

A PRESS-TELEGRAM SPECIAL REPORT

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BEYOND THE KILLING FIELDS

A report on the Khmer Rouge survivors and their families living in Long Beach



In a four-year holocaust in the 1970s, the Khmer Rouge slaughtered nearly two million people in Cambodia. Their mass graves became known as the “killing fields.” Those who could escape the nightmare did. More than 145,000 Cambodian refugees fled to the United States, hoping to share in the American dream. Many of them — more than 50,000 — settled in Long Beach, California, considered the largest Cambodian community outside Southeast Asia.

Now, 20 years later, the horrors of war still haunt those who survived the killing fields. Some are succeeding, but many are not.

But, amid this sense of hope and optimism, problems persist. Many Cambodians in Long Beach feel isolated by culture, poverty, race and lack of education. Many do not speak English. Many distrust authority. Many are suffering from severe mental disorders. Even raising children in the United States can be a struggle as

families, the core of Cambodian traditions, suffer huge generation gaps. Parents complain that their American-born children have become too Americanized.

However, there are plenty of success stories in the Cambodian community in Long Beach. Many of the killing fields survivors are looking to their children to achieve the American dream. Many of their businesses are thriving. Many barriers are being broken down.

In this special report, which ran as a series December 2-9, 2001, the Press-Telegram took an in-depth look at how Cambodians are coping in Long Beach. We reported on

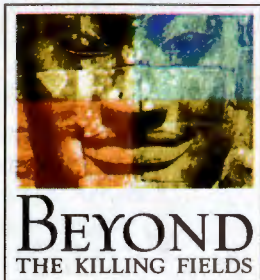
their struggles, their hopes and their dreams. We welcome your comments.

Rich Archbold, Executive Editor
Press-Telegram

604 Pine Ave., Long Beach, CA 90844
562-499-1285, rich.archbold@presstelegram.com



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BEYOND THE KILLING FIELDS

Twenty years after the Khmer Rouge slaughtered nearly 2 million in Cambodia, survivors in Long Beach look to their children to achieve the American dream



Above. kindergartner

By Wendy Thomas Russell
Staff writer

Perhaps you remember them. They were Cambodia's battered and broken. The widows and orphans who used their last scraps of resolve to flee the notorious killing fields of the Khmer Rouge. The families shattered by a four-year holocaust that took nearly 2 million lives. The children weighed down by enough bad memories to bring them nightmares for the rest of their lives.

They were the victims who would become survivors.

Reeling from trauma and culture shock, more than 145,000 Cambodian refugees stepped off American airplanes in the late 1970s and 1980s with nothing but the clothes they wore and a flicker of hope.

Like the Vietnamese "boat people" who sought refuge here after the Vietnam War, Cambodian refugees formed small, tight-knit communities across the country. None grew bigger than the one in Long Beach. Most estimates at the time put the city's refugee population at upwards of 50,000.

For some of them, 20 years has made a world of difference.

Many Cambodians in Long Beach have gone from welfare to college to work. They've moved from cramped apartments to comfortable homes. They've become doctors, engineers, business owners.

They've learned to adapt in America without neglecting Cambodian traditions. Some even combine Christianity and Buddhism, modern medicine and ancient remedies.

Cambodian children are living out the American dream, free of warfare and oppression. They are doing better in school than ever before, and college attendance figures among Cambodians are on the rise.

Above, kindergartner Ricky Chhear awaits instructions in his class at Whittier Elementary School in Long Beach. At right, Phan Khull, left, and Sin Va take in the sights at a fund-raiser for victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The event, called "Cambodian-Americans Stand United," was held in MacArthur Park Nov. 11.

Photos by Jeff Gritchen / Press-Telegram

Inside

A visit to Anaheim Street — the heart of Little Phnom Penh.

More

For more Cambodian photos.



rise.

"We are very strong people — mentally and physically," says Chhomarith Chet, a refugee who lost his entire immediate family during the bloody reign of the Khmer Rouge. "We've been through a lot of abuse."

But, amid this hope, problems persist.

- Many of Long Beach's Cambodians still live in poverty, with more than 10,000 Khmer speakers on the welfare rolls, according to county statistics. They reside in densely populated areas where trees are sparser than streetlights.

- Most first-generation refugees still do not speak English fluently. They came from provinces where elementary education was rare, and higher education nonexistent. In 1990, two-thirds of local Cambodians over the age of 5 did not speak English "very well," according to that year's census.

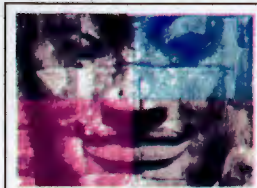
- Cambodians have been slow to fill professional jobs. In Long Beach, only about 1 percent of Cambodian-owned businesses are classified as professional, according to the city's Economic Development Bureau. By comparison, professional businesses make up about 14 percent of all Long Beach business licenses.

Other trends are noteworthy.

Mistrust of city government and police persists. And crime — or the perception of it — still afflicts the area known as "Little Phnom Penh." This area, named after Cambodia's capital city, is bordered roughly by Seventh Street on the south, Pacific Coast Highway on the north, Long Beach Boulevard on the west and Temple Avenue on the east.

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SPECIAL REPORT TEAM



BEYOND
THE KILLING FIELDS

REPORTERS

Wendy Thomas Russell, Tracy Manzer,
Helen Guthrie Smith, John Cox

PHOTOGRAPHERS

Stephen Carr, Jeff Gritchen

DESIGNERS

Brenna Jennison: Page Designer
Paul Penzella: Graphic Artist

COPY EDITORS

Chris Berry, Jill Schoenberg

EDITORS

Rich Archbold.....Executive Editor
Jim Robinson.....Managing Editor
Jim McCormack.....Senior Editor
Christine Strobel.....Design Editor
David Weiner.....News Editor

BEYOND CAMBODIA

Horrors of war still haunt those who survived the killing fields. For some refugees, the effects have been devastating

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Gone are the Cambodian-versus-Latino street wars of the early 1990s. Between 1989 and 1994, nearly three dozen people died in gang-related gunfire. But the violence has not been extinguished. Two Long Beach City College students were shot — one fatally — in the 1000 block of Hoffman Avenue two months ago. And, last month, a 16-year-old boy was gunned down on Anaheim Street.

Raising children in America has presented its own challenges. Families, the core of Cambodian traditions, suffer massive generation gaps. Language and cultural barriers drive wedges between refugees and their American-born children; parents lament that their children have become too Americanized.

In addition, the war has left most refugees with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, characterized by depression, flashbacks and panic attacks.

The effects vary from person to person.

• Sary Chea, 49, lives in a crowded, run-down apartment with her husband and 10 children. The Khmer Rouge murdered 13 members of her

America (CAA) in Long Beach. But when he speaks of his own pain, about leaving his family in his little village and buying his way out of Cambodia with his wife's family, his voice gives way to quiet sobs.

Stress disorder is the haunting tie that binds Cambodian refugees together. Whether it delivers crippling blows or shivers of pain, it has spared almost no one.

"We have the ability to cope with the stress," says Kimthai Kouch, who works under Chhim at CAA. "But no matter what, that depression is deep inside us ... It will come out at one time or another."

It was April 1975 when French teacher Pol Pot and his communist insurgents, known as the Khmer Rouge, took control of Cambodia — a small, farming country wedged between Thailand and Vietnam in Southeast Asia. Home to the ancient religious temple of Angkor Wat, Cambodia had been weakened by the war in Vietnam, as well as its own civil conflicts.

Backed by the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, the Khmer Rouge set out to purify the "Khmer race" and create a classless society. It rose



PAUL PENZELLA / PRESS-TELEGRAM

grounds for execution.

City dwellers, called "New People," were treated the worst, seen as the embodiment of capitalist evil. Khmer Rouge soldiers wasted no time killing known intellectuals, skilled workers, ethnic minorities and officials of the prior, Lon Nol government. Those allowed to live were worked harder, fed less and eyed carefully.

James Dok, a Long Beach pastor, remembers the day the soldiers — known as "the Pol Pots" — rolled their tanks into Phnom Penh. The son of a schoolteacher, Dok was 17 — the oldest of seven children. The soldiers waved flags from atop their tanks. They smiled and cheered. He cheered, too.

"As a teen-ager," Dok says, "we didn't know what communism is all about. We're happy because the country (had been) on the

children alone on the roads.

Anyone who refused to make the trip, or collapsed from exhaustion, or asked questions, or paused for a crying child, was pulled out of line and killed.

"I can hear the sound of people being tortured, moaning and crying," Dok says.

Because the Khmer Rouge targeted intellectuals, prisoners often ditched their eyeglasses along the way. Teachers tried to pass as taxi drivers. Those with any education at all quickly learned that telling the truth would get them killed.

Once people had arrived at the work camps, soldiers controlled them through malnutrition, brutality and secrecy. No one was told who was running the country — only that those in power were to be called "Angka." Soldiers brainwashed children to believe in nothing but Angka and

S-21, a converted high school in Phnom Penh where thousands of political prisoners were tortured to death.

Much like Jewish concentration camps during World War II, Tuol Sleng became known as "the place where people go in but never come out." Of the 20,000 people known to have entered, only six are known to have survived.

In January 1979, Vietnam invaded Cambodia and toppled the Khmer Rouge. Thousands of Cambodians rushed to the borders and settled in refugee camps while trying to reunite with their families and seeking entrance into other countries.

Nearly 2 million people — roughly a quarter of Cambodia's population — perished between 1975 and 1979. Their burial sites became known as the killing fields.

Today, the memories of those fields are tightly wound into the character of Long Beach refugees. When first-generation Cambodians are introduced to each other in restaurants, shops or Buddhist temples, their initial questions are always the same, says Rev. Kong Chhean, Long Beach's preeminent Buddhist monk.

"How are you?" they ask. "Where were you during the war?"

In a traffic safety course run by the Khmer Parent Association in Long Beach, teacher Chan Hopson spends the first few days talking about life under the Khmer Rouge. It seems to break the ice, she says, and puts everyone on equal footing with each other — and with her.

"I'm from the killing fields, too," Hopson tells her students. "I'm no better than you."

After a few days, Hopson gives a pep talk that helps guide parents from the past to the

government.

"This community lives and breathes by what's going on in Cambodia," says Michael Sieu, a Cambodian refugee and assistant city planner with the Long Beach Department of Planning and Building.

Long Beach is considered the largest Cambodian community outside Southeast Asia, but it isn't the only one.

In the early 1980s, churches, organizations and individuals all over the country sponsored Cambodian refugees, leaving them scattered from coast to coast. Eventually, they began to migrate to certain cities.

They moved to Stockton and Fresno for the farmland. They moved to Dallas, Texas, for the weather. They moved to Lowell, Mass., because a large manufacturing plant there employed many Cambodians.

And they moved to Long Beach because of its mild climate and an already-established Cambodian community. Before the war, Cambodians had attended Cal State Long Beach through a program run by the U.S. Agency for International Development.

It is unclear how many Cambodians now reside in Long Beach.

The 2000 Census found roughly 22,000 "other Asians" living in Long Beach — with most of them being Cambodian. Community activists, as well as deputy city planner Jack Humphrey, question that number.

"It's suspiciously low to me," Humphrey says. "We feel that there was an undercount."

Sieu, who works under Humphrey, says refugees often don't fill out census forms. Language barriers prevent some from reading the forms. Others don't understand the census, or

• Sary Chea, 49, lives in a crowded, run-down apartment with her husband and 10 children. The Khmer Rouge murdered 13 members of her family in front of her, and she's never recovered. Her nightmares are so vivid that she wakes screaming in the night. She takes anti-depressants, smokes cigarettes to calm her nerves and hasn't held down a job since the war. When she recalls the way her family died, tears stream down her face.

• Him Chhim is one of the best-known Cambodians in Long Beach. He is a modern-day village elder, a gray-haired man with strong opinions and stronger judgments. He comes from an educated family, and is now executive director of the Cambodian Association of

conflicts. Backed by the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, the Khmer Rouge set out to purify the "Khmer race" and create a classless society. It rose to power by taking over rural provinces and recruiting poor, illiterate peasants as soldiers.

By the time Pol Pot took the capital city of Phnom Penh, his military had reached an estimated 30,000 people. He emptied cities, bombed banks, outlawed religion, separated families, eliminated private property, herded residents into collective farms and destroyed all aspects of social and cultural life.

He turned the country into a prison-camp state, where even young children worked 12-hour days with very little to eat. Malnutrition often gave way to starvation. Foraging for food was

brutality and secrecy. No one

cheered. He cheered, too. "As a teen-ager," Dok says, "we didn't know what communism is all about. We're happy because the country (had been) on the verge of collapse."

Within hours, the mood darkened.

Soldiers demanded that all families pack up small supplies of food and clothes — and march out of town in single-file lines. They encouraged residents to leave by telling them the United States was going to bomb Phnom Penh and that everyone would be allowed to return home in a few days. Both were lies; it was a death march.

Soldiers dragged the city's sick and aging from their hospital beds. They forced elderly grandmothers to suffocate in the humidity. They left young

was told who was running the country — only that those in power were to be called "Angka." Soldiers brainwashed children to believe in nothing but Angka and lectured adults in propaganda sessions, ironically called "livelihood meetings."

At the camps, most executions occurred at night. Soldiers awoke prisoners suspected of any number of "crimes" and quietly led them into fields or forests. Those marked for death were ordered to dig their own graves before being blindfolded and killed. Sometimes they were bludgeoned or stabbed to save bullets.

Under Angka's command other workers wasted away in the rice fields or were shuffled off to death camps. The most famous was Tuol Sleng Prison, or

"I understand how depressed you are," she explains. "I understand how much you left. You miss your home, family. I would like you to put the stress behind your back and look forward, and start to learn."

After a few days, Hopson gives a pep talk that helps guide parents from the past to the future.

Even Cambodians able to move on keep in touch with their homeland. Most have family there, and they miss the Cambodia they knew before the war. They are constantly taking part in humanitarian efforts in Cambodia, and about two dozen expatriates have left Long Beach to take high-level cabinet jobs in Cambodia's newly reorganized

Humphrey, says refugees often don't fill out census forms. Language barriers prevent some from reading the forms. Others don't understand the census, or its value.

And many, Sieu says, mistrust government. The Khmer Rouge traumatized them, often punishing those who revealed details about their lives. The census is still too foreign, he says.

Just how many Cambodians live in Long Beach is a matter of debate. Social-service organizations, such as the Cambodian Association of America and the United Cambodian Community Inc., put the number at about 50,000.

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CAMBODIAN TIMELINE: HOW THEY CAME

1954-1962: The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) develops a program to educate Cambodian nationals in American universities. Of the 187 students who come, many settle in Long Beach and attend Cal State Long Beach. The Vietnam War halts the USAID program.

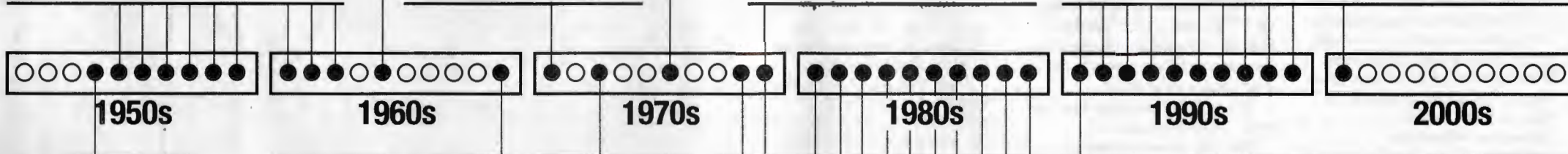
1964: U.S. enters Vietnam War.

1970: Right-wing Lon Nol government topples Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

April 1975: Cambodia falls to Pol Pot's Communist Khmer Rouge, which tortures, enslaves, starves and executes nearly 2 million Cambodians by 1979. Their mass graves became known as the "killing fields".

1979: Vietnam invades Cambodia, toppling the Khmer Rouge. Fear drives throngs of survivors to refugee camps outside Cambodia. Some live there for years, awaiting entry into other countries.

1990-2001: About 10,000 immigration visas are granted to family members of Cambodians living in the United States.



1953: Cambodia receives independence from France.

1969: U.S. begins bombing of Cambodia, contributing to destabilization of country.

1972: U.S. withdraws from Vietnam War.

1978-1990: Nearly 150,000 Cambodian refugees are admitted into the United States, and Long Beach becomes their greatest haven.



1979: Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot leads a column of his men, in this photo obtained by Japan's Kyodo news service. (AP Photo/Kyodo)



July 1997: A Cambodian man walks past one of the many killing fields sites at a school on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. (AP Photo/Richard Vogel)



January 1998: Former Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot answers questions during an interview near Anlong Veng, Cambodia. He dies in his sleep four months later at age 73. (AP Photo/Prasit Saengrungruang/Bangkok Post)

SOURCES: CNN news source; David Kreng, former co-chairman of the Southeast Asian Refugee Council; Teri Yamada, Southeast Asian Studies Center; The Office of Refugee Resettlement; U.S. State Department



Long Beach is home to the largest Cambodian community outside Southeast Asia, but the exact number is a matter of debate. Most estimates range from 25,000 to 50,000. Here, a crowd assembles at a fund-raiser in MacArthur Park a few weeks ago. More than 500 people attended the event, which raised some \$10,000 for the victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

BEYOND CAMBODIA

Haunted by war, looking to and building a future

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although he's not sure by how much. He says certain Cambodian-heavy tracts of the city seem to have lost Asian residents in the last decade.

"There are several possibilities," Humphrey says of this loss. "One, that the Cambodians are simply going someplace else, or two, that they are beginning to improve their economic status and are moving out of that very crowded, congested area (into) better circumstances."

Many successful Cambodians have moved out of the city in the last 20 years. While Long Beach remains the Cambodian-American capital, suburban cities such as Lakewood, Cerritos and Orange have pulled successful residents away.

Chhim and Dok, for instance, both live in Cerritos.

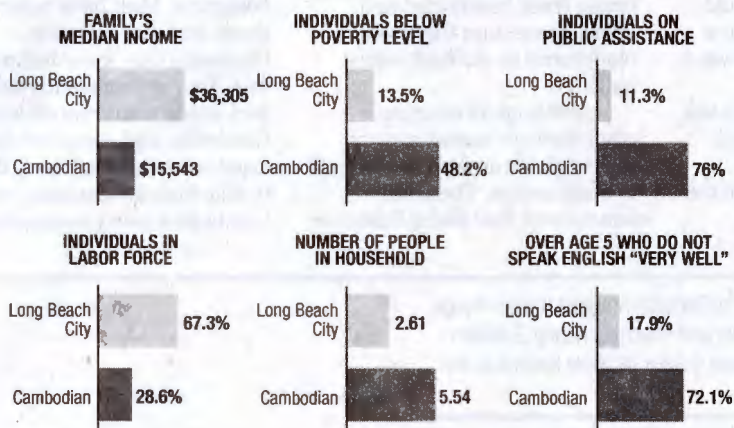
The pattern is not unique. In the Vietnamese community, those with higher incomes often move from Westminster's "Little Saigon" into Lake Forest, Irvine and Anaheim Hills, says Son Kim Vo, a Vietnamese refugee and coordinator of Cal State Fullerton's Intercultural Development Center.

Ethnic communities offer refugees the support they need, Vo says. When refugees no longer need that support, they move.

"Maybe they begin to lose a sense of belonging" she says. "They don't need to be as attached to the community, in terms of language and in terms of socio-economic situation."

A COMMUNITY IN TRANSITION

Here's how Long Beach Cambodians compared with the city's population as a whole in the 1990 census. New census figures will be released next year.



SOURCE: 1990 Census

PAUL PENZELLA / PRESS-TELEGRAM

John Shapiro, a project director for UCC, laments the fact that a number of successful Cambodians have severed their ties with the Long Beach community.

"It's a brain drain that way," he says. "The best move out."

The split between those who have been able to pull themselves out of poverty and those who haven't often can be traced back to Cambodia. It's the difference between the educated city people and the illiterate farmers.

Cambodians who were illiterate in their own language have found it overwhelming to learn English — especially widows who were trying to raise several children while

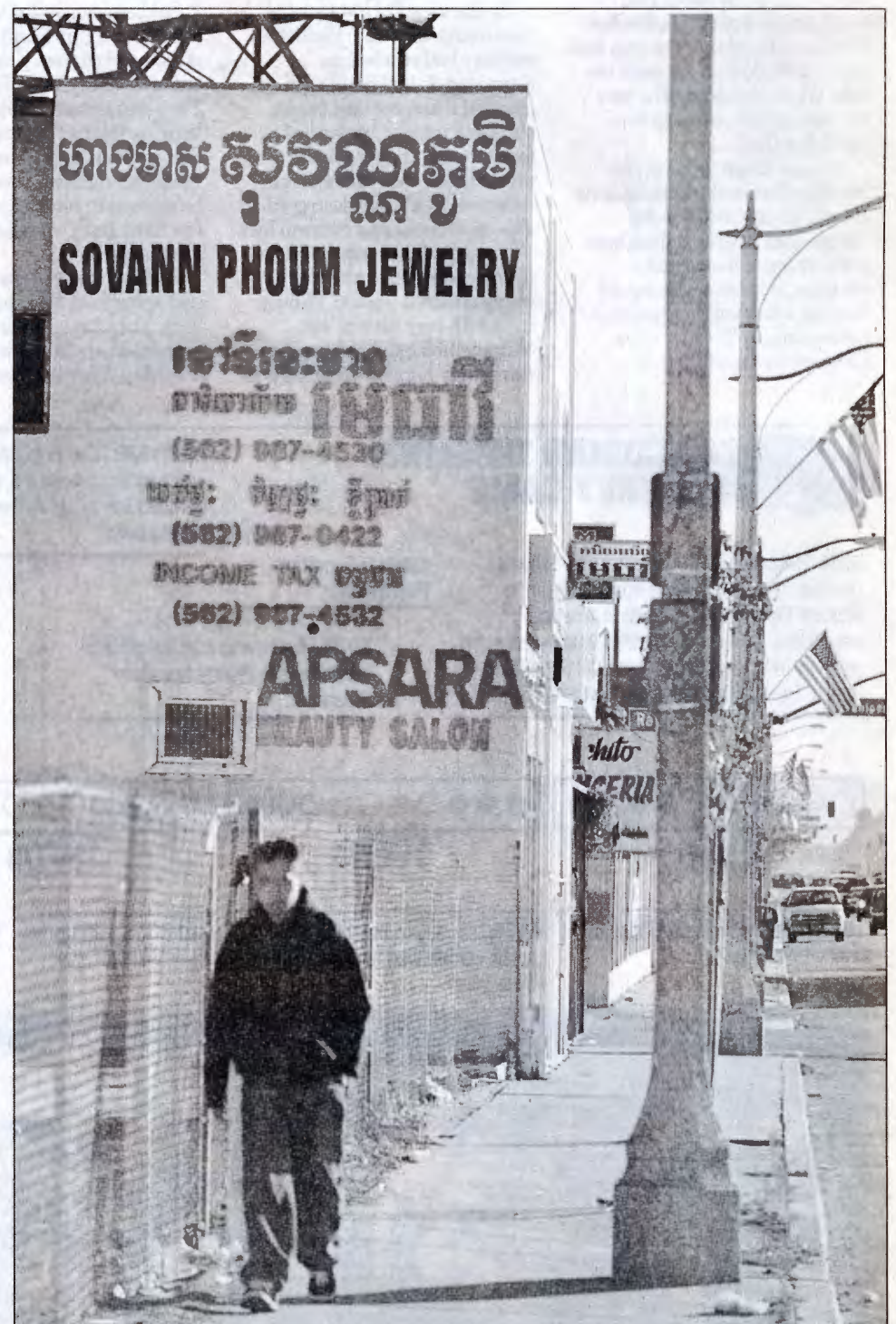
becoming accustomed to a new land. Those who came from educated families stood better chances of adapting here.

Even now, many find it hard to discuss this community's achievements without discussing the war. Considering what people went through under the Khmer Rouge, they say the community's successes are dramatic.

"They deserve an 'A,'" Vo says. Chhim agrees.

"All of the brain of Cambodia (was) abolished," he says. "Just think how hard it is to keep ourselves alive again."

Monday: A generation gap divides many families.



Signs along Anaheim Street, between Long Beach Boulevard and Temple Avenue, show the Khmer script alongside English. Anaheim Street is home to dozens of Cambodian-owned businesses and restaurants.

Jeff Gritchen / Press-Telegram

THE FAMILY THAT STAYS TOGETHER



“ **S**he used to crush fresh, whole coconuts by hand in Cambodia. When there were weddings, she would make special cookies for the entire village. She still does it here, and it takes two days to prepare. ”

— Kuntheary “Theory” Tiep granddaughter of 71-year-old Heak Pek who is a survivor of the killing fields

Heak Pek, center, kneeling, prepares chicken for her curried chicken dish that was requested by her pregnant daughter. The elaborate dish takes two days to prepare and includes vegetables and spices indigenous to Cambodia. Food has taken on special significance for the family, which was nearly starved during much of the Khmer Rouge regime.

