



..... Cambodia's Children of War

identifragmentured



James Higgins and Joan Ross

Foreword: Sovann-Thida Loeung Introduction: Tuyet-Lan Pho Essay: George Chigas



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Sovann-Thida Loeung is an elementary school teacher and an instructor of traditional Cambodian dance. In her foreword, she bears witness to the flow of history as it swept her family from their Cambodian village to refugee camps in Thailand to Bataan in the Philippines, then on to Southern California and finally New England.

Tuyet-Lan Pho is currently Director of the Center for Diversity and Pluralism at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. She maintains research interest in urban education and ethnic studies, and also teaches graduate courses at the College of Education. Her introduction offers a larger geo-political perspective and adds a rich social context to the subject of Southeast Asian youth. Since 1975, she has actively participated in the resettlement of refugees and immigrants in the U.S.

George Chigas is a specialist in Khmer literature and translation. His ground-breaking publications, *Resolute Heart* and *Cambodia's Lament*, were among the first Khmer-English anthologies of contemporary Khmer writings. His essay, about Sovann-Thida and her three brothers, is a meditation on survival, memory, and witness.

We would like to thank the following people and organizations for their participation and support in this project: the Chelmsford Cultural Council; the Lowell Cultural Council; Caryl Dundorf and Charles Goldberg from Middlesex Community College; Laurie Beth Kalb of the New England Folklife Center; Reverend David Malone and members of the Eliot Presbyterian Church; the Lowell Streetworker Program; Rhea and Ken Gordon and the Young Khmer Women from the Lowell Mission Center; and Phousita Huy and Thoeun Thou of the Angkor Dance Troupe. We also wish to thank the following: Chhouk and her extended family of friends; Ry and the Veth family; Mr. Yang of Le Petit Café, Lepor, Tony, Sothom, Samnang, Saroeup, Hai Pho, Lynn and Fred Faust, Martha Norkunas, Erica Hazard, Pat Pestana, Ellen Sullivan, Gail Weinstein, Rosemary Noon, Ruth Page, Scott Glidden, and Rady Mom.

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Pam Putney's friendship and encouragement has meant so much to us, as it has to the many people whose lives she has touched while going about her valuable work in the field of women's health care in countries around the world. We are sure that her current work in Cambodia will play an important role in the lives of many Cambodian women.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who shared their life stories and opened their homes to us in the past few years as we documented the changes and growth among the young people of the Cambodian-American community, many of whom we met more than ten years ago while creating our first documentary book about their resettlement experience. Our lives have been enriched by these encounters and friendships. We hope this book helps people remember and understand the history of these young people, and the challenges they face.

—JH & JR



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CHANTU DUBNG

..... F O R E W O R D

by Sovann-Thida Loeng

*After we arranged for my uncle's sponsorship for us to come to this country, we prepared for our interview. My mother had to record her children's birth names and exact ages. It was the first time we had to use our birth names since the Khmer Rouge had taken over the country.*

*We had to change our last name to correspond with the last name of the person who had previously sponsored my uncle. My uncle had adopted his sponsor's last name so that he could pose as being his relative and be eligible for resettlement. Now my family had to do the same thing.*

In early 1979, after living under the murderous Pol Pot regime for nearly four years, my family and I returned to our destroyed village, finding nothing but the ashes of our home and fallow fields where there had once been prosperous rice paddies. Life seemed hopeless, yet we were determined to try to plant the seeds that give hope for the future. Day by day, life seemed to be getting better. To earn money for food, my mother joined a group of men smuggling goods between Thailand and Cambodia, knowing my sister and I, though only fifteen and sixteen, could take care of my two younger sisters and three brothers while she was away. Then one day in 1979, my mother packed some of our family belongings and told the children to go to sleep early. The previous week, she had planned an escape route to the border camps with a Cambodian soldier who knew the safest way to Thailand by foot. In return my mother gave him a gold necklace. They decided that my family would leave that following week.

I don't remember if I had the feeling of being in any great danger during our escape. Maybe I was unconsciously thinking of living in a peaceful Thailand. In any case, it wasn't long before we reached Thai soil, where we were arrested by Thai soldiers in a village called Tapriya. I remember very clearly what my mother said to these soldiers who, perhaps rightly, did not want us to stay in their country: "You can kill me now if you want, but don't tell me to go back to Cambodia." After pleading with them again and again, the soldiers finally pointed with their bayonets, directing us to a nearby army barracks. Fortunately, the soldiers treated us well, and the next day we went to our first camp, the Sakeo Refugee Camp. From there we would go to Mairut Camp. My family and I were in different camps in Thailand according to our changing refugee status. This was when I learned the word "refugee" (chun pia

kluen) for the first time. My instincts told me that we had left Cambodia for good. Yet I never asked my mother why we had left our country. And she never explained to any of her children why we had to leave.

In July of 1981, my family received news of our acceptance for resettlement in the United States. We were transferred to the Philippines Refugee Processing Center in Bataan, Philippines, to learn English and to be oriented to American culture and work. The excitement of starting a new life had really begun. Our lives were now driven by the dream for freedom and opportunity in America. Like nearly everyone else in the Philippines camp, we wanted to lead self-sufficient and productive lives in our new home, America, and we didn't imagine there could be any obstacles that might hinder us. We had no idea of gangs, for example, or the violence of living in some American cities. Even after my family had lived in Long Beach for three years, I didn't believe that gang violence could ever become a problem for a family like mine.

After our family had become settled in Long Beach, California, my mother enrolled us in the public schools. She even allowed us to have friends and enjoy our new lives in American society. As a good daughter to my mother, school was very important to me. I was determined to do my best in order to graduate from high school. In September, 1981, I entered Millikan High School in Long Beach. Unfortunately, I was not able to stay there long enough to get my diploma since the Long Beach Unified School District does not allow students to study at the high school after reaching eighteen years of age. Consequently, I continued to pursue my diploma in an adult school program instead. I never felt I would give up on my desire to complete my education.

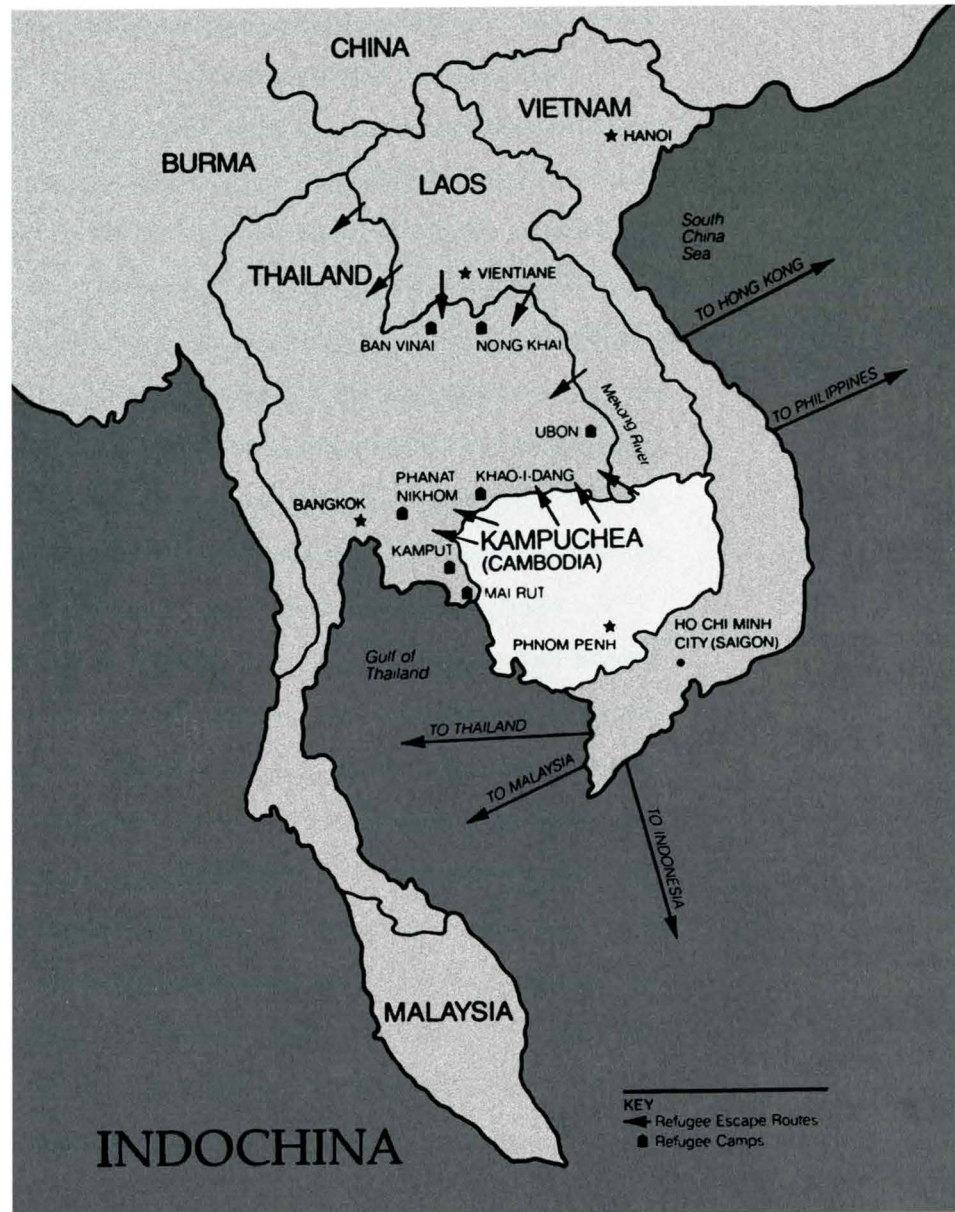
For my three younger brothers, however, school was like a battle. They struggled to learn not only the language but also the ways of their peers. Being so much younger than me they developed a much different attitude toward education. They soon became discouraged and unmotivated. They started to hang out more with their friends in the neighborhood. I was concerned about the way they responded to their school work, but I was in school myself and not able to look over their daily homework. According to Cambodian custom, the father would typically have had this responsibility. But since our father had passed away during Pol Pot, my mother was the one to take

over that role. Unfortunately, however, my mother did not know enough English to help them with their homework.

