

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
SOUTHEAST ASIAN DIGITAL ARCHIVE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT, 2019-ONGOING
UML 17**

Sivaing Suos, Oral History #19.05

INFORMANT/NARRATOR: SIVAING SUOS (SS)

INTERVIEWER: TYLER SAR (TS)

DATE: AUGUST 19, 2019

SPEAKER	TIME	DETAILS
TS:	00:00:01	Either is on and working right now.
SS:	00:00:02	Perfect.
TS:	00:00:05	And this one right here? That's okay. So this is Tyler Sar speaking. And I am the Southeast Asian Digital Archive Archivist at UMass Lowell. Today is August 19th, 2019 at about 3:00 PM. I'm with Sivaing Suos at the Center for Humanities Social Sciences at 820 Broadway Street in Lowell, Massachusetts. All right. So let's just start with general biographical information. So what is your full name?
SS:	00:00:40	My full name is Sivaing Suos.
TS:	00:00:43	Okay. Have you gone by any other names?
SS:	00:00:46	No.
TS:	00:00:46	Okay. What is your date of birth?
SS:	00:00:47	June 16, 1979.
TS:	00:00:49	Okay. And where were you born?
SS:	00:00:51	Cambodia.
TS:	00:00:51	Cambodia?
SS:	00:00:52	Kampong Chnang, Cambodia.
TS:	00:00:54	Okay. Where do you live right now?
SS:	00:00:57	I live in Townsend, Mass.

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TS: 00:00:58 Townsend, Massachusetts. Okay. And have you lived anywhere else?

SS: 00:01:02 Yes, many places.

TS: 00:01:03 Okay. Anywhere notable as longer periods of time?

SS: 00:01:08 Yeah, I lived... So when I first to America, I lived in Fall River for about five years. Five or six years. And then I moved to live in Andover, Mass.

TS: 00:01:18 Andover, Okay.

SS: 00:01:18 And then I moved back to live in Cambodia and work there for a few years. And then when I came back, I lived in Westborough, Mass. And then I moved Townsend, Mass.

TS: 00:01:30 Okay. So a lot of places in Massachusetts.

SS: 00:01:32 Yes.

TS: 00:01:34 And so where did you go to school growing up?

SS: 00:01:37 Growing up? That's what's complicated. So, I grew up in Cambodia. I went to school in a small village where I lived. I was growing up during the postwar. So, my schooling experience was not typical one like over here?

TS: 00:01:55 Yeah. Yeah. Around what years were you at school?

SS: 00:02:01 I started at first grade when I was about nine years old.

TS: 00:02:06 Nine years old, okay.

SS: 00:02:08 And then I didn't finish my eighth grade until I was about 14 or 15-ish. Around there. 15-ish. Yeah.

TS: 00:02:18 Okay. All right. I guess that's good to know. So did you attend high school after that and then college?

SS: 00:02:27 Not in Cambodia.

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- TS: 00:02:28 Not in Cambodia, okay.
- SS: 00:02:30 Because due to my safety I had to escape my hometown and moved to live in the capital city of Cambodia and I became a garment factory worker.
- TS: 00:02:41 Okay. Do you know around what year?
- SS: 00:02:41 I was about 15 and a half.
- TS: 00:02:41 15, okay.
- SS: 00:02:44 And I worked there until I was 18. 18, yeah. And then I...
- TS: 00:02:48 And then so did you say you went to college or university?
- SS: 00:02:51 I did here in America. So, I came to United State in July 1997, and I came here as an immigrant. It was not intention to go to school. But because I love education and I guess my first reason why I went to school because when I go to work, I work in a factory. And my first job in America was a perfume factory where I did not know a word of English. And then when people talked to me, people got frustrated that I can't talk back to them.
- SS: 00:03:25 And I myself got frustrated, because I can't communicate to them myself. And I started to learn ESL in a church near where I lived at that time. And about a few months later, I believe my ESL teacher recognized that I'm a fast learner. And he then approached the priest at the church -- because I learned at church. And the next morning is when he say not planning. The priest ask me if I want to go to school, and I was still almost 19 years old.
- SS: 00:03:53 And then he helped me to... The next morning he picked me up and got me my physical checkup, and at the same day also took me to Fall River Durfee High School, almost 19 years old. I started a freshman there. So yeah, I did go to high school here in America. I was 19 years old.
- TS: 00:04:14 Okay. So did you start off as a freshman?
- SS: 00:04:15 Yeah.

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- TS: 00:04:16 Okay. And so you went through all four years?
- SS: 00:04:17 All four years. I graduated at about 21 years old.
- TS: 00:04:19 Wow. That's really nice of them. And so for university, what was your major focus?
- SS: 00:04:26 My major focus was reverse psychology.
- TS: 00:04:29 Okay.
- SS: 00:04:31 So I started as an immigrant... My English was... You know when in four year in high school all my classes were ESL program classes in high school. So I started at Middlesex Community College for my associate degree in psychology. And I also moved onto UMass Lowell when I graduated with a bachelors in liberal arts concentration on psychology and sociology.
- TS: 00:05:02 Okay. So what else? So when did you finish school or college?
- SS: 00:05:05 I just graduated 2018.
- TS: 00:05:09 Okay. Congratulations.
- SS: 00:05:10 Because I... Thank you. Because I took a gap few years after I got my associate, I went and moved back to Cambodia. I came back in country and got my bachelors.
- TS: 00:05:17 All right. So you probably have... I saw your resume. So you have a lot of jobs, right? So which jobs would you say are your most important ones that you've experienced since living in the States?
- SS: 00:05:32 All of my jobs are very important. But one of them that really stand out to me, it was domestic violence. I was a domestic violence worker from 2012 up until 2000... I'm sorry. From 2002 until 2012.
- TS: 00:05:48 Oh wow. That's long time.
- SS: 00:05:49 I mean I took up a couple... Actually, two years off, I've been and I did case manager at a mental health in Providence. But then I went back to domestic violence. Because that's what I thought I was

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good at. Well I think I know I'm good at it. So that's very... I love the job because I got to help a lot of women and children and some men too. And educate them and help them not just to get out from an abusive relationship, but also to empower them. Especially women and children. So they become independent and get out of the trap basically.

- SS: 00:06:30 And more I'd like to say, I'm very -- I really like the job. Because I'm very passionate about helping people. I help many women from different countries to be able to stay in America. To get the green card basically.
- TS: 00:06:45 Okay.
- SS: 00:06:45 Yeah.
- TS: 00:06:46 And so right now, what do you do for a living?
- SS: 00:06:48 I am working as a caseworker at the Justice Resource Institute here and Chelmsford. We covered the Lowell areas. So I would say Lowell. My office in Chelmsford but I work with the Lowell residential.
- TS: 00:07:05 Okay. So is it with like the juvenile system?
- SS: 00:07:09 The program I'm working at right now is called the Young Parent Support Program. So I work with parents who are young. Who are 22 and younger.
- TS: 00:07:16 Okay, okay. All right. Okay. So moving on a bit. I'm just going to ask a few questions about your family. So what are your parents' names?
- SS: 00:07:27 My mother's named Thou Meas. First name Thou and last name Meas. And my father's name Chan Suos.
- TS: 00:07:33 Okay. And what were their backgrounds? Where were they born? Where did they live? And what kind of jobs they did?
- SS: 00:07:41 So my... Both of my parents were born in Kampong Cham Province in Cambodia. My mother's deceased. My father is alive.

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He also lives in Cambodia. He does not want to come to the States.
He is 80 years old now.

- TS: 00:07:57 Okay, wow.
- SS: 00:07:59 Yeah. So, yeah.
- TS: 00:08:00 Okay. And before they got older, what types of jobs did they do?
- SS: 00:08:06 So yeah. Basically my parents... I'm going to give a little background of them. So my mother she's... Before the war, I think she had her own business. She graduated from college before the war. But then as a Cambodian woman, no matter what, you went back home and got married-- become a mother. And they have their own business. And my father was a farmer. And then, yeah. That. Prior to the war.
- TS: 00:08:38 And do you remember your grandparents' names?
- SS: 00:08:41 No, I never met them. I know their name, but I never met them.
- TS: 00:08:44 Okay. Do you know anything about their backgrounds? What they did?
- SS: 00:08:48 I know the grandparents from my mother's side was the wealthiest family in the village where they were living before the war. And they got executed as soon as the war start because they are accused of them of being a... I forgot the word in English. In Khmer we call moulothon. Like other richer people, they're business owners or whatever. So those that get-
- TS: 00:09:10 So just like wealthy?
- SS: 00:09:10 Wealthy. Yeah. So they got... So from my mother's side, both of my grandparents, my aunts and my uncles they all executed the same day.
- TS: 00:09:19 Oh, God.
- SS: 00:09:20 When the war broke out. Yeah.