From killing fields to American fields of plenty, matriarch sees rewards of kinship

By Tracy Manzer
Staff writer

Heak Pek sits on mats on the floor of her modern American kitchen, slowly scraping the succulent meat of red peppers from the skin with a large cleaver.

The pulpy mass is then deposited into a bowl on a small wood chopping block surrounded by dozens of peeled garlic cloves, fresh ginger root and powder, red pearl onions, lemon grass stalks and carrots sliced so thin you can almost read through them.

The 71-year-old mother of 12 and grandmother of 20, with another grandbaby due next year, works slowly and methodically as she instructs her 20-year-old grandson, Kunthina "Nathan" Tiep, in how to

prepare her curried chicken dish.

Heak uses her left arm to wield the heavy knife, despite the fact she is right-handed. Five years ago, part of her right lung was removed after a benign tumor nested there. Her right arm has never been the same since.



BEYOND
THE KILLING FIELDS

"She says the tumor was caused by Pol Pot," her 22-year-old granddaughter, Kuntheary "Theary" Tiep, says, referring to the fanatical Cambodian peasant leader whose Khmer Rouge revolution in the 1970s led to nearly 2 million deaths.

"During the Khmer Rouge, she was put to work composting human feces," Theary says. "She had to work in urine and (excrement) with her bare hands. They didn't give them any masks or gloves."

As Theary translates for her grandmother, the older woman's pained expression mirrors the indignity she suffered. A proper, gentle woman, her clothing, hair and makeup are immaculate when she leaves the house, even if only for a quick shopping trip.

When she was younger and her husband, Ban Eng Man, was alive, the pair would dress in their best clothes at least once a week for nights of dining and dancing with her brothers-in-law and their wives. Forcing her to perform an offensive task was a message to her and others that their lives were worth little to the Pol Pot regime.

Heak survived the Cambodian holocaust, called Mahantdorai, along with her cobbler husband, their 11 children, an adopted nephew whose family was killed, and two of her grandchildren. They made it, she says, because the family never allowed itself to be dismantled.

The bond that kept them alive in the time of the killing fields is reflected throughout their lives, from pitching in at the Tiep family's Lakewood sandwich shop ("New York Subs" on Carson Street) to preparing special dishes such as curry chicken.

Heak began the lengthy chopping and cooking process on a Wednesday afternoon because her daughter Monireith Charlton is expecting her second child and had a powerful craving for the decadent dish, which mixes hot peppers with sweet coconut



Kuntheary Tiep, left and her grandmother Heak Pek chant prayers at a blessing ceremony for close friends. Praying in the presence of monks requires a discrete dress code, including scarves worn in traditional Cambodian style.

milk and a host of exotic spices.

After two days of cooking, the result is a creamy, fiery sauce that includes greenbeans, potatoes and chicken served over steamed rice. Many of the ingredients are grown in the family's backyard. There is Cambodian guava, light green and much more tart than the pink variety with which most Americans are familiar. And persimmons and the gnarled krocht sauch, a lime-like fruit found in Cambodia.

"She used to crush fresh, whole coconuts by hand in Cambodia," Theary says. "When there were weddings, she would make special cookies for the entire village. She still does it here, and it takes days to prepare."

Kitchen help

Heak was helped by her daughter Marath Man, son-in-law Kunthoul "Timothy" Tiep and grandchildren, Theary, Nathan and Kunthony "Thony" Tiep when they got home from closing the family business after 10 p.m.

Marath and Timothy chopped the chicken and cooked it in a large pot on a burner in the backyard. There are three pots in all — a small one of at least five gallons, a medium one about half a size larger, and the largest, used for special occasions, such as weddings, that call for meals for 100 or more.

The family of six lives in a moderate, 1,644-square-foot, four-bedroom home on East 69th Street in North Long Beach. Originally a three-bedroom house, it was enlarged with a fourth bedroom — Nathan and Thony's — and a family room.

Not long ago, the house was crowded with all of Heak's 12 children, including the nephew she and her husband adopted, plus her son-in-law and three of her grandchildren. The family lived together to support one another after arriving in the United States in 1983.

Then, Timothy worked two jobs and attended English classes at night, while Marath worked as a seamstress at home. The couple, appointed joint heads of the family by Marath's ailing father, supported everyone, including her younger brothers and sisters, who attended local schools and colleges.

"When she would make mistakes in her sewing, we would stay up all night helping her undo the stitches," Theary recalls. "We all depended on it to survive. She



Kunthoul "Timothy" Tiep wipes down the tables before closing the family-owned "New York Subs" in Lakewood. Timothy and his wife, Marath Man, work every day from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., except Sundays when they close at 8 p.m.

sewed all of our clothes, too."

The family of 17 lived first in a small apartment before pooling their money and buying a house in central Long Beach. After a few years, they were able to purchase their current home in North Long Beach. As Heak's sons and daughters grew up, married and



Marine Man

Eldest son

Age: 54

Residence: Long Beach

Occupation: Community activist



Kunthoul Tiep

Son-in-law

Age: 53

Residence: Long Beach

Occupation: Business owner



A 71-year-old mother of 12, Heak Pek rests after a full day of cooking and looking after her grandchildren. Heak holds an old toy dog named "Sparkles" that replaces a family dog which died. Some of her children have tried to throw away the toy, but Heak always seems to find it.

Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram



Manoreath Man

Son

Age: 39

Residence: San Diego

Occupation: Sony Corp.



Moniroth Man

Daughter

Age: 35

Residence: Long Beach

Occupation: Bank employee

FAMILY

Three generations of Cambodian-Americans keep family ties strong



Marath Man

Eldest daughter

Age: 49
Residence: Long Beach
Occupation: Business owner



Manorak Man

Son

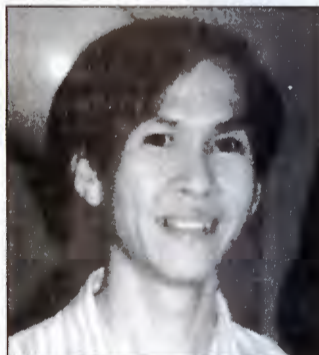
Age: 46
Residence: San Diego
Occupation: Sony Corp.



Mara Man

Son

Age: 45
Residence: Maryland
Occupation: Mechanic



Sarin Man

Nephew

Age: 44
Residence: Texas
Occupation: Engineer



Marann Man

Son

Age: 41
Residence: Lakewood
Occupation: Social worker

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started families of their own, they moved out. Some of Heak's daughters now live on the same street or a few blocks away. One of her sons moved to Texas, and she has children living in San Diego.

Holidays, such as Thanksgiving, fill the house with almost all of Heak's children. Meals are enjoyed on low, black, lacquered tables, with family members sitting on cushions and mats on the floor. Less formal meals are often eaten at the more American kitchen table, with its high surface and chairs.

Their lives today could not be more different than the one they left.

Escape from Cambodia

It was in 1980, five years after the Khmer Rouge toppled a right-wing government led by General Lon Nol, that Heak and her family finally escaped Cambodia to a refugee camp on the Thai border. Like millions of others, they had been forced from their ancestral homes in 1975 and into slave labor camps, where Heak and her children risked starvation and execution on a daily basis.

One night, Marath says, she dreamed that Buddha came to her and told her the family must flee the village to which they'd been assigned. Heak dismissed her daughter's vision as hunger-induced hallucinations.

"I was starving, near death many times. I couldn't walk," Marath says. "But my father, he believed me."

He decided the entire family would flee in the middle of the night. Marath says she and her mother chanted Buddhist prayers every step of the way in order to stay conscious and keep walking. The next day, Marath says, everyone in the village they'd left was killed.

Marath met her husband, Timothy, during "the dark time." Timothy, assigned to the same village as Marath's family, was supposed to marry Marath's good friend. But when he saw Marath, he changed his mind. When Marath's father arranged their marriage, however, Marath says she became very upset.

"Not because I didn't want him, but because I didn't want to be married," she says. "I was so angry. I had no hope. I didn't see why I should marry when everything (was so) bad."

Marath became so depressed at one point that she tried to commit suicide by bashing her head against a pole. After three tries, she blacked out.

Makeshift wedding

She and Timothy could not have the traditional Buddhist ceremony because the state religion had been outlawed by the Khmer Rouge. Temples were desecrated and turned into shelters for animals. Monks were murdered if they refused to give up their robes. If the Khmer Rouge found out about married couples, they often separated them and even ordered husbands and wives to take new partners.

Marath says her father calmed her fears and told her the dark time would not last forever. He and one of his sons had built a generator out of car engine and bicycle parts. It powered a radio that allowed them to secretly listen to American news broadcasts on the war in Southeast Asia.

"He said the Americans were coming and then we would be free," Marath recalls.

She and Timothy were married with a handshake. Their oldest child, Theary,

"They would tell us that we couldn't trust anyone, not even our own family. They told the kids to walk around at night and listen to conversations. If they overheard something that went against the government and reported it, then they would be rewarded with food."

— Heak Pek

Kuntheary Tiep translates this from her grandmother

was born in Cambodia. Their middle child, Nathan, was born in the Thai refugee camp where they lived for two years before going to the Philippines and then coming to the United States, in 1983. Their younger son, Thony, was born in Long Beach.

Memories of the Khmer Rouge come pouring out in family discussions late at night, after Timothy, Marath and their children have come home from work. Marath grows agitated as she recalls the starvation that sapped her father of his vitality and strength, raking her fingers through her hair.

"It makes me so mad what they did," she says, shaking her finger and pointing to the goose bumps on her arms. "Khmer killed Khmer. They kill their own people. It was very bad."

Timothy recalls the day in 1975 when he and his father were plowing a field and a Khmer Rouge guard, a yothea, came up and took his dad away. He laughs nervously at the memory. "That was the last time I saw my father," he says.

The awkward laughter, frequent among Cambodians who survived the holocaust, is often misunderstood by Americans. If those who survived had shown any emotion while their families were being tortured and killed in Cambodia, they in turn would have been beaten, brutalized or murdered. Survivors adopted a grim sense of humor that stays with them today.

"You knew people were killed," says Theary, "because you would see their clothes redistributed through the village in the next few days."

Timothy was the only member of his family to get out of Cambodia. His mother, who survived the holocaust, died there in 1986 from heart disease.

Brain washing

The ability of Heak and her husband's family to stay together when so many families were torn apart is almost as miraculous as their survival. After their children were sent to communist "re-education classes," Ban Eng Man would talk to each of them to undo the damage. If caught, it would have meant death for

everyone involved.

"They would tell us that we couldn't trust anyone, not even our own family," Theary translates for her grandmother. "They told the kids to walk around at night and listen to conversations. If they overheard something that went against the government and reported it, then they would be rewarded with food."

It was one of many insidious methods the Khmer Rouge used to destroy the foundations of Cambodian life. Family and religion became primary targets of Pol Pot and suffered the greatest abuse.

As Ban Eng Man and his family fled through Cambodia's jungles to the border camp in Thailand, they used the little gold and jewelry they'd saved to buy boat and car transportation and the services of an armed guide.

In her constant state of fear, Marath says, she would bury small pieces of gold in the jungle when they stopped to rest. When they moved on, she would forget and leave them behind.

"She says that it's alright because then it was there for someone else who needed it," Theary explains. "Maybe (Buddha) meant for it to happen so that the gold could be used to save someone else's life."

Border skirmish

At the Thai border camp, the family found themselves dodging bullets from the Khmer Rouge, embroiled in a bloody fight with the invading Vietnamese army, and from rounds fired from cruel soldiers guarding the Thai border.

After seeing Marath's swelling belly — seven months pregnant with Nathan — the Thai guards accused her of swallowing gold and jewels. They threatened to slice her open, but the family eventually was able to buy their way into the camp.

"They hid the gold that was left in the waistband of my pants," Theary says. "I was just a baby, and my grandmother was holding me. She got right up in the guards' faces and said, 'Go ahead and search me. I have nothing to hide.'"

The guards waved the grandmother and her infant granddaughter through the gates without a strip search.

Once in the camp, the family waited two years before they were accepted by the U.S. government for resettlement. At one point, France expressed an interest in the family, but Heak's husband refused.

"He waited for America," Theary says.

Today, the family is extremely patriotic. Theary says her mother is a Democrat, her father a Republican. But both respect the president, regardless of party, and put their faith behind national leaders once they are elected.

Heak speaks almost no English, but she loves to chime in with the PBS spot that came out following this year's Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. It features people of various ethnicities proclaiming, "I am an American."

She became a U.S. citizen on Nov. 8, 2000, and proudly displays her certificate. Her grandchildren say she studied vigorously in the weeks before her citizenship exam, asking them to quiz her on such questions as where the national and state capitals are and who the first president was.

One of the last gifts Heak's husband gave her before dying in 1988 was a U.S. \$10 gold coin set in a necklace. Now Heak is buying more of them, a few at a time, so her children and grandchildren will each have one before she dies.

Terrorist attacks



Monireith Charlton

Daughter

Age: 33
Residence: Long Beach
Occupation: Teacher



Monirom Eichler

Daughter

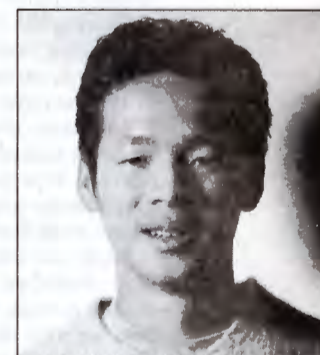
Age: 31
Children: Long Beach
Grandchildren: Healthcare worker



Kuntheary Tiep

Granddaughter

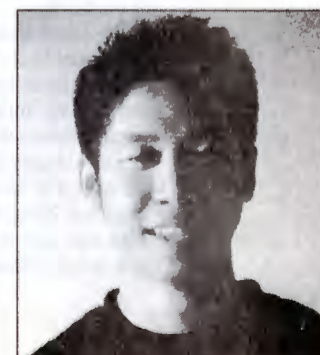
Age: 22
Residence: Long Beach
Occupation: Job placement specialist



Kunthina Tiep

Grandson

Age: 20
Residence: Long Beach
Occupation: Teacher's assistant



Kunthony Tiep

Grandson

Age: 17
Residence: Long Beach
Occupation: Student

FAMILY

CONTINUED FROM 10

The Sept. 11 attacks had a profound impact on Heak and her family, especially those with vivid memories of their war-torn homeland. "This is not supposed to happen here in the U.S.," Theory translates for her grandmother.

Like many businesses, the sandwich shop saw a post-attack decline in business, although it is slowly returning to normal. Before buying the store, the family owned a donut shop. Theory remembers rising at 3 a.m. with her parents and helping to make doughnuts.

"The grease was so hot, it burned your arms just getting close to the (vat)," she recalls. "To this day I can still remember how to make doughnuts. You have to dip them into the frosting quickly, or they don't turn out right."

Marath knew her customers so well that she would get their doughnuts and coffee ready when she saw their cars pull into the parking lot. But she and Timothy prefer the hours of the sandwich shop, which they say has been much more lucrative.

Lunch time at the sandwich shop is the busiest part of the day, with many surrounding businesses — the Boeing Co. plant, Cal Bowl and Glacial Gardens ice skating rink — providing regular customers. Crime has not been a problem, although recently a drunk and belligerent woman threw the service bell on the cash register at Marath, breaking a Japanese good luck statue.

"People come in and ask if we serve Chinese food all the time," Theory says. "One woman actually asked my dad if we put MSG in the sandwiches."

Timothy and Marath open the store at 10 a.m. and close at 10 p.m., Monday through Saturday. On Sundays they stay open until 8 p.m. Breaks are rare, and Marath usually spends the entire time at the shop. Timothy leaves only to run errands and pick up Thony after school.

The kids usually shop for supplies at wholesale warehouses while their parents are at the store. If Timothy or Marath needs time off, one or more of the children or one of Marath's sisters fills in. When Timothy and Marath took Theory to Cambodia and Thailand three years ago, Marath's sister Monirom worked in the store each day with Nathan and Thony.

There is good rapport among the regular customers, and many ask about the family, especially Theory, Nathan and Thony.

Theory works in a job program run by the Long Beach-based Cambodian Association of America, a nonprofit service agency. Fresh from earning her bachelor's degree in sociology at UC Irvine, she says she appreciates the opportunity to help her community. But she's considering a master's in business.

Since she began working in the jobs program, it has seen record levels of interviews and job placements. Theory helps the program's clients prepare resumes and brush up on computer skills, and she drives those without cars to job interviews. When businesses hire them, the program subsidizes their salaries.

"Our clients usually fall into one of two categories," Theory says. "They're either older and need help with job training and work skills because they don't have much self esteem or confidence in their English, or they're younger and have trouble finding work because they have been in trouble and didn't finish school."

Nathan is in his junior year at Cal State Long Beach, where his classes begin at 8 a.m. He hopes to work in the computer industry.

He also works five days a week as a teacher's assistant in the after-school program at Minnie Gant Elementary School, near the college. Some days,



Kuntheory "Theory" Tieg and her mother Marath Man wash dishes in the small backroom of New York Subs, the family-owned sandwich shop. Theory graduated from UC Irvine earlier this year, but she, like her brothers, still goes to the shop every day to help her parents during her lunch hour and after her work day is done at the United Cambodian Community.

Photos by Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram

to pursue a degree in business when he goes to college.

His first class, AP English, begins at 7:50 a.m., so he is usually out the door shortly after 7. He's quiet and studious, and most of his teachers seem pleased with his work.

Lunchtime is usually spent in his 11th-grade history teacher's classroom or his Spanish teacher's classroom, where he and his friends hang out and talk. Sometimes discussion falls on the Cambodian New Year celebration they are planning at school.

Thony says one girl at school almost became his girlfriend. But things changed after she and her mother went to a fortune teller, very common at some Buddhist temples, who described her future husband as being very much like Thony.

"That kind of freaked me out," he says. "We're good friends. But I'm not ready for anything like that."

Delicate issue

The issue of dating is handled delicately in the Tieg house. As Thony's aunt Monireith puts it, "In Cambodian culture you are either single or married. Dating isn't part of the equation."

Monireith and Monirom, the youngest of Heak's children, grew up in Long Beach attending local schools, like their niece and nephews. They dated and married boyfriends who were not Cambodian. But Monireith says it's hard for her mother to let go of old customs.

"You should see her when girls call Thony," Theory laughs. "For her generation, it's really inappropriate for a girl to call a boy."

Theory teases her brother Nathan about visiting his girlfriend when he says he is going out to study, and they both chide Thony when he talks on the phone to friends. But it's Theory who has the strictest curfew, despite being the eldest child.

"My mom always uses this proverb that sort of translates to: 'Having a daughter is like having a toilet in your front yard,'" Theory explains. "It isn't meant as an insult toward me; it means that anyone can come and (defile) your daughter. She is helpless to defend herself in a way that sons aren't."

But dating, although restricted, is not a new concept seen only in America. A well-known Cambodian proverb dealing with parents



Kunthony "Thony" Tieg does his math homework in his room while talking to a friend on the phone. Thony, a senior at Jordan High School, is taking several advanced placement courses this semester. He hopes to earn a bachelor's degree in business and is considering going to Cal State Long Beach, like his older brother Nathan.



Heak Pek holds her gold necklace, complete with a U.S. ten dollar coin. She buys a few of the coins at a time, when she has saved enough money. One day, before she dies, she will pass them on to each of her children and grandchildren.



After classes at Cal State Long Beach, Kunthina "Nathan" Tieg works part-time at Kids Club, an after-school program for pupils at Minnie Gant Elementary School in Long Beach. A pack of rambunctious 5-year-olds clowns around with Nathan, who helps settle disputes and monitors the kids. "I'm paid to work with kids all day," Nathan says. "But the (kindergartners) can wear you out."

program at Minnie Gant Elementary School, near the college. Some days, Nathan is assigned to the kindergarten group, a particularly exhausting brood. One moment he may be dealing with a pack of rowdy, laughing 5-year-old girls who throw themselves upon him. Moments later, his calm words are smoothing over a fight among players in a kickball game.

Of the three Tiep children, Nathan is probably the most reserved. But his smile speaks volumes about his warm and genuine personality.

Young American

Thony, the youngest, is still in high school and is the family's typical American kid. He doesn't like Cambodian food. "I think it was the Big Macs my mom ate when she was pregnant with him," Theary says. He enjoys rap and MTV, as do Theary and Nathan.

A senior at Jordan High School, Thony is enrolled in a number of advanced placement classes and hopes

America. A well-known Cambodian proverb dealing with naivete translates: "Don't believe your daughter when she says she has no lover."

Despite the cultural gaps, grandmother, mom and dad and their children are quite close. It's clear that Heak adores her children and grandchildren.

Child care

Monday through Friday, she cares for her youngest granddaughters — 3-year-old Milan Eichler and 2-year-old Sierra Charlton — the daughters of Monirom Eichler and Monireith Charlton.

Milan is shy and quiet, doesn't like to get dirty and can play for hours by herself. Sierra is a live wire, always on the go and constantly snacking. As she tears around the house, the sounds of her grandmother clucking "oh oh oh" can be heard trailing behind her.

Because the girls would rather play than nap, they can be rather grumpy

by the time their moms return from work to take them home. Sierra sometimes takes cat naps on the floor and has even fallen asleep at dinner.

Both girls keep Heak on her toes. Sharing is sometimes hard for Milan, and Sierra can be very headstrong. But the cousins look out for one another, continuing the family tradition. Recently when Sierra fell and hit her chin on the marble floor, it was Milan who ran to the freezer for ice.

Their cousins Melissa, 11, the daughter of Marann Man; and Aaron, 10, the son of Moniroth Man; also help look after the girls when their parents drop them off at the house. Sierra and Milan call all their cousins by a sort of nickname. For example, Melissa is bongsasaa and Theary bongree. Bong denotes "older," and sasaa and ree are abbreviated versions of the older girls' names.

Similarly, all their aunts and their grandmother are "mommy," with part

of the names attached at the end, such as mommythuet for their aunt Marath. Their mothers are just plain "mommy."

Once the grandchildren have been picked up at night, Heak often retreats to her room with a large glass bottle — the type used for Chianti — filled with hot water, which she rolls across her aching shoulders as she watches old American movies on the TNT network.

"She doesn't understand what they're saying, so she just makes up her own story line," Theary says. "Sometimes she's pretty close, and a lot of times her story is better than the one on TV."

End of the day

The only time Heak, Timothy, Marath, Theary, Nathan and Thony are usually together is late at night. Heak doesn't stop worrying about her

family until she can see them all under one roof. Marath frequently gets up in the middle of the night and wanders through the house, checking on her children.

On Sunday, the six family members go to a local Chinese restaurant after closing the shop. When the fortune cookies are served with the bill, everyone begins reading their fortunes aloud. Nathan's could have been written by his family's history.

It says simply, "Your family is worth more than money," and as he reads it his grandmother nods her head and beams. With a thumbs-up sign and an earnestly spoken "good," it receives the ultimate level of approval.

Wednesday: Educational concerns remain.



Armani Ngoun, 9, center, joins his friends at the United Cambodian Community Center as they play video games while waiting for their sisters to finish performing traditional Cambodian dances.

CAMBODIA IN LONG BEACH



PAUL PENZELLA / PRESS-TELEGRAM

Anaheim Street is the cultural corridor of Long Beach Cambodians, alive with the sights and sounds and smells of a land 9,000 miles away. Here, customers find the staples of Cambodian cooking — jackfruits, lemongrass, fresh fish. They buy karaoke tapes in Khmer, the language of Cambodia, and sift through imported artwork and jewelry. To most Long Beach residents, it may seem a jumble of auto shops, restaurants and markets. But to Cambodians all over the country — and the world — it's a tourist destination, says John Shapiro, a program manager for the United Cambodian Community Inc., whose offices are a landmark on the street. "We know people who come from Minnesota just to hang out on Anaheim Street," he says.



The Cambodian owned Riverside Supermarket at 1842 E. Anaheim St., has served the Cambodian community for seven years. The market offers a variety of asian products such as fish, dry goods, fruits and vegetables.

Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram



Nary Chea, on vacation from Phnom Penh, Cambodia, fixes her make-up during her lunch at an Anaheim Street restaurant.

Jeff Gritchen / Press-Telegram



A woman prays at the Bothiprik Rattanaram Cambodian Buddhist Temple in Long Beach. The temple is located inside a modified home near Anaheim Street on Gaviota Ave.

Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram



Neary Meth, 48, tends to her chinese broccoli that she planted and sells to local Cambodian markets. Her garden takes up her front and side yards along the 1300 block of East 11th Street. Meth came from Cambodia with three children in 1981.

Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram

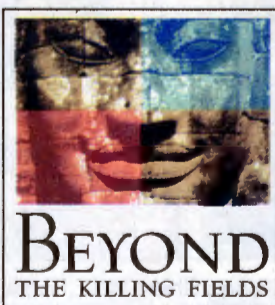
REPORT CARD

Many of Long Beach's Cambodian students perform well academically, although parents may keep a distance from American schools



Jeff Gritchen / Press-Telegram

Thousands of pupils of Cambodian descent are attending Long Beach schools, and about 4,000 are still learning English. Above, Sunny Nou, a teacher's aide at Whittier Elementary School, teaches the letter "V" to a group of kindergartners. She's one of about 140 speakers of Khmer, the



language of Cambodia, employed by the school district.

But despite an improvement on elementary school tests, Cambodian high school scores still lag. And educators say

parents' cultural differences may be to blame.

Stories begin on page 14



Bob Williams, principal at Lincoln Elementary School in Long Beach, talks with fifth-grader Reaksmeay "Rocky" Suos during recess. Williams says he constantly tries to get Cambodian parents involved in school. "They come to America with a different sense of what school is about," he says.

Jeff Gritchen / Press-Telegram

THE LEARNING DIVIDE

Linguistic and cultural worlds separate
Cambodian parents from their children's education

By Wendy Thomas Russell
Staff writer

omething wasn't right.

That's what Chan Hopson thought as she arrived for her son's graduation from Long Beach's Polytechnic High School.

It was June 1994, and her son was among more than 100 Cambodian kids receiving diplomas that day. As a refugee who had immigrated to the United States in 1980, Chan was intensely proud of her son, who was graduating with honors, and of the other Cambodian graduates.

But something was missing.

Scanning the room, Hopson realized only a few Cambodian parents had come to see their kids graduate.

"I felt so bad," she says. "I couldn't sleep for several months."

The gap between Cambodian parents and Long Beach schools is nothing new. Few of the parents participate in school events or actively support extracurricular activities. Language barriers create a natural distance, as many refugees still speak Khmer, the language of Cambodia. Culture plays a role, too.

Traditionally, teachers in Cambodia serve as "intellectual parents," disciplinarians and caretakers. They act autonomously, communicating very little with parents and criticizing interference. Teacher's notes and parent-teacher conferences are nonexistent.

Hopson knew this. But that didn't cushion her disappointment in the parents who skipped their children's graduations, and it didn't weaken her resolve to change things.

With the help of local social-service organizations and other Cambodian parents, Hopson founded the Khmer Parent Association in 1995, and held a graduation party for 250 Cambodian graduates from five local high schools.

Hundreds of dollars in scholarships were awarded through donations from local individuals, businesses and organizations, such as the Cambodian Association of America and the United Cambodian Community Inc. Each graduate got a T-shirt.



Cambodian parents Maly Long, Leng Khiev, Ho Chomn, and Bopha Kit, from left, work on a communication-building exercise during a parenting class offered by the Asian Pacific Counseling & Treatment Centers in Long Beach.

Jeff Gritchen / Press-Telegram

And the best part: "The room was full of parents," Hopson recalls.

Today, she sees herself as a bridge between classrooms and parents. But more bridges are needed.

When refugees were growing up in Cambodia, schools were rare. Buddhist monks taught children to read in their temples, and few children received advanced educations.

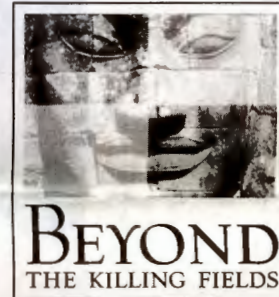
"It's not a culture with a great history of literacy," says John Shapiro, development programs manager for the United Cambodian Community Inc.

Many of Cambodia's educated were killed during the bloody reign of the Khmer Rouge, which tried to form a classless society by ridding the country of intellectuals.

Most adult refugees in Long

Beach came from Cambodia's farming provinces where formal education was rare. The 1990 Census, taken roughly 10 years after their arrival, showed that of Long Beach Cambodians:

- 72 percent over age 5 could not speak English well.
- 50 percent over age 25 had less than a fifth-grade education.
- Only 4 percent over age 25 had a bachelor's degree or



This series and additional photos can be seen each day at press-telegram.com

higher.

Census 2000 figures on education are not expected until next year, but district statistics suggest that parental education remains low.

Roughly 51 percent of the parents at Whittier Elementary School and 55 percent of the parents at Lincoln Elementary School did not graduate from high school, according to this year's Academic Performance Index. Both schools have large Cambodian populations.

Mary Ann Seng, the Long Beach school district's first Cambodian-American psychologist, says uneducated parents are intimidated by teachers, who are often likened to gods in Cambodia.

"These people come with very

PLEASE SEE **LEARN** / 15

Prop 227 forced most Khmer from classes

By Wendy Thomas Russell
Staff writer

Sitting on the carpet in their kindergarten classroom, a dozen Cambodian-American children hold crayons in their small hands and study pictures of palm trees and giraffes.

Many of these pupils speak primarily Khmer, but their Long Beach teacher uses English to describe the difference between short and tall.

The children listen carefully, then begin circling the shorter

palm tree, the taller giraffe.

This is Whittier Elementary School in the wake of Proposition 227, the controversial ballot measure that removed most forms of bilingual education from California schools.

Before Prop. 227 passed in 1998, kindergarten teacher Sim Heng would have taught most things in two languages at once: English and Khmer. Now, as part of a reading curriculum called Open Court Phonics, she

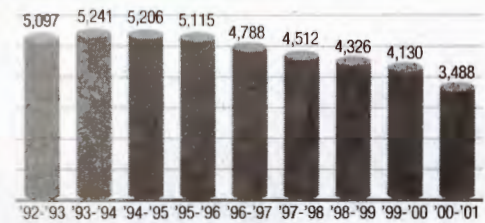
PLEASE SEE **PROP 227** / 16

ENGLISH FLUENCY IS RISING

School enrollment figures show a growing adoption of English by Cambodian children. The most dramatic change — and the greatest indicator — is in kindergarten.

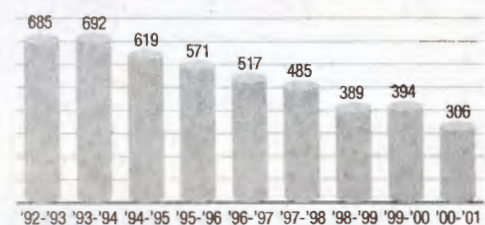
ALL GRADES

The number of Long Beach pupils in all grades whose primary language is Khmer has dropped by a third in the last decade. Here's how many Khmer-speaking pupils have been enrolled in the Long Beach Unified School District.



KINDERGARTEN

The number of Long Beach kindergartners whose primary language is Khmer has dropped by more than half in the last decade. Here's how many Khmer-speaking kindergartners have been enrolled in the Long Beach Unified School District.



SOURCE: Long Beach Unified School District

PAUL PENZELLA / PRESS-TELEGRAM

LEARN

Except for grades, parents mostly stay out of school life

CONTINUED FROM 14

little education," Seng says. "And here it is: Meeting the teacher is like meeting the pope."

No parents in PTA

Lack of school involvement by refugees exists at every grade level, but is most extreme in high schools.

"You don't see any Cambodians in the PTA; that's a fact," says Crystal Meng, 16.

A senior at Poly, Crystal says her mother doesn't see the value of the PTA or extracurricular activities. When Crystal got involved in a Cambodian leadership class, her mother was skeptical.

"Other parents would be so thankful that their kids are involved in that," Crystal says. "She doesn't think it benefits me."

Similarly, the Cambodian kids involved in badminton get little encouragement from their parents, says Steve Meckna, Poly's badminton coach.

"I would love to see these kids' parents more involved," he says. "I think sometimes they don't get involved out of respect or deference to the school. I do not think it's out of uncaring."

"I also suspect that sometimes they don't always understand the difference between sport and play, and ... they don't understand the role of extracurricular activities in college acceptances."

Meckna says most kids are accustomed to the lack of parental involvement and don't let it bother them.

But Seng worries sometimes that parents' detachment is misinterpreted as disinterest. "It

would be wonderful if the teachers would understand that these parents love their kids, too," she says.

Former Whittier teacher Wayne Wright, who was active in the district's bilingual program, says the definition of involvement varies culturally.

"They're not leading the PTA," he says of Cambodian parents, "but they are giving their kids a place to do homework and talking about grade cards."

Deference to teachers is not the only reason Cambodian parents don't attend school board meetings or volunteer to lead student car washes.

Phin Sen, a 41-year-old refugee, is married with eight children, ages 1 to 14. The Long Beach man says he tries to be active, but language interferes. He speaks Khmer and often can't find a translator to accompany him to school functions.

Sen also complains that school officials call him only when his child has done something wrong.

"Every time the teacher calls, there's always a problem," Sen says through a translator. "They never tell me anything good."

Refugee Maly Long, 45, is the mother of four children, the youngest 16. She says she knows where her kids attend school — but not much else.

It's hard to even find the principal's office, she says, because often there are no Khmer speakers in the front offices.

Help spread thin

Seng, one of 140 Khmer speakers on the district's



Long Beach school psychologist Mary Ann Seng speaks with a Cambodian man about his son. Seng, who often makes house calls, is the only Khmer-speaking school psychologist in California.

Jeff Gritchen / Press-Telegram

payroll, divides her time among four elementary schools — Alvarado, Butler, Lincoln and Whittier. She's one of the few staff members who make house calls to Cambodian homes.

Working in the field, she says, makes her realize how many needs are not being met.

Once, she went to a home to find out why a child was doing poorly in school and discovered the girl had been raped. The mother had been afraid to call the police because she didn't speak English.

"I wasn't able to tell anyone that my daughter was raped," the woman confessed to Seng.

Seng helped report the crime. "Parents don't know who to turn to," she says. "We've got people's lives on the line."

Another time, Seng took a student to get a magnetic resonance imaging scan because the parents weren't comfortable doing it themselves.

"The people then offered me food," Seng says. "They offered me artwork. They offered me a husband. They were so thankful that I helped their child."

Seng says she's glad to help out, but concedes, "I've been spread very thin."

Without willing translators, many families rely on their children to get by. Kids fill out tax forms, interpret letters, even translate grade cards.

"As a kid," Seng recalls of her own childhood, "I would read tax forms for my dad and translate."

That kind of reliance makes it easy for mischievous children to take advantage of their parents, which widens existing

generation gaps. Jeanetta McAlpin, a former probation officer who has counseled Cambodian youth for years, says she once counseled a boy who told his mother that an "F" on his grade card meant

"Fantastic."

"The kid had gotten all F's," McAlpin says, "and the mother was so proud."

Educating parents

McAlpin and Hopson work together for the Khmer Parent Association, which runs a tutoring program four days a week in a building off Redondo Avenue and the San Diego (405) freeway.

Hopson also works with parents, teaching them how to talk to teachers, read report cards and respond to problems.

Parents and teachers must enforce the rules together, she says. "The parents are the right hand, and the school is the left hand."

"The reward is the kids' progress," she says. "The kids excel. The parents know what to do to help the kids."

In the last five years, Hopson has tutored more than 70 children. All finished high

school, she says, and most went on to college.

Other programs help fill the need, too. The district's Cambodian Family Literacy Program offers English as a Second Language classes, as well as job assistance, child care and parenting classes.

And several local agencies now provide tutoring to Cambodian youth.

At Lincoln Elementary School, Principal Bob Williams tries to embrace Cambodian culture — and Cambodian parents — by learning as much as he can about them.

Williams says it's important to constantly remind Cambodian parents that their opinions are welcomed.

"They come (to America) with a different sense of what school is about," he says. "They want their children to succeed and they want their children to do well. They just don't have that experiential base."

Reading main weakness in Cambodian academics

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By Wendy Thomas Russell
Staff writer

Cambodian-American children are performing better than other pupils in two Long Beach elementary schools where many of them are enrolled. But they lag behind in high school, especially in reading, according to statistics prepared for the Press-Telegram.

At Polytechnic High School in central Long Beach, Cambodians averaged scores in the 29th percentile in reading on the 2001 Stanford Achievement Test, or SAT9, according to figures from the Long Beach Unified School District. Non-Cambodian scores averaged in the 43rd percentile.

The median on the test is 50, with half the state's students scoring higher and half scoring lower.

The low Cambodian scores show that students from Khmer-speaking families lack the language skills to comprehend complex reading questions, says Poly Principal Shawn Ashley.

"They can get the day-to-day English, but they have a hard time competing with the academic part of it," Ashley says.

But there is good news for Cambodians, too:

- At Whittier and Lincoln elementary schools, where most children speak either Khmer or Spanish at home, Cambodians scored 8 to 24 percentage points higher than non-Cambodians in reading, language, spelling and math.

- In Poly High's magnet program for gifted students, called PACE, 84 — or 12 percent — of the 698 enrolled this year are of Cambodian descent.

- And at Cal State Long Beach, the number of Cambodian-American students is steadily rising. Last year saw 445 Cambodian students enrolled, compared with 68 in 1991.

"They're doing as well as, and in some cases better than, other ethnic groups," says Alexis Ruiz-Alessi, director of the district's 25-year-old Program Assistance for Language Minority Students, or PALMS, department.

Officials at Lincoln and

Whittier say they know Cambodian pupils are performing well on the SAT9 but they can't explain why Khmer speakers consistently score better than Spanish speakers.

At both schools, all pupils qualify for free lunches, an indication that they come from low-income families. And most are being raised in non-English-speaking households, where the language is either Khmer or Spanish.

Julie Nyssen, Whittier's principal, says many variables could be involved. "There's no way in the world I could tell you what all the factors are," she says.

Lincoln Principal Bob Williams agrees, but adds he has noticed that Cambodian children tend to speak English on the playground more than Latino children, a pattern that may allow Khmer speakers to develop their English skills.

"You don't find many of our Khmer-speaking kids speaking Khmer to each other," he says. "But you find many of our Spanish-speaking kids speaking Spanish to each other. It's kind of a phenomenon."

Some officials view test scores with skepticism, saying they may not paint an accurate picture of how children are doing.

Tests are "one piece of the puzzle," says Nyssen. "A child could take it upside down and get a really good score, and functionally not be reading."

Additional information on Cambodian-American performance is sparse. Statistical breakdowns include them simply as "Asians," a category that includes many other ethnic groups.

But some conclusions can be drawn by looking at schools where Cambodians dominate the Asian population, such as Whittier, Lincoln and Poly.

At Poly, for example, 58 percent of last year's Asian graduates completed the University of California's entrance requirements. That's better than black and Hispanic graduates, whose rates were 39 and 45 percent, respectively. But it's much lower than white students, 82 percent of whom filled the requirements.

Gloria Keo, a senior at Cal State Long Beach, says she

HOW CAMBODIANS SCORED ON SAT9

This chart shows average percentile ranks of Cambodian and non-Cambodian students on SAT9 tests taken last spring at two Long Beach elementary schools and one high school. Cambodians were defined as those whose parents spoke Khmer at home.

		READING	MATH	LANGUAGE	SPELLING
Lincoln (Grades 2-5)	Cambodian	27	55	44	59
	Non-Cambodian	28	34	28	39
Whittier (Grades 2-5)	Cambodian	37	68	44	59
	Non-Cambodian	29	46	30	35
Polytechnic (Grades 9-11)	Cambodian	29	54	45	—
	Non-Cambodian	43	61	54	—

SOURCE: Long Beach Unified School District, Research Office

PAUL PENZELLA / PRESS-TELEGRAM

WRITING TEST SHOWS ACHIEVEMENT

At Poly High School, in Long Beach, 83.87 percent of Asian students (mostly Cambodian) passed a Grade 11 writing test last year.

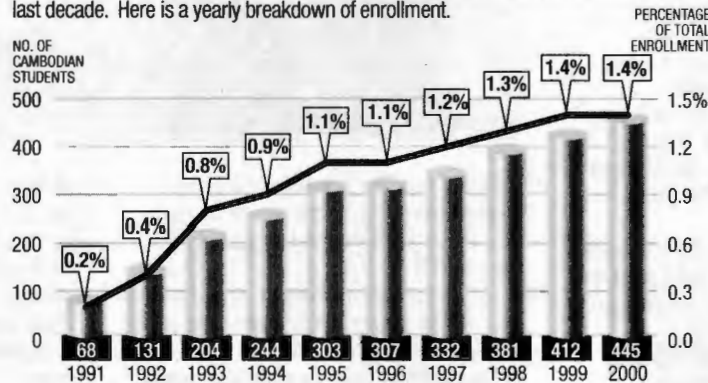
ETHNICITY	NO. STUDENTS WHO TOOK THE TEST	PERCENTAGE WHO PASSED
African American	142	75.53%
Asian	286	83.87
Filipino	66	94.29
Hispanic	90	64.75
Native American	1	100.00
Pacific Islander	16	72.73
White	135	94.41
Total	736	81.42

SOURCE: Poly High School

PAUL PENZELLA / PRESS-TELEGRAM

MORE CAMBODIANS ARE GOING TO COLLEGE

The number of Cambodian students at Cal State Long Beach has steadily risen in the last decade. Here is a yearly breakdown of enrollment.



SOURCE: Cal State Long Beach Office of Institutional Research

PAUL PENZELLA / PRESS-TELEGRAM

spent two years at Poly and was surprised by how few Cambodians excelled there. She says she transferred in her junior year and stood out easily.

"It was not a competition," she says.

The biggest problem for Khmer speakers in all grades is reading comprehension, administrators say.

Even at Lincoln and Whittier, the reading scores are far lower than in spelling. Cambodian pupils in both schools scored in the 59th percentile in spelling but in the 37th percentile in reading.

Nyssen says it's sometimes hard to spot elementary-age children who can't read because they fake it well. A child may

read texts perfectly, spell words correctly and still not understand what the words mean.

"They even read with feeling and with timing," Nyssen says. "But they couldn't tell you the first name of the character in the story."

Williams calls it decoding, and his school has implemented a program called Kagen Structured Cooperative Learning, which encourages children to talk about what they're reading.

The system, involving one hour a day of intensive English, is based on interaction of children. Kagen ensures that at least 50 percent of the pupils are interacting at one time. As the course work grows increasingly hard, the children are moved into transitional and English-only classes.

To allow parents to be involved in the school, Williams has Spanish and Khmer translators present at parent meetings. "We do everything in three languages," he says.

It wasn't always that way.

Two decades ago, when thousands of refugees flooded Long Beach, the district was overwhelmed. Most refugees spoke no English and had little education. Only a handful of district teachers spoke Khmer or knew Cambodia's history and culture.

The transition was chaotic, many say, and hundreds of children fell through the cracks.

Researcher Jessica Zimmer recently reported that one Long Beach refugee was placed in an English as a Second Language class with a teacher who spoke Spanish. Phavantha Mao, who was 12 when he arrived in the United States, told Zimmer he was lost for years in the Long Beach school district, confused about why no one could understand him.

"When summer came, he didn't even know there was vacation," Zimmer wrote. "So for two weeks, he would take the bus to school, wondering where all the students and teachers were. He ended up playing basketball from 8 a.m. until 3 p.m."

As a result, Cambodian kids' grades were low, dropout rates were high and successes were few.

Now the gift of time has

benefited today's Cambodian students.

Born in America, they have assimilated in ways their parents and grandparents never could. By ninth grade, they speak, dress and act like other students, says Poly's Ashley. "They're American for all intents and purposes."

Kry Lay, a Cambodian American who has worked for the school district since 1977, says academic success is largely based on how much instruction children get at home. "If they have a core teacher in the home, they will succeed," he says.

Lay is positive about the state of education for Cambodian kids in Long Beach, saying computers have sped learning for hundreds of bilingual students.

And he applauds the PALM department for providing a laundry list of academic services to Khmer-speaking pupils.

But Lay says more parents need to get involved in schools and set examples for their children. And more bilingual teachers are needed.

The district employs 140 Khmer-speaking staff members, but they are spread out among many schools, and dozens of them are aides rather than teachers, Lay says.

At Lincoln, where about 275 children come from Khmer-speaking families, there are four Cambodian teachers and one community worker, Williams says. That's one teacher to about 68 kids.

At Whittier, the Cambodian teacher-pupil ratio is much higher. For the school's 288 Cambodian students, there are 14 teachers and one specialist, Nyssen says. That's an average of one teacher for every 20 pupils.

Lay, who has tentative plans to retire at the end of the school year, says he knows there is more to be done. But he's proud of what his people have accomplished in Long Beach. His own daughter is a Harvard graduate and is now seeking her master's degree from Stanford.

He also remembers the faces of so many Cambodian students who have gone on to achieve similar success.

"One day, I will invite all of them who are successful in their fields to celebrate," he says.

LEARNING ABOUT THE PAST



"The Killing Fields," an Academy Award-winning film based on the life of Khmer Rouge survivor Dith Pran, is one way Cambodian-American youths learn about their parents' past. Sometimes, it's the only way.

Survivors may keep quiet about the killing fields, but local rappers don't

By Wendy Thomas Russell
Staff writer

LONG BEACH — Behind almost every Cambodian-American student at Poly High School is a parent's amazing story of survival and escape in the killing fields of Cambodia.

But ask some of these students about the most painful chapter in Cambodian history and you may be surprised at their lack of awareness.

"Many of these kids don't know about what their parents went through to get here," says Polytechnic Principal Shawn Ashley.

In Long Beach, home to the largest Cambodian community outside Southeast Asia, some children are growing up with few stories passed on by their parents.

Their understanding of the Khmer Rouge is based largely on "The Killing Fields," the Academy Award-winning movie portraying the life of Dith Pran, now a New York Times photographer.

In Julie L. Seng's house, the subject has been mostly off-limits.

"My parents didn't really talk about it very much," says Seng, a 17-year-old Poly senior. "I had to read it through books."

It's kind of an unspoken "don't ask, don't tell" policy, she says.

"I don't, like, ask my parents for details, she says. "If they wanted to tell me, they would tell me."

Maryca Lim, 16, says her mom rarely talks about her past.

"I think it's because she had a bad experience, and she doesn't like to bring it up."

Many things contribute to a lack of story-telling at home. Parents who suffer symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder say they no longer remember what happened to them, or have chosen to forget.

Some parents may want to spare their children the details of a painful — often shameful — ordeal. Others think their children aren't interested in what happened, or can't comprehend it.

So history is lost among the younger generations, who rarely read about Cambodia in school books or get the full impact of their parents' past.

"They don't understand what I've been through because they've never experienced such a thing," says James Dok, a refugee and local pastor. "In some ways, it's been just like a story to them. ... It's not really registering."

Some kids know

That isn't true of all Cambodian children. Many are able to repeat their parents' stories word for word, and seem interested and deeply disturbed by what



Local rap artist Prach Ly, center, practices his songs with fellow rappers Sparc, left, and Dozer. Ly has begun to teach the history of the Khmer Rouge through his songs. He says he raps about the Cambodian holocaust "so it won't happen again."

Jeff Gritchen / Press-Telegram

happened during Cambodia's holocaust.

"My parents tell me every day about horror stories," says Solina Tith, a 17-year-old senior. "The gory details become like violence is to us today: normal."

For others, history comes in long, detailed accounts, where every nuance of the Khmer Rouge is discussed.

"My dad woke me up two years ago and told me the whole story," says Sereyrathana Keng, 17. Until then, she says, "I never really thought about it. I'd heard about it; it's a part of my culture. But it was not foremost in my mind."

Kanara Ty, also 17, says the terrorist attacks on America three months ago have served as a conversation-starter between her and her refugee mother.

"Ever since the event of Sept. 11, it has triggered memories," Ty says of her mom. "That helped me understand what she's gone through."

And, much like depression-era parents lamenting that their children have nothing to complain about, refugee parents sometimes save their Khmer Rouge stories for when their children get into trouble, or fail to appreciate what they have.

Parents tell stories "when you're bad,"

Keng says, as her friends erupt with laughter.

Susan Som, a 16-year-old Poly junior, nods.

"It's the equivalent to walking in the snow to get to school," she says.

Still, some Cambodian kids seem hungry for information.

Last April, Ashley says, a refugee named Luong Ung, who now lives in Washington, D.C., spoke to Poly students about her autobiographical book, "First they Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers."

Many students hung on her very word. Afterward, the book "went around campus like wildfire," he says.

Unfortunately, Lim says, Poly's Cambodian population doesn't get much supplemental information from their history classes.

"When they speak about Asia," she says of most teachers, "they basically go to China."

Rapping about history

Ironically, a local rap artist named Prach Ly has begun teaching local youths what some parents and schools

have not. At 22, Ly has gained underground fame with a rap album he cut in his garage last year. Singing in both Khmer and English about the killing fields, the album has even been pirated and sold in record shops in Cambodia.

Shattering the stereotype of a rapper, Ly is polite and earnest. A 1997 graduate of Jordan High School, he immigrated to the United States when he was 4 years old and now works in a karaoke shop on Anaheim Street.