After getting my high school diploma I went to live with my older sister who had recently married and moved to Lowell, Massachusetts, with her new husband and child in search of jobs. That year, 1985, I learned from my mother that two of my brothers had quit school and joined a gang. By 1992, one of them had been murdered by a gang member, while the other had ended up in jail. It was very hard for me to accept the reality of what was happening. I kept asking myself how this could have happened to my family. I asked myself if my brothers had forgotten the hardship we had lived through for four years. I remembered that during Pol Pot our village had scarcely any food to eat. My father would sneak out in the middle of the night to steal food for his children. He sacrificed his life scavenging for food to feed his family. As the Cambodian proverb tells us, he died so the children could give rise to the next generation. It seemed to me that my two brothers had not remembered that our father had saved them from starvation all those years. It seemed that the better life my mother wished for us was an impossible dream.

Being too young to learn about what is beautiful in Cambodian culture, my two brothers had only known Cambodia as a place of war, a place that had left the scars of starvation, while teaching children to kill and steal, distrust family members, and disobey parents. Their sense of family, community, and self-identity became buried deep beneath the scars. They stopped listening to my mother and me when we warned them about what they were getting themselves into. After all those years of surviving under the Khmer Rouge, it broke my heart to see them turn away from us and to their friends in the gang instead. I try not to think too much now about the problems in my family. I try to be grateful that my youngest brother and sister are in college now; for the rich culture of Cambodia; and the life my parents gave me when I was growing up before the war. Maybe this is the difference between my two unfortunate brothers and me. I was old enough to have had something to hold on to before the fighting and genocide took everything away. But fighting and killing is all they have ever known. This may be why I am able to cope better with the feelings of fractured identity and confusion that break so many young people apart.

Refugee escape routes from  
Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.





• • • • • I N T R O D U C T I O N

*by Tuyet-Lan Pho*

Growing up in the United States today, this generation of American youth faces many challenges in their path to develop a mature and functional identity. They must live in a highly mobile, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society with a tremendous pressure to seek instant gratification for material needs. With adequate social and parental support, most grow up to be successful adults. Poverty, poor schooling, dysfunctional homes, and peer pressure may form a breeding ground for self-destruction, substance abuse, anti-social behaviors, or sometimes criminal activities.

Establishing an identity in the American pluralistic society taxes the ability of most newcomers — young Cambodian refugees and Cambodian-American youths in this country are no exception. Many of us do not know the full extent of the complex challenges that confront the children of Southeast Asian refugee families who recently resettled in the United States. The poignant story of Chenda Soth, a young Cambodian woman, gives us only a glimpse of the pain and agony she has experienced in order to overcome these challenges and to fashion for herself a new personal identity.

.....  
CHENDA'S STORY<sup>1</sup>

*I think I'm not too Asian, I'm not too Americanized, I'm somewhere in between. I don't try to be American or Asian; I just try to get along with everybody. I guess I'm Asian in the way I respect my Mom and Dad — I suppose some American teenagers do that, too, but a lot of them don't. I help my parents do their chores, and I always greet older people with respect.*

*I used to be very shy, and I decided that I was too shy. I told myself, "This is not working. If you're too shy, you're not going to have any friends." So I made myself be more outgoing, open up and greet people and be more friendly. I guess that is one of the ways I have become more Americanized.*

*We go to church, and I value those American values. And I like to be able to express my own opinion, so I guess I value freedom of speech. I'm more independent than a child would be in Cambodia, and I value that. In Cambodia, you do what your parents say, and you can't object to it. Here, I can say, "But Mom, I like to do things this way. . . ."*

Chenda tries to maintain the balance between being Cambodian and being American, while serving as a role model for her younger siblings. The most moving aspect of her story is her yearning for acceptance and her efforts to overcome the anxiety and isolation associated with growing up in a multi-cultural environment.

In addition to oral history studies, the literature on the search for identity and the assessment of school performance among Southeast Asian youths has been recently published. It includes two large-scale surveys conducted by the University of Michigan Institute of Social Research and the National Education Longitudinal Study and a number of research papers that focus on the social, psychological, and educational adjustment of Southeast Asian refugees and their children. Like many immigrants and refugees who settled in the United States before 1975, the Southeast Asians suffered a number of social and emotional setbacks. However, the psychological vulnerability of the Cambodian, Lao, and Vietnamese appears to be more serious than their predecessors. It is important to recognize that the Southeast Asians are refugees who escaped their homeland out of fear for being persecuted, and many may still have a strong familial and emotional bonds to the relatives they left behind. As a group they experienced severe trauma during their escape and their subsequent stay in refugee camps. Many of them may never recover from the profound sense of loss in their life even after they have safely resettled in America. Psychology field investigators have found that the self-esteem of many refugees has suffered in the face of significant status loss, underemployment,

isolation, and instances of hostility by Americans. The incidence of major depression, psychotic disorders, and other health problems may reflect the impact of numerous stresses the Southeast Asian refugees have confronted.

Some researchers suggested that the Southeast Asian refugee children who grow up in the United States may perceive four identity systems that are at times overlapping, but more often conflicting with one another and with the Southeast Asian cultural background and family life. These identities are: Southeast Asian, American, Refugee, and Adolescent. This identity crisis may create difficulty for the social adjustment and academic performance of Southeast Asian students, and the multidimensional identity assumed by many Southeast Asian youths may have negative effects on their outlook on life and their work. Southeast Asian adolescents who migrated with their parents, or are in foster care with other Southeast Asian families, do better in school and are much less depressed than are those adolescents placed with American families or in group homes.

A review of essays, diaries, and journals written by Southeast Asian students in high schools, colleges, and universities reveals their hopes for a brighter future that might be attained through education, as well as the frustration that they have experienced in their search for an identity that enables them to carry on the traditional values and practices at home while at the same time being “Americanized” in school. The students’ voices are most compelling in situations in which they try to sort out the differences between their acculturated perspective as an Asian American and their parents’ traditional perspective as a Southeast Asian. The students’ identity crisis requires resolution as they reach adulthood and have to cope with the friction of racism and prejudice in a pluralistic society.

They share a similar identity crisis with other immigrant children or first-generation American-born students. However, their search for an identity has been compounded by the traditional values rooted in Confucian philosophy and religious beliefs embedded in Buddhism that their parents had imparted to them. In the socialization process at home, students often have to deal with an apparent split loyalty to their parents’ culture and to the American values that emphasize independence, self assertion, and individual determinism. There are cases where the differences between parents and children serve as internal forces for self drive and individual achievement, but there are also

incidents whereby these differences foster dysfunctional behaviors or self destruction.

Although there are distinctive differences in cultures and languages among Cambodians, Lao, and Vietnamese, these people share some common social customs and traditional values. For more than two thousand years, Southeast Asia has been a crossroads of cultural activity, influenced by the customs, languages, and institutions of the Chinese, Indian, and Oceanic peoples, and adding European Christian influences in the past 500 years.

Religions practiced by many Southeast Asians include Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism; spiritual reverence for ancestors, gods, or objects may also occur in some Southeast Asian cultures. Common themes among these religious practices include the search for peace and harmony and the respect that is given to ancestors or deceased relatives.

The traditional family unit in Southeast Asia is larger than in the United States, including not only parents and their children, but also grandparents, married children, aunts and uncles, and other relatives as well, all living in a single household or in close proximity. In the family a great deal of respect is paid by children and youth to parents and the elderly. The father is accepted as the head of the household, although he may not be the sole wage earner, and is charged with upholding family traditions and setting moral standards for his children. The mother is often responsible for maintaining the household budget and promoting family unity. It is not unusual for older brothers or sisters to take care of their siblings; the younger children obey and respect the older brother or sister much as they do their parents. Because of strong family ties, refugees may seek out relatives who have resettled in the United States.

The role and responsibility of individual members of the family that many Southeast Asian refugees are able to maintain after their resettlement in the United States enable them to provide a home setting that is supportive and nurturing to children. On the other hand, many Southeast Asian families have become more nuclear as they acculturate into the American society, as a result of housing conditions, employment requirements, and choices of schools for the children. This shift in the Southeast Asian family structure has been more evident since 1990.

The traumatic experiences of escape and life in refugee camps are additional luggage that refugees carry with them for life. Newcomers to the United States during the past century have been admitted under two major immigration categories: refugee or immigrant. Each status provides its constituency with different rights and restrictions, and is governed by separate Acts of the Congress: the Immigration Act of 1917, the Refugee Relief Act of 1952, and their subsequent amendments. According to Section 101(a)(42) of the Refugee Act of 1980, a “refugee” is a person who is outside of his or her country of origin who is unable or unwilling to return because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion. An “immigrant,” on the contrary, is a person who planned to leave his or her country and chose to live in another country voluntarily.

