



Cristina Salvador/Press-Telegram

Sary Chhean, left, and her sister, Sarom, stop outside Hep Market on East Anaheim Street after shopping with their mother. Long Beach's Cambodian community has transformed what was once a bleak slum along Anaheim Street into an urban frontier

known as Little Phnom Penh. Anaheim Street's success has inspired talk from such people as Gary Larsen, chairman of the Long Beach International Bank, of building an upscale Asian-Pacific commercial-retail center in Long Beach.

CAMBODIANS
IN LONG BEACH

BEYOND
THE
KILLING
FIELDS

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Last of six parts

Leaving anguish behind, refugees look to the future

Cambodians guided by lesson in humanity

By Janet Wiscombe

Staff writer

The blue nylon backpack propped up against a wall holds the contents of the future.

It contains snarls of rusted barbed-wire, corroded and bent knives and forks and spoons, a plastic bag of human ashes.

Mel Mermelstein recently unearthed the sacred items at Auschwitz for display in his museum, a moving personal sanctum located in a small warehouse on the property of the lumber company he owns in Huntington Beach. In the 45 years since his liberation from a Nazi death camp, the 63-year-old Long Beach resident and civic leader has made 20 pilgrimages back to the scenes of the Holo-

caust in Eastern Europe.

"That's how I have survived," he says. "To go on living, I have no choice. When I have no tears left, when my tears dry, when I feel no longer the meaning of what it feels to suffer, I go back to Auschwitz."

Survivors of monstrous acts inflicted by other human beings have much to tell the world about where humanity has been and where it's headed, Mermelstein says. "The study of the Holocaust is the study of mankind."

The warm, kindhearted grandfather with the piercing blue eyes and the glow of health is particularly touched by the 40,000 Cambodians who have settled in

CAMBODIANS IN LONG BEACH



“It would stand to reason that survivors of horrors would want to get even ... to become killers themselves rather than caring, loving human beings. (But) injustice of any sort breaks our hearts.”

—Mel Mermelstein



Cristy Peov, 3, left, and her 4-year-old sister, Sokoeum, admire a display of dolls at a swap meet. The girls' parents bought only clothing for their five children. The Peov family shares a small one-bedroom apartment with another

family of five. Father Oeun Peov has been unable to work because of injuries suffered when he stepped on a land mine trying to escape from Cambodia. Peov can only work or sit still for one hour at a time, making it difficult to find a job.

Cristina Salvador/Press-Telegram

Cambodians push on toward a bright future

FROM/A1

Long Beach in the past decade. Many are survivors of the killing fields, men and women and children who have witnessed and experienced colossal brutality and staggering loss.

Their past experiences, Mermelstein predicts, will help define the future of the community in which they — and we all — now live.

"For survivors, life doesn't go on as smoothly as some people may think," he points out. "None of us is at peace. We're highly sensitive. We're always touched by those who are cold or hungry or fearful.

"It would stand to reason that survivors of horrors would want to get even, to emulate the oppressor, to become killers themselves rather than caring, loving human beings. What is remarkable is that 99.99 percent of the Cambodians and Jews who survived massacres are generous and fair. Injustice of any sort breaks our hearts.

"The Cambodians are a tremendous asset to Long Beach and to America."

Becoming mainstream

In the past decade, Long Beach has become known far and wide as the "Capital of Cambodian America." More than half of the 40,000 refugees who have settled here have come from other parts of the United States to build a future with those who speak the same language, eat the same food, share the anguish of yesterday and the fiercely determined dream of creating a better world for their children.

Though no one knows what the future holds for Long Beach and the 10 percent of its population that is Cambodian, there are historical precedents and logical trends that offer clues.

One thing is certain: the ethnic shifts in the Long Beach area are irrevocably changing not only the face but the heart and soul of this city and of Southern California elsewhere. By the turn of the century, for example, close to a third of the population in the Los Angeles area will be foreign-born. Next year, 40 percent will be Latino or Asian by birth or ancestry.