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- TS: 00:09:22 Okay. And so what would you consider as the ethnicity of you and your family?
- SS: 00:09:29 I'm a Khmer.
- TS: 00:09:29 Yeah. Khmer Cambodian?
- SS: 00:09:30 Yeah. Cambodian.
- TS: 00:09:33 And what languages did you and your families speak?
- SS: 00:09:36 Back home we spoke Khmer. We speak Khmer.
- TS: 00:09:39 Exclusively like only Khmer? Nothing else?
- SS: 00:09:40 When you talk back home, home, you have only Cambodia.
- TS: 00:09:43 In Cambodia.
- SS: 00:09:44 In Cambodia exclusively yes, Khmer.
- TS: 00:09:49 Okay. Do you have any siblings?
- SS: 00:09:50 I do. I do have a lot of siblings. If you people ask me about siblings I always expanded the answer because I do have only one younger sister that we have the same parents. But I got three step-siblings from my mother's side and also three step older sibling from my father's side. Again, because of the war. Their first spouses were... One of them got executed. My mom's first husband got executed in my house. My father's first wife got starve to death. And so they were match by the Pol Pot Army. And then they have me and my younger sister.
- TS: 00:10:26 Okay. And so far, I guess starting out with your younger sister, what's her name?
- SS: 00:10:31 Her name is Siva.
- TS: 00:10:32 Siva. And what does she do? Just a bit of background.
- SS: 00:10:36 Yeah, she is living in Cambodia still. And she is an accountant.

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- TS: 00:10:44 Okay. And so how about the rest of your siblings?
- SS: 00:10:48 They are some of them are business owners. Some of them are... I think two are farmer and the rest are business owner in Cambodia. They all live in Cambodia.
- TS: 00:11:00 They all live in Cambodia still. So do you have any big childhood memories that you're fond of or that are important to you?
- SS: 00:11:12 Childhood? There's a lot. Like I said, I grew up during the postwar. And the memory was good and bad. One of the good memory that I grew up in kind of jungle sort of. So I only herd 25 cows. I herded 25 cows. I loved to spend my time in the forest. And that's my good memory because I climb a tree. I was a very creative child. And I love and I was very... I'm like a leader. I had a leader personality.
- SS: 00:11:46 So I kind of like... I know how to control my peer. Can make them do things on his own. So it's kind of good but bad at the same time and too bossy whatever. But then another memory that I remember is when I go to school. Because I was like nine, 10 years old. And I had to ride a bicycle each way about two and a half hour from my house to my school. And it was very dangerous.
- SS: 00:12:12 So those memories they're vivid... Like sometime when the Pol Pot Army... Because again, the postwar. So when they come and they bomb and broke the bridge, we have to buy myself my bicycle and my backpack. Well it's like a plastic bag, whatever I had at that time. We have to cross with a very tiny boat. But at that time, at that particular river, it had a lot of alligators.
- TS: 00:12:34 Oh, wow.
- SS: 00:12:35 Yeah. And I used it every day. Every time I cross that. So I have like a thousand butterfly in my stomach. And I feel like all of my intestine come up to my chest because I'm like, "When they're going to come to me?"
- TS: 00:12:45 Yeah. It's so scary.
- SS: 00:12:46 So every time I crossed that river -- that's my vivid memory, that sometimes I see them merging towards us. And praying to God and

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to Buddha to... Anyhow, so that those time when I use the memory that every day that I go to school. Either I fear being raped by other people or I fear of being eat by alligator.

- TS: 00:13:06 That's crazy. Every single day.
- SS: 00:13:08 Yeah.
- TS: 00:13:09 Anything else you can think of?
- SS: 00:13:13 In my childhood when I herd my cows in a forest, I always... Again, I'm very creative. I always make myself. So I'm very independent. Even I grew up with my parent, but I know how to make things to sell. I cut dead branches and tie two bunches and put in from my house and sell to earn money so I can... And I know how to grow sweet potato vegetable. All kinds of potato.
- SS: 00:13:42 I grew all kind of vegetables and then I would sell them on my way to school and earn the money to spend for myself so that my... Basically that's one thing I know about me, that I always know how to create resources and make my living. That, my parents never had to worry about get money to buy my clothes and whatever. I always supported myself when I was little.
- TS: 00:14:03 Yeah, yeah. So very resourceful.
- SS: 00:14:05 Right.
- TS: 00:14:06 That's really good. Okay. So after that, I guess we'll just start talking a bit about your immigration history. So why did you... So was it only you that left to the States or was it the rest of your family?
- SS: 00:14:20 Yeah.
- TS: 00:14:21 Was it only you.
- SS: 00:14:21 I'm by myself came to the States.
- TS: 00:14:23 Okay. So why did you leave Cambodia?

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- SS: 00:14:26 It'll be interesting, to be quite frankly is that I just not... I did not want to come here. But because of the safety... First I fled my village. Because there's a guy was scared of a rumor of someone wanted to kidnap me. So my mom had to evacuate me in the middle of the day as soon as she heard the news. She sent me to Phnom Penh. I live at somebody's home and my family. Like with an extended relative from the village but they live in Phnom Penh.
- SS: 00:14:57 So I stayed with them and stayed with their family who gambled. They work the gamblers. And everyday -- and Phnom Penh is unsafe for me too. Because there a woman who I stay there. She always wanted to sell me to prostitution. She wanted to sell me to many places. But then I got saved by her husband. But anyhow, long to a short story. The woman, the same woman who wanted to sell me many time, she end up having the idea.
- SS: 00:15:28 Because she gamble, she owe people a lot of money and she have an idea because I was young. I was 18 at that time. 18 and a half. And she had an idea of sending me to America so I can work and earn money to help her so that her husband won't find out about her gambling issues. So it's all about not my idea. So she would tell my family in hometown say, "Oh, why don't you send her to America? She will earn money. She can come... She would help you guys."
- SS: 00:15:56 But her story she told me is a different way from she told my family. She said, "You've got to go there. You've got to help me. I offered you my house to stay for a few years. And now your time to pay me back. How would you want to help me? So you go to America. You work, you help me as long I pay off the debt. My husband won't kill me." And I was young. I was very naïve. I didn't finish eighth grade from the village. And so yeah. And so I get whatever she said. And my family said, "Okay, you go". And I said, "Okay. I come."
- SS: 00:16:31 Yeah. When I came here, I came with zero English. So I came here with \$11,000 debt. Because everybody from my family, they try to gather the money whatever. I have no idea how they did the paperwork, but they just tell me to answer certain to their embassy. And then whatever they did, I don't know. But then they got me here. So I came. So when I came here, that's when I told I work at the perfume factory. And that's where I felt that I needed to learn

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English. So to answer a short question -- yeah. I came here, it's not on my will. I came here because somebody set me up to come.