The first wave of Southeast Asian refugees or the “evacuees” at the end of the Vietnam war in 1975 was made up of approximately 130,000 Vietnamese who left South Vietnam. A small number of arrivals from Cambodia and Laos came in 1976 and 1977. The second wave of refugees or the boat people arrived between 1978 and 1981. These refugees took to the high seas in small fishing boats, swam across the Mekong river, or walked through the jungle from Cambodia and Laos to Thailand. It was estimated that only half of them made it safely to the shore of third countries of asylum such as Hong Kong, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, the Philippines, and Australia; the other half were lost at sea or fell victim to pirates. The third wave of refugees is a mixture of refugees and immigrants who have made up the continuing flow from their countries of origin since 1985. Those who arrived under the refugee status were screened in from a larger pool of displaced people in refugee camps in Southeast Asia. The other third wave arrivals migrated to the United States under three different immigration processes: (1) the orderly departure procedure granted immigrant visa status to those who wished to reunite with their immediate relatives; (2) the Amerasians, who are mostly illegitimate children of American servicemen; and (3) the humanitarian order covering special groups of immigrants including Vietnamese who were political prisoners in their own countries.

The arrival of refugees from 1975 through 1994 and their subsequent resettlement throughout the United

States were documented in Refugee Reports prepared by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, of the United States Department of Health and Human Services. Among all nations, the United States has resettled the largest number of Southeast Asian refugees. According to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, the total number of Southeast Asian refugee arrivals in the United States from 1975 through September 30, 1994 is 1,180,538; this figure includes 70,832 Amerasians. By the end of fiscal year 1994, it was estimated that the Vietnamese made up 67 percent of the total, while 20 percent were from Laos and about 13 percent were from Cambodia. Southeast Asian refugees have settled in every state and several territories of the United States; large concentrations can be found in a number of West Coast cities and in Texas, as well as in several East Coast and Midwestern cities. Massachusetts is among the top ten states with a large Southeast Asian population (34,479 or 3.1 percent), and California has the largest Southeast Asian population (446,092 or 40.2 percent).

Southeast Asians residing in the United States shared the following characteristics: (1) more than 85 percent have been in the country for more than five years; (2) approximately 55 percent are male and 45 percent are female; (3) their median age is 28; (4) the school age population represents 21 percent, young adult 19 percent, working age 60 percent, and 65 or older 3.5 percent; (5) average family size is 5.2; and (6) a large number of households have from 4 to 6 children. These characteristics make the Southeast Asian refugees and immigrants different from their predecessors such as the Irish, French, Italian, and other European immigrants who came mostly as single males and settled in a number of large cities on the East Coast.

Southeast Asian refugees coming to the United States bring with them a wide range of socio-economic and educational backgrounds, from tribal mountain dwellers to farmers with limited literacy to urban professionals holding advanced degrees. However, most schooling in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam has been disrupted since 1975; many younger refugees may not have attended school.

The educational systems in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam were based on the French system as a result of French colonialism, an instructional approach that emphasizes memorization and repetition. As a result of the

Confucian education, teachers are highly respected, to the point that no one would consider questioning either the information a teacher provides or the way in which it is provided. Both children and parents from Southeast Asian cultures may have difficulty adjusting to the style of learning in public schools in the United States, where discussion and questioning are preferred and encouraged.

The influx of Cambodian refugees to Lowell started in 1985, and lasted through 1990 largely as a result of second migration. Lowell is a mid-sized city located approximately 30 miles northwest of Boston, Massachusetts. Its population is composed of about 100,000 people from many different ethnic backgrounds. Southeast Asian refugees who have resettled there since 1980 represent approximately 25 percent of this community's population. It is estimated that Southeast Asians who reside in Lowell include 20,000 Cambodians, 5,000 Lao, and 2,000 Vietnamese. Among American cities, Lowell has the second largest population of Cambodian-Americans. The concentration of Cambodian refugees in Lowell has led to dramatic changes in the city. The Cambodian community has impacted not only the city's housing pattern but also the schools and the business environment as well. More than 75 shops and stores are Cambodian owned and operated. There are numerous service-providing agencies and Buddhist temples. Altogether, these establishments have sustained the preservation of cultural heritage and created business opportunities for the newcomers as well as the city residents. At the same time they have fostered a greater level of tension in the integration process of the Cambodians and their children into the city.

For many young Cambodians who live in Lowell, the pieces of their life may not fit well together—and their stories need to be told. Since the early 1980's, Joan Ross and Jim Higgins have opened their home, lent their ears, and patiently recorded the faces and the voices of many Southeast Asian refugees and their children. Their work was brilliantly assembled and published in 1986 as *Southeast Asians: A New Beginning in Lowell*. The book was appreciated by the Southeast Asian community and well received by historians, teachers, and social workers across the nation. In this sequence, *Fractured Identities: Cambodia's Children of War*, Higgins and Ross have followed a number of Cambodian elementary school students they photographed in 1986, listened with compassion to their stories, and

captured the poignant images of their lives. These children of war have grown into young adults with compelling stories of their struggle against great challenges in their search for an identity. There is joy, pain, and hope for the future in their stories.

\*1 This is an excerpt from the transcription of a taped interview with Chenda, one of the subjects of an ethnographic study conducted with students at Lowell High School in 1993.

*Newly-arrived Cambodian  
refugees photographed  
at Logan Airport in  
Boston, 1985.*

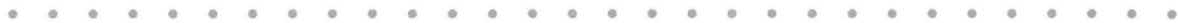






ପଦ୍ମାବତୀ

Ten  
Years  
After



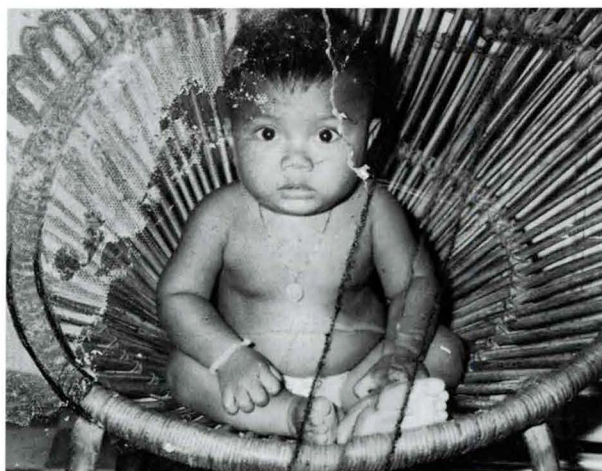
*A college student studying criminal justice, Tom has his own Tae Kwon Do school where he instructs military personnel.*

“We got to this country when I was nine. Where I lived we were surrounded by American families. I’d walk to school in the morning and the kids would spray water at me with a hose. My father knows I could beat the kids up anytime but he say we came to their country, let it go. I started to learn Tae Kwon Do, and in high school I ended up on the same sports teams with the same kids that sprayed water at me. In time we became friends, and we would laugh about those times.”





“When I was fourteen, I took the summer off to become a monk. My family make a big parade for me and my cousins. We dressed in saffron robes and rode horseback from our home to the temple just like my father did in Cambodia. At the temple I would wake up at 4:00 in the morning and cook noodles and rice for the monks. We would say the prayer over and over. We cannot even kill an insect. In those three months I learned more than in nine or ten years. I learned to meditate and to think a lot about everything. Now, I always think twice.”





*Kim, photographed with her two children, and with her extended family, at the Eliot Presbyterian Church.*

“She’s afraid that her son will grow up to be like his father. . . he was in a gang and now he’s in jail. I told her I won’t let it happen. . . he’s only young.”

*—Cham Rong, about his sister and her son*





*“Junior” has a full-time job, and is the high-scoring forward for the “Rascals,” a traveling basketball team that competes up and down the East Coast.*

“As far as movies go, I like action, fighting, and comedy —especially Arnold. . .and Eddie Murphy. Robin Williams is good. I saw *Good Morning Vietnam* with my uncle two or three times. We don’t learn anything about the history of Cambodia in school here. . .just Columbus. . .who discovered America. . .stuff like that—it just doesn’t go in my head.”





*Vy, a recent vocational school graduate, holds a picture of his father who is missing in Cambodia.*

“His father disappeared after the Khmer Rouge came to our village. He was just a baby and he don’t remember him, but he keep his picture in his room. It keeps him from forgetting.”