Snuggled along the stretch of East Anaheim Street now known as Little Phnom Penh, Cambodians are transforming what was once a bleak slum into a thriving, pulsating urban frontier.

For now, their world is largely isolated from the mainstream. But like the waves of earlier immigrants from Europe who settled on the East Coast, younger generations are learning the Pledge of Allegiance and becoming American.

Traditionally, incoming groups of immigrants and refugees have longed to return home, yet seldom did. A survey conducted by the Press-Telegram earlier this year found that 39 percent of the Cambodians in Long Beach wish to return home, with 25 percent of this

group stipulating "if there is peace," or, "if the country is free."

Son Sann, the 78-year-old president of the non-Communist Khmer People's National Liberation Front, one of four political factions of the troubled nation, was in Long Beach last month to urge students to return to the homeland.

"We are a small people," he said of Cambodia, a country which lost about a quarter of its 7 million citizens during the Communist Khmer Rouge reign of terror from 1975-79. "We need thousands of trained people in the administration so we can resist communism."

But at a time when the country teeters on the brink of civil war, no one is predicting an exodus back to Cambodia soon — if ever.

Erasing the pain

For many of those who wish to return, the transition from a rice growing culture into a complex technological society has been next to impossible. Most arrived from the bamboo border camps of Thailand with broken hearts.

"Right now, they are very frightened," says Dr. Bernard Teitel, a Long Beach psychiatrist who has treated hundreds of Cambodians in the past decade. "Time doesn't heal all wounds, but it does ameliorate pain.

"In spite of traumatic memories, the Cambodians are very industrious," he adds. "Their children are doing well in school. In two generations, they will become integrated."

Before coming to the United States, 31 percent of the Cambodians now living in Long Beach report they had been physically assaulted; 91 percent experienced a serious shortage of food. Almost all lost family members.

They arrived with nightmares, but few skills and little English. Some, particularly members of the older generation, haven't survived. They remain prisoners of their past, victims of psychological torture so severe they have come to be known as The Lost Generation.

Yet, most have joined hands and resources to create a collective nest imbued with religious protections and centuries-old traditions, and an increasing interest and awareness of their new land.

"After we escaped, I thought, 'That's it for Cambodia,'" says Terri Kontheary Nong, a 21-year-old student at California State University/Long Beach. "But in Long Beach, I eat Cambodian food and go to the temple at the New Year. It's not like Cambodia, but I feel like I'm somewhere in Asia."

Se Muoy Bou, 43, a former physician in Cambodia, was brutally tortured by Khmer Rouge revolutionaries. Like Mermelstein, he struggles to make sense of the obscenely senseless. "Sin cannot be erased by sin," he declares.



A woman passes by worshipers to serve tea to the Buddhist monks at her home. Members of the refugee community have donated \$1.1 million to establish the Khemara

Buddhikaram Temple staffed with saffron-robed monks out of what was once a union hall on West Willow Street in Long Beach.

Still, for all of the anguish, he's proud of his children's outstanding accomplishments in school and his own ability to learn English and become self-sufficient.

"I don't want to be fed by others," he says flatly.

Ethnic shift in Long Beach

Although many have left Long Beach for such places as Stockton and Fresno, where rents are cheaper, and the wave of new arrivals has trickled down from a peak of more than 10,000 refugees in 1981 to only 331 this year, estimates indicate the Cambodian community will continue to grow steadily in the next decade.

"The young will stay in Long Beach, but will want to move to better neighborhoods," says Chanthan Chea, coordinator for the Southeast Asian Genetics program at the University of California at Irvine and chairman of the United Cambodian Students of America.

"Cambodians brag about their town when they are with Cambodians



Vuth Peov, 9, left, was born in a refugee camp in Thailand and immigrated with his parents to the United States, where he now lives in a crowded apartment complex with other Cambodian families. With Vuth is his friend, Sothorn Kok, 6, who also lives in the building.

CAMBODIANS IN LONG BEACH

“The Cambodians want desperately to become a part of the community, but they aren't finding a hospitable environment. They feel isolated. They are waiting for someone to say 'Welcome.'”