- TS: 00:17:17 And do you remember when you came here? So what age or what year?
- SS: 00:17:19 I came here at 18. So it was July 27, 1997 when I landed here. And actually, I landed in Green Airport in Providence, Rhode Island.
- TS: 00:17:32 And where did you... So before that you lived in Phnom Penh for-
- SS: 00:17:37 I lived in Phnom Penh.
- TS: 00:17:37 For how many years?
- SS: 00:17:37 I lived in Phnom Penh from age 15 to 18. So about three years.
- TS: 00:17:40 So three years. Okay. And your city of arrival again. Where did you-
- SS: 00:17:44 Fall River.
- TS: 00:17:45 Fall River? And you stayed there for five years?
- SS: 00:17:47 Yes.
- TS: 00:17:48 All Right. Did you have relatives to stay with or did you?
- SS: 00:17:50 Extended.
- TS: 00:17:51 Extended family. So no one you knew.
- SS: 00:17:54 Actually it's not even my blood relative. It was my mother first husband's niece basically. So it's not blood relative, yeah.
- TS: 00:18:02 Okay. Now just a bit about your refugee experience. So you stated that you... So you were born after the Khmer Rouge and it was-
- SS: 00:18:13 Yeah. It's not totally after, but when it's about... So during the breakout I wonder. So when I was born during... When the Vietnamese army invaded and a number that was during the shooting. So I was born on the mountain basically while my

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mother was escaping. So I'm kind of lucky to survive basically.
But no midwife, no nothing and-

- TS: 00:18:36 Yeah. That is crazy. And so I know you were living in Phnom Penh and then you moved here because not on your own will. Because you were forced to basically. What were the circumstances of the rest of your family? Like your parents, your siblings?
- SS: 00:18:58 They are... So my... At that time, all of my parents have they was doing farming. And two of my siblings, they did their business in the village. Like buying products and selling that whatever they do there. And they all live in my own town.
- TS: 00:19:21 Okay.
- SS: 00:19:21 Yeah.
- TS: 00:19:22 And they all just lived there and grew up there?
- SS: 00:19:25 Grew up there and they all still there now.
- TS: 00:19:27 Yeah. Okay. So just a bit more about your arrival to the States. How did you feel overall just first arriving over here?
- SS: 00:19:38 Lost. Confused. Scared. Everything smell... The smell. I remember the smell was kind of strange. I smell the American food. I felt so sick for like a week. I couldn't eat anything. I miss my mother terribly. I mean, I was away from her in Cambodia but in the same country. But coming here is a huge difference.
- TS: 00:20:06 Yeah. It's huge. So big. And how was your relationship with the extended-extended family?
- SS: 00:20:14 To me grow up during the war and also the culture, I know how to survive. So I basically, I do anything to please them, to make them happy. Even sometime if they still not happy, but it doesn't matter. I still just keep my mouth quiet and do everything I had to do in the house. Cooking, cleaning. Again, I do everything I have to just to make sure that I can live with them safely and okay and survive each day.

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- TS: 00:20:41 And about how many years did that last?
- SS: 00:20:45 I lived with the family for about a year. Yeah, about a year. Because I got arrange married to my first husband. Who I rejected when I was in Cambodia. I didn't... Yeah. But anyhow. So yeah, I lived with that family for a year. And then I got married and I moved out. I kind of move. Not move. I move downstairs to their... They have like a three family house.... So I rented the apartment downstairs.
- TS: 00:21:13 And with your husband?
- SS: 00:21:14 With my husband at the time. Yeah.
- TS: 00:21:16 Okay. And what were some of your biggest struggles coming here?
- SS: 00:21:21 Everything. Biggest struggle, the language, culture. Food I kind of adapt to pretty quick. Language, culture. I don't know. Just being alone. It just like... And also the fear is that because I came here, the money that everybody put together to send me here, I didn't even know until I got here. And when I landed, I was told that you have to come up with \$11,000 to pay back the people who put the money for me.
- SS: 00:21:52 So, and at that time, that also one of the biggest fear. Even though the language and your culture was a culture shock for me and everything. But I was focused on how am I going to earn the money to pay them back. And at that time I was 18 and I had... And then the working in the factory and I was not legal go to work. People just send me and I just go work with them. And I made \$4 an hour. And I had to pay to the rent with the woman who I live with. I had to pay rent, I had to pay food. I had to save and send the money back.
- SS: 00:22:25 So basically for the first five year in fall River I never buy... I wouldn't say, "No." But I almost never buy any new clothes or shoes. So I would get stuff from the church to survive on. And in order for me to pay off the debt, that I had without asking for. So, yes. So that was my biggest fear. But then also the culture shock. It was very big for me too. And I was at the age, but I was kind of forced to grow up in a way. So I did not have the early teenager's life. So I grew up very, very different. A lot of responsibilities.

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- SS: 00:23:06 And it's shocking too because I became married to somebody who I never met in my life. But somewhat, I had no choice. I was told either I'm married to the person or I'm going to be sent back. And I say, "I can't go back without having enough money to pay them." If I go back when I work in Cambodia in a garment factory work, as a garment factory worker, I made \$35 a month. How can I come up with \$11,000 to pay the debt I own? So I'm kind of like, "Yes, I have the willing to married somebody who I didn't even know." And right away I became a mother.
- SS: 00:23:40 So that's another fear. Each more fear coming along. And it's like one after another.
- TS: 00:23:44 A lot of burden and responsibility.
- SS: 00:23:44 And a lot of burden, right? And then I had to learn the language. So, yeah. It's a lot.
- TS: 00:23:45 Yeah. So just everything piling on top of each other.
- SS: 00:23:53 Everything piling on each other. And you living with somebody who you don't know, the personality, the needs, the interest. And it just very complicated. And that's the reason why I asked him to divorce after five years marriage. Because of that's all of the factor that kind of like something I did not ask for. I did not ask to be a wife, I did not ask to be a mother. But everything just came along the way.
- TS: 00:24:20 Okay. Moving on a bit. So what kind of support systems or... Yeah. What kind of support did you have other than that family?
- SS: 00:24:29 Honestly, I did not have the support. Even that family, they weren't supportive of me. They was emotionally abuse me pretty bad. But I guess I'm a hard headed person. So I never considered myself to be a victim. I'm a fighter. But I fight silent. My way of fighting is to work hard and improve myself. And I will not accept any negativity. When they call me names, I just stay quiet. But I tell myself, "That is not me. They can call all they want."
- SS: 00:24:56 For some reason, I have a very strong foundation. Because I think the love my mother gave me... Even though it was postwar, but the love that she gave me a strong enough for me to shield all the

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negativity around me. But yes. And to answer your question, if I have any support system -- no I don't.

TS: 00:25:12 So, nothing.

SS: 00:25:13 I did not. Yeah.

TS: 00:25:14 Yeah.

SS: 00:25:15 I mean I have to say I have the church, the priest. He put me into school. That was a huge support. But then after that I was on my own. Because, why? My husband did not support me to go to school. The family who I stayed with told me not to go to school. They told me as a Cambodian expression, "You as a woman, you cannot turn around a kitchen. Why you have to go to school for? You're supposed to be a wife. Supposed to be a mother. You should be a mother and a wife. You should not go to school." But I did not listen to any of them.

TS: 00:25:47 Yeah. So you went to school full time and you didn't work at the same time or-

SS: 00:25:50 So before I got pregnant, after... I've been going to school. So I arrive in July. I started school in November the same year. And then I got married the following June, July. I think the following June of next the 1998. So anyhow, so yeah. I've been going to school before I got married. I was going to school in the morning and I work in the evening at a perfume factory. And the same thing after I got married I did the same thing. I go to school the morning and I work in the evening.

SS: 00:26:27 And then up until my pregnancy about two month before I due when I stop working, I just continue go to school until I give birth to my twins. And then I stay home for a couple of months. They sent the teacher to teach me at home and do test everything at home. So I was still in school. And then when my twins turned, I think six months old, I went back to work. So I go to school in the morning, put them in a daycare, come back home. My husband at that time stay home with them when I go to work in the evening. So I've been schooling working the whole time.

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- TS: 00:27:03 Yeah. Yeah. A sort of no time for yourself basically. Did your husband have a job as well?
- SS: 00:27:09 He did. He did. But because he's not really educated, so his job was pretty much a factory worker. Make pretty much minimum wage.
- TS: 00:27:19 And you said you worked at a... Was it a perfume factory?
- SS: 00:27:22 Perfume factory. Yeah. That's my... I worked at that place for quite some time.
- TS: 00:27:26 Okay. So that was the whole time you were in Fall River and basically.
- SS: 00:27:29 I work elsewhere too. But it's not my reg. So my regular job was at the perfume factory. But then I also work at the cranberry farm in Watertown on the weekend. I remember... Oh yeah. I remember on the winter. I remember in November, around November time, it was cold freezing outside. I went and worked in a cranberry farm. Pull out the maple leave tree. Little tree in the farm. It was very cold. So I do it on the weekends. So I literally took any job open and available, I worked seven days a week.
- SS: 00:28:04 And I remember one summer 2000, I think eight, 1998 I think I was I work seven days a week because a school vacation. So I work seven days a week in double shift every day. So I remember one day I almost fainted at the clothing factory in Brockton. So I remember I was overworked and my body kind of like exhausted.
- TS: 00:28:28 Yeah, yeah. It's too much.
- SS: 00:28:29 Yeah. So I fainted once. But yeah. I've been working a lot.
- TS: 00:28:33 Yeah. A lot of jobs. Okay. And now just a few questions about having children whilst over here. So you said you had... How many children do you have right now?
- SS: 00:28:45 I have two.
- TS: 00:28:45 You have two children?