—Vy’s mother

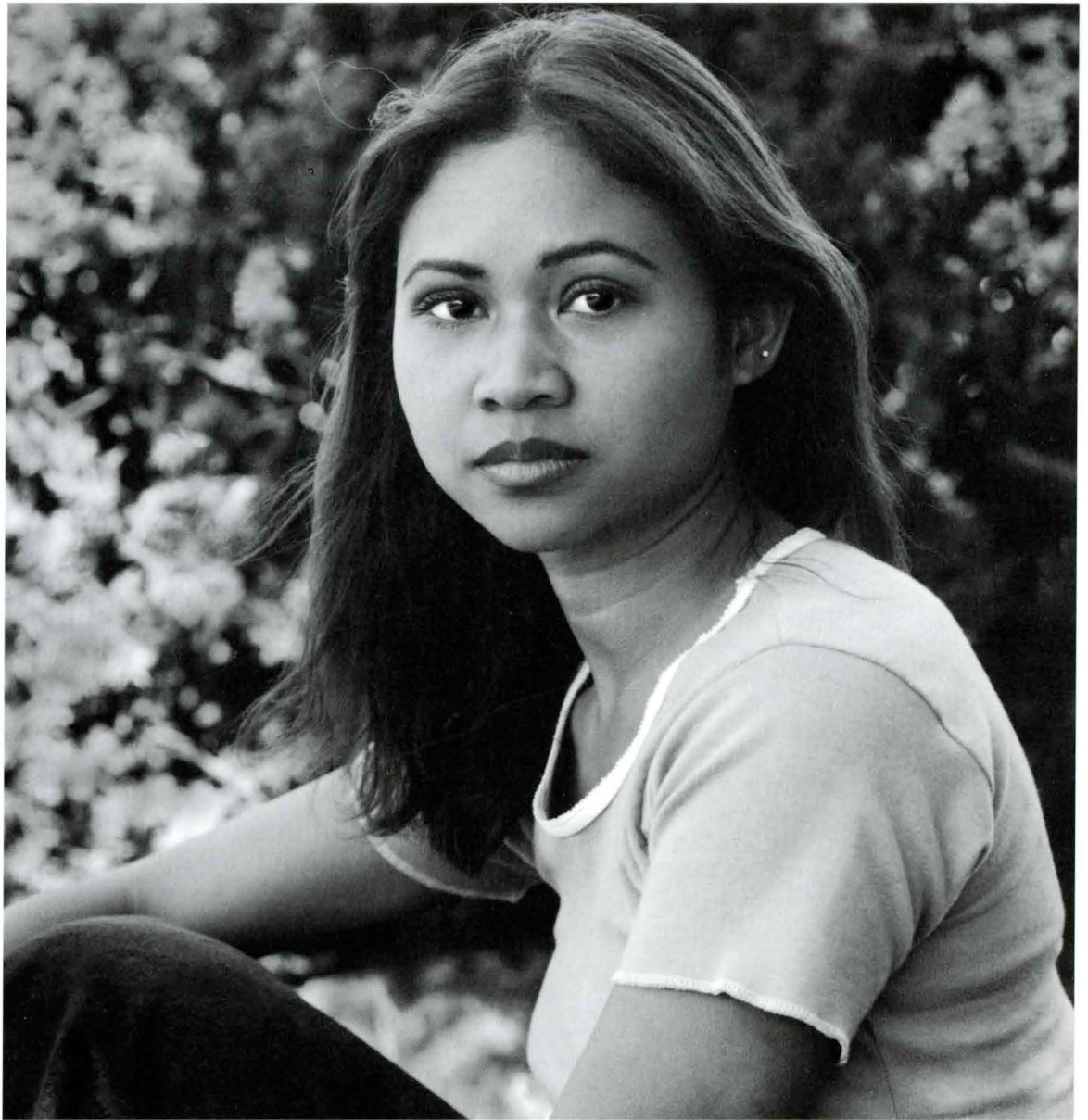


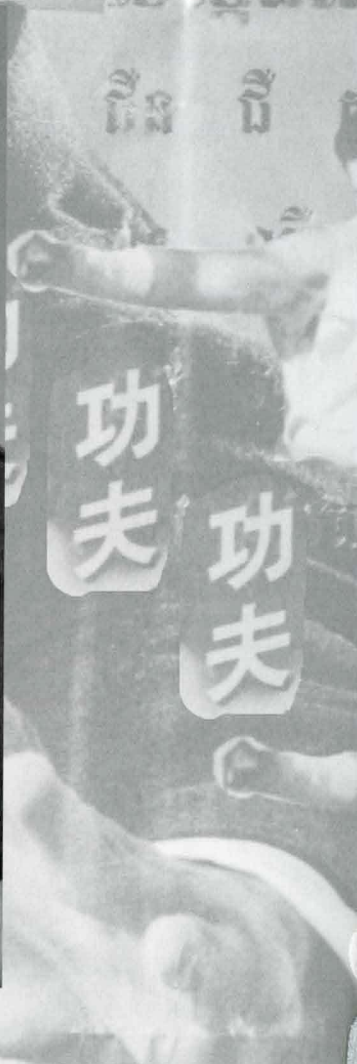




*“Salina” works at a fast-food restaurant and is in her second year of college.*

“I’m still expected to help out at home with the younger children, but my mom is happy for me being in school. I want a business degree and then maybe I’ll have a chance to get a good paying job. I have three older sisters but I’m the first in our family to go to college.”

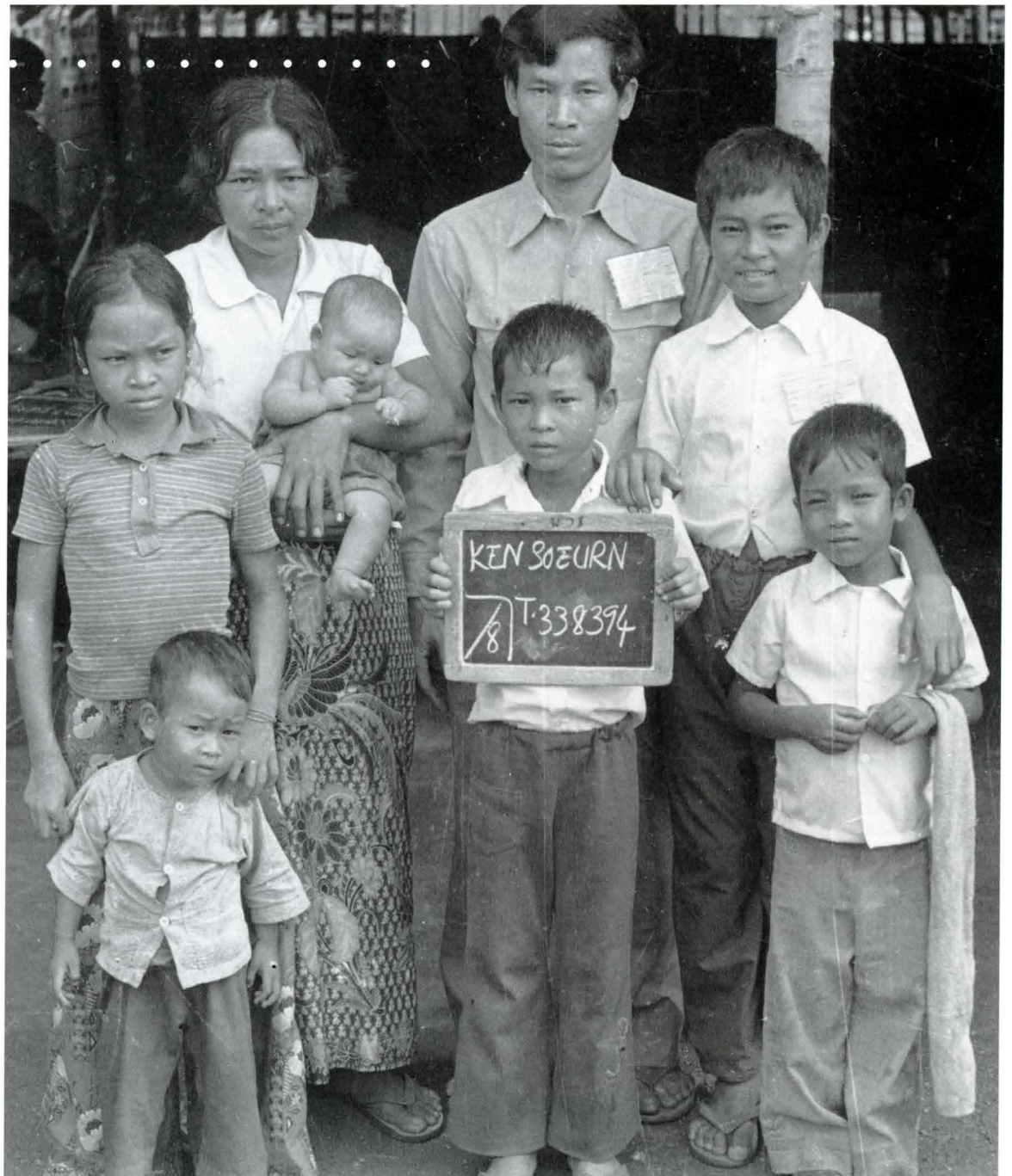




After escaping  
Cambodia—family ID  
portrait at Site Two  
refugee camp in Thailand

Sa-ang (left) is a college senior studying  
electronics; Sophin studies computer  
networking and takes classes in graphics.