He says many of the kids he grew up with had only a faint grasp of what brought their parents to America. So he sings to communicate that important part of history — one that saw the deaths of nearly 2 million people.

Scribbled on a page in his notebook, a set of Ly's lyrics reads:

*I was welcome to this world, 1979 was the year
those were the times of the killing
fields in Kampuchea
I love Cambodia, as I was born there,
but they got my people living in fear
cramp'd up in camp concentration
million refugees can you feel me, are U
listen?*

Ly's album, which he gives out free because he has no distributor, is called "Dalama: the end'n' is just the beginnin'." He says "Dalama" is a word he created from "dalai lama" and "dilemma."

He keeps connected with other Cambodian youth through a well-trafficked Web site called khmerconnection.com, which posts news and runs a chat room. And he performs live several times a year.

Through his music, Ly says, he has gained a renewed sense of identity, a richer knowledge of his people and an emotional connection to their struggle.

He says he raps about the Cambodian holocaust, "so it won't happen again."

But Som wishes more Cambodian kids would get their history from their parents. No book or movie, rap song or friend can compare to what a parent has to offer, she says. They're the best learning tools.

"It's got to be your parents," she says, "because although your experiences may be similar, nothing can compare to what your own parents and families went through."

PROP 227

Demand for Cambodian-based bilingual education declining

CONTINUED FROM 14

rarely gives instruction in Khmer.

On this Wednesday morning, just before Heng's Phonics lesson begins, one little girl doesn't join the group of youngsters seated on the floor.

"Come sit down," Heng says, motioning to 5-year-old Sopanney Thach.

The girl, sitting at a nearby table, looks at the teacher and smiles uncomfortably.

"Come sit down," Heng says again.

Still nothing.

"Mok ang kouy chos," Heng says, using Khmer.

Sopanney quickly rises and finds her place on the floor.

"She doesn't understand English," Heng tells a classroom visitor, "so I say it in her primary language."

Studies vary on which type of education — bilingual or English-only — reaps better long-term results.

Proponents of bilingual education say learning both languages helps children meet both their linguistic and cultural needs. Opponents say it delays improvement in English skills and keeps elementary-school test scores down.

Activists in Long Beach's Cambodian community tend to favor bilingual education.

"At home you speak one language, and at school you learn another language," says Narin Kem, who publishes Serey Pheap, one of Long Beach's Khmer newspapers.

When one language is phased out entirely, he says, children grow up speaking broken English and broken Cambodian — a dialect known as "Camlish."

Long Beach school district teachers and administrators have been torn, too.

At Whittier and Lincoln elementary schools — which boast high percentages of Cambodian children — bilingual education was gaining momentum when Prop. 227 passed.

Former Whittier teacher Wayne Wright recalls spending hundreds of hours translating children's books into Khmer, putting together puzzles that taught Khmer characters, designing lesson plans that would make kids literate in two languages at once.

Lincoln teacher Mory Ouk contributed to the program with his book, "Handbook for Teaching Khmer-Speaking Students," published by the Southeast Asian Community Resource Center in 1988.



Other equally passionate teachers worked overtime regularly, at no extra pay, to get the bilingual program off the ground.

"After six years," Wright says, "we had all the materials in place, had all the teachers in place, had all the people trained. And then all the carpet sank beneath us."

Bilingual education was phased out starting in the 1999-2000 school year. Parents could sign waivers to have some class instruction in Khmer, but teachers were ordered to scrap their previous lesson plans.

"It wasn't a choice," says Whittier Principal Julie Nyssen, who took her job shortly after Prop. 227 passed. "Basically, that's the way we approached it."

The waiver system was short-lived, Nyssen says. Initially, Whittier got

hundreds of waivers from parents, she says. Last year, it got a few dozen; this year, a few.

"Parents are not clamoring for the waivers," she says.

But Alexis Ruiz-Alessi, director of the district's Program Assistance for Language Minority Students department, says part of the drop in waivers is because of a perceived "anti-language sentiment" at schools, in light of Prop. 227. Parents, she says, are now nervous to put their children in bilingual classes.

But Ruiz-Alessi says dual literacy isn't dead.

"If people want to access it, we can start it up," she says.

Wright says he believes the district has done too little to encourage the waiver system and educate parents about the benefit of bilingual

Sim Heng keeps an eye on her students during recess. Before Proposition 227, Heng would have taught English and Khmer. Now, she teaches English only.

Jeff Gritchen /
Press-Telegram

instruction. The district has sacrificed the success of thousands of Cambodian pupils in favor of "high-stakes testing," he says.

Today, stacks of boxes holding what's left of the district's Khmer-English program have been relegated to the back of a North Long Beach garage owned by Wright's sister.

Wright has since quit his job and become a doctoral student at Arizona State University.

"I couldn't return to a district that believed in 'sink or swim' and ignoring the needs of bilingual students," he says.

But back at Whittier, the new system, Open Court Phonics, seems to be working well, Nyssen says. Despite the rough transition, children have become accustomed to the new method and are scoring much better on tests, she says.

The issue of dual-literacy in Khmer may soon be obsolete, as the number of Khmer-speaking children shrinks every year.

Nine years ago, 3,767 Khmer-speaking children were learning English, district records show. Last year, it was less than half: 1,930.

Nonetheless, some are deeply concerned about the loss of the Khmer language in Long Beach. They believe the only remaining connection of Khmer children to their roots is through language. Take away language, and culture goes, too.

"I think it's a concern just in humanity," says Lincoln Principal Bob Williams. "You hate to see children lose that touch with their roots. I guess that's bound to happen, but I hate to see it."

CULTURE AND CRIME

Wariness between Long Beach Cambodians and police is hard to shake



Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram

Even after the recent shooting deaths of two young Cambodians, Chhavarath "George" Chheav, 16, and Sophy Ouk, 19, police say members of the community have not cooperated in their investigations. Local Cambodians, in turn, complain that police aren't doing enough to solve the slayings. To refugees from Southeast Asia, police were corrupt officials who arrested people at will but solved few crimes. Left, Long Beach Police Officer Udom "John" Sawai, who is Cambodian, directs traffic at an intersection along Anaheim Street. He has been with the Long Beach department six years, the result of an intensive recruitment campaign to bring Cambodians and Khmer speakers onto the force.

Stories start below

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A matter of TRUST

Police face cultural barriers in Little Phnom Penh

By Helen Guthrie Smith
Staff writer

When thousands of Cambodian refugees flooded into Long Beach in the 1980s and '90s, they carried a perception of police that has bedeviled their lives and frustrated those who have tried to help them in their new homes.

The police they knew in Southeast Asia were corrupt, arresting people at will but solving few crimes. Cambodians became wary of anyone in uniform, and unwilling to call or talk to police when crime touched their lives.

The passage of time has brought change, but for some the old perception has been hard to shake.

It surfaced dramatically again at community meetings last month, after two young Cambodians were shot to death in Long Beach, two weeks and a mile apart.

Police weren't working hard enough to solve the crimes, some complained, perhaps because the victims were Cambodian and because the killings took place in the inner city, rather than in upscale Belmont Shore.

"The belief in the Cambodian community is their victims are not as important as anyone else's," said Andrew Danni, executive director of United Cambodian Community Inc., one of the two major Cambodian organizations in town.

Police officials had their own complaint: The Cambodians' distrust of police, coupled with a fear of retaliation, was hampering the two murder investigations.

"We have had absolutely no cooperation from the Cambodian community," Cmdr. Robert Luna told one community meeting. "No one has seen anything or heard anything ... (no one) wants to be involved in any shape of form."

Recent murders

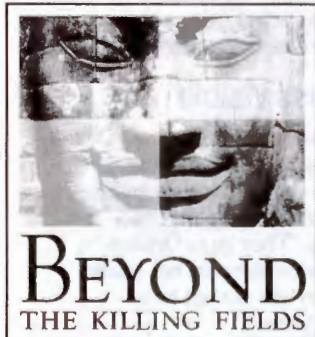
The killings of Sophy Ouk, 19, and Chhavarath "George" Chheav, 16, aroused chilling memories of the Cambodian-versus-Latino gang wars that killed three dozen people in central city neighborhoods from 1989 to 1994.

Ouk, a Long Beach City College student, was shot in the head just before noon on Oct. 20 as he sat in a parked car in the 1000 block of Hoffman Avenue. Chheav had been waiting on his



Theavy Chheav, center, and her husband, Dee Khlok, listen as Long Beach 6th District Councilwoman Laura Richardson-Batts speaks at an Anaheim Police Center meeting. Chheav's nephew, Chhavarath "George" Chheav, 16, was shot and killed in November.
Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram

PLEASE SEE CRIME / 20



This series and additional photos can be seen each day at press-telegram.com

Helping one resident at a time

By Helen Guthrie Smith
Staff writer

Bryant Ben listens patiently as the Cambodian man seated opposite him details the problem that brought him to the Community Police Center on East Anaheim Street.

The man, speaking Khmer, says he needs help in getting his belongings back from a woman he'd been living with.

Ben relays the information to Ken Schack, a retired Long Beach police lieutenant who is in charge of the center, at 1206 E. Anaheim St., that Wednesday evening. Schack advises Ben to tell the man that a police officer can meet him outside the home to oversee the transfer of his property.

The man will need to bring receipts — other than for men's clothing — to prove what belongs to him, Schack tells Ben.

"I explained ... (but) he's afraid when police show up they will believe her. He's afraid she'll tell him bad things about him," Ben reports back to Schack.

"A woman scorned is the best informant," Schack quips. "In Cambodia, they don't use police for this. They use a go-between."

It was 10 years ago that local Cambodian leaders, including Ben, began pressing the city for a police community center for their neighborhood. Many Cambodian immigrants were reluctant to go to a police station. A more informal setting closer to home might help solve that problem, they said.

The neighborhood got its first storefront

community police center, now located at 1004 E. Seventh St., in March 1993. A second center, on Anaheim Street, opened in October 1997. It moved a week and a half ago to larger quarters at 1320 Gaviota Ave.

Retired Long Beach police Sgt. Bernard Frydman shares the supervisory role with Schack. Ben works with them three evenings a week. A Spanish speaker is also on staff.

"The people who come to the center are primarily Latino and Cambodian," says Schack. "They come with all kinds of issues — landlord-tenant, where to go to for car registration, domestic violence, run-away Cambodian kids."

Cambodian victims of fraud also come for help. "People take advantage of their lack of experience," says Schack. "The older Cambodians are easy targets for fraud in crimes involving processes they don't understand."

"Cambodians have the same problems as anyone else. A family problem is a family problem — an abusive husband, a runaway child, a gullible aunt. It's the same worldwide. It makes no difference where you are. Just variations on a theme."

"Sometimes, we're really able to help somebody. Sometimes we're just a referral service. We'll give them phone numbers. We'll look it up for them."

They also write letters for victims. Opening a file drawer, Schack pulls out copies of neatly typed letters to the Internal Revenue Service for an identity theft victim, and to the DMV for someone



Bryant Ben is a Cambodian community activist and field deputy for Councilwoman Laura Richardson-Batts. He also works part-time for the Anaheim Police Center, which recently moved to 1320 Gaviota Ave., assisting area residents, who are mostly Cambodian and Latino.
Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram

who got tickets that weren't his.

When the man with the boyfriend-girlfriend problem leaves, Ben turns his attention to another Cambodian man waiting to talk to him.

This time it's a roommate problem. The man doesn't get along with his roommate and wants him to move. The hang-up, the man says, is that he gave the landlord the roommate's share of the deposit, and he doesn't have the \$75 to refund to the roommate.

"He (the visitor) didn't want the apartment owner to get involved because he didn't know he had a roommate," Ben tells Schack.

Ben suggests a compromise: Let the roommate stay another five days or a week, without paying additional rent, in exchange for a refund. The man agrees.

"Sometimes the biggest service we provide is arbitration," Schack says. "And sometimes (as the person talks), the solution presents itself."

A lot of these young men may have been active in a gang a few years back, but they have reached a certain age and they realize they have wasted a lot of time. They're maturing, raising young families, paying rent, making car payments. And that is their priority now, as well it should be."

— Alvin Bernstein

Long Beach Gang Intervention/Prevention program

AN UNEASY PEACE

Relative calm has settled in Cambodian Long Beach, where gang wars once raged

By Helen Guthrie Smith
Staff writer

LONG BEACH — It started in October 1989, reportedly when a carload of Cambodian youths shot and killed a 16-year-old Latino boy in another car.

The racial bloodbath that followed raged for five years and claimed at least three dozen lives. The children of Cambodia's killing fields found themselves in a Long Beach killing field of their own.

Today, despite two recent fatal shootings of youths, the East Anaheim Street corridor, heart of Long Beach's Little Phnom Penh, is tense but relatively peaceful. No longer are "Cambodian and Latino gangs playing a deadly game of get even," as a Press-Telegram headline



Long Beach gang Officer Roger Zottneck talks to a Cambodian man, who was detained and then released.

Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram

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Last week, the Long Beach Superior Court took steps to reign in the East Side Longos, one side of the Asian-Latino gang war.

The court issued a permanent injunction against the criminal street gang and 23 of its most active and hardened members, prohibiting them from such activities as gathering, drinking, fighting or possessing weapons in public; being on private property without permission; acting as lookouts to warn others when police are approaching; and using gang hand signs.

"This is the beginning of disarmament," said City Prosecutor Tom Reeves, who got the injunction. "We will take the guns out of the hands of the East Side Longos first, and we'll go after the Asian gangs next — and we will have peace on our streets."

Until Oct. 20, when Sophy Ouk was slain in the 1000 block of Hoffman Avenue, none of this year's murder cases was known to be Latino vs. Cambodian or vice-versa, police say.

The 19-year-old Long Beach City College student's death was followed Nov. 2 by that of Chhavarath "George" Chheav, 16, who was gunned down in the 1000 block of East Anaheim Street.

Police said witnesses told them that both killers were Latinos.

Latino-Asian conflict

"There is always that on-going conflict between Hispanic and Asian gangs," says Teresa Chavez, a gang specialist with the Long Beach Unified School District. "With any one incident, it could flare up again."

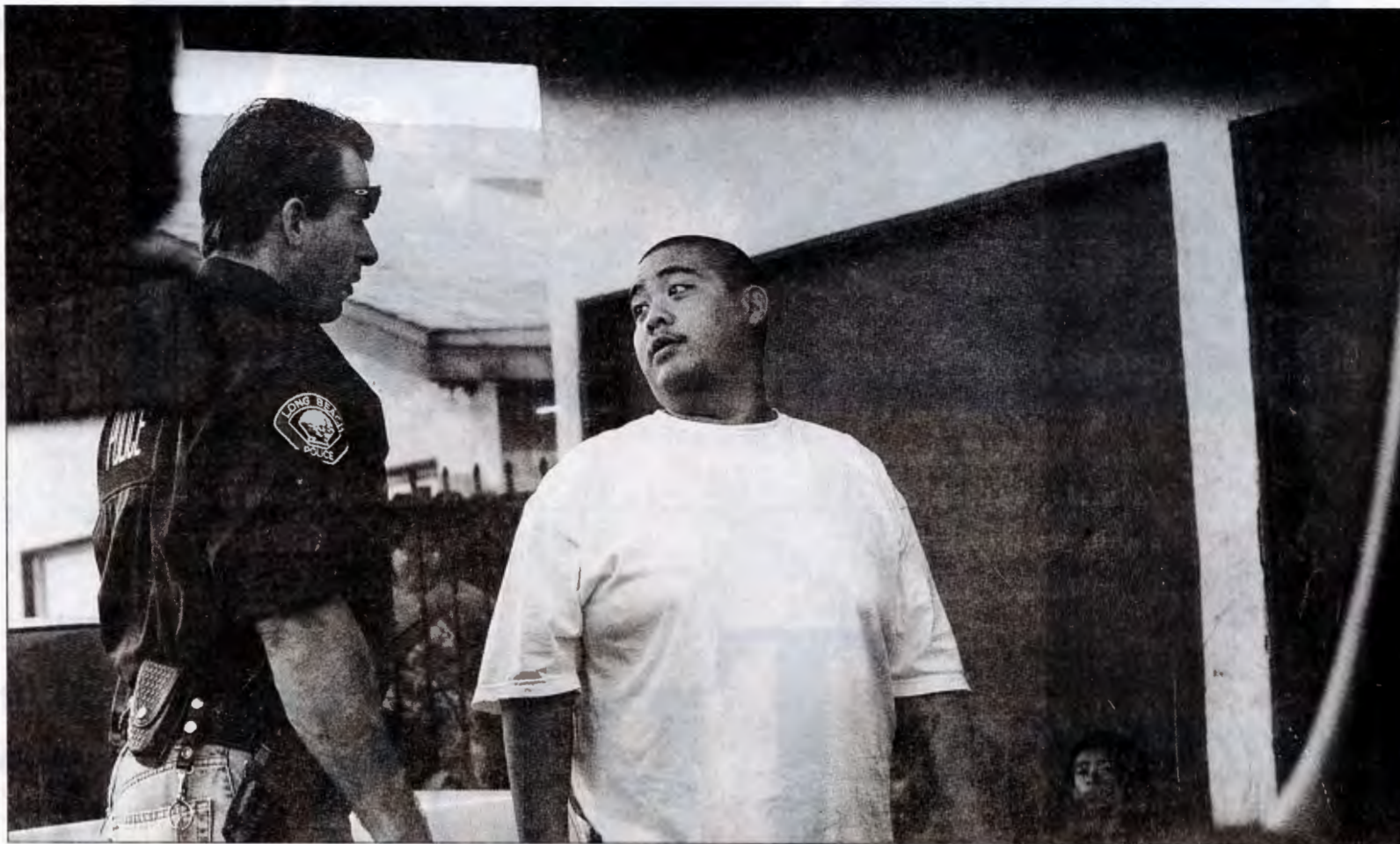
Retaliation shootings still occur, says Detective Alex Galvan, an authority on the city's Cambodian gangs. "A lot of it has slowed down, (but) you don't know when it will pop up," Galvan says.

Early this summer, there were shootings between two Southeast Asian gangs, Galvan says. Police worked with probation and parole officers, spreading the word that when gang members violate the terms of their probation or parole, "that brings heat down," Galvan says. "The shootings dried up."

Since the Ouk and Chheav killings, police have practiced "zero tolerance" enforcement against any criminal activity involving gang members or associates," says gang Lt. Joe Rabe.

In November, anti-gang detectives arrested 142 Latinos and Cambodians for criminal activity, most of them in the Anaheim Street corridor, Rabe says.

Other factors have changed since Asian and Latino gangs agreed to a truce in 1994.



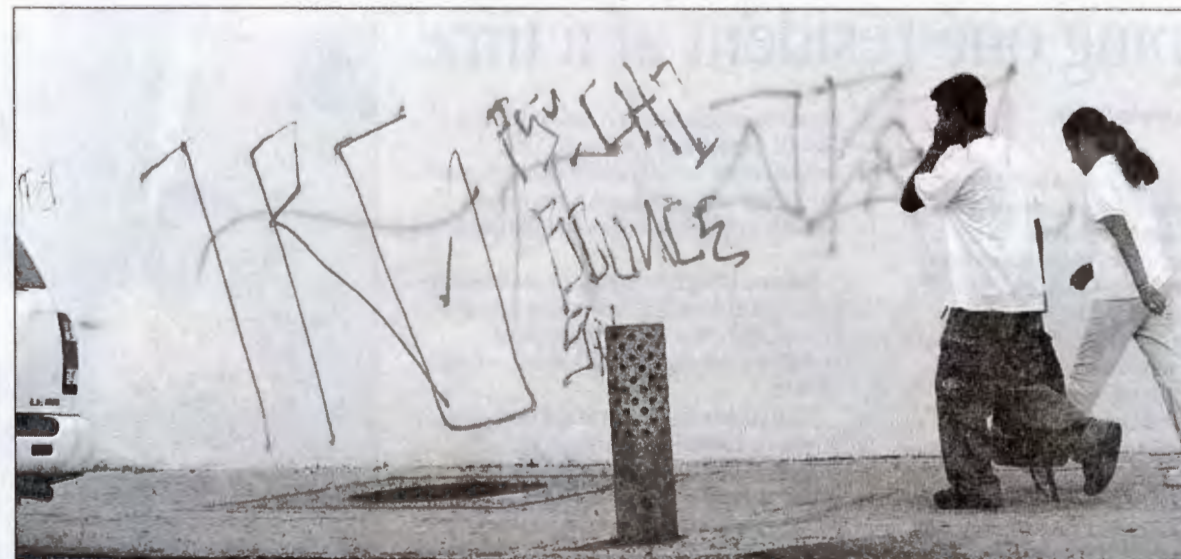
Long Beach gang Officer Roger Zottneck talks to a Cambodian man, who was detained and then released.

Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram



Alvin Bernstein, Long Beach's Gang Intervention/Prevention superintendent, speaks at an Anaheim Police Center community meeting in Little Phnom Penh. Retired Sgt. Bernard Frydman, left, is one of two supervisors at the center.

Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram



Fresh graffiti on the corner of Anaheim Street and St. Louis Avenue illustrate the Asian gang presence in the neighborhood. TRG (Tiny Rascal Gang) and ABZ (Asian Boyz) are among the Asian gangs in Long Beach.

Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram

"There are fewer (Asian) gang members now than there were in 1994," Galvan says. "I think they grew up. When my partner and I see them, they say, 'I've got a job now.'"

Gang prevention

The city's anti-gang program can claim credit for part of that about-face.

"We've got guys going back to school, becoming employed, becoming regular community

members," says Alvin Bernstein, superintendent of the city's Gang Intervention/Prevention Program, who helped engineer the 1994 truce.

"A lot of these young men may have been active in a gang a few years back, but they have reached a certain age and they realize they have wasted a lot of time," Bernstein says. "They're maturing, raising young families, paying rent, making car payments. And that is their priority now, as well it should be."

Heng Ly, 21, is one of those who say they want to leave the gang life behind. Ly was a member of the Tiny Rascal Gang (TRG) when he went to state prison for a year for violating terms of his parole from a robbery and auto theft conviction. He was released Oct. 5 and rejoined his family in Long Beach.

Ly says he wants to find a job, but, with a criminal record and without a high school diploma, he worries about his chances of finding employment.

"I'm on parole, and they don't want to hire you," he says.

Hard life

Ly joined the TRG after his father, Pheng Ly, was shot and wounded by police, says Jeanetta McAlpin, a community activist who raised Ly for a while after his father was sent to a state mental hospital.

The shooting occurred when officers responded to a domestic violence call to Pheng Ly's house on Aug. 8, 1992. He was shot seven times when he allegedly ran toward officers with a knife.

Heng Ly, who was 11, witnessed the shooting.

"The kid was in PAL (the Police Athletic League) and in a Red Cross (youth group). He was making A's in school," McAlpin says.

But, after the shooting, his path took a sharp downward turn, she says.

"He left PAL because he was mad at the police. He started hanging out with gang members, and he began to get into trouble," McAlpin says.

"He ended up becoming a gang member."

Does Ly still consider himself a gang member? "Not really. I'm trying to change," he says, adding that he doesn't want to go back to jail. He's already been locked up seven times, including terms at youth camp and the county jail.

Gangs less visible

Along with shrinking membership, Cambodian gangs are less visible in Long Beach because they've been changing location, Galvan says. "They go to Orange County because they are not known there, so they are not apt to be stopped (by police)."

Asian gang members are very mobile, Galvan says. "They travel throughout the state and the country. We're getting calls from Colorado and Massachusetts when they ran into members from here."

The gangs may also have changed their focus.

"The Asian gangs are kind of underground," says Bryant Ben, a Cambodian community activist who lived in Anaheim and Walnut Avenue in the days of gang warfare. "I think they've gone to different kinds of crime. I think, instead of violence, which brings police in, they are doing white collar crimes — check fraud, computer crimes."

The new crimes are extortion of businesses and street robberies of others, says Long Beach gang Detective Scott Sorenson. Generally, the crimes occur within the Cambodian community and in bordering residential areas — somewhere they can rob and get home quickly, he says.

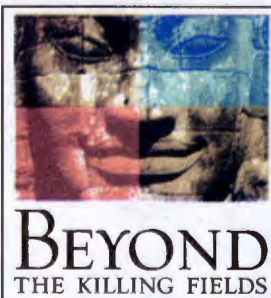
"Some are getting into narcotics

COPING WITH THE PAST



Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram

Although more than 20 years have passed, the devastating effects wrought by starvation, torture and exposure to wartime violence during the Cambodian holocaust can be seen in the mental and physical health of Long Beach refugees today. Lack of food and sleep can



For complete story, see / A17

wreak havoc on the body's organs, especially the heart and brain. People forced to witness murder and brutality carry psychological and emotional scars. Above, refugee Sary Chea, who shows symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, slumps in the doorway of her Walnut Avenue apartment, as her daughter, Sarin, looks on.