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- SS: 00:28:45 There's only two.
- TS: 00:28:47 Only two?
- SS: 00:28:47 Mm-hmm (affirmative). They twins.
- TS: 00:28:49 Twins. And you had them a year or two after... Was it two years after arriving to America?
- SS: 00:28:57 So I arrive in 1997, July 19. And I had them two years about... After two years. I had them March of 1999.
- TS: 00:29:11 Okay so how was it... I guess, parenting while you had all these other burdens on you?
- SS: 00:29:20 On my own.
- TS: 00:29:20 Yeah. On your own.
- SS: 00:29:20 Yeah, on my own. My husband was pretty... I would it call it old school. He had no parenting skill. And so myself I did not have any parenting skill. But one thing I know for sure that I had the love for my kids. And I always make sure they clean. Make sure they well fed. Make sure they're loved. And I remember that... No one had taught me because again, I'm very privileged in a way that I had my mother. Because she well educated before the war.
- SS: 00:29:52 So even though the post war, there is no book, nothing. We live in a jungle in a way and there's no book. But then my mom always tell me story every night. She's always had different story to tell me. So it's kind of routine. So when I had my kids, I think my routine with them is every night with my broken English, I read them a book. And later on I remember when they knew English better, they kind of corrected me. And the same because before they get like they're listening and they didn't even understand anything. They were so small.
- SS: 00:30:21 So, yeah. So, parenting wise, I just went along and did what I think is right for myself. No one had taught me anything here.
- TS: 00:30:30 And sending them to school. Was that any trouble just navigating the public school system?

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- SS: 00:30:36 No, I did not. So, I'm the type of person who tries it. Because I knew I'd been working. So the job that I had been doing helped me a lot. So I work with domestic violence with parents and children. Obviously you're going to be involved with a family involved with everything. So I kind of get familiar with the school system. And I know how to advocate for myself, my kids along the way. Because the job that I had been, I got trained to know how to help them.
- SS: 00:31:07 And I have to say I don't have any issues. Because everything come along, I always request for meeting with teacher. I always ask question. I always attend parenting meeting and all of those things. So as a single mom, because I divorce when my kids were three years old. So I raise them basically by myself. But I didn't have any problem. Again by the time my kid started school, I have enough ability in English skill to support them and navigate myself along the way.
- TS: 00:31:40 Yeah. And just another question about language. So when you didn't know any English at all, how did you go about just navigating everything?
- SS: 00:31:50 It's hard. It's hard. I remember in high school everything was ESL classes. And the first month I remember clearly the first one month mark I gave up for a week. Because I sat in a classroom. I had no idea what the teacher was saying. I mean, I know yes, no. Okay. And when she's not happy, her face expression I know. Like yelling or whatever. But I don't know the whole context of the conversation. So I got... And I feel very bad. Because I cannot read, I cannot follow the reading with other peers. Even other peer they younger.
- SS: 00:32:26 And they had some... Even they also may immigrant from a different country, but because they younger they ask. Some of them, most of them have some previous English from their home. From their country. Whereas I'm a pure garment worker, factory worker from Phnom Penh and a complete a different story. So anyway, I felt so bad, I cried almost every day. And after a month I quit at school. And I went to work double shift at the perfume factory. And then one incident, something went wrong.

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- SS: 00:32:59 I think I misplace the bottle. Because you work on the line. When you placed it when the line ran too fast, you only can do so much, right?
- TS: 00:33:07 Yeah.
- SS: 00:33:08 I miss a bottle and then the perfume was spilled out and the I got yelled at by the leader who controlled the line. And she like screaming out of her lung at me. And her eyebrows almost popped out. And I want to explain to her that you put the line too fast and I'm not a machine. I'm a human being. But I cannot explain that to her. It make me so mad and frustrated. And I say to myself on that day, I said, "I'm going to go back to school. I'm not going to quit anymore." So I should thank to her about the way she treated me and pushed me like, "I have to learn. I have to be able to communicate with them. I cannot live like this anymore."
- SS: 00:33:43 And then I went back to school and from then on I stick in school until I graduated.
- TS: 00:33:49 So all four years?
- SS: 00:33:50 All four years I study whenever opportunity I have. I read. I try to open dictionary. I put word together. I try to listen to... Oh, and by the way the family who I stayed with, she have a... At that time she has seven year old girl. She kind of like taught me. I try to speak with her a lot and she taught me English along the way.
- TS: 00:34:12 Okay. Just asking a bit about naturalization and citizenship. So at the moment, what is your citizenship status?
- SS: 00:34:21 I am a citizen.
- TS: 00:34:22 Okay. When did you get naturalized?
- SS: 00:34:25 In 2004.
- TS: 00:34:27 2004? How did it?
- SS: 00:34:29 I did it on my own too. Again because I am... So at the privilege I got when I live in Fall River, I have to say I'm one of the Cambodian that can speak and write both English and Khmer. So I

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got a really good job working with... They're called Catholic Social Services in Fall River as a... My first job was I worked in a headstart for a year but then I move on to domestic violence work where I work for the Catholic Social Services. Where I got trained and everything. So I'm sorry, I missed your question, right?

- TS: 00:35:05 No, I was just wondering how you got naturalized.
- SS: 00:35:08 Oh yeah, that's right. So when I do that job, I got to work with an emigrant attorney in the same office. And I ask her. I said, "I've been here for a certain amount of years now. I want to apply for the citizenship." Because I wanted to sponsor my mother. At that time she was still alive. Anyhow so I did it. So that particular colleague attorney work in the same organization and help me through. So I applied for it and I got an interview and I passed it.
- TS: 00:35:38 Okay. How was the process overall?
- SS: 00:35:40 It was not hard at all. Because again because I knew enough English at that time. And also I did at that time beside I did domestic violence work, I also work for a Cambodian Mutual Assistance in Fall River. My job as a part-time, at that time I helped older people. So it's called Woman Group. So I help a lot of older people to get naturalized. So I often took them to Boston and I get familiar with the system, the questions and everything. So when is was my turn it was very simple and just quick and easy.
- TS: 00:36:12 Yeah. So that helped a lot?
- SS: 00:36:13 Yeah, yeah.
- TS: 00:36:15 So was there a significant community in Fall River?
- SS: 00:36:19 Yeah, it's a good amount of Cambodian. It's not as big as Lowell. But it's, yeah, I'm not sure how many. About four or 5,000 maybe.
- TS: 00:36:25 Okay.
- SS: 00:36:26 Yeah.
- TS: 00:36:26 Oh wow. That is a decent amount.

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- SS: 00:36:28 I hope that's a true number. I'm just make it up. But I'm not assuming that. They do have temple there. They have stores. Couple of stores there. So it's a good amount of people.
- TS: 00:36:36 Yeah. Enough to be established. To see-
- SS: 00:36:38 Yeah. Yeah.
- TS: 00:36:39 ... them around. So did you go to temple or church first off, growing up and then afterwards?
- SS: 00:36:46 Yeah. I went to both. When I was living there. I go to church because again, the priest who helped me put me in school that one day that he made decision to help me it change my life. So for the matter of fact, I went and saw him last weekend to say "Hi." He's older now. He's in his 80s now. But anyhow. So yeah, I went to church. But then during the Khmer traditional ceremony like Pchum Ben or Khmer New Years, I go to the temple. It's just to carry my tradition. But when I go to church, it's more like I pay respect to the priests who helped me.
- TS: 00:37:22 Okay. And growing up, did you go to temple while you were in Cambodia?
- SS: 00:37:28 Yeah.
- TS: 00:37:28 Okay. How often?
- SS: 00:37:31 Only the special occasion like Pchum Ben and New Year. Because again during my time growing up there, the country was very undeveloped. And things was pretty behind. And is a lot different compared to now.
- TS: 00:37:48 Okay. So I guess even though you went to church, would you say you followed the beliefs of Christianity or did you go mostly just because of the help the priest gave you?
- SS: 00:38:01 Yeah, I honestly until today, I grew up in a religious and a Buddhism families and tradition. But to me, God or Buddha's I think it's in my heart. I think when I'm a kind and good to other people, it doesn't matter. I'm Buddhist or Christian. I don't really define myself which one is for real but I respect both. I think both

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have a good... I think they teach people in a good manner. If we are... I think to me, I believe is a matter how you adapt to it. How you interpret the theory of their beliefs.