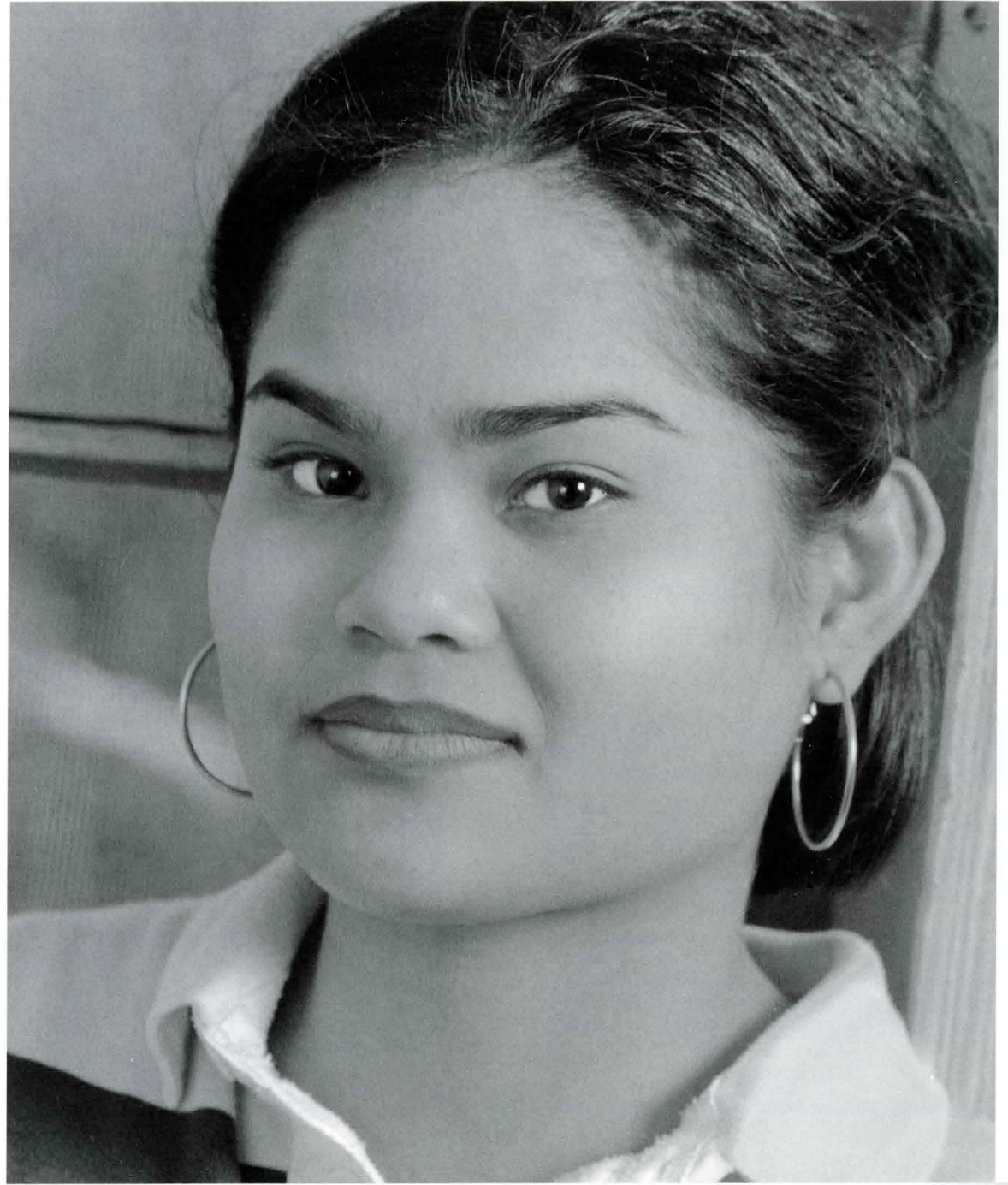
“My mother complains because the  
phone is always busy when her friends  
try to call. Our modem is hooked up to  
our telephone line. . . We have student  
access to the internet so we spend  
about four hours a day on-line.”





*Dy is a junior in high school and is a member of the Lowell Mission Center.*

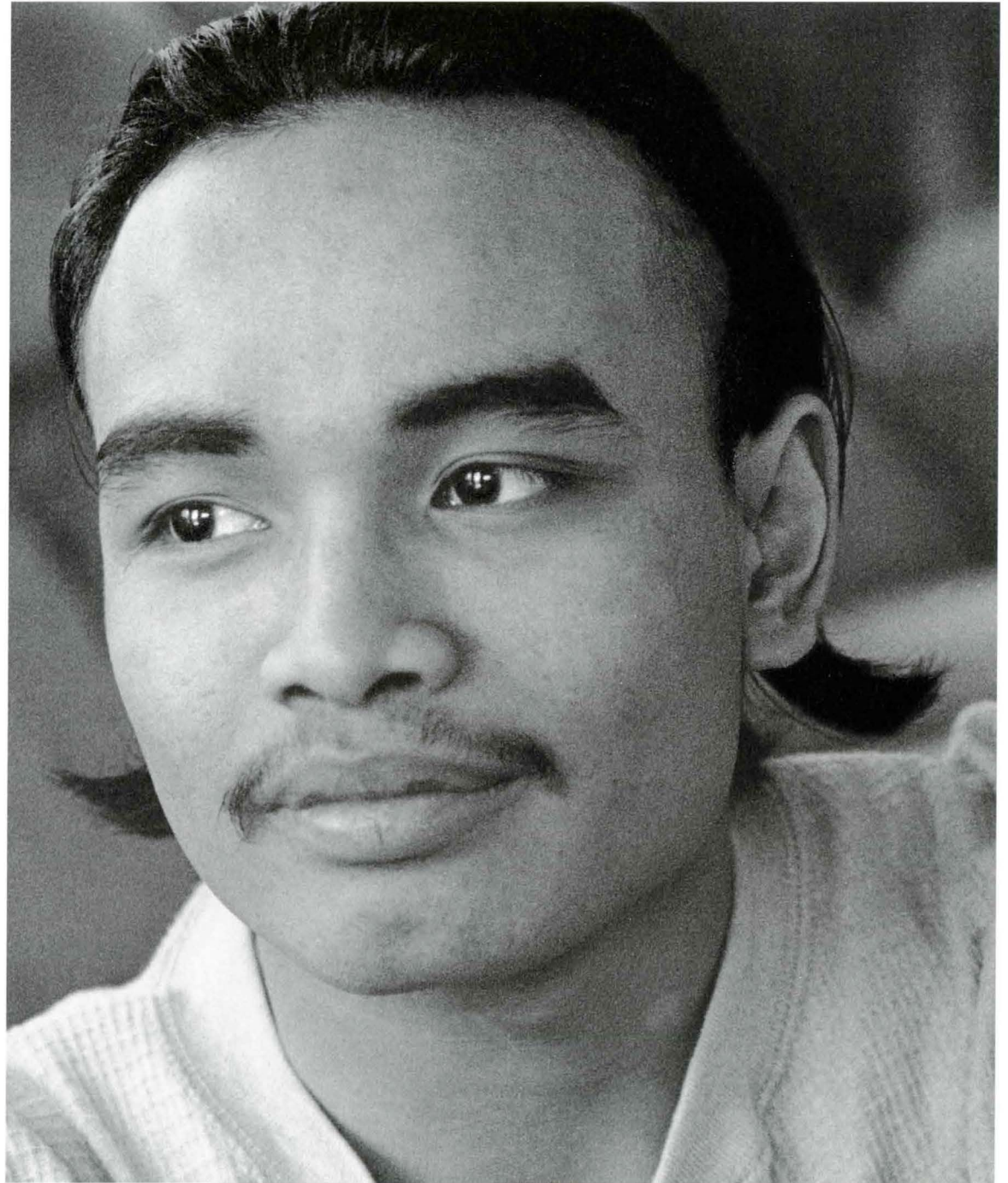
“When I was 15 I got in trouble. I wanted to go out at night but my parents wouldn’t let me. I started staying out at my friend’s house and when my parents felt they had no control over me, the DYS put me with foster parents. When my family moved to California I tried going with them, but my mom always complained of how much trouble I was in—so, I left on a bus and came back to Lowell. . . it took four days. I came back to my foster parents. I feel like I fit in here in Lowell. I want to go to college to be a surgical technician. I like biology and science and I *can* stand the sight of blood!”





*Cham Rong graduates high school this year. He hopes to go to college and find a job to help support his mother and grandmother.*

“It’s kind of hard to get out of a gang . . . when you’re in, you’re in. You have no choice. It took me a while to understand that all the things I did were wrong . . . beat up people for respect . . . that’s not how you get respect. I had to be locked up for three years with lots of time to think. At first I didn’t really want to listen to the counselors there, but when I did listen to what they had to say it helped me to help myself. It’s hard not to listen to your friends, but if they are really your good friends, they won’t ask you to do things you don’t want to.”





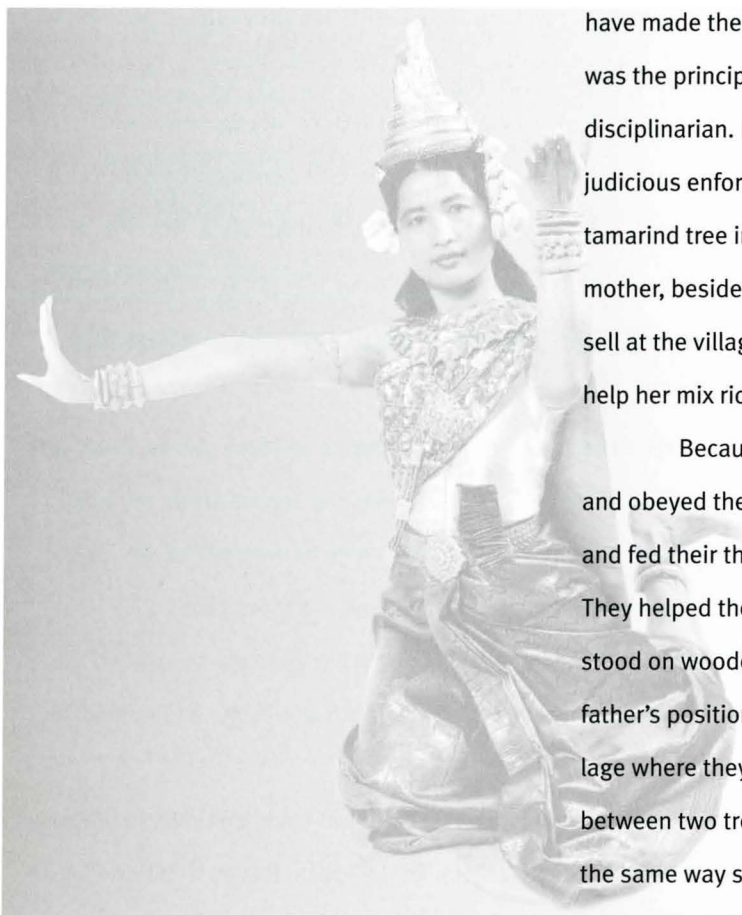
• • • • • T H R E E B R O T H E R S

*An Essay by George Chigas*

One family. Three lives. Three brothers. One was killed. One went to prison. One went to college. The telling of the story depends on these so-called facts.