—Marc Wilder



Shopping at swap meets helps keep many Cambodian families within their budget. At center, Keng Oun, 32, inspects some clothes as her husband, Oeun Peov, 35,

Cristina Salvador/Press-Telegram
kneels to do the same. Wanting in on the fun is their child, Sokoeum Peov, 4, and, at left, a neighbor compares goods as well.

L.B. Cambodians religious affiliations

| | |
|------------------------|-----|
| Buddhist | 72% |
| Catholic | 2% |
| Other Christian | 10% |
| Buddhist and Christian | 7% |
| Other | 1% |
| No religion | 8% |

If Buddhist:

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-----|
| How often do you go to temple: | |
| Once a week | 8% |
| Once a month | 14% |
| Few times a year | 64% |
| Once a year | 5% |
| Hardly ever | 6% |
| Never | 3% |

If Christian:

How often do you go to church?

| | |
|------------------|-----|
| Once a week | 71% |
| Once a month | 9% |
| Few times a year | 9% |
| Once a year | 3% |
| Hardly ever | 9% |
| Never | - |

The statistics in these charts represent the adult population of Cambodian refugees in Long Beach. They are based on a random sample of 206 individuals who were interviewed by the Press-Telegram in 92 households.

The percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding off of the figures.

Press-Telegram



Peggy Peattie/Press-Telegram

Buddhist worshippers chant a Sanskrit text similar to the Bible's Ten Commandments, including such passages as "Thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, and honor thy mother and father." In the Buddhist religion, the mother and father are honored above all else.

Refugees keep hope alive as they push toward the future

FROM/A9

from places like Texas and Massachusetts. They're proud to say they are part of the largest population of Cambodians in America."

In 1978, urban planner and former City Councilman Marc Wilder predicted that 39 percent of the population of Long Beach would be comprised of minorities in 10 years.

City officials expressed utter disbelief. Wilder's projections proved right on.

Next year, over 43 percent of the city's population will be Latino, black or Asian. By the year 2010 "minorities" will make up an absolute majority.

"The family builders in Long Beach are Cambodian, Hispanic and black," Wilder says. "Sixty-three percent of all the children under 18 in the city live in the dense, poor areas around Poly High School or on the west side of town. Seventy percent of the city's schoolchildren are minorities.

"There is a significant decrease in the white population; a significant increase in the minority population," he continues. "In 20 years, Long Beach will be home to a whole different set of people, a whole different set of voters with no history of this place."

Wilder, an adviser to the Cambodian Business Association, believes new institutions will evolve to meet the demands of the vastly changing population. "The Cambodians and other minorities have nothing but positive things to bring to us," he says. "But we will need more depth in our

political infrastructure. Right now we have no community. There is a Berlin Wall at Redondo Avenue. The East and West sides of town aren't communicating.

"The challenge the community has to face is this: Are we going to assimilate or isolate the majority of the population on the west side of town?"

"The Cambodians want desperately to become a part of the community, but they aren't finding a hospitable environment," Wilder adds. "They feel isolated. They are waiting for someone to say, 'Welcome.'"

A positive force

Yen Do, editor of Nguoi Viet, a Vietnamese newspaper in Little Saigon, arrived in Westminster 11 years ago. At that time, there were only six struggling Vietnamese-owned businesses. Now there are 15,000, and the refugee population has swelled to about 140,000.

Citing the prospering Asian enclave centered on Bolsa Avenue as an example, Do strongly believes immigration brings more positives than negatives.

"Most of the Cambodian refugees are survivors," he says. "They are highly motivated. They are a very good element.

"Long Beach needs new manpower and manual jobs for the Cambodian people. That will attract investors and help the city become part of the Pacific Rim era."