- TS: 00:38:37 Yeah. And moving on. So I knew you didn't have very much time at all with I guess just growing up in the States. But after the first five or so years when you had a little bit more time. Even though you're still a parent, which is still a full time job. What were you able to do for recreation or just time on your own? Was there anything that you enjoyed?
- SS: 00:39:05 I did not feel or do any enjoyment until my kids were... until I move to Andover. Until I move out from Fall River to Andover. Because after I... First I first got divorce I still work two jobs. I've been working two jobs all my life I think in America more or less. I started to enjoy my life more around 2006 to seven. I think around 2007 when I started to drive take my kid on for a ride. Sometime I love to explore. So the three of us just pack and then we just go off.
- SS: 00:39:48 And sometime I drove start from Mass and turn around to New Hampshire. Start from 93 came back 95. I just drive around.
- TS: 00:39:55 Oh, okay.
- SS: 00:39:56 So I don't have fear. One thing about me that I do not fear I just... Driving is like therapeutic for me. And that's why I talk about the driving. And I start to go hiking with friends and stuff. One of them I know from school and from work. Yeah. So my recreation started around 2007 and on. But prior to that I didn't... I remember one of my colleague he was an intern. Like our psychologist who assigned to work with me.
- SS: 00:40:22 He work with me every day. He noticed that I didn't do anything for fun. He'd go like... I remember he bought me a thick guide book. And he said to me, "We need to take time off and go far to have fun." And I still have the book until today and I never done it. And I remember like a couple of months later he call. "Did you do anything?" I said, "No." He said, "I bought that book for you to go and have fun." And I say, "I don't have time." So, yeah. I didn't do anything until 2007. So literally between 1997 to 2007, I was

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focused in working full time. Two jobs, mom and everything.
Yeah. Student.

- TS: 00:40:58 Yeah. Okay. So when you explored, you mostly just drove. And did you like any places in particular like cities or nature?
- SS: 00:41:06 I love nature because I grew up in nature. I love to go hiking. I love to drive in the mountain. That's why I like to go to New Hampshire a lot. Even in Mass, I like to drive anywhere that's have a lot of trees. Because I feel peace and I feel within myself when I'm around those area. When I go to city I only enjoy for a short period of time. And normally I just go to city when I go to once in a blue moon. One of my friend she's grew up here. She try to get me adapt to go to club. I've been too there I feel like going to puke there because it's not my environment. I like the city but not... I would not live there. I will not enjoy. I would enjoy for a temporary.
- TS: 00:41:45 Yeah. Yeah. Okay. And just going way back. So what was your feeling about the U.S. before you actually moved here? What were your impressions?
- SS: 00:41:54 No clue.
- TS: 00:41:55 You didn't know anything about it?
- SS: 00:41:57 No clue. The first time I learn about the U.S. when the lady told me, "You need to go there because you can make a lot of money." And I have no idea what does it mean. I was expecting when she told me to come here, I thought I would come here and make good money and stuff. I thought is... I never knew anything about law. I have no idea. No clue.
- TS: 00:42:13 Okay. Did you know anything much about other countries other than the U.S.?
- SS: 00:42:20 Nope. I only... The only country I've been to is Vietnam. This a border that I went with the lady who are living in Phnom Penh she went for a treatment. And she took me with her one time just to help her because she was sick. But that was about it.

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- TS: 00:42:36 Okay. So now I'm just going to ask a bit about like comparisons comparing the United States with Cambodia. So first off, how would you compare the healthcare system of the United States compared to Cambodia?
- SS: 00:42:48 Day and night. It's uncomparable.
- TS: 00:42:51 Describe a bit about-
- SS: 00:42:52 So the healthcare in Cambodia growing up, I never seen a doctor. When I got sick is all home remedy. Home remedy that my mom made it for me. I remember when I had chicken pox, she soak it. Fermented some sort of leaves for a few days and I have to take a shower. Use that water that she fermented that particularly to wash my body smell horrible. Yeah, it was completely... It can't even compare, right? So basically if I compare my personal experience, the time I lived there there's no end.
- SS: 00:43:33 Like I say, I've never seen a doc. Or I only see a doctor when I went to get a medical checkup before I came to America. And I didn't have any recollection because I was set up to go and tell me how to answer questions. So it was not for myself. So I don't remember any... But I know that I was sent to see a doctor and that was it and I came here. But then prior to that, I never seen a doctor for any sickness.
- TS: 00:43:57 And were there any village doctors in your area or?
- SS: 00:44:02 It's only like a magic spell.
- TS: 00:44:03 Like shaman?
- SS: 00:44:07 Shaman, I don't know how to say it in English.
- TS: 00:44:08 Yeah, I think that what it called.
- SS: 00:44:09 I remember when I was in middle school, I liked to play like a boy. I'm very aggressive. I play like a boy game. Like I used a stick to pick in whatever. And most of my friends are boys too. Because I can't play with girl. I'm too aggressive for girl. They don't like to play with me. So, I'm we'll play with the particular stick. And we

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call herng right? So the stick went in through my... I think either my left or my right eye. So I was I'm lucky that I can have my eye.

- SS: 00:44:34 So I was blind for a few months. So when I remember the only doctor I saw was this old man in my village. And he use his magic then blow in the water or whatever. He blow in my eye. And I had to see him twice a day. And I don't know, if his strategy worked or just it healed itself. But apparently the stick that poked in my eye, is about bigger than my finger.
- TS: 00:45:00 Oh, my God.
- SS: 00:45:01 Can you imagine?
- TS: 00:45:01 Yeah, yeah. I can.
- SS: 00:45:02 Like I said, I couldn't see anything for a few months I was blind. But it healed. Right? So if I don't believe I have to believe because it worked for me. There's no doubt doctor have done any operation in my eye.
- TS: 00:45:13 That's crazy.
- SS: 00:45:15 But then came here, it completely different. You know how this... But then it's hard for me when I went even to see a doctor. When the doctor ask question, I did not know how to answer properly because I was in my... First all the language, I didn't understand. When a doctor question you, he want to hear something you don't know.
- SS: 00:45:36 You just through translation from other just really messed up. It was a really not a good experience despite the healthcare system with better. But because the language is make it lost in midway. You know what I mean? So the treatment worked. But at the I... Because I never have any medical issues so I don't have a lot to say about that. Besides just regular medical checkup and pregnant. And other than that, I don't have any problems that I can share a lot.
- TS: 00:46:05 And how about with your kids? Was it useful, helpful with your kids? Do they have any big problems?

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- SS: 00:46:11 Oh yeah. Actually my son growing up as a baby -- my daughter was pretty healthy as a baby. And my son was constantly having fever and he cried a lot. And he also had an ear infection. He was not a healthy baby. To me every so I knew how to like... If the time so I have I only have the thermometer with me if the temperature go up high I always call the doctor. And he always gets seen. So that is convenient. Excuse me. So that is convenient that I don't... That's one thing that assure me that I'm not worried if something goes wrong. I can rely on a doctor.
- TS: 00:46:49 Yeah, yeah. And were they helpful during that process?
- SS: 00:46:51 Yeah, it was helpful. Even though I'm... At that one day when my kid was a baby I know a little English already. So I did not need any more translation. But sometime I need to ask the doctor repeat things twice or have to explains thing very slowly to him. But yeah. I didn't experience any much difficulty.
- TS: 00:47:12 Okay, okay. That's good. And so I guess your overall impression of the healthcare system in the States is better?
- SS: 00:47:19 Oh yeah. Oh yeah.
- TS: 00:47:20 A lot, lot better?
- SS: 00:47:21 Yeah.
- TS: 00:47:22 Okay. And now just asking about comparisons with education. What do you think the biggest differences are between?
- SS: 00:47:30 The differences are over here, if I only look into a narrow two places over here is a lot like... Again is uncomparable. In Cambodia the teacher was... Because the teacher in Cambodia was not well trained first of all. Especially in my time. Most of my teacher all war survivor. Right? They not were trained professionally. And there's no professional trainer in Cambodia. So the teacher taught whatever they knew.
- SS: 00:48:00 There's a curriculum that put you know... Put it this way. Their country, the leader of the country didn't even have education. So what can you expect, right? So I remember a lot abusive. I've had a

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few of my friend who had to quit school when they're like 12, 10 years old. Because of a lot of physically abused.