IN SEARCH OF GOOD HEALTH

New world and old
world illnesses
plague Cambodians

By Tracy Manzer
Staff writer

It is a bitter legacy. The thousands of Cambodians who fled their nation's killing fields, survived refugee camps and made it to the United States, arrived with an invisible burden that continues to plague them today:

Fragile health.

Despite America's medical prowess, many continue to suffer from a battery of war-related diseases and conditions too little understood by their own community and by the Western doctors who treat them.

U.S. health workers' inexperience with effects of war trauma and starvation can let problems go undetected or incorrectly diagnosed. Many American doctors don't think of nutritional disorders when presented with symptoms of headache, dizziness or numbness or when evaluating attention deficits and memory disorders.

Experts agree that until the state and federal governments assess health needs based of ethnic groups, vital information in the battle to solve many of these problems will continue to elude doctors, social service agencies and hospitals attempting to serve them.

The problems prevalent among Long Beach's Cambodians include:

- Lack of familiarity with Western medical systems, including the cost, language barriers, complicated paperwork, delays in treatment and what's perceived as a lack of personal concern by Western physicians.

- Radical cultural differences over the causes of illness. Cambodians believe, for example, that illnesses may be caused by bad winds or evil spirits.

- Unusually high rates of high blood pressure, cholesterol, strokes and heart disease.

- And an extremely low reporting rate for HIV, despite a high known presence of the disease in Cambodia.

A particular threat is noninsulin-dependent diabetes, also called type II diabetes or adult-onset diabetes. Diagnosed more and more frequently among Long Beach's Cambodian community, it results from an Americanized diet high in calories from fatty and sugary foods and a sedentary lifestyle, physicians say.

A study by Khmer Health Advocates Inc., a nonprofit, Connecticut-based group, has found some correlation between survivors of famine and the development of diabetes. So-called adult-onset diabetes has become a threat even for children, says local pediatrician Song Tan. Complications include diabetic coma, blindness and kidney disease.

Foods high in sugar, salt and fat have also been linked to higher incidences of high blood pressure and cholesterol, which in



Community health advocate Veasna Ek, left, takes a blood sample from Lim Ly, a monk at the Bothiprik Rattanaram Cambodian Buddhist Temple. The test was part of a free health screening sponsored by Families in Good Health, a nonprofit organization at St. Mary Medical Center that provides a variety of health programs to the Cambodian community.

Photos by Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram



During a house call, community outreach worker Sophalla Chap, left, gives health tips to Kim Sean Kong for her 3-week-old daughter, Geradine Riv Morm. Chap will visit the mother and child once a month for the next five years to ensure good health practices are followed.

turn can lead to an increased incidence of cardiovascular disease.

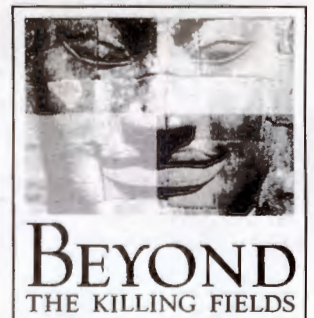
In Cambodia, dishes prepared with a lot of salt are beneficial because of the sultry climate. The extra sodium helps the body retain water that would otherwise be lost through perspiration. Such high concentrations of salt aren't needed in California's more temperate climate, but Cambodians find it difficult to modify their tastes.

A California study, "Analysis of Health Indicators for California's Minority Populations," found Cambodians' death rate from stroke is four times that of the general

population. The need for research to identify the cause is urgent, Khmer Health Advocates says.

"Is it due to cardiac arrhythmias, stress or head injuries? Would taking an aspirin a day help to prevent stroke in the survivor population?" the study asks. "It would be tragic if a lack of research prevented relatively simple interventions which could prevent tragic and costly long-term illness."

A United Nations study in Cambodian border camps, published in 1987, listed heart



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PLEASE SEE HEALTH / 25

'COINING'

Large numbers of Cambodians turn to traditional healing

By Tracy Manzer
Staff writer

The nurse in a local doctor's office was feeling sluggish, achy and slightly feverish.

After two weeks of Tylenol, fluids and Vitamin C, she turned to an ancient Asian remedy to ease her aches and pains: coining.

Kos kchall, as it is commonly known in the Khmer language, is widely practiced in Long Beach's Cambodian community.

The nurse, who spoke on condition of anonymity, says she knows it can't cure serious illnesses. But she insists it's effective against tiredness, headaches and dizzy spells.

The process is a popular treatment with many Southeast Asians — a kind of chicken soup cure for a variety of ailments. It involves rubbing medicinal oil or salve, usually onto the upper body, and using a coin or other blunt-edged object to abrade the skin in long strokes across the neck, back, chest and sometimes the arms and legs, until red or purple welts or even blisters form.

The practice, passed down through countless generations and learned simply by watching, is applied by a relative or friend. *Kos kchall* is so common that one Cambodian social worker in Long



The tradition of "coining" is a common practice in Cambodian culture.

Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram

Beach estimates it is used by more than 90 percent of Cambodian-born refugees, especially those who are older and less Americanized.

The nurse uses the method on her entire family, including her children. But she did not want to be identified because the practice has been

condemned by some. The Los Angeles County Department of Child Protective Services considers it abuse, and parents who coin their children and are reported risk losing custody of their child.

Most who use coining say it is not painful but results in a warming sensation, like a vigorous massage. But some say it can be painful, especially in certain areas. Painful reactions are often thought to denote sickness in a particular area.

Children frequently complain when they are coined, and it is generally tolerated much better by adults. This, and the marks, are part of the reason coining is considered suspect by child protective services.

Song Tan, a Long Beach pediatrician and survivor of Cambodia's killing fields, says the treatment stimulates the body by releasing adrenalin. The burst of strength and energy may cause a patient to feel better. But Tan stresses that it isn't a cure, and the adrenalin eventually fades.

Coining is tied to metaphysical beliefs of yin and yang, an ancient Chinese system of balance between opposites. Since rubbing generates heat, coining is believed to be effective in relieving "cold" illnesses, such as aches, colds, weakness and fatigue.

When the Khmer Rouge regime of the 1970s executed Cambodia's doctors or drove them into hiding, people came to depend on home remedies to cure themselves. Besides coining, they use herbal mixtures, suction cupping, pinching and burning, although most say the last is extremely rare.

Tan warns his patients that coining cannot be a substitute for qualified medical care and could lead to complications, such as bleeding and infection.

He cites a case in which an elderly man passed out at work and co-workers attempted to revive him by rubbing him with a coin. By the time they

By Tracy Manzer
Staff writer

Samuel Keo's first flashback came in 1993, when the Long Beach psychologist was earning his doctorate.

One moment Keo was in the United States, helping fellow Cambodians sort through their mental anguish. The next moment his mind was back in the 1970s, reliving his own nightmarish past.

In his flashbacks, the Khmer Rouge is still in power, and Keo and his family, along with millions of other Cambodians, are working as slaves, pushed to the brink of starvation.

Most of Keo's siblings died during this time, along with his father. When the stress in his current life becomes too great or his routine is disrupted, Keo's mind flashes back to those moments. The memories are so vivid it is difficult to distinguish between what is past and what is present.

In a typical flashback, Keo is fighting with his mother. His youngest brother, only 2, has been slowly starving to death for more than a year. Keo himself is not well and must work in the fields from before sunrise until after sunset or risk losing his meager food allowance.

Keo's mother tells him to give his little brother his rice. But Keo says his brother doesn't have to work in the fields as he does. He needs the scoopful of starch to keep going. When Keo returns that night from work, his mother is in the corner and his brother's body is on the floor, covered with dirty rags.

"She said, 'If you gave your brother just half of your rice, he would still be alive,'" Keo recalls, his voice steady but his eyes flashing with pain at the memory. "I have many friends who have helped me through this. I know one spoonful of rice could not save him. But I still carry the guilt."

Stress disorder

The flashbacks are a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder, a condition characterized by recurring and often disabling re-experiencing of trauma, an agitated nervous system and a numbing effect on emotions. Those afflicted may avoid sights, sounds and activities that can trigger memories.

Unlike simple bad memories, stress disorder flashbacks can take on a life of their own. Some people are completely overwhelmed. Keo, a community mental health psychologist, has clients who not only see images from the past but also hear and smell things that happened nearly 30 years ago.

With a patient load of more than

HEALING THE COMMUNITY

Psychologist Samuel Keo must relive his own killing fields nightmares as he helps other survivors battle post-traumatic stress disorder



Samuel Keo's experiences in the killing fields contributed to his decision to become a psychologist. He treats more than 200 Cambodians in his work for the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health and volunteers in Orange County.

Stephen Carr/Press-Telegram

200 Cambodians, avoidance is not an option for Keo, who must constantly address the scars of his past as well as those of his clients. He works in the Long Beach Asian Pacific Mental Health Program, run by the County of Los Angeles Department of Mental Health. Because of his experience, his client list is entirely Cambodian.

The trauma Keo suffered played a large part in his decision to pursue a career in psychology. While attending graduate school, he worked in Orange County, where the average counselor's

patient load was about 25 clients. But in Long Beach, with the largest Cambodian population outside Cambodia, the demand is much greater. It's not unusual for Keo to work 10- or 12-hour days, and he still volunteers in Orange County, because "they supported me when I needed it most."

The methods used by the Khmer Rouge to control the population had a devastating effect on survivors, who describe hearing people beaten to death, seeing bloody clothing and smelling dead bodies. Most witnessed

killings only when Khmer Rouge leaders allowed it, or if they secretly followed the soldiers to the killing fields.

Years of torture

Khmer Rouge tortures included isolation, mock executions, beatings, burnings, lashings with whips and electrified wires, and removal of fingers and nails. The greatest distress came when people were torn from their families or forced to watch family members suffer.

In a working memoir, Keo details many stories. One passage recalls two young boys who were forced by starvation to eat the remains of their mother after she starved to death. When no one had heard the boys' hungry cries for a few days, they went to the family's hut to check on them. The leader of the village, a Khmer Rouge official, heard what the boys had done and butchered their bodies into small pieces.

"I heard a lot of stories about people killing people for food or digging up graves to strip the flesh from corpses," Keo says quietly.

Local therapists — and the few studies done on Cambodian holocaust survivors when they began to enter the United States — say parents and children or siblings tried in vain to find their loved ones and save them from pain. The Khmer Rouge often forced people to watch their family members being killed or raped.

One distress syndrome sufferer, speaking on condition of anonymity, says he constantly hears the screams of his then-pregnant mother, who was tied to a tree trunk before her belly was sliced open and her unborn child smashed against a boulder. She was left to bleed to death along with the man's father, who was shot after his wife was slain.

A gentle man, he laughs nervously as he recalls the story, then cradles his head in his hands. It's a common reaction among Cambodian refugees and often misunderstood by Americans, who expect tears rather than laughter. Those forced to watch such atrocities were forbidden to express emotion. If they did, they faced torture and death themselves. A pattern of joking about their dire lives developed.

These days, Keo says he finds himself unfazed by the blood and gore in violent films, but at the end of the movie, when everyone "lives happily ever after," he finds himself crying.

"I think, 'What am I doing crying at this?'" Keo says. "It's because there is a void in my life. I experienced the worst that war offered, but I never had closure."

Guilt remains

The guilt he feels over his brother's death was never addressed with his mother, who died in 1986 in Cambodia. He was unable to attend her funeral because of political turmoil.

His father died after being beaten by Khmer Rouge soldiers. When Keo returned to Cambodia in 1992, he was

UNITS OF SORROW

A Long Beach apartment complex is home to refugees with painful memories

By Wendy Thomas Russell
Staff writer

Look around Long Beach and you'll find plenty of Cambodian refugees who have overcome obstacles and won success in their adopted country.

You'll find those who learned English, attended college, gained citizenship; those who got jobs and bought homes; those who sent their children to Stanford, Berkeley and Harvard.

But you probably won't find them here, in the courtyard of this pink, stucco apartment building at Eleventh Street and Walnut Avenue in Long Beach. These apartments, shielded by a steel fence, sit in a tough neighborhood, where drug dealers pass baggies through handshakes and the streets are strewn with trash.

Most of the Cambodian refugees who occupy these apartments have not been educated in America — or in Cambodia. Most do not speak much English. They don't go to work in the morning or bring home paychecks at night. Some work at home, sewing clothes for distributors at small fees, or do odd jobs. Most live largely on government aid.

Those who live here say it's not laziness or lack of willpower that keeps them from finding success in the wider world outside these walls.

The war in Southeast Asia and the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime left them shattered, physically and mentally. Some have 20-year-old bullet wounds or knife scars on their bodies. Many suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. And most came to Long Beach from Cambodian farming provinces, where education was scant. Illiterate in their own language, learning another seemed insurmountable.

On this afternoon, the sun is starting to set, and dozens of children run laughing, talking and screaming around the cement-slab courtyard. They run up and down the outdoor stairwells and around the second-story balconies. They dash in and out of apartments.

Here, everyone knows everyone else. And no one turns a child away.

Cramped conditions

Phyroum and Sary Chea live in a second-story, two-bedroom apartment with 10 children — ages 11 months to 19 years. The youngest two are their grandchildren. All were born in America.

Like many adults here, the Cheas don't work. The government considers them disabled and provides them with a monthly Supplemental Security Income of \$1,200. It's enough to pay the rent of \$595, but it barely puts food on the table.

The eldest son, Phyroath, 19, graduated from high school last year and was admitted to Long Beach City College. But enrolling took longer

than he thought. He gave up and passed his college money on to his parents to pay bills. He continues to look for work.

The family plans to move to another apartment complex in Signal Hill soon because of a disagreement with the landlord. But on this day, no one has begun to pack.

Phyroum, 53, sits in a chair outside his cramped apartment. He is a dark-haired, mustachioed man with a round belly and kind, weathered face. In Cambodia, he was a soldier and mechanic from the Kampong Chhnang province, which fell to the Khmer Rouge. He met his wife in a Thai refugee camp in 1980 and briefly lived in Kentucky before moving to Long Beach.

Sary, 49, sits at her husband's feet, her arm hooked around his knee and a cigarette balanced between her lips. She wears little makeup, and her eyebrows have been painted on. Her face is hardened, sad.

When asked about the war, tears well up in her eyes and run down her face.

With her daughter, Sarin, 17, translating from Khmer to English, Sary recalls how her 13 family members were tied up and murdered one by one. Many of them had been soldiers in the Lon Nol government, she explains, so the Khmer Rouge targeted them for death.

Survivor's guilt

Sary says she was tied up, too, but was able to cut herself loose and escape. She was the only one. Two decades later, she is still stricken with guilt and grief.

"They killed my mother, father, grandmother, sister ..." she says, trailing off and hiding her face in her hands, which she often does.

Sary, who suffers symptoms of PTSD, says she takes medication to help her cope. She exposes a long scar on her belly, where she says she was cut open by "the Pol Pots," the name given to the minions of Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot.

At this point in the conversation, family dynamics begin to surface. One by one, the Chea teen-agers — outspoken and confident — offer their comments.

Phyroum puffs out his chest, playing the role of protector.

"When I heard about that," he says, his face icy, "I wanted revenge."

Sarin, a Poly High School senior, is the compassionate one.

"See," she says gently, "when they talk about it, they cry."

Phyriath, 16, is an ROTC member and an aspiring soldier. Her stance is stoic, her worlds blunt.

"Her whole family is dead," she says, adding



An apartment complex at Eleventh Street and Walnut Avenue in Long Beach, above, is home to dozens of Cambodian families. Few adults here work regular jobs, still traumatized by the war in Southeast Asia. Sary Chea, left, embraces her daughter in the doorway of her home. Chea, a refugee, says she is depressed and suffers frequent nightmares.

Stephen Carr /
Press-Telegram

that both her parents suffer from frequent and vivid nightmares.

And 15-year-old Phyrith, who still finds it hard to grasp his parents' former reality, references the Academy Award-winning movie about the war in Cambodia.

"Did you see 'The Killing Fields?'" he asks. "It was just like that."

Behind every door in this complex lies an equally tragic war story.

Shared experiences

It's part of the reason that complexes such as these have become a part of the refugee experience. They offer camaraderie in a new society, as well as financial and emotional support.

Big families can pile into relatively small apartments, and no one minds, says Bryant Ben, a community activist who once managed this building.

And residents share a common, painful past. For the widows who lost their husbands to the Khmer Rouge, the war was especially cruel.

Bryant says he used to hold "neighbor-to-neighbor dialogues" where residents could talk about their experiences. Sometimes, women were asked whether they were raped or tortured.

"They don't answer," Ben recalls. "They just cry."

Cambodian history and traditions are kept alive here, but these walls are not impervious to American culture. The children can speak Khmer, but their voices are mostly heard in English.

Religions also mix here. Incense burns around Buddhist shrines in most apartments, but the youth embrace Christianity. A local church sends a bus to the complex every Sunday to transport people to services and other activities.

As the sun falls below the horizon, several women sit on mats outside their apartments and prepare their dinners. They talk quietly and watch the children play.

Despite poverty, hardship and the occasional sound of gunfire, Phyroum Chea says he has no complaints.

Living in Cambodia, he says, was the hard part. He calls this "the best."

By Tracy Manzer
Staff writer

It's Friday in Dr. Song Tan's pediatrics clinic at Atlantic Avenue and Tenth Street in central Long Beach, and 5-year-old Mary perches on an exam table as the doctor peers into her mouth.

Where there should be a full row of pearly whites, gaping holes reveal pink flashes of gum. Many of Mary's baby teeth have fallen out prematurely.

The problem? Mary is about to start kindergarten, but she still drinks a baby bottle every night before she goes to sleep.

The sugar in the milk collects in her mouth, leading to cavities and a rapid loss of teeth. When her permanent teeth arrive in a few years, they'll have nothing to guide them into alignment.

But there is a greater danger than crooked teeth.

Many Cambodian mothers, trying to ensure strong, healthy children by adopting the American tradition of plenty of milk, are unwittingly inviting anemia.

Dr. Tan, a Khmer Rouge survivor and the only board-certified Cambodian pediatrician in Long Beach, says he frequently sees children up to 5 years old or more who should be eating a balanced diet but instead are existing solely on milk and often are bottle fed.

He explains to Mary's mother in Khmer that her daughter should have been weaned from the bottle by age 1, but the mother only smiles.

Tan tells a reporter, in English, "I'm going to empower Mary." Then he turns to the child and says with a smile, "You are a big girl now. You're about to start school. You don't need a bottle anymore."

Mary agrees heartily with everything, except the last comment, at which she lowers her face, peering up at Tan with her voluminous brown eyes and slowly shaking her head. Mary will consume nothing else, her mother says.

"It's hard to convince them because they think they are doing the right thing for their children," Tan explains.

While milk is considered essential in a growing child's diet, Tan says, it does not provide many crucial vitamins and minerals — such as B12, folic acid and iron. Children who consume only milk can become seriously anemic, he says.

The problem comes from living in a new country with a different diet. In Cambodia, milk is not available; children and adults subsist on a

BAD START

Toothless Cambodian children suffer anemia, a common result of drinking too much milk



Pediatrician Song M. Tan checks the mouth of Mary Sem, 5, at his office on Atlantic Avenue and Tenth Street. Mary had lost a majority of her baby teeth, a telltale sign that her mother is feeding her a diet of almost only milk, including a bottle every night. The all-milk diet has led to unwitting cases of childhood anemia, one of many problems specific to the Cambodian community.

Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram

healthy diet of rice, plenty of vegetables and fruits and fish. Meat is expensive and therefore a staple only for the rich or special occasions.

"They associate milk with the affluence of America," Tan says. "They think if they have their children drink it constantly, they will grow big and strong like Americans."

The situation persists despite educational efforts by groups such as the Well Infants and Children (WIC) program, which provides prenatal and neonatal treatment for families in need.

Anemia is a deficiency of red blood cells, hemoglobin or both. Normally, a drop of blood contains about 250 million red blood cells. The microscopic, diskshaped cells are filled with hemoglobin, a reddish pigment that carries oxygen from the lungs to all parts of the body and carries carbon dioxide from cells in the body back to the lungs.

Characterized by an unhealthy pallor, anemics may experience pulsating sounds, dizziness, shortness of breath, and fainting. Ultimately, the

heart's extra efforts to deliver oxygen throughout the body can cause it to enlarge and the pulse rate to skyrocket.

Beyond dietary issues, Cambodians and other Southeast Asians frequently carry hemoglobin E, which creates smaller red blood cells than hemoglobin A. A parent with the hemoglobin E trait has a 50 percent chance of passing it on to a child. Babies who inherit hemoglobin E from both parents will only produce hemoglobin E. As adults, they will

“They associate milk with the affluence of America. They think if they have their children drink it constantly, they will grow big and strong like Americans.”

— Dr. Song Tan,
pediatrician

transfer the hemoglobin E trait to their children, whether or not their partner has hemoglobin E.

Potentially deadly developments can occur when a child inherits hemoglobin E from one parent and the “beta thalassemia” gene from the other parent. The beta thalassemia gene causes the body to make less hemoglobin than usual. Paired together, these two genes lead to a disease that causes severe destruction of red blood cells.

This life-threatening disease has no known cure. Iron supplements are useless, and a child with hemoglobin E beta thalassemia disease usually dies in its teens or 20s, Tan says.

A handful of Tan's patients suffer from the disease and require transfusions — usually once a month — to survive. But repeated transfusions can cause other problems, because of unprocessed iron left in the body or infections passed in the blood, such as hepatitis.

A couple who carry the two genes face a one-in-four chance that the disease will develop in their child. Tests can usually determine by the second month of pregnancy whether or not a baby will have the disease.

This makes genetic testing and counseling really valuable for Cambodian couples who are about to be married or have children, Tan says. “It's hard, though, because most (Cambodians) are not always comfortable with testing. It goes back to the culture and the perceptions of health and medicine.”

MENTAL HEALTH

Khmer words can't describe depression or post-traumatic stress disorder

CONTINUED FROM 23

unable to find his father's grave or the grave he had dug for his 2-year-old brother.

"I won't lie to you; sometimes (patient's stories) are too much for me to cope with," Keo says. "But now I can recognize the symptoms of my illness, and I know how to deal with it. ... I think that I have been put here to do this for a reason."

Studies have repeatedly documented the incidence of war-related depression and stress disorder among Cambodian Americans.

A survey of 168 Cambodian refugees, conducted in 1993-94 by the Indochinese Psychiatric Clinic in Boston, found a high rate of psychiatric disorders. A survey of 590 Cambodians, by California's Department of Mental Health, found 16 percent of respondents met the criteria for stress disorder and 36 percent were clinically depressed.

A detailed study by Los Angeles psychologist Megan Berthold of 69 Long Beach Cambodian teens, published in 1989, found that 40 to 50 percent of those who had lived through the Khmer Rouge regime had post-traumatic stress disorder and 53 percent suffered from clinical depression.

Connecticut-based Khmer Health Advocates Inc., a nonprofit study group, says it sees some stress disorder symptoms in almost all its patients, and the incidence is increasing in recent years. That seems to reflect studies of concentration camp survivors of World War II, which found that stress disorder symptoms increased as the survivors aged.

Among local Cambodians, several factors make mental illness difficult to comprehend and treat, says Kim Sasaki, program manager of the Long Beach Asian Pacific Mental Health Program, run by Los Angeles County.

Cambodians tend to experience somatic illnesses — dizziness, fatigue, vertigo and gastrointestinal disorders — but don't realize these are common complications associated with clinical depression, Sasaki says. They also tend to treat their illnesses with home remedies or seek treatment from general practitioners. Often, the mental illness goes undiagnosed.

Taboos remain

The stigma surrounding mental illness is very pronounced in Asian cultures, Sasaki explains. The community is close-knit, and problems are usually confined to the family. Admitting there is a problem may reflect poorly on the family and bring public shame.

Perhaps most importantly, the term "mental illness" does not translate into the Cambodian language. The closest that Keo and Sasaki can

"An eye test shows there is nothing wrong with their eyes, but they cannot see a thing. It's entirely in their mind. The pain of their past is so great, they 'go blind' trying to block it out."

— Rev. Kong Chhean,
who holds a Ph.D in psychology
and counsels clients in the Long
Beach Asian mental health program

provide is a literal translation of "sickness or illness of the mind or head."

This is often interpreted by Cambodian refugees as insanity.

In fact, depression can be treated through therapy and medication. Left unchecked, though, it can impair brain function in many ways, usually disabling the ability to remember.

Clinical depression is diagnosed when someone cannot work or complete daily tasks, Sasaki says. It is so severe it completely incapacitates the person, making it almost impossible to learn a new language or adapt to a new culture.

Conversely, those with post-traumatic stress disorder are unable to forget. If the disorder is suffered long enough, it can be equally disabling and, in turn, cause depression.