Though Little Saigon is no Chinatown or Little Tokyo, the Bridgecreek

Traumatic past

Cambodian experiences of adult refugees*

| | |
|--|-----|
| 1. Complete loss of personal property | 98% |
| 2. A feeling one's life was in danger | 93% |
| 3. Serious food shortage | 91% |
| 4. Change in residence because of proximity to battle area | 81% |
| 5. Family member killed in Cambodia | 89% |
| 6. Relative who disappeared | 87% |
| 7. Friend killed in Cambodia | 85% |
| 8. Friends who disappeared | 84% |
| 9. Assaulted | 31% |
| 10. Injured while leaving Cambodia | 19% |
| 11. Friend imprisoned for political reasons | 25% |
| 12. Family member imprisoned for political reasons | 22% |
| 13. Imprisonment for political reasons | 14% |

*The statistics in these charts represent the adult population of Cambodian refugees in Long Beach. They are based on a random sample of 206 individuals who were interviewed by the Press-Telegram in 92 households.

SOURCE: Press-Telegram Survey

Press-Telegram

Going home

Long Beach Cambodians who would return to their homeland

| Yes, would return | | | | |
|-------------------|------------|------------|------------|-------|
| 18-24 yrs. | 25-34 yrs. | 35-49 yrs. | 50 & older | Total |
| 24% | 32% | 41% | 59% | 39% |

Conditions for return

| | |
|------------------------------|-----|
| Peace; no war in Cambodia | 31% |
| Free Cambodia, no communists | 34% |
| To see family, friends | 6% |
| No response | 29% |

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Press-Telegram

Group Inc., owners of the area, are enthusiastic about its future, and say about a quarter of the visitors now are not Asian.

Gary Larsen, Bridgecreek president and chairman of Long Beach

Seeking citizenship

Long Beach Cambodians who are, or want to be, U.S. citizens

| | 18-24 yrs. | 25-34 yrs. | 35-49 yrs. | 50 & older | Total |
|-------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-------|
| U.S. citizen | 28% | 19% | 13% | 11% | 18% |
| Have applied | 8% | 11% | 12% | 11% | 10% |
| Plan to apply | 57% | 43% | 28% | 16% | 35% |
| No plans to apply | 4% | 19% | 38% | 50% | 28% |
| Other | 4% | 8% | 10% | 11% | 8% |