- TS: 00:48:25 Was it the teachers-
- SS: 00:48:25 The teacher. Yeah. If you don't have.... Basically everything learned through rehearsal. It's not learned through critical thinking. If you can rehearse it, you good. If you cannot rehearse it, you bad. There's no mental health involved. There's no diagnosing. If you slow, you dumb, you stupid, right? If you can catch up, you're good, you're smart, you are in. And you not smart, you out. That just how the students were treated then. It was just, yeah. It was pretty, pretty bad.
- SS: 00:49:01 And I feel so bad. I've been back, I met a few friend of mine who went to middle school. Or I think it was an elementary school, that they quitted and then they became illiterate themselves. And that kind of pass on to their younger kid. Because they don't understand the value education. So that make me so sad in my heart when I went back and see them that they are still struggling. Now 2000. At the time was 15. They still live in a lifestyle like they're in 1990. That's sad for me to see.
- SS: 00:49:31 The education has oppressed them. And here obviously, I did not have a good experience in high school. Because a lot of my teachers are Portuguese. I got actually put down a lot by my... That's another thing too. Anyone put me down, I fight back. So one of my teacher actually in high school here in Fall River. One day I remember I supposed to read... we all supposed to read the story about the Oedipus. About the Greeks and pathology.
- TS: 00:49:57 Oedipus Rex.
- SS: 00:49:58 Yeah. And I remember that time my twin were having a cold. It was around winter around November, December, I forgot. But it's a winter time. But despite, I didn't do the homework, I still show up in class. And then I remember that when she ask, did anyone read... For those who read the story, the homework that I assigned raise your hand. Everyone in my class raised them except me. And she said to me, "You. Why didn't you do your homework?" And I said, "Because my baby was sick and I did not have time. They were crying all along."

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- SS: 00:50:33 And she said to me, "This is a place to learn. If you want to have a baby, you stay home. This place if you learn you come here. You don't then you stay home." And she sent me out the class the whole time. I'm not allowed to be participate in this discussion of the topic. And that was hurt I feel like I wanted to learn, but my circumstance I don't have the lifestyle like these kid have. But I've push myself to be here. But she did not see it. And then it was hard. It still affects me until today.
- SS: 00:51:02 But anyhow, I want to prove her wrong that I'm not going to give up. I keep going show up myself in her class until I graduate. So yeah. But at the same time not all teachers are bad. There're some are good teacher who has supported me along the way too.
- TS: 00:51:17 But it's rough when a teacher like that isn't understanding and just kicks you out of the class when you just want to learn.
- SS: 00:51:26 You know the social justice is an unfair everywhere. The peer it depending on who you are dealing with. Right? And that's why when I take sociology, I've learned about it and make me think about all those. That's why I'm very passionate and have worked in the society and helping all that. Because I know how people take advantage of other when you don't have the ability and knowledge to support and to advocate for yourself.
- TS: 00:51:52 Yeah. Yeah. Okay. And just moving on. So well actually just a bit more about the education I was wondering what was the demographic of the kids in your class? Like what race or ethnicity were they mostly?
- SS: 00:52:09 You mean in America?
- TS: 00:52:10 In high school first of all.
- SS: 00:52:11 In high school in America? Yes. So I went to school in Fall River. Most of them are Portuguese. Especially in my time because I was a ESL student. So all of my... We in high school, but they have a different program. They have like you guys know who born here, you under different program. You're on typical program. But then for us as an immigrant or refugee kids, we are in the ESL class. And I would say 95 are Portuguese.

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- TS: 00:52:43 Yeah, wow.
- SS: 00:52:44 Maybe I may lie. Maybe some Spanish too. But most of student I was with mostly Portuguese. They all spoke Portuguese.
- TS: 00:52:50 Yeah. And that was your community as well? Was there a lot of Portuguese in Fall River?
- SS: 00:52:59 Yeah. In Fall River is like Portuguese town. Yeah, it's a lot of Portuguese. I learned a few words when I was there. All of my teachers are Portuguese. I would take 90%, 99% of my teacher at that times are Portuguese.
- TS: 00:53:10 That's crazy.
- SS: 00:53:11 That's like their town.
- TS: 00:53:11 Yeah, I didn't know that.
- SS: 00:53:12 They different generations of them living there. So yeah.
- TS: 00:53:16 Yeah. And how about your other areas where you lived? What were they like races mostly?
- SS: 00:53:19 When I live in Andover I was in mix. A lot Indian, Chinese and Caucasian, white.
- TS: 00:53:30 Did you live in the suburbs or in the city more? In Andover.
- SS: 00:53:34 I lived in a near that in the town. Like near the libraries so near the school where my kid went to so they can walk. So what I try to do is that as single mom I always work two jobs to support us. And also, you know. And again kind of to answer maybe not your question. But to share that my experience that I'm here not just trying to support myself and my kids. But at the same time I support my elder father who and living in... And also my younger sister. I supported through out since my mum pass away in 2005.
- SS: 00:54:12 I supported my younger sister from high school and throughout her college year there. I paid literally 100%. Her living expense everything and school tuition and also my dad. So I have literally four people to take care of. So I always work two jobs. And to live

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in Andover, I have to live near the school so my kid can walk to school and walk back home while I'm busy at work.

- SS: 00:54:36 Because I cannot afford daycare and you know. I'm in the day at that time in middle school. But yeah. So I live by in downtown. Near like downtown. Its like a town. Maybe a small town.
- TS: 00:54:49 Yeah. It's not that big. So after Andover, where did you go?
- SS: 00:54:53 We moved to Cambodia.
- TS: 00:54:55 Cambodia for how long?
- SS: 00:54:56 So because I got remarried. So my husband worked for UNHCR. And he moved there first. And then I wanted to bring my children to learn the culture. And part of me, I work here and I wanted them to know where the root of them. Right? So when they learn the culture, right? And also to get to know the family. Because here I'm just me and them. I don't have any family member here.
- SS: 00:55:24 So they lived there about a good two and a half years.
- TS: 00:55:27 Wow. That's a long time.
- SS: 00:55:28 So I took my twins after they graduate from middle school here, they started high school there. And then they finished their 10 grade and then we came back.
- TS: 00:55:39 Okay. And was it a school that taught English as well?
- SS: 00:55:42 Yeah, it's an international school.
- TS: 00:55:44 International school.
- SS: 00:55:45 Yeah. And I worked there as well. So I worked for USAID project.
- TS: 00:55:48 Okay. How do you describe the education system in the international school?
- SS: 00:55:55 International school, the system is not bad at all. They have a really awesome... We love the curriculum that they have. But the

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problem was that because the school is in the third world country, the teacher often change every six to nine months or a year.

- TS: 00:56:09 Oh, yeah.
- SS: 00:56:09 Because people would go there from America, from England or from Australia or from other parts of the European country. They went there just to explore. So they live while they live they get a job to teach. And then when they feel like they've done enough enjoying the country, they return. And then there's a new teacher come. And that's something is not good for our kids.
- TS: 00:56:29 So you're missing that connection. The longterm connection.
- SS: 00:56:31 Right. Right. But they learn. We did not regret any bit of piece of it. Because it taught my kids a lot about the lifestyle here and lifestyle there. So that they are understanding that they don't take anything for granted. They've seen what was happening to people there.
- TS: 00:56:52 Yeah. Did they live in the country or in Phnom Penh?
- SS: 00:56:55 While they go to school, we lived in Phnom Penh. But often I take them to the country where my hometown is. So they spend time with their cousins there.
- TS: 00:57:04 Okay, okay. And I guess going back to high school in America, was it difficult to adjust or was it-
- SS: 00:57:14 Oh my God, yes.
- TS: 00:57:15 It was?
- SS: 00:57:17 A few time. I came from a culture that girl not supposed to talk to boy. Walking around high school and see all the Asian. Especially when I see other white people, I don't know why but my mentality. When I see other white people, kids kiss each other, hug each other on the hallway, it doesn't bother me. But every time I see a Khmer kid standing and kissing with other... Their boyfriend or whatever, I'm just, "Oh my God. I'm going to have a heart attack." It's like I don't know why it's in my mentality is it make me feel that's not okay.