A current study being completed by the Indochinese Psychiatric Clinic states, "Preliminary results indicate that a history of torture is associated with hidden or undiagnosed traumatic brain injury, which may be interfering with positive response to psychiatric treatment."

At the Asian mental health program, treatment tends to be based on family approaches and each client's individual needs. Education is a key element in helping people understand what they are going through, which in turn alleviates many of the patient's fears, Sasaki says.



Julie Lau, left, reads about Cambodia and the killing fields to her class in Long Beach. The class is made up of Cambodians, many with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, who lived in Cambodia during the time of the Khmer Rouge.

Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram

Women's trauma

Studies by various organizations in 1987, 1989 and 1993 found that Cambodian women experienced the most extensive trauma. Women were victims of physical violence, often of a sexual nature, and exposed to multiple forms of emotional abuse, torture and forced labor. Many witnessed the deaths or executions of their husbands, and most lost at least one, and often several, children. In many cases, such sights have led to psychosomatic blindness years later.

"An eye test shows there is nothing wrong with their eyes, but they cannot see a thing," says the Rev. Kong Chhean, who holds a Ph.D. in psychology and counsels clients in the Long Beach Asian mental health program. "It's entirely in their mind. The pain of their past is so great, they 'go blind' trying to block it out."

Extended kinships, so much a part of Cambodian women's heritage and everyday functions, were also destroyed. To alleviate their pain, a support group formed to get homebound Cambodian women in Long Beach into society.

Such women typically fall into two categories: those of child-bearing age and the elderly. The younger group often have small children, which discourages their participation in outside activities until their children are in school. The elderly group are isolated, with little to do during the day. Some women from both groups may have skills useful in the workplace but may be unaware of opportunities because of language barriers and their responsibilities as wives and mothers.

Retraining opportunities may be hard to come by and require exposure to the public. Many of the women live in largely Cambodian neighborhoods, where they can avoid stressful situations such as riding a bus with strangers

who don't speak their language. If their families can't take them to a doctor or a store, and a neighbor can't drive them, they don't go, Sasaki says.

"Part of this is due to the role of women," Sasaki says. "They traditionally are in the home caring for the children."

Loss of authority

Because their English skills are poor, many parents rely on their children to translate bills, report cards and other significant pieces of information, Sasaki says. This means a loss of parental authority, a serious problem for fathers in their traditional role as head of the house. Such men may then lash out at their spouses and children.

No men's group has been established because most of the men in the project aren't interested in participating in group therapy, Sasaki says. They tend to seek individual or family counseling.

A recent issue of concern in the community is the belief that parents who survived the killing fields are now passing stress disorder to their American-born children or to children who were so young when they fled Cambodia they have no memories of what occurred.

The unofficial syndrome has been nicknamed "trickle-down PTSD."

There are no clinical studies to support the theory, Sasaki says, but no study has disproved it, either.

"It's hard to generalize," Sasaki says. "But obviously parents who are suffering from major mental illnesses are not always able to tend to the emotional needs of their children. ... That would have an effect on the child."

HEALTH

Cambodian social agencies sound warnings against cigarette smoking

CONTINUED FROM 22

disease and cerebral vascular disease among the three leading causes of death in adults over the age of 45, and heart disease as the leading cause of death in adult women under 45.

The starvation and torture used by the Khmer Rouge to control the Cambodian populace resulted in extreme stress to the heart and vascular system. While there are no known surveys of cardiovascular health in Cambodian refugees, studies of the Jewish holocaust found abnormally high death rates from cardiovascular disease among survivors of Nazi Germany.

One researcher found that the hearts of concentration camp victims "turned senile" typically 20 years earlier than normal. A victim who died in the Warsaw Ghetto had a heart that weighed 100 grams; the usual weight of the heart is about 250 grams.

"If one part of the body is abused it affects the entire system," says Dr. Kittya Paigne, who practices at Long Beach Memorial Medical Center, Pacific Hospital of Long Beach and St. Mary Medical Center. "Even sleep deprivation can have serious consequences."

Studies of WWII holocaust survivors led to the discovery of Concentration Camp Syndrome, which includes symptoms of premature aging, reduced resistance to disease, headache, fatigue, gastrointestinal disorders, depression, social adjustment problems, and posttraumatic stress disorder.

The syndrome, as described in medical literature, "persists for decades and causes poor health, emotional suffering and early death."

Little is known about Cambodians' predisposition to cancer, although the California tumor registry showed a high incidence of liver cancer in Cambodian men. Similarly, stomach cancer is particularly high in Asian women, and breast and cervical cancer have become a silent killers for Cambodian refugee women. Most of them are uncomfortable discussing their sex history and reproductive health with anyone, let alone a foreign doctor. Checkups are rare.

Lung cancer and other effects of smoking are a frequent target of programs offered by many local Cambodian service groups, including Families in Good Health, the Cambodian Association of America and the United Cambodian Community, Inc.

The Khmer Rouge used cigarettes as an appetite suppressant, and smoking was the only chance for rest for those who toiled in Cambodia's fields. At one point, a pack of cigarettes was valued at the same price as an ounce of gold, says Samuel Keo, a psychologist with Los Angeles County's Long Beach Asian Pacific Mental Health Program.

Today, prenatal programs focus on the negative effects of smoking on infants. Families in Good Health also tries to steer Cambodian women from using traditional remedies for aches and pains in pregnancy and postpartum depression. The



Smoking is one of many health issues that plague the Cambodian community. Cigarettes were used as appetite suppressants during Pol Pot's reign. They also offered Cambodians forced to work in slave labor camps one of the only opportunities for rest breaks. Above, an anti-smoking billboard overlooks Anaheim Street, the heart of Long Beach's Little Phnom Penh.

Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram

herbs can be unsafe and are often soaked in Cambodian "rice wine," similar to sake or vodka.

Gastrointestinal disorders are common among Long Beach Cambodians. Local doctors' offices see patients who suffer from bloating, heartburn, constipation and diarrhea. And psychologists see many patients whose episodes of post-traumatic stress disorder are associated with gastrointestinal upset.

Malnutrition and starvation can also lead to disorders of the skeletal system caused by decalcification. Rheumatism, osteoporosis and other disorders are reported with great frequency in medical texts.

Khmer Health Advocates reports the almost universal experience of body pain in adolescent and adult survivors. The most common pain is in the shoulders, with periodic numbness in the hand and arms. Many survivors consider leg cramps a simple fact of life.

Chronic pain plays a big role in sleep problems. Many Cambodians rely on a combination of acetaminophen for pain and alcohol for sleep, a potentially deadly combination.

Reported cases of HIV and AIDS are extremely low among local Cambodians, making it difficult to get federal and state funds for prevention programs targeting them. Yet Cambodia itself has one of the world's highest growth rates for new cases of HIV and AIDS.

The Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services is concerned with local Cambodians' low reporting rate — just 1 percent of reported AIDS cases in the Asian community. The suspected underreporting may be because the law doesn't require reporting of HIV infection, and private physicians are not required to report AIDS.

Meanwhile, the Southeast Asian Health

Project found that 48 percent of prostitutes in Cambodia are HIV positive, and that numbers of Cambodian-American tourists are being exposed to strains of HIV and AIDS presently rare in America.

"It can be predicted that as mobility between Phnom Penh and Long Beach increases, the HIV/AIDS virus will increase in Long Beach," wrote Teri Yamada, director of the Southeast Asian Studies Center at Cal State Long Beach, in a paper following a conference in Hamburg, Germany, in 1998.

"Rev. Kong Chhean told me of the new proverb circulating in the community, loosely translated as, 'Go to Cambodia and bring back red mango.' Red mango, of course, is a very delicious fruit; it is also the generic term in Cambodian for STDs and HIV/AIDS."

COINING

Allegations of child abuse can scare Cambodians from seeking medical treatment for serious illnesses

CONTINUED FROM 22

realized that he was seriously ill and called the paramedics, the man had suffered a stroke and lost his ability to walk and speak, Tan says.

"Coining is not usually a problem," he says. "The problem arises when someone suffers from a serious ailment, like a heart attack or stroke, and the person is content to delay treatment and use coining instead."

Many say coining provides relief in much the same way that massage works, and is far more accessible than Western medical practices.

Cambodian refugees frequently have trouble seeking U.S. medical treatment for several reasons, including cost, language barriers, paperwork and what they perceive as a lack of personal concern by Western physicians.

But the biggest hurdle is a difference in beliefs about the origins of illness.

Because of their reliance on traditional remedies, some refugee parents have been accused by authorities of child abuse. Although coining leaves no permanent scars, the lines of red welts have alarmed teachers and social workers, who mistakenly thought children had been beaten.

Tan and other Cambodian



Coining involves medicinal oils, salves and balms briskly rubbed into the body with a copper or bronze coin.

Americans know well the story of a Vietnamese man in Fresno whose children were taken from him for coining them.

"He became so distraught over them taking his children away, he was so ashamed, that he killed himself," Tan says.

Such stories have terrified many of Tan's patients, making them unwilling to admit they still practice coining or, worse, delaying other medical treatment so he won't see the telltale red marks and report them.

Tan says he would not do that, and he works hard to help his patients understand that he is not angered by the practice, while impressing upon



Cupping, at left, involves inserting a flame into a glass cup. Once the flame burns out, the hot edges of the cup are pressed on the body, leaving a red ring or bruise. It is believed that cupping draws ill winds or evil spirits out of the body.

Photos by
Stephen Carr /
Press-Telegram

back thousands of years cannot be forgotten within a few decades in a new country. And it's a mistake for doctors to try to force Eastern immigrants to abandon their beliefs.

A common belief among Cambodians, for example, is that a "bad wind" invades the body and causes illness. Coining, also called "wind scratching," is believed to drive out the ill wind and serve as a means of prevention.

The reason for using coins isn't clear. Some speculate on an old belief that gold or bronze coins have an ability to draw out sickness.

Jup kchall, pinching, is used to treat headaches and malaise. The first and second fingers are used to pinch the bridge of the nose, neck or chest, which usually leaves bruises. *Jup* also refers to the practice of "cupping."

Cupping involves inserting a flame into an inverted glass cup causing the flame to burn out. The hot edges of the cup are then pressed on the body, leaving a red ring or bruise. Believers say evil forces and ill winds that cause illness and pain are drawn out of the body.

Because a number of illnesses among Cambodian refugees are psychosomatic — because of the trauma suffered at the hands of the Khmer Rouge — so is the effectiveness of the treatment.

The nurse says her elderly aunt often falls ill with unexplained bouts of weakness, pain and dizziness. Doctors can find nothing wrong with her and chalk it up to age. But when her aunt is coined, the nurse says, she sobs and is flooded with relief.

The aunt's cries are not from pain but because the older woman relives the nightmare of her fight for survival and the brutality of her family's slaughter.

"It eases her mind, it eases her stress and she feels better," the nurse says.

them that coining is not a cure.

"Most of these practices are not abuse in any way," says Lillian Lew, director of the Families in Good Health program at St. Mary Medical Center, which serves the area's Southeast Asian population and counts Cambodian refugees and their families as its largest client group. Lew sees more danger in such things as over-the-counter herb remedies

that boast quick energy but may cause heart attacks and death.

"If someone has a headache and coining helps, I don't discourage them," she says. "But if the headaches are persistent, we tell them they need to be examined by a doctor. If the exam doesn't reveal a more serious problem, then that's fine. They can continue to coin."

Lew says a tradition that dates

“ People have been oppressed for so long and don't see the value of one person, one vote. They don't see the power of the city councilperson. ”

— **Him Chhim**, executive director
Cambodian Association of America, Long Beach

“ Political leaders (in Long Beach) belong to political parties in Cambodia. And once they do that, they distance themselves from (those) in their community. ”

— **Rithy Uong**, first and only Cambodian-American councilman of an American city: Lowell, Mass.

POLITICS IN LITTLE PHNOM PENH

Long Beach Cambodians loom large in governance at home and abroad

By **Wendy Thomas Russell**
Staff writer

LONG BEACH — For years, Cambodian refugees in Long Beach were political outsiders, unable to master the labyrinth of American bureaucracy.

Now, after more than two decades, a growing number of first-generation Cambodians are venturing into city politics — and, in turn, local politicians are venturing into the Cambodian community.

It's no longer uncommon to find Cambodians in City Hall, or Long Beach City Council members at Cambodian festivals. Cooperation is building, many say, along with mutual respect.

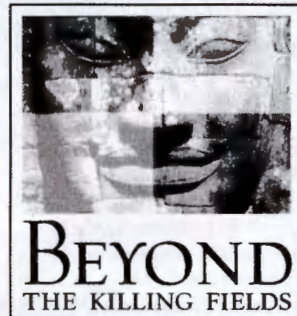
But true political clout has been hard to come by.

The only two Cambodians to run for Long Beach City Council have lost their races by wide mar-



Long Beach 6th District Councilwoman Laura Richardson-Batts, right, joins Kry Ly, center, a board member of the Greater Long Beach American Red Cross, and businessman Danny Vong, in a patriotic song at a Red Cross fund-raiser in MacArthur Park last month.

Jeff Gritchen / Press-Telegram



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gins — demonstrating, in part, that even strong Cambodian leaders have so far been unable to pierce the bubble of their own ethnic enclave and gain support in the community at large.

And some political power has been lost by default. Many Cambodians don't vote, and those who do often stand divided.

Nonetheless, Long Beach Cambodians have made a number of strides over the years.

Council members and their aides have appeared at several recent events on Anaheim Street — including a banner-hanging ceremony and an Asian Town Hall meeting. In June, mayoral candidate Norm Ryan chose Cambodian restaurant La Lune to announce his candidacy.

And last year, Long Beach City Council candidate Dee Andrews courted Cambodian voters and came within six votes in a runoff election against 6th District Councilwoman Laura Richardson-Batts.

Him Chhim, executive director of the Cambodian Association of America in Long Beach, says this is the type of situation where Cambodians could decide the winner.

"If the race was close," Chhim says, "we would be the swing vote."

Voter turnout among Cambodians is on the rise but is still low, according to the Khmer Ethnic Studies Institute, which represents Cambodian communities across the United States.

The institute recently reported that lack of citizenship, language skills and candidates who appear knowledgeable keep most first-generation Cambodians from voting. In addition, some refugees, accustomed to life under a communist regime, are skeptical of democracy and unwilling to take part.

"People have been oppressed for so long and don't see the value of one person, one vote," Chhim says, "They don't see the power of the city councilperson."

PLEASE SEE **POLITICS / 27**



San Arun dances at a party in her honor at the New Paradise restaurant in Long Beach. Arun is the Undersecretary for the Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs in Cambodia. She ran for Long Beach City Council in 1996 and lost.

Jeff Gritchen / Press-Telegram

② Taking democracy to Cambodia

By **Wendy Thomas Russell**

Staff writer

LONG BEACH — San Arun and Yasith Chhun have a lot in common.

Both survived Cambodia's holocaust under the communist Khmer Rouge and immigrated to America as refugees 20 years ago. Both settled in Long Beach, went to college, opened businesses and reared families. Then both shifted their focus to their homeland — hoping to effect change in the government by getting involved in Cambodian politics.

The two refugees with a common ground now stand on opposite sides of a political divide, which pits Cambodian against Cambodian, neighbor against neighbor.

Arun joined the Cambodian government. Chhun tried to overthrow it.

Cambodia's political epicenter may be some 8,000 miles away in the country's capital city, Phnom Penh, but Long Beach is a microcosm of these politics — reflect-



Yasith Chhun is an accountant in Long Beach and leader of the Cambodian Freedom Fighters.

Jeff Gritchen / Press-Telegram

ing a range of views, from moderate to the extreme.

"The history of politics in Cambodia has always been very contentious and emotional," says Cal State Long Beach professor Teri Yamada, director of the school's Southeast Asian Studies Center. "Many (Long Beach refugees) remember Cambo-

dia in the 1950s, an era of relative peace and prosperity. All of that was destroyed. They would like their memory of that Cambodia to become alive again."

It's not uncommon for refugees to be political party members in Cambodia while never having entered a voting booth in the United States. Cambodian senators frequently make this city a campaign-trail stop.

And, in the last eight years, dozens of well-known Long Beach leaders have taken high-level Cabinet jobs in the Cambodian government — sometimes at great personal and financial expense.

Among them are Deputy Prime Minister Lah Tol, Defense Secretary Bun Sroeu Por, Agriculture Secretary Sam Oeun May, Rural Development Secretary Vora Kanthoul, National Elections Commissioner Tip Janvibol and Senate First Vice-President Prince Chivan Monirak Sisowath.

PLEASE SEE **DEMOCRACY / 28**

DONORS REMEMBER THEIR ROOTS

Phnom Penh has come to depend on Long Beach businesses as a source of charity

By Wendy Thomas Russell

Staff writer

An auto body shop teeming with oil-smudged mechanics, broken Chevys and used spark plugs is not your traditional hub of philanthropy.

There are no leather chairs, no Armani suits and certainly no expensive paintings.

Yet Tap's Auto Repair Center on Cherry Avenue is frequently called upon to fund humanitarian projects in Cambodia — a Third World country largely destroyed during three decades of war.

Shop owner Phana Tap, a Cambodian refugee who settled in Long Beach in 1985, is known for giving generously. He says he donates "a couple thousand dollars a year" — a significant sum considering that teachers and police officers in Cambodia earn an average of \$25 a month.

"I give all the time — no matter what they do," Tap, 45, says with a shrug. His money has gone to build temples, roads and schools.

Tap's budget for charity is noteworthy, but his altruism is all too common.

Most of Long Beach's Cambodian refugees — even the very poor — manage to contribute to causes in Cambodia. Whether sending money to relatives, donating to food drives or funding construction projects, these refugees remain strongly linked to their homeland and devoted to its recovery.

In turn, Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, has come to depend on Long Beach as a financial pillar.

Relief organizations looking for handouts know they should hit Anaheim



Seng Bounnay, right, works on a car as Phana Tap, left, cleans a homemade oil collector he uses when lubing cars at his auto shop, Tap's Auto Repair Center on Cherry Avenue in Long Beach. Every year, Tap sends thousands of dollars to Cambodia for humanitarian projects.

Jeff Gritchen / Press-Telegram

Street — the main thoroughfare of Long Beach's Cambodian business district. Cambodian government officials make this city a necessary stop on their campaign trails.

"They like the American dollar," says New Paradise restaurant owner Kevin

Kang, who regularly holds fund-raisers at his Anaheim Street restaurant.

Aid to Cambodia comes in many shapes.

Some Cambodian-Americans donate to nonprofit organizations or send money to individual relatives. Others orga-

nize their own relief efforts, open businesses to boost the Cambodian economy or involve themselves in politics there.

David Kreng, an engineering consultant, settled in the United States in the 1960s and helped organize refugees in the late 1970s and early '80s. His over-

seas efforts have focused on destroying land mines left by warring factions in the early 1970s, and creating a Boy Scouts of Cambodia.

"Most people," he says, "want to help their country."

Sereivuth Prak is deputy director of the United Cambodian Community Inc. in Long Beach and vice president of Internal Affairs for Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation in Lakewood. The latter refers to Cambodians living in the Mekong River Delta of Vietnam. The federation, Prak says, fights for their human rights protections, religious freedoms and democratic participation.

Expatriates often take it upon themselves to bring about change because they mistrust the Cambodian government, says Teri Yamada, director of the Southeast Asian Studies Center at Cal State Long Beach. There is a sense, she says, that "the only way to actually help is to make sure you do it."

Corruption and greed are still widespread in the mid-level ranks of Cambodian government, experts say, and the government's new infrastructure is still too weak to support its people adequately.

Asked if he would consider moving back to Cambodia, auto mechanic Tap shakes his head "no" and talks about the opportunities America has afforded him. He still doesn't trust the Cambodian political system, he says, and wouldn't dream of returning.

But that doesn't stop him from opening his pocketbook — and his heart. "I never forget my roots."

POLITICS

Community fractured over district lines, but candidates seek Cambodian votes

CONTINUED FROM 26

Poverty plays a role, too. "They're not going to say anything," says Moni Sing, a Cambodian refugee and field deputy to Congresswoman Juanita Millender-McDonald, D-Torrance. "They're just trying to survive." The exact number of Cambodian voters in the city is unknown, but estimates in the 6th council district put the number of Asian voters in the June 6, 2000, election at 463, says Michael Sieu, who campaigned for Councilwoman Richardson-Batts.

Sieu says 1,663 Asians are registered to vote in that area; that's roughly 12 percent of the total Asian population.

A community voice

City officials say they want to raise the level of political involvement among Cambodians. Richardson-Batts and 4th District Councilman Dennis Carroll say they are dedicated to spending time with Cambodians and giving them a voice.

"There's a tremendous amount of energy placed on working with that community and making sure they are part of everything that's going on," 2nd District Councilman Dan Baker says.

At a mayoral debate Nov. 26, five of six candidates referred to the Cambodian community when answering questions about diversity. Incumbent Beverly O'Neill said she had recently met with a group of Cambodians to discuss giving them a voice in city issues. And three challengers said the city should be more responsive to that community's needs.

Rounding out the core of City Hall support is Bonnie Lowenthal, who was elected as the 1st District councilwoman this year. Lowenthal is a former planning director at the United Cambodian Community Inc., an assistance organization devoted to helping Cambodian refugees and their families.

Lowenthal's house is full of Asian artifacts — many taken from her three trips to Cambodia. Tribal headdresses, wood carvings, masks, pottery and figurines cover her windowsills, walls and tables.

She is intensely proud of her relationship with Cambodians

and optimistic about their political future.

"There are more people becoming aware of the richness and beauty of this particular culture, as well as the tax base of the business community," she says. "It's very significant."

Still, council members declined requests from Cambodian leaders on two occasions this year. Some saw the votes as symbolic.

In April, Cambodian activists asked the city to waive fees associated with holding the wildly popular Cambodian New Year celebration in El Dorado Park. The council declined, saying security problems at past celebrations warranted a heightened police presence. The city couldn't possibly foot the bill, council members told a packed audience.

As a result, Cambodian organizers canceled the El Dorado Park festival, and the Buddhist Year of the Dragon was rung in on the lawns of Santa Fe Dam Recreation Area in Irwindale, some 35 miles north of Long Beach.

Then, in July, city officials redrew their district borders to reflect population shifts during the last five years. A few Cambodian leaders urged the council to put the area known as "Little Phnom Penh" in one council district in hopes of better representation.

That neighborhood — bordered roughly by Seventh Street on the south, Pacific Coast Highway on the north, Long Beach Boulevard on the west and Junipero Avenue on the east — had long been placed in four districts.

In the end, the borders that split Little Phnom Penh shifted very little. Carroll's 4th District moved east, acquiring part of El Dorado Park. Richardson-Batts' 6th District grew west and north into the Wrigley area.

Richardson-Batts, who has one of the most ethnically diverse districts in the city, says she values her Cambodian constituents but also must represent a large number of Hispanics and blacks.

It's not "that I don't support Cambodian representation," says Richardson-Batts, who is black. "In fact, I do. But to dilute the African-American vote — the only minority represented on the council — isn't right

COUNCIL DISTRICTS CROSS NEIGHBORHOOD

Some local Cambodian leaders wanted the city's heavily Cambodian central neighborhood to fall into a single City Council district when new boundaries were drawn this year. But the neighborhood remains divided among four districts (1st, 2nd, 4th and 6th).



PAUL PENZELLA / PRESS-TELEGRAM



Long Beach
1st District
Councilwoman
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Jeff Gritchen /
Press-Telegram

either. ... You cannot dilute one minority group for the sake of increasing another."

Few candidates

So far, only two Cambodian Americans have run for seats on the Long Beach City Council. The late Nil Hul ran in 1986 in the 6th District, garnering 5 percent of the vote in a field of nine.

Ten years later, businesswoman San Arun ran in the 4th District, as Sandy Arun-Blankenship, and earned 10 percent of the vote. Shortly after her loss, she accepted a Cabinet job in the Cambodian government.

Some blame both council losses on low voter turnout and the lack of a single, Cambodian-heavy district. More likely, however, is that Cambodians themselves lack unity.

Many belong to political parties in Cambodia, which are far more numerous than U.S. parties — and more contentious. Political differences give way to infighting. Simple disagreements turn into drawn-out battles.

Rarely do Cambodians here back a single person, many say, or agree on key issues of importance to the community.

Rithy Uong became the country's first and only Cambodian-

American city council member when he was elected to serve a two-year council term in Lowell, Mass., in 1999. He says the bitter divisions that mark Cambodian politics have no place in local American governments, including Lowell and Long Beach.

"Political leaders (in Long Beach) belong to political parties in Cambodia," he says. "And once they do that, they distance themselves from (those) in their community."

"You've got to be fair to all people. All those leaders who belong to different factions — they don't know how to play politics."