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Press-Telegram

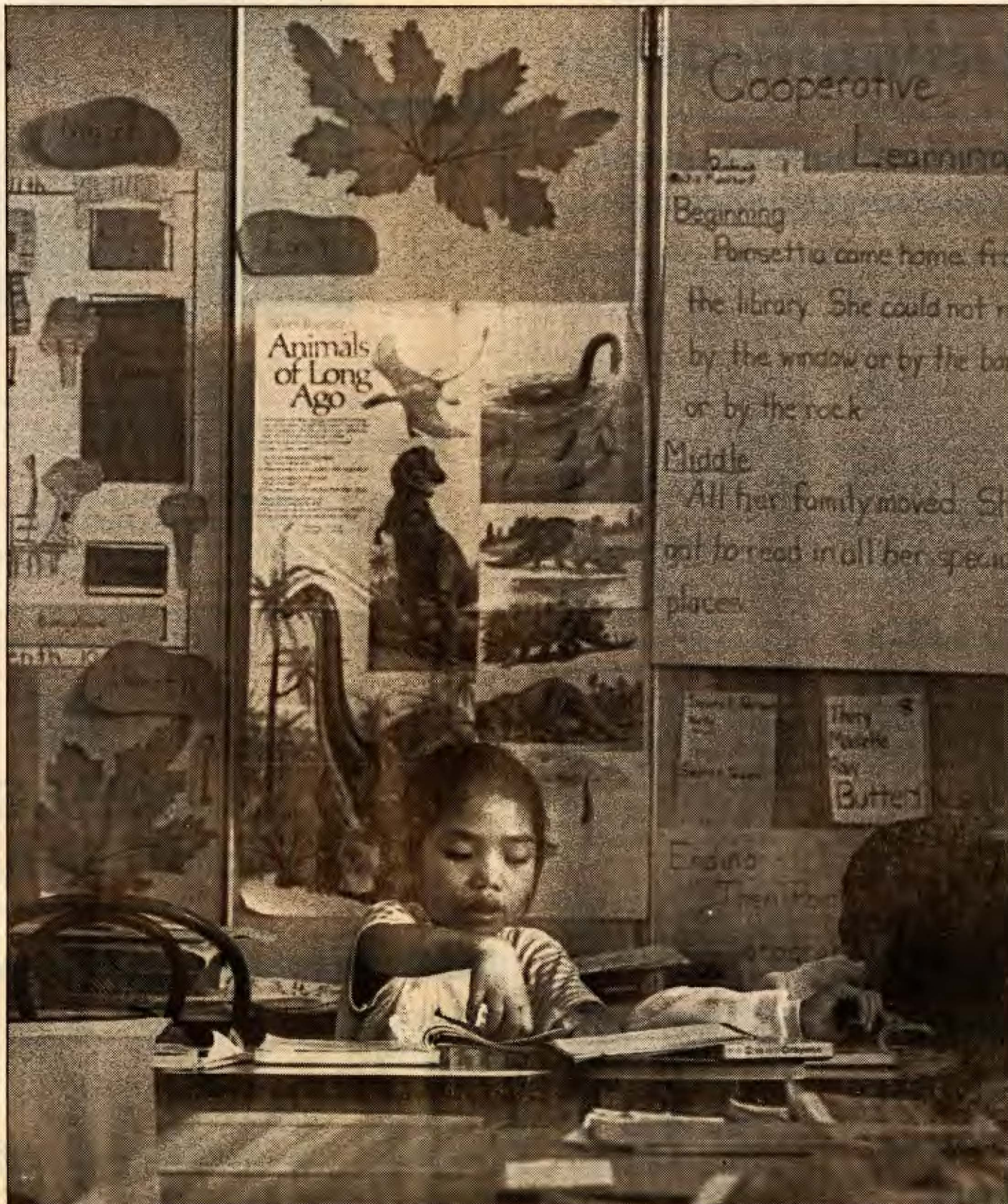
International City Bank, says he'd like to build an upscale Asian-Pacific commercial-retail center in Long Beach.

"We think Long Beach is probably one

CONTINUED/A11, Col. 1

“ They are about a graceful attempt to acknowledge and respect the unknown ... They are about friendship. They are about value BEFORE profit. ”

—Peter Sellars,
director of
Los Angeles Festival



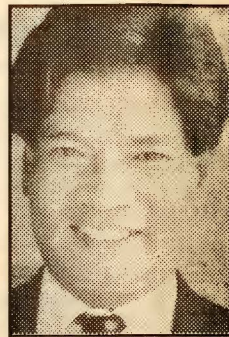
Peggy Peattie/Press-Telegram

Solira Tiev, 7, studies in her second-grade reading class Long Beach Unified School District pooled its resources to at Willard Elementary School in Long Beach. At Willard, hire Khmer-speaking teachers' aides. Khmer is the native nearly half the school's enrollment is Cambodian, so the language of Cambodian.

Survivors of a tragic experience carry on



Soth Polin
Age: 44
Arrived in U.S.: 1978
Occupation: Writer for "Serey Pheap"



Than Pok
Age: 46
Arrived in U.S.: 1975
Occupation: Executive director of United Cambodian Community Inc.



Nil Hul
Age: 60
Arrived in U.S.: 1975
Occupation: Executive director of Cambodian Association of America



Vora Huy
Age: 43
Arrived in U.S.: 1975
Occupation: One of the United Cambodian Community, Inc. founders and president of the Cambodian Business Association



Blending tradition, new ways, refugees begin to mainstream

FROM/A10
of the best, if not the single best, development opportunities in California."

Not a political force

Despite fears that newcomers will usurp the homes and jobs of natives and leave the community with a larger and poorer underclass, there are indications that this pessimism is unfounded. As Do points out, immigrants tend to take low-wage, low-benefit jobs in manufacturing and service industries — positions natives don't want.