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- SS: 00:57:46 But it's kind of like other... Again, I was older student. Like my when I start I was supposed to be finished already, right? So it's hard. I didn't have... I only have like two friends. And those two friends because they Khmer kid and because they wanted to learn Khmer from me. They still connecting with me nowadays. Because they want me to teach them Khmer. Which is good that they've reach out to me. So they help to take care of my baby while I teach them Khmer. So those, they were my friends.
- TS: 00:58:14 Okay. Now I guess moving on. For your work and career. So I know you had a lot of difficulties adjusting in general. About how long did it take you until you really got used to the language then really found you could do well at work and find a career?
- SS: 00:58:34 I would say three years later.
- TS: 00:58:36 Three years.
- SS: 00:58:38 The first year, I got my professional job right away. And I remember all the job when I started and when I leave. Because I got my first job. So I graduated high school June 10 in 2001. And July 10, the same year a month later, I got a job offer at a headstart in Fall River. So I work in the office, try do translation or like a school handout and a school handbook and all those to translate from English to Khmer.
- SS: 00:59:06 And then I work there for a year. It was so much mentally abuse. I would say call and work. It's kind of discrimination because of my accent because of my grammar is not good. I spoke like backward and messed up. And instead of helping me, they laughed at me. And then they treat me like I'm not equal at all.
- TS: 00:59:25 Yeah, yeah.
- SS: 00:59:26 So it was really mentally-
- TS: 00:59:29 Abusive.
- SS: 00:59:30 Yeah. Pretty bad. But then I left and then after that I left to the domestic violence job. Where I had most amazing boss who I still connect with her until today. Yeah.

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- TS: 00:59:42 And after that... So would you say that was your first real career?
- SS: 00:59:47 Yes, that was real career at the head start. And then at the domestic violence that my second year I started it. I worked exactly a year at the head start. And then the following year I start at domestic violence as a domestic one coordinator. Again, that was the most difficult job for me ever. Because it going from working as a translator, you really don't use your brain too much. You just translating two languages. Right?
- TS: 01:00:10 Yeah. Yeah.
- SS: 01:00:10 But then you become like because I speak the language, the Khmer and English, so they put me to become a program coordinator. And I have to lead about six volunteers. Not just for Khmer but like Portuguese, Spanish and Creole and all those people work under me. And I'm like... So I have to pull myself to be mature. But sometime I find myself very struggle because some of the volunteers who are spoke perfect English, while myself have broken English.
- SS: 01:00:39 But then again, I got a lot of support from my supervisor at the time. And she pushed me and make me move when she sees something in me and she gave me the opportunity to do it. So I did it. So after that job, the funding, we ran out of the funding. But then after that I became more confident more... My thinking become bigger and I can manage things better. So yeah. But it was not easy early on. It was a very, very difficult. But again, I'm hard headed. Things that bothers me is only bothers me for a short period of time
- TS: 01:01:16 Yeah.
- SS: 01:01:17 Yeah.
- TS: 01:01:18 And how would you say the career path in the United States differs from Cambodia as well? What would be the traditional thing for men and women in Cambodia?
- SS: 01:01:31 From my personal experience is hard. I mean for man and woman, I don't... In Cambodia if you talk about my time, I did not experience or see any... I didn't see a lot of professional work.

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Beside I grew up in a farm. And I saw if people work for the government, like my brother-in-law, work in army, office and no female. I didn't see any female work besides teacher.

- SS: 01:01:57 I saw a lot of teacher, female teacher, but not male. I mean, but not any other job. All right. The judge, I know mostly men. That's what I know. And here obviously I've seen both men and women working here. But I also aware that's a deep level they are discrimination. I mean inequality in terms you know?
- TS: 01:02:18 Sexism.
- SS: 01:02:20 Right. Sexism. That's in a deep level that I become more educated, more of the work I do. I recognize that too. But to talk about comparison between here, Cambodia, Cambodia cannot compare to here with all this.
- TS: 01:02:29 Yeah. Yeah. And about your family life? Or just family life in general. Comparing United States and Cambodia.
- SS: 01:02:41 Family like Cambodia, we are close knit. My mother she done an amazing job as a mother and as a stepmother. All of my step-sibling from my dad side respected my mother. So we are really we one family. Because sometime I see other family when they have stepmother and stepfather, they don't get along. But my family we very close and we support each other. But everyone they got married, they live on their own home. They have their own family, they have their own... They support themself.
- SS: 01:03:13 And talk about now, things have change. So they do well financially and educational. And my niece and nephew are well educated. Some of them got to study oversea and they got scholarships and stuff like that. So they more like westernize and more like... They become like a normal, like us here now. Because of they know English and they spoke English very well. They written and writing and now the different. But then back home the parents are staying like...
- SS: 01:03:42 Like one of my brother, he bought a house in a couple of city just to have all of his four children live while they go to school. And then him and his wife live at home and do the business at home. So I have three nephew. So in the capital city right now, I have from

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one of my brother, he have four kids. All of them are now in college. One that the oldest two have graduated already. The two are still in college and then I have two other nieces both are in college.

- SS: 01:04:10 So, yeah. And the other two nieces they already graduate from accountant and they went back and got married. They have their own job and whatever. So a lot of my family, younger generation, my niece and nephew, they all get college graduate. They all college graduates in Cambodia.
- TS: 01:04:26 So they're beginning to value the education in general?
- SS: 01:04:29 They do. They do because they're time is growing up they have more resources and things have change compare to my time.
- TS: 01:04:36 Yeah. Yeah. And how does the family life differ would you say compared to the United States?
- SS: 01:04:45 Before it differ because my brother and my sister, they'd raise the kid more very controlling way. Like demanding. But because of my influence, I have to say it because I went there almost every year. Took my kids there before with prior before I went to live there. I always go, I went every year to visit. But then I always influenced them by like... I embrace. I kind of brought the American ideas of raising kids to them so that they will not put pressure on their kids. And so when they raise the kid and let them allow them the room develop and free.
- SS: 01:05:21 So the lifestyle between my family and here are not much different. Like I said, because they adapt. They are willing to adapt a new culture.
- TS: 01:05:31 That's good.
- SS: 01:05:32 Yeah.
- TS: 01:05:33 And comparing law enforcement United States against Cambodia.
- SS: 01:05:39 I get a lot to say. Well everywhere is... Let's talk about the inequality, right? It's everywhere. Corruption is big time in Cambodia. In America, I experience inequality. Why? Let me

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share about the America and Cambodia I can share after. So in 2002 I remember I worked in the domestic violence field. One of my clients, she called me and that she got beat up by her partner. And I took her right away to the police station. And at that time my English was still accent. But I still I knew what I was doing.

- SS: 01:06:22 So I took her to the police station and try to file a report. And I asked him. I say, "The apartment belongs to her. He is just a boyfriend. He come to stay. But then because he had more power over her, he beat her up and kicked her out of her own apartment and he stays." So basically I said, ""Sir, I need your help." This woman she came with a black and blue eye. I mean you don't have to explain. You can see it. I said, "He is there." I gave him the information. I said, "This is his name. This is what he looks like. This is his picture. She has it all."
- SS: 01:06:51 And the police said to me, "Well, I'm not sure what I can do." And then at that time I can tell that he doesn't think that I would fight. That I would stand my ground. He said, "I see what it can do." I said, "Sir, I don't accept that answer from you." I said, "I need you to help my client. She needs to go back home." I just took her back from the hospital to get a checkup because he beat her so bad.
- SS: 01:07:17 And then he said, "Well, I can't speak to him." I said, "Sir, I don't care if you can speak to him or not. But it's your duty to keep people safe. And she is the victim of domestic violence. It's your job. I don't care what you do. But your job to keep him away from her. If something happen to her again and violence happen," I say, "I'm right." And I said, "So just you know I'm writing your badge number." Then he looks at me like, "Who the hell are you?" Because I think a lot of police officers sometime they do the work so well. And sometimes they pick and choose if they want to work or not.
- SS: 01:07:49 So I think my point is that I did experience discrimination because of my skin color, because of my language, because of my accent. I did not get treated the way I supposed to get treated. My people did not get treated they supposed to get treated. They didn't get the proper protection. If I did not stand up and speak up for her. If I did not threaten to them, "I got your badge number and if somethings happen to my client, I'm going to go after you." And right away he said, "Oh well, I'm sending the guy there now."