Long Beach residents are so entrenched in Cambodian politics, in fact, that several major Cambodian parties have seasonal headquarters in Long Beach, meaning they establish election-time campaign offices. And an organization called the Cambodian Freedom Fighters, also based here, has launched at least one attack on Cambodia's capital in an attempt to overthrow the government. While widely shunned by other Cambodian refugees, the freedom fighters' organization exemplifies just how extreme these groups can become.

Factionalism is most visible in

the number of Cambodian-run organizations serving the refugee community here. Dozens of agencies have formed and splintered. Estimates put the number between 70 and 100 — the two largest being the Cambodian Association of America and the United Cambodian Community Inc.

"There are layers of fracturing going on here," says Cal State Long Beach professor Teri Yamada, who runs the Southeast Asian Studies Center. "I really believe that this is the most dysfunctional Cambodian community in the United States."

CAA and UCC, which have traditionally competed for grant dollars, have recently become friendly and cooperative. But their long-standing rivalry has set the stage for competition here, and Yamada calls their relationship "an uneasy truce."

CAA became the country's first Cambodian refugee-assistance organization in 1975. Three years later, CAA defectors established UCC as the same type of organization. Since then, leadership has changed many times over. Last year, after UCC hit financial trouble, Andrew Danni stepped on board to take over. He's the organization's first

white executive director, but says he plans to hand the post back to a Cambodian-American when the books are balanced again.

These days, city officials and Cambodian community activists tout the Cambodian Coordinating Council as evidence that the community is uniting.

Several community leaders founded the group, nicknamed Cam-CC, last year to tie numerous organizations together.

Divisiveness

But even Cam-CC has fallen victim to internal squabbles.

Michael Sieu helped create Cam-CC to bring attention to numerous issues in the community. At the time, he was assistant director of Mt. Carmel Cambodian Center; he has since become an assistant planner for the city.

At first, Sieu helped lead Cam-CC in devising policies and goals for the group. But three months later, the group insisted on electing officers: It elected Chhim president, and Sieu second vice-president.

Several months later, Cam-CC members accused Sieu's employer, Mt. Carmel, of lacking dedication to the group. They held a vote, and ousted all Mt. Carmel representatives from the table. Sieu was forced to leave.

"That's called a coup," Sieu says, still stinging from the vote, "and that's a pattern that the Cambodian community does."

Chhim defends the election, saying it was democratic, not a coup. He says he disagreed with the decision because it divided a group formed in the spirit of unity. But it was the majority's will, he says.

"His agency was voted out," Chhim says. "Michael Sieu had to go. Nothing I can do."

Despite the friction, Sieu says he is still hopeful that the similarities of his fellow refugees will outlive their differences.

"We suffer enough under the genocidal (Khmer Rouge leader) Pol Pot — and adapt to a new society," Sieu says. "We're hating each other. How come?"

Vora Kanthoul, a former Long Beach resident who is now secretary of state for the Ministry of Rural Development in Cambodia, says it's just a matter of time before Cambodians hold real power in city government.

"To gain political clout, the community must be united or at least project the image that we are united," he says. "Other immigrant groups have learned that before us."

Sieu is among those first-generation Cambodians looking to the next generation to make a big difference in the political realm. Those born here will have better understandings of American politics, he says. They will be more removed from the fractured political system of Cambodia. And they will likely be united.



The Cambodian National Assembly in session in Phnom Penh. Sin Neung, former owner of the Bayon Market in Long Beach, is parliamentarian.

Sinith Heng / For the Press-Telegram

Arun, who lost her bid for Long Beach City Council when she ran as Sandy Arun-Blankenship in 1996, is now undersecretary in the Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs.

"Long Beach is central to Phnom Penh," Yamada says.

It also may be detrimental.

Chhun, a 44-year-old Long Beach accountant, two years ago founded the Cambodian Freedom Fighters, an anti-communist group that opposes Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen.

Last fall, Chhun shocked Long Beach's refugee community when he masterminded an armed attack on three government buildings in Phnom Penh. At least seven men died in the attempted coup, and a dozen more were injured — mostly rebels.

Chhun's methods are far too extreme for most — especially since Cambodia is experiencing its first period of sustained peace in three decades. His long-distance revolution demands little credibility here or abroad.

But Chhun is not the only one criticizing Hun Sen — or those working under him.

Corrupt government

Cambodia's government is still widely regarded as an extension of the corrupt rulers that refugees fled two decades ago. Hun Sen, a former communist, is seen as doing too little to lift the country's 13 million people out of poverty, stop human rights violations, eliminate corruption, create jobs, develop land and bring Khmer Rouge war criminals to justice.

Just four years ago, Hun Sen launched his own bloody coup against Prince Norodom Ranariddh before holding elections under pressure from international leaders. Now, the government consists of more than 30 parties — including Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party, the royalist party known as FUNCINPEC, the Khmer Nation Party, the Republican party, the Khmer People's National Liberation Front and the Khmer Rouge.

Also, it's common knowledge that public money earmarked for poverty-stricken farmers often fills the pockets of mid-level politicians.

For these reasons, refugees often criticize expatriates now holding office in Cambodia.

"I just escaped from there," says Jonathon Dok, a Cambodian refugee and former aide to Long Beach Mayor Beverly O'Neill. "Why would I go to work for the same corrupt government?"

Dok says the best way to help Cambodia is to stay out of it. People cannot pull a sinking ship ashore if they're helping to weigh it down, he says.

Some lament the fact that the Cambodian government is taking Long Beach leaders away. There is still much to be done for refugees here — in employment, education and health care, for instance. And when leaders leave, some say, that means fewer people will make a difference.

"Every leader right now — most of them are in Cambodia," says Sitha Sum, president of the Cambodian-American Rescue Committee, a humanitarian organization in Long Beach.

Leading from Long Beach

But Kanthoul, who called Long Beach home for 15 years before taking his post in the Ministry of Rural Development, says Long Beach residents are improving Cambodia. New laws are being passed, he says, and corruption is waning.

"To those critics of our participation in government," he says, "I could only say that if we all sit by the sideline in Long Beach, I doubt these reforms (would be) taking place now."

Kanthoul says he never truly considered the United States his home, even though his wife and children still live in Long Beach.

"We appreciated the hospitality of our adopted home but never stopped wanting to return home to Cambodia," Kanthoul says. "I'm glad to be able to contribute to the rehabilitation of this very poor country and to be able to help its hapless people."

Arun is equally passionate about helping her homeland, but is clearly

DEMOCRACY

Long Beach Cambodians are prominent in politics of homeland

Dozens of Cambodians who once made their homes in Long Beach have returned to Cambodia to work for its government. Here are some former Long Beach residents, showing what they did here and the position they now hold in Cambodia:



SAN ARUN

Then: President of the Cambodian Business Association.
Now: Undersecretary of Women's and Veterans' Affairs.



SAM OEUEN MAY

Then: Long Beach Unified School District teacher.
Now: State Secretary of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing.



PRINCE CHIVAN MONIRAK SISOWATH

Then: Social worker for the Los Angeles County Department of Social Services; played a Khmer Rouge member in Academy Award-winning film, "The Killing Fields."
Now: Senate first vice-president; married to a daughter of King Norodom Sihanouk.

SAVOEUN CHEA

Then: Doughnut shop owner.
Now: Minister of Religious Affairs.

SIN NEUNG

Then: Owner of Bayon Market on 10th Street.
Now: National Assembly member.



TIP JANVIBOL

Then: Project coordinator for the United Cambodian Community Inc. (UCC).
Now: National Elections Commissioner.

DON NUTH

Then: Senior accountant for UCC.
Now: State Secretary of Tourism.



PRINCE SIRIRATH SISOWATH

Then: Representative of Cambodia to the United Nations.
Now: Co-minister of National Defense; his first wife was a daughter of King Norodom Sihanouk.

CHAN KANG

Then: Owner of Sovann Phoum Jewelry on Anaheim Street.
Now: Senate member.



SIPHAN PHAY

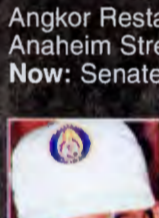
Then: Owner of restaurants, including former Apsara Restaurant on Atlantic Avenue and

GARY TO

Then: Employment counselor for the Cambodian Association of America (CAA).
Now: State Secretary of Environment.

VORA KANTHOUL

Then: Executive director of UCC.
Now: State Secretary of Rural Development.



Angkor Restaurant on Anaheim Street.
Now: Senate member.



LAH TOL

Then: Associate executive director of CAA.
Now: Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Education, Youth and Sports.

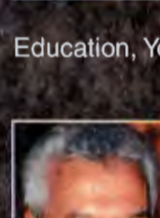


BUNNEANG KHEM

Then: Pharmacy owner, real-estate investor and honorary consul general to Cambodia.
Now: Ambassador to Indonesia.



Then: Real-estate investor in Victorville.
Now: State Secretary of National Defense.



SEM YANG

Then: CAA board member; consultant to the California Refugee Program Branch of Los Angeles

County Department of Social Services.
Now: Constitutional Council member.



Then: Executive director of UCC.
Now: State Secretary of Education, Youth and Sports.



LAY SRENG LU

Then: Owner of Long Beach's first Cambodian restaurant, Mekong Restaurant, on Anaheim Street.
Now: Minister

CHANDARITH PUTH

Then: Field engineer for Bendix Corp. in Lakewood.
Now: Governor of Kampot.

of State, Minister of Information and Press.

"We appreciated the hospitality of our adopted home but never stopped wanting to return home to Cambodia. I'm glad to be able to contribute to the rehabilitation of this very poor country and to be able to help its hapless people."

— Vora Kanthoul

more torn.

She had been president of the Cambodian Business Association and even made a run for Long Beach City Council

before returning to Cambodia three years ago. Leaving meant saying goodbye to her grown sons and taking a 90 percent cut in pay.

"I never thought I would go back," she says. But "if you want to improve yourself, your family, your country, you have to be involved."

During a recent visit to Long Beach, Arun was the guest of honor at a dinner at New Paradise Restaurant on Anaheim Street. At first, the 53-year-old seemed perfectly poised — passing out handshakes like fliers and flashing grins visible across the crowded room.

But as she stood at the lectern, tears slid down her cheeks: She was homesick.

"My heart is still here in Long Beach," she told a room full of Cambodian business leaders. "When people ask me when I'm coming home, I get confused. Because I don't know where is home. I have two homes. One is here in Long Beach and one is there in Phnom Penh."

Although she declines comment on the Cambodian Freedom Fighters, Arun defends Hun Sen as making Cambodia a better place to live.

The country "has come a long way. So give him some credit. Give the government of Cambodia some credit," she says. "When you're in power, people always say you're never good enough. The more you do, the more they blame you."

Picking up the pieces

For Tip Janvibol, who was confirmed as a National Elections commissioner in 1997, returning to Cambodia has meant more than just helping his country.

Interviewed via e-mail from Phnom Penh, Janvibol says his presence there has forced him to face the horrors of his childhood.

When the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia, Janvibol was among the masses forced to evacuate his home and march into the jungle, where he worked in rice fields for four years.

And he was a lucky one.

Janvibol's oldest sister's family, as well as all of his aunts and uncles, were starved to death working hard labor. Two close cousins were tortured and murdered. And his 7-year-old brother was buried in the ground and severely burned after being accused of stealing a potato. He lived, but the scars remain.

"This happening to your own family members," he says. "You could not imagine."

The country, Janvibol says, has not yet recovered from the atrocities.

"The Khmer Rouge crimes in the 1970s still cast a paralyzing shadow over Cambodian society," he says. "The killings of educated professionals and disintegration of Cambodian society by the Khmer Rouge left gaps that still cripple the social fabric, judiciary, the government administration — including the health and education structures."

"The moral impact," he adds, "was even more profound."

But making himself a part of the struggle is gratifying, Janvibol says, and facing his past is cathartic.

"Returning to Cambodia," he explains, "helps me in dealing with (my) post-traumatic stress disorder."

As for Chhun, the mild-mannered accountant who doubles as a rebel leader, politics are played at a distance. His route to change is less direct and more risky, as illustrated by the surveillance cameras that greet visitors to his accounting office on 10th Street.

He says he's been the subject of several assassination attempts, two FBI searches and a grand jury investigation. And, earlier this year, Cambodia convicted Chhun of terrorism in absentia and sentenced him to life in prison. Chhun is free only because Cambodia lacks an extradition treaty with the United States.

One Cambodian government official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said he met Chhun in Long Beach and doesn't consider him a credible opponent.

"Yasith is never considered by people who know him as any real threat to the government in Phnom Penh, which is solidly in place," the official said. "The disturbances that so-called members of his group caused...could hardly be termed an 'attempted coup.'"

Chhun strongly maintains he has violated no American laws; he provided encouragement — not weapons — to rebel troops abroad, he says.

Still, he remains determined to win his fight.

"We are going to overthrow this government."

CAMBODIA TOWN

The people of Little Phnom Penh are looking to cash in on tourism and upgrade their neighborhood with an official Anaheim Street business district



Above, Nicholas Yiv, 4, helps his mother, Mincia Keamn, sign a petition to designate a portion of Anaheim Street as "Cambodia Town." Right, Athena Phang practices the Tivear Propiay dance during Sophiline Cheam Shapiro's dance class at the United Cambodian Community Center. The dance reflects the innocence and purity of youth.

Photos by Jeff Gritchen / Press-Telegram



By Wendy Thomas Russell
Staff writer

Kenneth So can hardly contain his excitement. It's noon on a chilly November day, and the Boeing engineer is sitting at a conference table with six other members of a new task force. Their goal: to create an official "Cambodia Town" on a run-down strip of Anaheim Street between Atlantic Boulevard and Temple Avenue.

Like Little Saigon in Westminster, Chinatown in Los Angeles and Little India in Artesia, Cambodia Town is envisioned as a tourist destination that would boost the area's economy. An official designation, So says, would allow leaders to market the area, give Cambodians a sense of belonging and spur interest from the city's other residents.

"Once it's officially recognized, we're going to work so hard to make it beautiful," he says. "Sometimes when I think about it, I just smile."

So's not alone in his dedication to the cause.

Others on the Cambodia Town Initiative Task Force — including a doctor, a lawyer and several Boeing Co. engineers — are equally enthusiastic. They talk about how far their community has come, where it needs to go and how they plan to help get it there.

They also talk about Long Beach and how thankful they are that the city created a safe haven for refugees.

"We want to pay back the (Long Beach) community," says task force member Harrison Lee, a senior engineer at Boeing. "We owe this community so much."

The Cambodia Town campaign began in August after United Cambodian Community Inc., one of two major Cambodian community

PLEASE SEE **CAMBODIAN / 38**



■ **Inside:** Long Beach's Cambodian notables run the gamut from small-business owners to police officers and health care workers. Right, Buddhist monk Kong Chhean went from an apartment temple to the largest Cambodian house of worship.



This series and additional photos can be seen at press-telegram.com



Boroth Chay, the city's Economic Development Bureau's Khmer business development specialist, will try to form stronger links with Cambodian owners and the city.

Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram

SURVEY: Looking for closer ties

CONTINUED FROM 34

Using business licensing data from Jan. 30, the development bureau identified 591 Cambodian-held business permits among the roughly 26,000 issued citywide. Of the 591, 353 were found to be businesses unrelated to property rental. (The bureau estimates the data's margin of error at 5 percent.)

Retailers, including restaurants, accounted for a little more than half of all Cambodian businesses not strictly focused on renting property. In Long Beach as a whole, these businesses account for a little less than one-third of the city's roughly 10,000 non-real estate business permits.

Services are the second-most common type of Cambodian business in Long Beach, representing a little more than one-third of the 353 permits. This is a broad category covering activities such as auto repair, lodging and tax preparation. Citywide, this is the leading business category with 41 percent of all licenses.

Professional offices are far less common in Cambodian Long Beach than in the city's broader business community. The bureau identified only four Cambodian-owned professional permit-holders — a chiropractic office, a dental office, a medical office and an accountancy. That's about 1 percent of Long Beach's Khmer businesses, compared with about 15 percent of all permits city-wide.

The fact that Cambodians are more likely to go into retail and services and less likely to

open professional offices speaks to their culture and lack of education, say bureau officials and other people within and outside the Khmer business community.

Retail in particular suits Cambodians, they say, because it requires little education or English. In addition, traditional Cambodian family roles fit well in small retail stores. Children as young as 12 are expected to help out at the family store by running registers, cleaning up and filling in for a sick parent. This eliminates the need for a payroll. Long Beach has a wealth of Cambodian-owned restaurants for the same reasons.

Services are a common business activity among Long Beach Cambodians partly because the community prefers to deal with its own people, Cambodian business people say. They say Anaheim Street, home to the city's highest concentration of Cambodian businesses, has many auto repair shops and other service-providers whose customers generally avoid non-Khmer speaking businesses.

Though professionals remain rare in Cambodian Long Beach, many say this is changing as members of the younger generation pursue college degrees that will enable them to offer professional services.

Statistics on Long Beach's Cambodian businesses have never existed previously, and officials at the economic development bureau say they plan to use their new knowledge to reach out to the minority community as never before.

'Tontines' supply business capital

Investment clubs help raise money in Cambodian community

By John W. Cox
Staff writer

LONG BEACH — With a single number written on a small piece of paper, months of trust suddenly evaporated from the \$9,000-a-month Cambodian investment club.

The number represented a bid, an offer of repayment to the club's 29 other investors. But this bid was suspiciously high — double the normal amount and large enough to make everyone else in the group nervous that the bidder was desperate to take home that month's pot.

Their fears were soon confirmed. The successful bidder took the pool of money and fled Long Beach, leaving the club's leader to cover the \$300-a-month payments that the deadbeat was supposed to have made.

She's gone

"We never found her again," said one of the club's participants, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Despite the risks, such investment-and-loan plans, called "tontines" (pronounced tawn-TEEN) remain a common method of raising money in Cambodian Long Beach. Many Anaheim Street merchants are said to owe their businesses to the clubs.

The Cambodian form of tontine begins with an agreement on how many people will be involved. Generally, the tontine lasts for as many months as there are participants. However, some participants may choose to buy in with more than one share. In that case, the arrangement is extended one month for each additional share.

Next, the group picks a leader, known in Khmer as the "mae." This person must be utterly trustworthy, for she (most maes are women) will be responsible for the tontine's continuity.

Finally, it's agreed on how much money each participant may be asked to contribute, per share, on a monthly basis.

Assume, for example, that 10 people, including the mae, agree to participate with one share each. And assume that

each person agrees to contribute \$100 a month. With 10 participants, the tontine will run for 10 months.

To begin, the mae visits each tontine participant individually on a given day — say, the 15th of the month. On this first visit, she collects from each participant the full contribution amount, \$100 per person, raising a total of \$1,000.

The first month is special; on this month only, the mae pockets the full \$1,000. This is insurance against default, for the mae may be called upon to put up some of her own money to cover any participant who, for any reason, cannot pay. If no such problems arise, the mae keeps the \$1,000 at the end of the 10 months as payment for assuming the risk.

Each following month, on a set day prior to the 15th, the mae returns to each participant and asks for a bid. The bid is written on a piece of paper and kept in strict confidence.

After all bids have been collected, the person who submitted the highest bid, say, \$20, is declared by the mae to be the winner. Then, on the 15th, the mae approaches each participant — except the winner — and collects \$100 minus the amount of the winning bid, so \$80. The total collected — nine times \$80, or \$720 — is given to the winner, who cannot submit bids thereafter and who must continue to pay the same monthly contributions as other participants in future months.

As the tontine continues, competition for the pot diminishes because fewer people are eligible to bid. So in subsequent months the bids get lower, the pots get larger and the winning bidders receive larger payouts.

On the final month of the tontine, when everyone else has already taken the monthly pot, the last person has no need to turn in a bid because there are no other bidders. So each participant except that one puts in \$100, and the winner gets the full \$900 payout.

As it works out over the term of the tontine, those most in need of cash bid high and win early — and eventually pay out more than they receive. Those who need money the least bid low and win late — and get back more than they put in.

All of this depends on trust; to default on a monthly contribution is unforgivable. In the example cited above, the woman who skipped out on her obligation will probably never return to Long Beach.

"She's not welcome in the community," says the club member, who became involved in order to raise money for a new car. "And if she is, nobody will welcome her into a tontine again."

Latino variation

Tontines are rare in most of the United States, though a variation called a "cundina" is familiar to Latinos. Perhaps best known in the United States is the tontine of movie lore, where everyone involved puts in money and the last person alive takes it all.

In many cases, economics dictate Cambodians' involvement in tontines. As a community, Cambodians tend to shun lines of credit, preferring to keep financial matters among family and friends.

Jim Suos, a Long Beach Cambodian real estate agent with an office just off Anaheim Street, compares tontines to stock: They pay regular dividends and they carry a certain amount of risk. For the most part, he says, tontines benefit everyone involved.

Cambodian-American attorney Vitthara Tan, who serves primarily Long Beach clients, says people in the community typically use tontine proceeds to save money, cover emergencies such as medical expenses or buy a business. The investment pacts are especially suited to the Cambodian community, he says, because so many of its members have no established line of credit.

Anaheim Street mortgage banker Alex Keo says credit has long been a problem for many Cambodian business people. They don't use credit cards regularly and they buy vehicles with cash, so they have little of the credit history required for many loans.

Even those who own property may find it difficult to secure a second mortgage to provide cash for business investment, Keo says. Lack of paperwork is a common problem. When Cambodian business people come to him for help, Keo asks them for copies of past business licenses and past bank statements.

"They say, 'I only have the last one,'" Keo says, adding that insufficient documentation can lead to higher interest rates.

While tontines are a common alternative for Long Beach Cambodians trying to raise money, the legality of such arrangements may be open to question, Tan says. That's because interest payments typically go unreported to the Internal Revenue Service.

Tan tells of a pending case he is handling in which a husband bailed out of a tontine leaving Tan's client, the wife, to make the monthly payments. The two have since decided to divorce and the tontine debt has come into play.

"We're trying to claim credit with that as community debt," Tan says.

KHMER: Accepting new risks

CONTINUED FROM 34

the obvious niche in Long Beach. He decided to take the entrepreneurial route, the one he thought best for his community.

"The main factor was — I felt that we lacked representation in the community," he says. Tan now has an office in Or-ange, where he handles immigration, divorce and other civil legal matters for Long Beach Cambodians — at discount rates he figures are about half what a large firm would charge.

Finding customers outside the Khmer-speaking population can be more difficult. Language and cultural barriers often limit Cambodians' business opportunities, Cheng and Chay say.

But not at Horn's Auto Body, a 50,000-square-foot, Cambodian-owned auto shop just north of Anaheim Street at 1427 Long Beach Blvd. Customers from all backgrounds come in for paint jobs, upholstery, engine repairs and body work.

Quality work

Insurance referrals and a commitment to quality keep the customers coming, says founder Krithny Horn. Now 65 and retired, he says the customers come mainly through contracted relationships he formed years ago with two major insurance companies.

This arrangement has implications for the business, says Horn's son Patric, now the shop's general manager. He says servicing the contracts requires a formality of operation uncommon among many Cambodian businesses in Long Beach.

For example, Patric insists there be no corner-cutting to save a customer the deductible, as he says other Cambodi-



Hang Cheng, right, enjoys a light moment with students at his Long Beach office. Cheng's company, Advanced Systems Engineering, installs and maintains computer networks for companies as far away as New York. He also offers a free class on computer technology and systems.

Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram

shops sometimes do. That approach only lowers quality and jeopardizes return business, he says.

The old business models are evolving even in one of the most traditional of Cambodian trades: jewelry.

Danny Vong owns a family-run jewelry store in a 9,000-square-foot commercial building he ordered built at Anaheim Street and Gaviota Avenue in the heart of Cambodian Long Beach. He opened the shop after previous moves into three consecutively larger storefronts. Now Vong focuses not on expanding physically but on doing more business with far-away jewelry dealers.

The jewelry Vong manufac-

tures at the shop is shipped to Cambodian dealers in Massachusetts, Texas and Utah, among other places. Business is good and getting better as the network grows, he says.

But Vong says he doubts the system would work without the strict code of honor among Cambodians. As he sees it, this kind of traditional Khmer business etiquette has allowed his business to grow. Vong says he sends product worth \$10,000 or more in a single shipment, without including paperwork or asking the recipient to sign for the goods. Such formalities would slow commerce, he says, and hamper the exchange of product.

"The money, it's not the issue," he says. "But the trust, it's very,

very important."

As president of the Cambodian Jewelry Association of California, Vong was recently involved in another joining of old and new business approaches. The group put together more than \$10,000 to publish what Vong says is the first book on how to make Cambodian jewelry.

Another business group in town, the Cambodian American Chamber of Commerce, is more concerned with showing its members how to expand. President Thommy Nou says the year-old association of about 20 business owners intends to promote the sharing of ideas within the Cambodian business community.