More facts. They arrived in Los Angeles in September, 1981, with their mother and four sisters, three older and one younger. Their father had died two years earlier during the Pol Pot regime. The second sister, my wife, once told me how he had stolen food for the family from the communal kitchen where he worked but did not eat enough himself; how before he became sick he was weak from hunger; how he died in a place called a hospital where there were no doctors or medicine. She told me that not long after his death the Vietnamese invaded the country, and in the confusion the family escaped across the mountains to the first refugee camps in Thailand. My wife, the second oldest, was fifteen. The boys were eight, nine, and ten.

As I present this information—the so-called facts of the story—I realize how I could be taken as posing as one who “knows” and is therefore in a position to make it known to others. That because this information may be verifiable as “fact,” I should be able to present a “true” account of at least part of their story. And that with enough facts I would be able to tell their “whole” story. But I must say from the start that I do not have enough facts, and the ones I have seem to leave out as much as they tell or, conversely, put in more than what might have been there to begin with. Further, the information I present is nothing more or less than someone’s translation of memory into language. This story, this translation, therefore, depends on memory. On memory which desires to be told. If this story must be told, then let it begin with the father’s death. This is because if there were anything that could



have made the story turn out differently, it would have been the boys' having had a father. In this story, the father was the principal of a village school in the Cambodian countryside who had the reputation of being a firm but fair disciplinarian. I am told that he was equally strict at home. But the father was not only a school principal and the judicious enforcer of rules and regulations. He was also a dancer, and in the afternoons after school beneath the tamarind tree in front of their house he taught his children, especially his second daughter, my wife, the dance. The mother, besides keeping house and raising the children, supplemented the family income by making desserts to sell at the village market. Early in the morning, before school, the second daughter would start a cooking fire and help her mix rice flower with water and sugar. The second daughter remembers this very clearly.

Because of their good parents, the children had a happy and comfortable life. The three boys respected and obeyed their father. The three older daughters went to school and performed household chores. They bathed and fed their three younger brothers. They gathered and split wood for cooking. They carried water from the river. They helped their mother prepare meals and wash clothes. They swept the ground beneath their house which stood on wooden stilts and which, during the rainy season, became engulfed in water. And so, because of the father's position and the industry and beauty of his wife and daughters, the family had a good reputation in the village where they lived. And on summer evenings, when movies would be shown on a large canvas sheet spread between two trees, the father's daughters and sons did not have to pay. The second daughter remembers this in the same way she remembers learning the dance beneath the shade of the tamarind tree and helping her mother make dessert in the morning before school.

The story's telling begins in the oral tradition. It is told both in the way that it was heard and *not* in that way. Its telling changes the teller which changes the telling. Its telling is the translation of someone else's translations of the memories of her life. The original experience of learning the dance beneath the tamarind tree or making dessert before school was not the same as I tell it or as she remembers it herself. Yet we are aware of their importance, especially the memory of the dance, which she carries with her, inside of her, like her breath. Dance





and the memory of learning the dance have a direct relation to the memory of the father. They are contiguous, physically touching each other in her mind. By maintaining the one, she sustains the other. The dance keeps a place inside of her to carry her father's memory. It opens a space for her desire to redeem his senseless death.

Yet, at the same time, the dance is what confirms his loss. The two memories, the one of the dance and the other of the father touch one another at an inaccessible horizon of meaning. Each simultaneously produces and negates the other. By dancing, her father is both presented and made absent. Dancing presents his absence. Perhaps this is why so many Cambodian dancers can look so terribly sad when they dance. They too may be remembering their teachers who died. This would make the tradition of lighting incense in honor of one's teacher all the more necessary and important. Since the genocide, this ritual has new and added meaning. The dance has become a way of both reclaiming an unjust death and mourning an irredeemable loss.

\* \* \*

The story's telling changes, must change. I remember the Christmas when we returned to America on home-leave from our jobs in the Philippines. The first brother had been arrested by the police after falling asleep at the wheel of his car. The officer had found an illegal weapon in the car. Upon investigation it was learned that the car had been at the scene of a recent robbery in Lowell. There is a picture in my mind of the way he looked when I went to the station to bail him out. They were taking his mug shot as he held a name card across his chest. I remember how the way he looked then resembled the way he looked in the small photograph taken for his exit visa on the day before his family left the refugee camp to come to the United States. In both pictures he is holding a small chalk board in front of him written with his name. There is a seven year difference between the two pictures, the picture of the departing refugee, the survivor, and the memory of the police suspect. And there is another seven years between this memory and its telling as part of this story. In both pictures he has the same curly hair

and confused expression on his face. In both pictures he is the oldest brother and the one who most physically resembles the father. The father who did not survive. Who did not come to the United States. Whose body became part of the Cambodian killing fields.

After driving him back home from the police station I sat him down with the second brother in the living room of their sister's house in Lowell. The second brother had also been in trouble with the police. The second brother, perhaps the brightest, would go to prison that year. He is the one, perhaps more than the others, for whom having a father could have made the story turn out differently. He is the one who always wanted something. The one who, on the way home from school in Long Beach, beat up his younger brother so he would not tell their mother he had joined a gang. He is the leader with a quick mind who did the best in school before dropping out. The one whom I saw years later at a Cambodian dance party after he had been released from jail the first time. The one who told the other gang members what to do. The one whom they respected and obeyed as their leader. The one who led them inside the restaurant to the party where they were seated and politely served food and drinks for free so there wouldn't be any trouble. He is the one who would go to jail again for manslaughter. Whom his sister and I saw during visiting hours on Sunday. Whose son is growing up without a father just as he did.

On that day after returning from the police station, the mother was waiting in the living room of her daughter's house. She was not the same woman who had lived in the village where her husband had been the school principal. Not the same woman who had made desserts with her daughter to sell in the market. In this story she is the widow who has fled her country. She is the refugee who doesn't speak English. In the course of this story she has become the survivor. In this story the widow sits with her two older sons in the first daughter's house in Lowell, Massachusetts. Her face is red and swollen from crying. There is a Christmas tree in the corner of the room with gifts placed underneath. The two boys are sitting on an old couch hanging their heads, looking down at the floor as I pace the room back and forth in front of them.

"This is not a game," I tell them, "not some kind make-believe show on TV. What the hell do you think



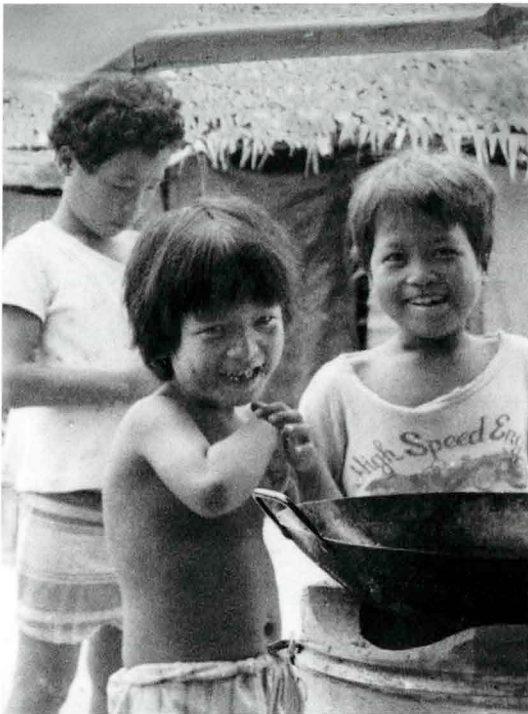
you're doing? What kind of life are you trying to make for yourselves? Your sister and I come home for Christmas, and we spend our time bailing you two out of jail. What is this all about?" The two boys sit silently on the couch as their mother wipes the tears from her eyes.

"It's not like the movies," I tell them again. This is for real. These gangsters shoot real guns with real bullets that kill real people. You want to die? You want to spend the rest of your lives in jail? For Christ's sake! I can't believe this is happening! I can't believe what you two are doing to yourselves and this family."

\* \* \*

There are other memories of other photographs. One of the three boys in the Mairut refugee camp in Thailand. They are in front of the family's crude bamboo and thatch shelter. There's something cooking on a fire made from the coal allotted by the United Nations to each family. The second brother is lifting the lid off of a cooking wok while the other two are laughing. They are all wearing soiled T-shirts, shorts, and flip-flops. Their sister keeps that photograph in an album in a box with other photographs from that time.

I never went to Mairut camp. But we did visit Site 2 many years after the picture was taken. I remember waking among the bamboo huts built in long, seemingly endless, rows with narrow, red clay alleyways between. On that day my wife and I saw similar scenes as in the picture of the three brothers in Mairut camp: people cooking, cutting wood, washing clothes in aluminum tubs. Children swam in the pools of stagnant water that collected in the drainage ditch by the side of the road. Many of these children had been born there and had never been beyond the barbed wire fence that surrounded the perimeter of the camp. The memory of these children, their laughing and how they waved at us, is connected to the memory of the three brothers in the picture of the camp. The memories touch each other in a way that is similar to the way the dance and the memory of her father physically touch each other for my wife. They are contiguous fragments but not like the parts of a puzzle which add up to



# Lowell man fatally shot during visit to Calif.

LOWELL — A Lowell man visiting his grandparents in Stockton, Calif. was gunned down Sunday in what his family feels was a gang-related attack.