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- SS: 01:08:18 That's all you need to tell me. You don't have tell, "Oh well, I see what I can do." Is not the answer, right? And so, yeah. So that is something I can... that's one example. I don't have to go through all. But yes, I did. I have experienced discrimination here. Myself or my client. Because I work a lot. Doing domestic violence work I dealt with a lot of law enforcement. And myself too I've been sometime I got... Like one time I get over speeded. I got mistreated really bad.
- SS: 01:08:48 Because I did not know how to explain myself well to him. I did not know how to communicate to him well. He wanted to arrested me because I cannot explain why. But anyhow but I never allow that to be an obstacle. I always stand my ground and fight back. And if I can't do it myself and I... The good thing too I work in the field. I have a lot of resources. I knew a lot of lawyers who I can talk to and can help me out and things like that. But that is what my point of view. And can you imagine for my client who don't know the language, who cannot communicate it, cannot support themselves and I can see a lot of struggle. A lot of inequality here for that.
- SS: 01:09:26 Back to Cambodia, there's no law. The law is in the book. I mean regardless during when I was younger or when I've been back. Because when I was younger like I said, I always fear for my safety. Because there's just a lot of raped. So that's why I act tough. Then as a young age because I'll be show that I'm tough. I don't want to be afraid of men. Because if you weak and men tend to take advantage of you.
- SS: 01:09:56 And then if you get rape, if you get whatever no one can defend you. You're on your own. You got pregnant, you on your own. Become disown by the community. Because there are the girl who got raped and got pregnant and the community did not accept them. Because they have a baby before they married but they didn't ask for it, right? So though there's no law to protect them that matters. And people beat up each other, people kill each other. There's no one protecting them during my time and I experienced that.
- SS: 01:10:22 But then until back in 2000. I live there from 2013 till the end of 2015. I work with the government. And I've dealt with them. It's completely hard for me because I get you to this country when I

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fight for my right, I know my right. I fought for it. I got my....
What's it called. I got my justice. I got the justice that I asked for.
As long as I know how to right fight for it. Over there, it took the
smarter you are, you are become their predator. They become your
predator because they don't like you're smart. They don't like... If
you speak your truth to them, they don't like you. They hate you,
you become the target.

- SS: 01:11:06 So it's like you have to act stupid to be safe. If you speak up, you're not safe. That simple as it is.
- TS: 01:11:14 Yeah. Yeah. So just telling you it's 4:30 right now. Yeah. About 15 more minutes left. There are only a few more questions left. So I'll just ask the biggest ones. So about your reflection. Looking back on your experiences, how do you feel about your life now in the U.S. in relation to your history? Like your past and your life before coming to U.S.?
- SS: 01:11:44 I feel like I'm... I feel strong. I feel powerful. I feel smarter. I think all the experiences that I've gone through, it had taught me a lot. It helps me shape me to be a person who I am. That I feel like I'm not rich in any form of wealth of materialistic. But I'm rich in my heart, I'm rich in my head that I am not afraid to do anything or to go anywhere. And I feel very confident in that sense.
- TS: 01:12:17 And how do you feel about the new culture now? Having adapted to it?
- SS: 01:12:21 My call, right now I can adapt to it. I accept it. I mean nothing is perfect. But I know how to work around and live around it and I'm happy with it.
- TS: 01:12:32 What do you like most about the U.S.?
- SS: 01:12:35 I like the fact that it provide the freedom. It provide the opportunity. So it is your choice to grab it or to let it go. So that's what I like. The opportunity's there. If you fight or you work hard enough, it's still yours. But if you don't work hard enough, it's going to slip be someone else.
- TS: 01:12:53 Yeah, yeah. And what do you like the least about the U.S.?

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- SS: 01:12:57 I like the least is the... I didn't prepare for this. What I like the least about the U.S. I think there sometime the politics will... I looks so perfect. But yet it's so imperfect.
- TS: 01:13:14 Yeah, yeah.
- SS: 01:13:16 Everything look so great, but when you really in it, it has so many flaw. Does that make any sense to you?
- TS: 01:13:21 Yeah, yeah. It makes sense. It makes a lot of sense. And so what do you miss most about Cambodia?
- SS: 01:13:30 I miss most. I used to. Well I miss my... I can't say I love my family. But that's not most because I barely grew up with them. I have been scattered all over the place. I miss the farm that I used to spend time with my mother there. The organic food that we grow on our own that we ate. All those thing. The peacefulness in the forest that we spend together. We grew up with vegetable and I can climb up all kind of trees I want to.
- SS: 01:14:01 Those kind of peaceful. I felt like when there's no shooting, life is perfect. I don't have to compete with anyone. I just live peacefully. My mom loves me as who I am. And she provide with the unconditional love that I couldn't ask for more. That's what I miss most. I miss to be around my mother and in our hometown. But just not the same anymore.
- TS: 01:14:25 So just about... We're almost done. Just some final thoughts. Is there anything that we haven't covered that you'd like to talk about?
- SS: 01:14:35 I know I can talk a lot. But I'm sure there's a lot to talk to that still haven't covered. I feel it cross about me specifically. I don't know. I feel like I share a lot. But I feel, I like to share that my mission is not complete. I wanted to give back to the community. I wanted to do more to help empower the woman to be strong and to be independent and to... I guess because I work with so many women from different cultures and background, not just Cambodian.
- SS: 01:15:14 A lot of them are like... They don't feel their own value. And especially in the Cambodian community I wanted to help them to understand their culture. And I feel like when you don't know your

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culture, you don't know who you are. And that's what I mean about they did not present themselves. And why I say that because when I work with women domestic violence, a lot of women try to please men. And they try to change themselves to a certain way that is not who they are.

- SS: 01:15:47 Like try to make themselves inject the lip or their chest or their bottom or whatever it is. And then their hair color. I mean it's fine. You do it for fun. But a lot of people that I experienced and work with did it because of the need of the society. Because they wanted to follow, to be fit in. But then they forgot about who they are, where they come from. What is their food? What is their culture? What is the language?
- SS: 01:16:11 And I think that's something that I... It bothers me. It bothers me my kid don't speak my language. They spoke, they understand a little but it's not enough. I want to see them do... I mean it's not just my kid. A lot of kid. But that's something that I wanted to myself that I wanted to see improving. I want to see that in Lowell that we have a Cambodian Khmer. Not Cambodia but Khmer language being taught solidly. That people can learn thoroughly know how to spell, know how to read, know how to write their language. Because I think to preserve our culture is very, very important.
- SS: 01:16:54 And that's something I really... I like to share that I really wanted to work on and helping other. But at the same time, I have to help myself too.
- TS: 01:17:03 Yeah. Just one last question. So what would be your final words or advice to future generations?
- SS: 01:17:15 To try to understand about their parents. Where they come from. Try to understand what they've gone through. How they get here. And at the same time ask elder for your root. Where you come from. I always like... One thing I really, really mean to my kids that I push them in a way when they don't do a... I kind of like, it's a shame on you when they ask you who are you and say you Cambodian. And when they speak, you speak in Khmer. You say you don't -- think that's very shame. But you don't grow up Khmer, you didn't speak Khmer. You are Khmer, you don't your Khmer culture. I think that's a shame on you.

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- SS: 01:17:51 I try to... That's a mean thing I tell them in a way not to put them down. But to make them feel anger so they can learn. But anyhow but overall, I wanted the Khmer generation to... I don't know, to have some eager to learn about their language. About their culture. It's rich. We have rich culture. We have a lot of valuable information that they should know.
- SS: 01:18:17 Look at our country. We have the most amazing Angkor Wat that known in the world. And on those wall, they have all the Khmer history in there. Go learn and try to understand where we come from. How we get here.
- TS: 01:18:33 Yeah. Alright. Thank you so much-
- SS: 01:18:36 Thank you.
- TS: 01:18:36 ... for spending your time. I really enjoyed the conversation.

Interview ends