Still, for every success, there are refugees who are trapped at the bottom of society with little hope of entering the mainstream. To close the growing gap between the haves and have-nots, leaders in the Cambodian community such as Vora Huy Kanthoul strongly urge government and industry to intervene by providing better educational and occupational opportunities to avert the widening chasm.

He, too, would like to market Little Phnom Penh on Anaheim Street as a tourist area, and calls on the city to actively help the Cambodian business community. Unlike the slow revival of downtown Long Beach, which has received millions of public dollars, he points out that Anaheim Street has been rejuvenated with private money.

"We are here to stay," adds Kanthoul, president of the Cambodian Business Association. "We are participants in an evolution."

For now, that evolution doesn't include active participation in politics. Nil Hul, executive director of the Cambodian Association of America, is the only Cambodian who's run for political office in Long Beach. He says he might consider another campaign for city council, but is more interested in encouraging young Cambodians to enter the political arena.

In fact, decades of corruption and wars have made many Cambodians highly mistrustful of the political process. This reality may partly explain why only 18 percent of the Cambodians polled this year by the Press-Telegram have become U.S. citizens. (Ten percent have applied; 35 percent plan to apply within the next five years; 28 percent have no plans to apply.)

Student Chanthan Chea is one who believes it will be some time until Cambodians become a political force.

"Right now if you go into politics, you don't get much respect from the community," he says.

Acute teacher shortage

It also may be some time until bilingual teachers who speak Khmer have much impact in the schools. Currently, only one-quarter of the Cambodian students in the Long Beach Unified School District speak English fluently, and there are no bilingual teachers, though the state requirement is 91.

Similarly, though mental health professionals agree that the need among refugee groups for psychological services is acute, there is no Cambodian with a doctor's degree in counseling in the entire state of California.

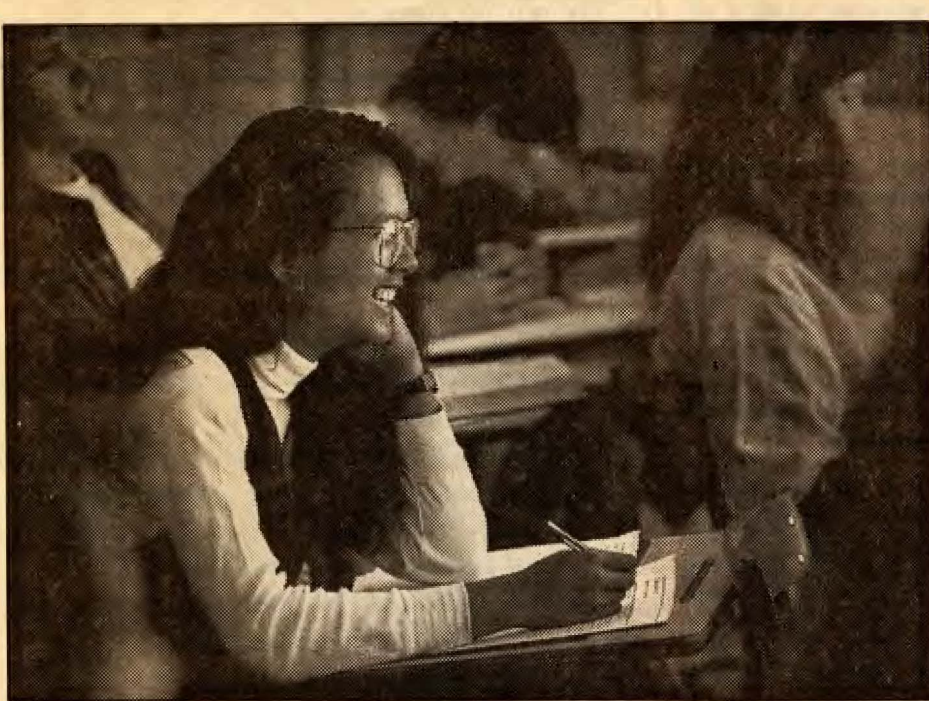
Ding-Jo Currie, coordinator of the Refugee Assistance Program at Long Beach City College and chairperson of the school district's new Asian advisory committee, urges school officials not only to recruit educated Cambodians for the classroom, but to encourage all teachers who work with refugee children to develop broader cultural awareness.