RETAILING DOMINATES CAMBODIAN BUSINESS

City business permit records show Cambodians are more likely than most ethnic groups to be involved in retailing or manufacturing and less likely to be involved in the professions or in service businesses.

In this chart, the first column shows the total number of permits issued in the category to all ethnic groups. The second column shows the percentage this category represents of all business permits held. The third column shows the number of permits in the category issued to Cambodians. And the fourth column shows the percentage this category represents of all business permits held by Cambodians.

For example: In the category of "Contractors," 239 permits have been issued citywide. This represents 2.4 percent of all business permits issued by the city. Among these permits, only one is held by a Cambodian. This represents 0.3 percent of all business permits held by Cambodians.

BUSINESS	NO. OF PERMITS CITYWIDE	% OF PERMITS CITYWIDE	NO. OF PERMITS HELD BY CAMBODIANS	% OF ALL CAMBODIAN-HELD PERMITS
Contractors	239	2.4%	1	0.3%
Manufacturing	311	3.1	16	4.5
Misc.*	100	1.0	1	0.3
Professionals	1,457	14.6	4	4
Entertainment	44	0.4	3	0.8
Retail	3,238	32.4	186	52.7
Services**	4,104	41	128	36.2
Vending	125	1.3	9	2.5
Wholesale	167	1.7	3	0.8
Unique***	90	0.9	2	0.5

*Gardeners, handymen, chimney sweeps etc. / **Hotels, hospitals, bookkeeping, auto repair etc. ***Vehicle rentals, medical transport, mobile food, etc.

SOURCE: City of Long Beach Economic Development Bureau, based on business license data as of Jan. 30, 2001. (Margin of error estimated at 5 percent.)

PAUL PENZELLA / PRESS-TELEGRAM

World view

"We want to learn more how we can expand our business to be international," says Nou, a paralegal.

Perhaps, he says, the new generation will be able to seize educational opportunities and lead the community to even greater and more diverse business successes, he says.

"We hope the new generation, they can do something different."

Roeun Chin is trying to do just that. At age 26, Chin was well on his way to becoming a traditional Cambodian business-man. He owned a profitable doughnut shop in Norwalk and was studying business at Cal State Long Beach.

Then Chin did something almost unheard of among Cam-

bodian Americans: He sold the doughnut shop in 1998 and used part of the proceeds to start an Internet business with some friends. Together they launched Khmer-Market.com, a directory of some 300 Cambodian-oriented businesses and 500 Cambodian individuals.

Though revenue from his 22-month-old Internet site still flows at a trickle, Chin says he is proud to be among a new generation of Cambodians who are going into businesses other than restaurants and retailing.

"I see we're going beyond that and getting into professional businesses," he says. "It's a good thing. It shows that we're progressing. Slowly, but we're progressing."

PEOPLE WHO ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE



Jeff Gritchen / Press-Telegram

SOPHILINE CHEAM SHAPIRO

Sophiline Cheam Shapiro doesn't just dance. She tells a story.

Through the graceful movements of her hands and feet, Shapiro evokes images of the mythical Apsara dancers believed to have given life to the Cambodian people. They are the same stories carved into walls of Angkor Wat, the oldest religious monument in the world.

Today, as director of the Arts of Apsara Performing Arts & Cultural Center in the United Cambodian Community center

on Anaheim Street, Shapiro is handing down those stories by teaching classical Cambodian dance to children.

Shapiro, 34, has the distinction of being among the first classes to graduate from the School of Fine Arts, now the Royal University of Fine Arts, following the fall of the Khmer Rouge.

It's an honor in both title and symbolism. During its four-year reign, the Khmer Rouge wiped out an estimated 90 percent of the country's classical artists. The continuation of the school represented the perseverance of a culture.

Shapiro traveled with the

Classical Dance Company of Cambodia until 1991, when she met her now-husband John Shapiro, an American, and moved to Los Angeles.

Shapiro's memories of the killing fields are reflected in a 1997 book compiled by Dith Pran, a New York Times photographer whose own story was portrayed in the film "The Killing Fields."

In her account, titled "Songs My Enemies Taught Me," Shapiro recalls the songs she learned from the Khmer Rouge during its occupation of Cambodia.

"Lyrics that promised us the riches of heaven were written by

the engineers of our own public hell," wrote Shapiro, who lost her father, two brothers, a grandmother and many cousins and uncles during that time.

In April 2000, Shapiro premiered her concert-length classical dance adaptation of "Othello" at the RUFA Theater in Phnom Penh. Her next choreographic project is a solo piece that explores the plight of Cambodian women. It will premiere at the Los Angeles Theater Center in June 2002.

She lives in Long Beach with her husband and two sons.

— Wendy Thomas Russell

ANDREW DANNI

Andrew Danni is executive director of the United Cambodian Community Inc., but you might not know it by looking at him: He's white. Last year, the 50-year-old Long Beach man was hired to help pull the social service organization out of debt and he says he's been eyed carefully ever since.



"They're watching me like a crocodile on a lake," he says with a smile. "They have a hard time believing in me."

But Danni says he's dedicated to doing a good job for the community before handing the post back to a Cambodian. Topping his agenda are fostering more bonds with city officials and making UCC a financially viable organization again. He's well on his way. Since his arrival, Danni has brought in more than \$300,000 in grants. And he's lobbying the city to forgive some of the debt.

"That, in itself, will be my major accomplishment," he says.

— Wendy Thomas Russell

JAMES DOK

Pastor of the Cambodian Seventh-day Adventist Church and chair man of the United Cambodian Community Inc., James Dok is a man of faith and conviction.



When Dok, 42, first came to the United States, he did not plan on seeking a career in the clergy. He attended Cal State Long Beach, where he earned a

degree in engineering. And was hired to work on a contract project for the ARCO refinery from 1985 to 1986.

When the job ended, however, it was hard for him to find another. After he was repeatedly approached by the church, he said he and his wife decided it must have been God's will for him to become a pastor.

Dok was asked to fill in as interim chairman of the UCC during a particularly difficult time. Many of the former leaders left to pursue politics in Cambodia and UCC was left \$1 million in debt. Dok's work to turn the struggling service center around has been so successful he was voted in for a second term as chairman of the board.

— Tracy Manzer

SOLANGE KEA

Solange Kea is a rarity in more than one way.

Not only is she one of only two Cambodian attorneys practicing in Long Beach, but she is among a minority of young Cambodian women who have chosen to take an active role in her community.

So far, boards, committees and projects serving Cambodians here have been occupied mostly by men over 40. But the 30-year-old Kea is breaking that mold.

Only recently, she jumped feet-first into the biggest project in the Cambodian community: getting a Cambodia Town designation for a stretch of Anaheim Street. She sits on the Cambodia Town Initiative Task Force with seven men and three women, and is the youngest of the group.

"Personally, I want to do whatever it takes ... to be the role model for the younger Cambodian children," she says, adding that if children work hard, dedicate themselves and "use the richness of the Cambodian culture," they can achieve anything.

— Wendy Thomas Russell

SEREIVUTH PRAK

When a 16-year-old Cambodian boy



SEREIVUTH PRAK

When a 16-year-old Cambodian boy was gunned down on Anaheim Street last month, many lamented that he was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

That may be true, says Sereivuth Prak, but it shouldn't be.

"I want to see Long Beach always the right place at the right time," says Prak, deputy director of the United Cambodian Community Inc., whose offices are just up the street from the shooting site.

"Long Beach should be a safe place all the time. It should not be just Pine (Avenue) or Ocean Avenue or Second Street."

Prak often makes similarly strong statements about the state of affairs in his Cambodian community.

Always dressed in a suit and tie, Prak will offer up a firm handshake and a smile to a complete stranger, and create room for a polite chat even when his day is already filled.

But get him on the subject of politics, and Prak will show his deeply passionate and serious side.

As a former staff assistant for U.S. Congressman Robert Dornan, Prak is familiar with American politics, and eager to put democracy to work in Long Beach and his native Cambodia.

He is most intrigued by international politics.

"I have no ambition and no intention to work in any office in Long Beach," he says. "My goal is to be a diplomat."

A longtime resident of Long Beach, Prak is a member of the 2001 Leadership Long Beach class and vice president of international affairs for the Federation of Khmer Kampuchea-Krom, which fights for the rights of ethnic Cambodians living along the Mekong River Delta in Vietnam.

And, like so many of his generation, Prak has a painful history. During the Khmer Rouge regime, he and his family were forced to do slave labor in the rice fields of Cambodia.

"My survival of this modern holocaust has taught me a great deal about discipline, patience and determination in coping with severe hardship," he says, "as well as understanding the true meaning of death, poverty, starvation and suffering."

— Wendy Thomas Russell



Jeff Gritchen / Press-Telegram

TIPPANA TITH

Community activist Tippana Tith was among the first Long Beach Cambodians to visit the homeland he fled in 1975 after the country fell to Pot Pol's murderous communist Khmer Rouge.

Tith, 45, went back in 1988 — the Vietnamese communists were in control then — and when he returned to Long Beach he urged others to make the trip.

He gave a slide show of the pictures he took in Cambodia to a gathering of some 400 fellow immigrants and told them, "You hate communists but please go back and show you are from the freedom countries. They need your help."

He said he told them, "It is OK. They don't kill you anymore."

"A lot of people went back after I showed the slides," said Tith, who lost all his family to the Khmer Rouge, then barely survived a harrowing six months on the run in the jungle before he could escape.

Tith has been a trendsetter in other ways.

"In 1984, I organized the first Cambodian New Year Festival," he said. It was held at Long Beach's Recreation Park that year.

He's continued to play a role in festival organization.

There have been other trips for him to Cambodia. He went back in 1997, and served as an adviser to Ung Houth, the prime minister, for two years.

Another love of his life, in addition to his homeland and his adopted city, is sports.

That led him to create United Cambodian Sports of USA, a league which includes basketball, ping pong, soccer and tennis.

"I'm still running it," he said.

Tith works for Continental Translating Service, translating for courts, lawyers, insurance companies and others.

He is married and has three children. The oldest is a senior in high school. He makes his home in the heart of Long Beach's Cambodian community. He doesn't want to live anywhere else.

"I care about my community," he said.

— Helen Guthrie Smith

GLORIA KEO

Gloria Keo, 22, is a Cal State Long Beach student and member of the Cambodian Student Society.

The daughter of dance teacher Leng Hang and Realtor Alex Keo, Gloria was born and raised in California. Her parents are no longer married, but she is close to both. Following in her mother's footsteps, Keo is a classical dancer and helps teach dance within the Cambodian Arts Preservation Group. She also aspires to join her dad's real-estate office after she graduates from college.

She has helped coordinate the Cambodian Leadership Class at Polytechnic High School and hopes to become a role model for other Cambodian youth.

"I have no Cambodian role models to look up to," she says. "The African-Americans have Dr. King. There is none (for us) yet."

— Wendy Thomas Russell



KIMTHAI KOUCH

Kimthai Kouch is the second-in-command at the Cambodian Association of America (CAA) and a passionate advocate for progress in his community.

As associate executive director and chief financial officer, the 39-year-old Long Beach man is taking a front-seat role in making that happen. He oversees the agency's administrative services, supervises staff, secures funding and represents CAA at numerous conferences and seminars, among numerous other duties.

A steady, friendly man, Kouch is widely considered a major backbone of CAA, which has earned numerous grants since he began working there four years ago.

He has served as a paraprofessional social worker, a bilingual family counselor and a project director for the community Rehabilitation Industries in Long Beach.

Kouch is married with two children, and a third on the way.

— Wendy Thomas Russell



ERIC SING

Eric Sing, 37, is the Long Beach Police Department's civilian liaison to the Cambodian community and also works in the Crime Prevention Unit.



His duties include putting together the Crime Watch Newsletters, which go to the city's block captains and members of the police chief's various advisory groups.

Although he has bachelor's and master's degrees in computer science, he prefers the job he has.

"Cambodians are not very pro-law-enforcement, (but) if a few of us work for law enforcement, we can make some impact for the good of the Police Department and the community," he said.

"Sometimes, the fulfillment of your career is not just the money," he said.

— Helen Guthrie Smith

HEMARUN SOM

Hemarun Som is a young man with a vision: One day, he wants to be sitting behind the big desk in the mayor's office at Long Beach City Hall.

Meanwhile, the 20-year-old Cal State Long Beach marketing major is developing himself as a community leader and helping to groom Cambodian high school students to be future leaders through the Cambodian Leadership Program.

He was president of CSULB's Cambodian Student Society last year when he helped form the CLP with Leadership Long Beach and the National Conference for Community and Justice.

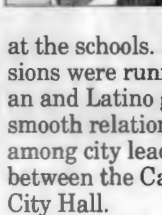
Som is also coordinator of the university's Cambodian Orientation Program, which helps new students understand the curriculum and helps their parents understand university life.

— Helen Guthrie Smith

JIM SUOS

A real estate agent by trade, Jim Suos has become known in Cambodian Long Beach as a proponent of education and youth programs.

Working closely with the Long Beach Unified School District, Suos has often volunteered to help Cambodian youth, guiding them in their educational and career endeavors. He is fond of saying that he considers all Cambodian children his own.



His activism doesn't stop at the schools. In the mid-1990s, when tensions were running high between Cambodian and Latino gangs, Suos stepped in to smooth relations. He has earned recognition among city leaders as a builder of bridges between the Cambodian community and City Hall.

"This country I like," Suos said. "It has a system. ... My country (Cambodia), we don't

CAMBODIAN

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groups, put up hot-pink banners on the lampposts of Anaheim Street. The banners, which hung for two months, read "Little Phnom Penh: The Children Are Our Future" and featured a drawing by a 5-year-old Cambodian girl.

City officials and Cambodian residents were thrilled with the banners, which sought to beautify the area and instill pride in the community.

"What such a little item can do to rally a community!" says Pasin Chanou, a Boeing software developer. "The momentum is there. If we lose the momentum, it will be really hard to get it going again."

"Little Phnom Penh," named for Cambodia's capital, has long been the unofficial name given to the area bordered roughly by Seventh Street, Pacific Coast Highway, Long Beach Boulevard and Temple Avenue. But local Cambodian leaders prefer "Cambodia Town."

It has more name recognition and is easier to pronounce, So says. It's also more accurate, as many of the thousands of refugees who live here came from provinces outside Phnom Penh.

Anaheim strip

Task force members describe Cambodia Town as a single stretch of Anaheim Street between Atlantic Boulevard and Temple Avenue. That way, leaders can focus their efforts on a defined area, heavily populated by Cambodian-owned businesses.

But the Cambodia Town campaign expects opposition. Many Latino-owned businesses are scattered along Anaheim Street, and some Latino activists object to putting a Cambodian label on such a diverse business district.

Task force members say they understand the concern but argue that a Cambodia Town would be good for all businesses — and good for the city. They say it will attract investors, create employment and reduce poverty in central Long Beach.

Of course, in a community beset with problems, Cambodia Town is no magic bullet.

Crime, poverty, a shortage of mental-health services and lack of political participation are among the ongoing struggles. And improving the lot of the city's Cambodians requires a serious effort, activists



Cambodian banners line Anaheim Street between Alamitos Avenue and Junipero Avenue. They were sponsored by the United Cambodian Community After-School Tutoring Program, the City of Long Beach Neighborhood Partner Program and Long Beach Strategic Marketing, Inc. They were designed by Mardie Sim.

Diandra Jay / Press-Telegram

\$11.4 million grant to get Long Beach refugees placed in jobs. Administered through the two local Cambodian associations, the money subsidizes 100 percent of trainees' salaries and benefits for six months or a year. When the subsidies end, employers decide whether to keep the employees or let them go.

In the last three years, the program has employed 448 refugees,

a part of the city.

"We are trying to encourage our people to participate civically," he says, adding that voter-registry centers are being established at both UCC and CAA. "That's the only way we can attract public officials to pay attention to us," he says.

Parent involvement

The lack of involvement centers

Drive for business district building on greater community togetherness

Several groups are working to improve the health of this population, but without full documentation of the people and their needs, local mental health professionals say, it's unlikely they will make much headway.

A new project called the Healthy Minds Program — a partnership between the Cambodian Association of America and the Long Beach Asian Pacific Mental Health Center — recently earned funding from The California Endowment, a nonprofit health care foundation in Woodland Hills.

The program will allow case workers to canvass the community, assessing and addressing mental health needs, says Kim Sasaki, project manager for the center.

Ron Arias, head of the Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services, says his staff has collaborated with CAA and UCC on a number of health projects, from anti-smoking campaigns to immunization programs.

But he says many needs are going unmet.

He hopes a planned Family Health Education Center, set to open soon, will help fill the void. It's a state-of-the-art building that will offer programs in foreign languages, including Khmer.

"It will help us deliver the many messages we have," he says.

For all the things remaining to be done, the community has several things working in its favor.

New unity

It is closer to unity than ever before. While homeland politics still divide people, the long-standing rivalry between the CAA and UCC has finally started to cool. The two groups have come together on several recent projects, including the Cambodia Town campaign.

"It's just symbolic to have unity, perhaps for the first time," says attorney Solange Kea, a task force member.

"We are starting to come together now," CAA's Kouch agrees. "It's not like before."

Also, like so many people in America, the Cambodian refugees and their families have been deeply affected by the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11.

Most refugees are all too familiar with the feelings of fear and uncertainty many Americans feel now. Just 20 years ago, they lived

City Hall.
"This country I like," Suos said. "It has a system. ... My country (Cambodia), we don't have a system."

— John W. Cox

PHYLYPO TUM

Phylypo Tum was a math major at UCLA in 1998 when he and three students from other universities founded the Cambodian Organization for Peace on Earth, or C-HOPE, a non-profit organization committed to improving the Cambodian community and developing its leaders.



C-HOPE is still going strong, and Tum is still working to meet its lofty

goals. One of its projects is a calendar aimed at encouraging people to pursue higher education.

Tum, 25, of Long Beach is a staff engineer at TRW's Space and Electronics Division and a June 2001 graduate of Leadership Long Beach. He volunteers his time for local community events, including last year's Cambodian New Year celebration and a recent fund-raiser for victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

— Helen Guthrie Smith

VISETH VANN



Named a 2001 Outstanding Graduate by Cal State Long Beach's College of Education, Viseth Vann now runs the Khmer Student Support Programs for the Long Beach School for Adults. At 28, he helps adults register for English classes and conducts parenting seminars.

Born in Cambodia and raised for eight years in a Thai refugee camp, Vann works to create bonds between the older generation of Cambodian refugees and their American-born children.

Education has become his No. 1 priority.

"My mother has inspired me the most to go to school," Vann says. "She endured tortures, faced starvation and crossed land mines in order to allow her children the opportunity to choose their own fate."

— Wendy Thomas Russell

political participation are among the ongoing struggles. And improving the lot of the city's Cambodians requires enormous effort, activists say. There are many changes to be made.

"If you were to ask me to prioritize (our needs), I cannot do that," says Him Chhim, executive director of the Cambodian Association of America (CAA), the other major Cambodian group in Long Beach. "That's my dilemma."

Thousands of Cambodian refugees in Long Beach are uneducated and living in poverty. They came to the United States two decades ago with little education and no money, after years of abuse and terror at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, a communist regime that sought to annihilate their culture, traditions and religion.

They had lost multiple family members and were ill-equipped to assimilate in America. Today, many still tread softly here. Older refugees are prisoners in their own homes, Chhim says, too uncertain of their surroundings to venture out much on their own.

Mental illness

Many suffer from undiagnosed depression or other mental illnesses as a result of their experiences in Cambodia's killing fields. They do not seek brochures telling them where to get health services, how to enroll in English classes or where to volunteer to be a Neighborhood Watch leader.

They care little about local politics and tend to distrust government officials, especially police.

Even younger refugees, now with American-born children, have similar tendencies. They have learned only enough English to get by, and have acquired limited job skills.

In 1990, 71.4 percent of Long Beach Cambodians were unemployed, according to that year's census. While the number is expected to have fallen by the time 2000 Census figures are released next year, Cambodians' employment rate is still expected to be far below average.

"A very small percentage of (Cambodian) people in Long Beach are successful," Chhim says.

Door-to-door outreach workers are too few to penetrate this community, Chhim says, and raising the community's employment rate has been difficult.

In 1998, the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement issued an

let.

In the last three years, the program has employed 448 refugees, says Kimthai Kouch, who helps run it as the CAA's associate executive director and chief financial officer. He says 60 percent of them have been retained in the workplace.

But within this program lies an unfortunate irony, Kouch says.

Voter campaign

Three years ago, community leaders launched a massive campaign to register Cambodians as citizens so they could vote. By the end of the campaign, Kouch says, roughly 1,500 refugees had gained their citizenship. Now, these citizens can't qualify for the employment project because it's only for those with refugee status.

As a result, hundreds of Cambodians who applied for the program have been turned away, Kouch says.

When it comes to achieving change, it's hard to get older Cambodians, Chhim says. The Khmer Rouge left them distrustful of authority, and some say city officials aren't doing enough to change that perception.

"My people have a lot of trouble reaching out to the government officials," says Sereivuth Prak, deputy director of United Cambodian Community. "And the city has a lot of trouble reaching out to my people."

He points to a lack of Khmer speakers in the Long Beach Police Department and says many crimes go unsolved because of communication barriers.

"The way they reach out into our community is not enough," Prak says. "I want them to step outside their black-and-whites and bring trust and confidence to the community. You need to win the hearts and minds of these people."

Police complain they get almost no cooperation from Cambodians when they're trying to solve crimes. Sgt. Steve Filippini, an LBPD spokesman, points to the Cambodian Citizen Police Academy, which teaches Khmer-speakers how the justice system works, as evidence of the department's outreach.

He says the department periodically tries to recruit Cambodians out of their police storefront in Little Phnom Penh.

Mostly, Kouch says, activists just want more Cambodians to buy into the Long Beach community, to feel

Parent involvement

The lack of involvement extends to schools, where many Cambodian parents have been slow to take active roles in their children's education. Lack of English skills and cultural differences account for much of the distance.

It's not enough to send a note home with a child about a parent meeting, says Chan Hopson, who runs the Khmer Parent Association in Long Beach. To be most effective, outreach needs to be more personal, she says. Parents cannot just be told to participate; they must be shown how.

Dick Van Der Laan, a spokesman for the Long Beach Unified School District, acknowledges the district has been unable to get Cambodian parents actively involved in their kids' education. He says the district has had more luck with Spanish-speaking Latino parents, with a program called Community Based English Tutor (C-BET).

"It's working so well for the Latino families, and I think we need to root out something like that for the Cambodian parents," he says.

Van Der Laan describes C-BET as a stair-step program for parents of young children. First, parents enroll in English classes. Second, they volunteer in their children's classrooms, where many of the same concepts are being studied. Third, they help their children with their homework. The outcome is that parents are empowered and educated, and they feel more comfortable staying involved with schools.

He also suggests that more needs to be done to get Cambodian teachers, psychologists and former students involved in creating solutions.

"You can't make someone go through a door," he says, "but you sure can open it."

Mental health is another area of concern.

Few comprehensive studies have been done on the effects of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder in the community. While cases of brain injury were extensively recorded with survivors of the Jewish holocaust, no comprehensive studies have been done on the effects of war trauma and starvation on survivors of Cambodia's killing fields. And there are no known studies on the physical health of Cambodian refugees or their children.

iar with the feelings of fear and uncertainty many Americans feel now. Just 20 years ago, they lived through something no one thought possible. Now, another terrible event has occurred.

A fund-raiser, titled "Cambodian-Americans Stand United," was held Nov. 11 at MacArthur Park in Long Beach. More than 500 people attended, and \$10,000 was raised for the New York victims.

Cambodians had come together to celebrate America — their America.

"We have to stand united behind our country," Kea says. "We should also stand united behind our culture — to be a part of the American dream."

For many, that dream lies in their children.

Dol Oth, 43, lives in a Long Beach apartment with his 5-year-old daughter and 3-year-old son. He works odd jobs, making \$6 to \$7 an hour, but says he's unable to find steady work. His limited English and lack of employment history work against him. But ask him his hope for the future, and he won't talk much about himself.

Instead, he speaks of his children.

Hope for children

"I don't speak English. I don't read. I don't write," he says. "I don't want the kid to be like me. All people right now want kid to get better job."

It's common for refugees to look to their American-born children to raise the family's education, economic and health status.

Most know education is the key, says Mary Ann Seng, the Long Beach school district's first Cambodian psychologist.

Seng says refugees appreciate that education is one of the certainties in life — something no soldier can steal, no government can strip away, no holocaust can destroy.

"They can take everything away from you," Seng says, "but they can't take away the education."

And schools are a breeding ground for progress and assimilation, says Kry Lay, a longtime Cambodian staff member with the school district.

"In Long Beach, we have a lot of blending," Lay says. "We belong to one language, one teacher, one school, one flag."

Staff writer Tracy Manzer contributed to this report.