Savong Duong

Duong's wife, Simonn, four months pregnant with his child, tearfully mourned her

Savong  
"Tommy"  
Duong 24, of  
53 Temple  
St., Lowell,  
was shot six  
times, ac-  
cording to  
police in  
Stockton.  
His killer is  
still at large.

something whole or complete. Instead, they remain broken and, in translation, continue to break, not apart, but farther. These fragments, which depend on the desire to remember, the desire to reconstruct an original experience, are paradoxically broken farther by remembering.

I remember the winter night in 1991, when the phone rang. It is true that the phone rang in our house on a winter's night in 1991. And it is true that my wife answered the phone and heard the oldest sister say that their oldest brother had been shot in a parking lot in Stockton and that he was dead. I remember the sound of her voice when she called my name and walked into the room. And I remember getting up from my desk and holding her in my arms and that we didn't say anything for a long while.

The next day I didn't go to work, and we sat in a chair holding each other. I remember there was snow on the ground outside the window. Perhaps there was a fire in the wood stove. There were however many hours of tears. In our life together there have been countless hours of tears. And afterwards there has always been the crumpled tissue left behind. The tissue that she clutches in her hand and presses to her eyes. The tissue that makes me think of a cloud. The same tissue I find beneath her pillow in the morning. The one she presses to her eyes as she lies next to me curled on her side. The one that drops from her hand when she finally cries herself to sleep. But to call the tissue "a cloud" would be unfaithful to the telling of the story. It would be an exuberance for the sake of "effect" that hinders the task of translating the memory of my wife, who has just been told of her brother's death. So now I must try to begin again.

\* \* \*

At that time the youngest brother was living with us in Millers Falls. Of the three brothers, he is the one I know best. Or I think I know. When he came to live with us, he was about sixteen. At that time he had been living with the oldest sister in Lowell, waiting to be called by the United Parcel Service for a job loading delivery trucks. In

the meantime, he sat in his sister's house watching TV. He was going to Lowell High School but failing many of his classes. He spent his time helping his sister take care of her three young children, going on weekend outings with the Mormon church and watching television. When my wife and I returned home from the Philippines and saw him sitting day after day in front of the TV waiting for a call from UPS, we decided that he should come with us when we moved to Amherst. In other words, we would be the ones to get him out of the city and give him a chance to make something of his life.

We knew that he didn't really want to go to Amherst. He had already moved too many times. During Pol Pot his family was forced to leave their village. After the Vietnamese invasion they fled to Thailand. From Thailand they were resettled in California. Then he left his neighborhood friends in Long Beach to move to Lowell. And now he had to leave his friends at the church in Lowell to move again. And he loved his friends. He needed his friends very badly. More than anything else I think, he wanted to stay in one place and be part of a loving family. The church gave him that, or at least, it gave him that more than anything else he had ever known. At this time his mother had moved back to Long Beach after an argument with her daughter. His second brother was in jail. The oldest brother had moved in to live with his girlfriend. One sister was here and another there. The church was his family now. But he had no choice. He had to do what his older sister told him to do. That is the Cambodian custom. He felt that he had to obey his elders.

I would like to think that by bringing him to Amherst we kept him from dropping out of high school and working at UPS for the rest of his life or perhaps being a Mormon missionary. I would like to believe that this is why he is a senior in college now. Why he went to Thailand as an American Field Service student when he was in high school. Why he joined the drama club and performed in *Guys and Dolls* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*. When we moved into our apartment in Amherst, he brought his skateboard, a sling shot and his Mormon Bible. The first two things had to do with him wanting "to be a kid." When I would tell him he was too old for sling shots, that's what he would tell me. He didn't want that taken from away from him. At least not yet. He entered Amherst High School at



the sophomore year, which he had just completed in Lowell. He had already been kept back one year and this made two. But I decided he wasn't ready to be a junior. He was still a kid.

In the morning before school, I made him noodle soup, and at night I corrected his math homework. He wasn't allowed to study in front of the television. When I came home one day and found him asleep in front of the TV as a pot of water was boiling on the stove, he was not allowed to watch TV for two weeks. I took my role seriously, perhaps too seriously. His sister didn't like me making him soup in the morning. He was too old for that, she'd say. She didn't like it when I drove him to the Mormon church in Amherst. Why did he go there when he didn't even know his own religion, she would say. His sister and I would frequently quarrel about what was best for him. I like to think I did the right thing. I like to think I did my best.

The story of the second brother is the story of a relationship that is not unlike the relationship between a father and son. And so I become aware of having started to tell a different kind of story in which the rules of the story's telling have changed. This translation is being done with a different mind. The space between the memory and its translation is more narrow, harder to locate, more difficult to maintain. The mind begins to reshape itself. It searches out new ways to give meaning to these memories. The tone becomes one of self-questioning and reflection on one's intention to do the right thing. The tone is sentimental. The telling of the story becomes more difficult because the memories I translate are not the memories of what someone else has told me. This translation is performed with the mind of a "parent" who wants to believe that he did the right thing.

The picture in my mind is the one of the third brother in his ROTC uniform. In that picture he is standing at attention with his arm lifted in a firm salute. He is wearing a blue visored cap and a white shirt with blue clip-on tie that is a little off center. He is smiling and happy looking. This is the brother who, in the beach pictures at Mairut camp, has his arm over the second brother's shoulder. He has the same good-natured smile. He is the same boy who wants everybody to love one another. The same boy who wants to be part of a family that loves one another.

As I said, when he was in high school he was chosen to go to Thailand as an exchange student for the AFS.






In Thailand the father of his host family, which he still calls his family, is an officer in the Thai air force. One day they went to the air field together to see the jets. He was treated as the “son” of his host father and given special treatment. One of the pictures he brought home to Amherst shows him sitting in an American jet. Since his return, he has exchanged letters with his family in Thailand and all of the friends, his “brothers” and “sisters,” that he met there. After receiving these letters he would tape them next to the pictures of his family on the wall in his room until it was nearly covered floor to ceiling. I believe that trip was a turning point in his life. It may have been the first time that he had ever received unconditional love and had had the opportunity to show that love. On the night he returned from his trip we all sat in the first sister’s new house in Chelmsford as he opened his jam-packed suitcase. He had bought each of us a small gift: batik shirts, sarongs, miniature carvings. For me there was a pocket watch in the shape of a lady bug, so that when you spread its wings the clock face appeared beneath.

During the two years his sister and I separated and she moved to Lowell to work as a teacher there, he continued to live with me for a number of months. I was very disturbed by the separation and impossible to live with. One night we had a horrible falling out that ended with me asking him to move out by the end of the month. By the end of the week he had packed his belongings, including the letters and pictures from the walls of his room, and left the house to stay with friends in Amherst. And so that part of the story ended.

It is hard for me now to find the space for the continued telling of this story. I ask myself who is using this sentimental tone to tell the story of a “father” and “son”? Who is telling this fiction whose telling is itself the experience? Perhaps he is the one who makes an offering of words in the hope they may be accepted. Perhaps his desire is the impossible desire of the three brothers. And their sisters. The impossible desire that one’s story could ever be told.



Why does it seem like the war will never end?

Why can't my people make amends?

We left our country to stay alive,

but even here we can't survive

brothers die and sisters cry

moms and dads wonder why

the children they run away

against each other they become the prey

in the streets they join a gang

in a week, a gun goes bang

a trigger pulled without a thought

too late now, a brother shot

just like way back then

we live the war again and again

Can't my people comprehend?