Currie also has submitted a proposal to the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education for a \$160,000 grant that would create a mentoring program between community college and high school students to encourage more young Cambodians to seek higher education and eventually become the teachers and the counselors, the physicians and the politicians of tomorrow.

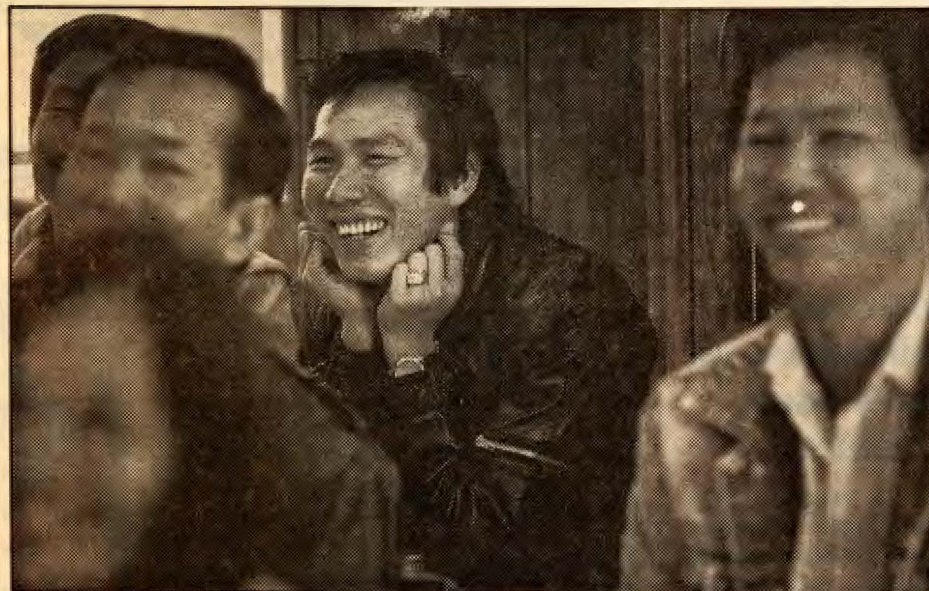
Understanding humanity

But the key to the future of the Cambodian community may not be found only in politics and economics, education and social services. To a large degree it already exists in homes and restaurants, at weddings and on dance floors, wherever people congregate in the spirit of commonality.

Peter Sellars, director of the Los Angeles Festival, is one who believes cultural understanding is the key to equal justice and economic opportunity in the future.



Morodak Meas, a Cambodian high school student in the PACE program at Poly High, laughs at a joke made by her teacher in the accelerated American history politics class. Morodak studies about three hours every day after school and hopes to be accepted to Harvard.



A Cambodian student enjoys himself at a recent class session of the Refugee Assistance Program. To get federal aid during their early months in Long Beach, refugees are required to attend English and vocational classes in the Long Beach City College program.

ty in the future.

Immigrant and refugee groups such as the Cambodian community in Long Beach are "about sharing," he says. "They are about a graceful attempt to acknowledge and respect the unknown ... They are about friendship. They are about value BEFORE profit."

They are about people, who, like Mermelstein, have important stories to tell. For him, the ability to speak out and write and collect remembrances of the Holocaust has meant his very survival.

We have much to learn from our new neighbors, he says. The Cambodians can help us better understand our own humanity. It is by sharing what we experienced yesterday that we can begin to come together to build a better world for tomorrow.

That is why Mermelstein will place the chilling contents of a blue nylon backpack in his personal museum.

To him they bear witness to the past, and hold the promise of the future.

Staff writers Dorothy Korber and Susan Pack contributed to this story.