one 56-year-old man. “I don’t think I am stupid at all. I am very poor, so most people have no respect for me.”

Other refugees have been the victims of violent acts.

“I have a major problem with black people,” says another 56-year-old man. “I could not understand what they said to me, but they were not happy to see me walk down the street to the market. They pushed me against the wall, and they took all my money.”

A 47-year-old woman says she was pushed off the sidewalk; a 25-year-old man says he was beaten by three men while he was on his way to adult school.

In the past, some Long Beach City College students showed up for class bloody, says James Martois, director of Refugee Assistance Programs. And he says many refugees remain “deathly afraid of black people.”

But he is unaware of any assaults during the past two years, and he says

Cambodians may fear blacks simply because they’d never seen a black person before they arrived in the United States.

“It’s something they’re not exposed to,” he says.

Such fears are not limited to Cambodians. A white woman recently asked Martois if it was safe to walk across a campus filled with Cambodian students.

While elementary schoolchildren of all races mingle on some Long Beach playgrounds, racial hostility and violence are an “integral part of the social fabric on most school campuses,” according to a recent statewide study on immigrant school children.

“Almost every student in our sample reported the first school year included incidents of being called names, pushed or spat upon, deliberately tricked, teased and laughed at because of their race, language difficulties, accent or foreign dress,” said the study prepared by California Tomorrow, which analyzes social trends.

The report quotes a 10th-grade Cambodian boy who immigrated at the age of 12.

“The Americans tell us to go back to our own country,” he says. “I say we don’t have a country to go back to. I wish I was born here and nobody would fight me and beat me up.

“They don’t understand. I want to tell them if they had tried to cross the river and were afraid of being caught and killed and lost their sisters, they might feel like me; they might look like me, and they, too, might find themselves in a new country.”

On Long Beach high school campuses, some Cambodian students mingle easily with their American counterparts, while others remain isolated. Some of them have joined Cambodian gangs.

“It’s a small percentage, but that small percentage seems to be very active,” says Joe Pistoia, a school district administrative assistant.

In fact, a turf war between Cambo-

dian and Latino gangs resulted in shots being fired in Recreation Park near Wilson High School several months ago — and the ongoing dispute is believed to be responsible for the death of at least one gang member.

Yet, Asian gangs tend to prey on their own, and there is racism within the Asian community as well. For example, there is a subtle prejudice between the lighter-skinned Chinese-Cambodians, who traditionally have been the city people, and the darker-skinned “pure” Cambodians, known as the country people.

More prevalent is the clash between Cambodians and Vietnamese.

“Throughout history, there has been hostility between Vietnamese and Cambodians,” says Morodak Meas, a 17-year-old Poly High honor student. “My father wants us to marry Cambodians. He would allow us to marry an American, someone like a senator, maybe. But he would kill us if we married a Vietnamese.

“It’s hard for me to understand. Right now, my best friend is Vietnamese. I have had friends of all colors all along — whites, blacks, Hispanics. I want to go to Europe this summer with my Vietnamese friend, and my father said no. I think that’s ridiculous. If she can be my friend at home, why not in Europe?”

The historical animosity between Cambodians and Vietnamese remains below the surface of Anaheim Street, where the two groups operate stores side by side.

“We are business,” says Pana Khou, manager of Grand Lake Supermarket. “When we talk about business, we cannot think about that.”

And some business people try not to think about the occasional taunt they receive from customers.

“They say go back to your country,” says Auv Phor, 49-year-old owner of Seventh Street Donut and Yogurt Shop. “Those people, they don’t have any education. You just don’t pay attention to any kind of business like that. They have problem themselves.”



insults or physical attacks, manifestations of racism. But relations appear to be improving, as refugees make new friends and immerse themselves in the community, and as understanding replaces animosity.

Wednesday



For years, struggling Cambodian families have lived in small, overcrowded apartments throughout central Long Beach. But now, as many of these immigrants earn financial success, they are moving into more spacious residences in other neighborhoods beyond downtown.

Thursday



The Long Beach Unified School District, once geared for American-born children, now faces the challenge of educating thousands of Cambodian children, many of whom begin school unable to speak English at all. While many refugee students excel, others are caught between clashing cultures. Whether the system will serve them is an open question.

Friday



Many Long Beach Cambodians remain prisoners of their past, victims of psychological torture so severe that they have come to be known as The Lost Generation. Yet, most have created a collective nest imbued with religion and traditions, and an interest in their new land. Their future depends now on how well they move from the anguish of isolation to self-sufficient assimilation.

“You’ve first got to know the other person’s problem. Your prejudice then subsides.”

—Clarence Smith
L.B. City Council member