it's time we put it to an end

lift your spirit and keep hope alive

no more worries and no more cries

the sun will shine and we will rise

DEATH  
OF  
TRG  
IS  
DEAD

—Chan Snguon


Youth Peace, June, 1995



ଅଧିକାଂଶ ଗଳ୍ପ

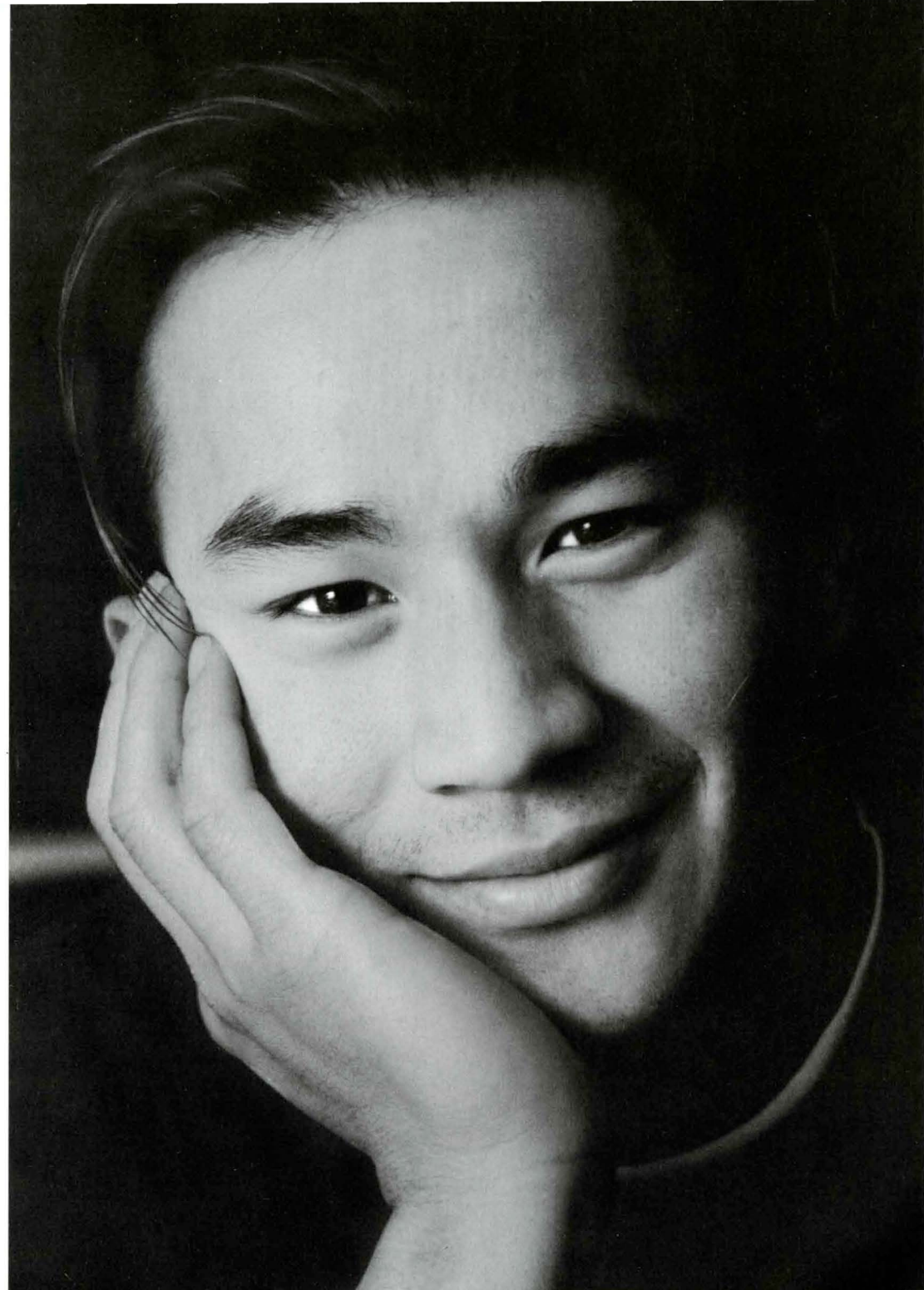
# More Stories





“At first life was good, but after we together for a while he more into gangster stuff and then life got complicated. When he joined the gang, that’s when I really lost him. His mother says you can have 10 wives but you only have one mother. She said he’s a man — why you always keep your husband home. . . treat him like a girl. He still has 3-5 years in jail. He may change for a few months when he gets out but after that it will be the same. I don’t want this life for my son — As of right now I don’t know how to protect my son from all this stuff.”

—Sunny



“My parents encouraged me a lot to stay in school. They were there 100% even though they didn’t understand English. I don’t put the blame on the parents. It’s hard for them. . .they can’t go to work and learn English, too. It’s not the involvement, it’s the time. . .they just don’t have it. And sometimes they don’t feel comfortable at school because they think that they might be looked down upon. One of my friends brought home his report card with all Ds and the parents asked what a D means and he said that means good. So, the parents were so proud.

“My father was a monk for ten years and he is a Buddhist but I am a Christian. I was baptized. I wanted to believe in something to make life better to live for. Sometimes I often ask myself, “Did God make us, or did man make God because man wanted something to believe in, or something to have faith in, or someone to talk to when he’s by himself, all alone. . . .”

— Tony



“Two years ago I got involved with Young Khmer Women in Action—we talk about Khmer women and what the role is inside and outside of the family. I guess we have kind of rebelled against the strict rules where a girl has to come home right after school. Being a young Cambodian woman is really hard because you basically don’t have a voice. You can’t go out with your friends because in the Cambodian community reputation is very important. If it is not good, the community will look down on your whole family.

“Personally, I don’t feel comfortable at the park because it’s all guys and they’re mostly in gangs—there’s a fear about the park. . .you’re not supposed to *fear* the park. . .it’s a place to play. . .so I thought of an idea; maybe the Young Khmer Women in Action can make a banner with the words that Chan wrote (poem on page 40) and hang it high in each park so when they play basketball, they can read it, and maybe it will mean something.”

— Lepor

“When I joined ROTC I was thinking of being an Air Force nurse or an office worker, but now I think I want to be a pilot—this is the 90s and I feel like I want to do something more for myself.

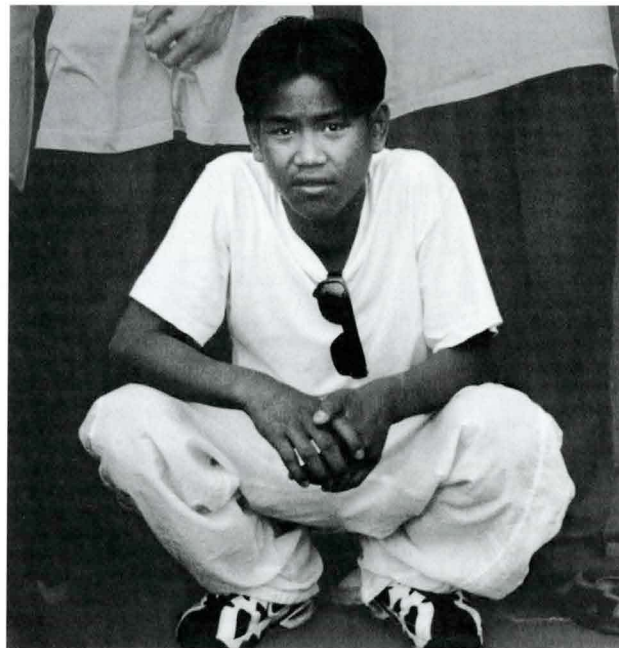
“My parents think that when I go out after school I’m looking for trouble. . . even though the Young Khmer Women are going out for community service to break down the stereotypes of kids getting in trouble. They say, ‘I don’t see the other kids going out joining a girls group or whatever you call it’. . . they just don’t understand. They worry that the neighbors might think I’m going out to look for trouble—I say I don’t care what the neighbors think.”

—Phors



“The first time I went to DYS was for hitting the principal. He came up from behind and put his hand on me and I turned around and swung at him because I thought someone was attacking me. I was sent to Forest Tree Camp. . . you’re out there alone with the wind and trees and stars. They make us walk 42 miles with everything on our backs—one thing lucky to us is there was snow, so we cross-country ski for 42 miles instead of walk.”

—*Bun*



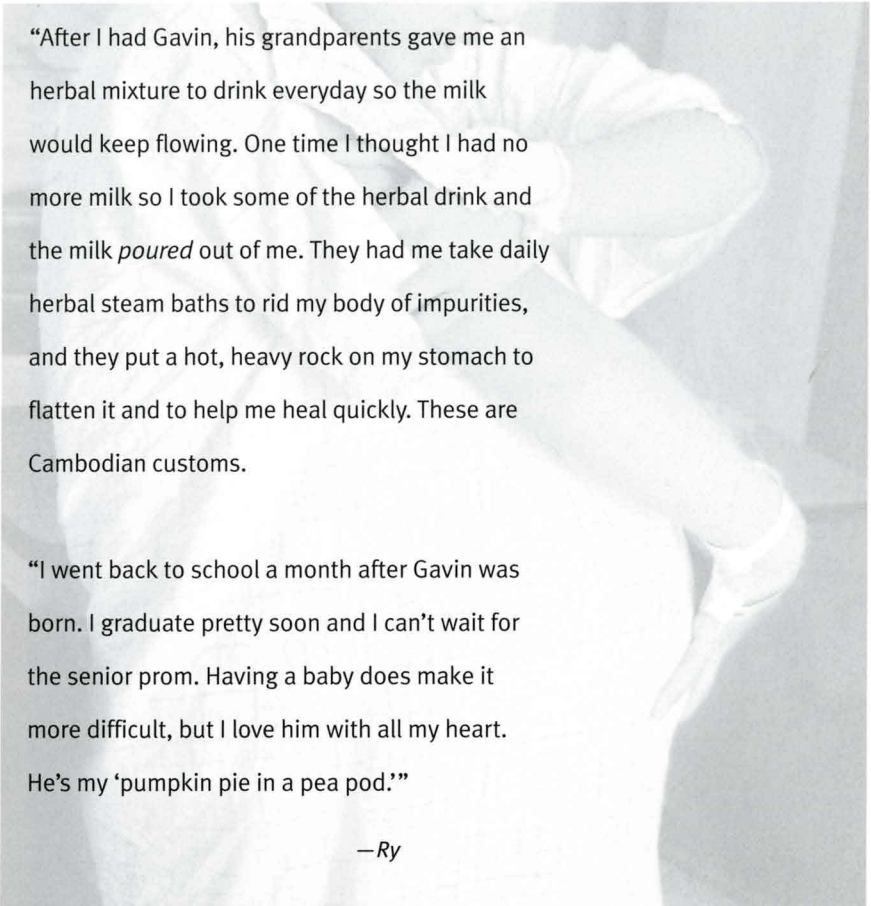
“My mother goes to ESL class, but can’t speak much English. My father’s 57 years old. The only time I talk to him is when we get a phone call, or when the mail comes. When I ask him for money he never gives me money. . . nothing. Right now my parents are doing a blessing on the house. . . every couple of months you have to do a blessing on the house so the evil don’t come.”

—*Yom*





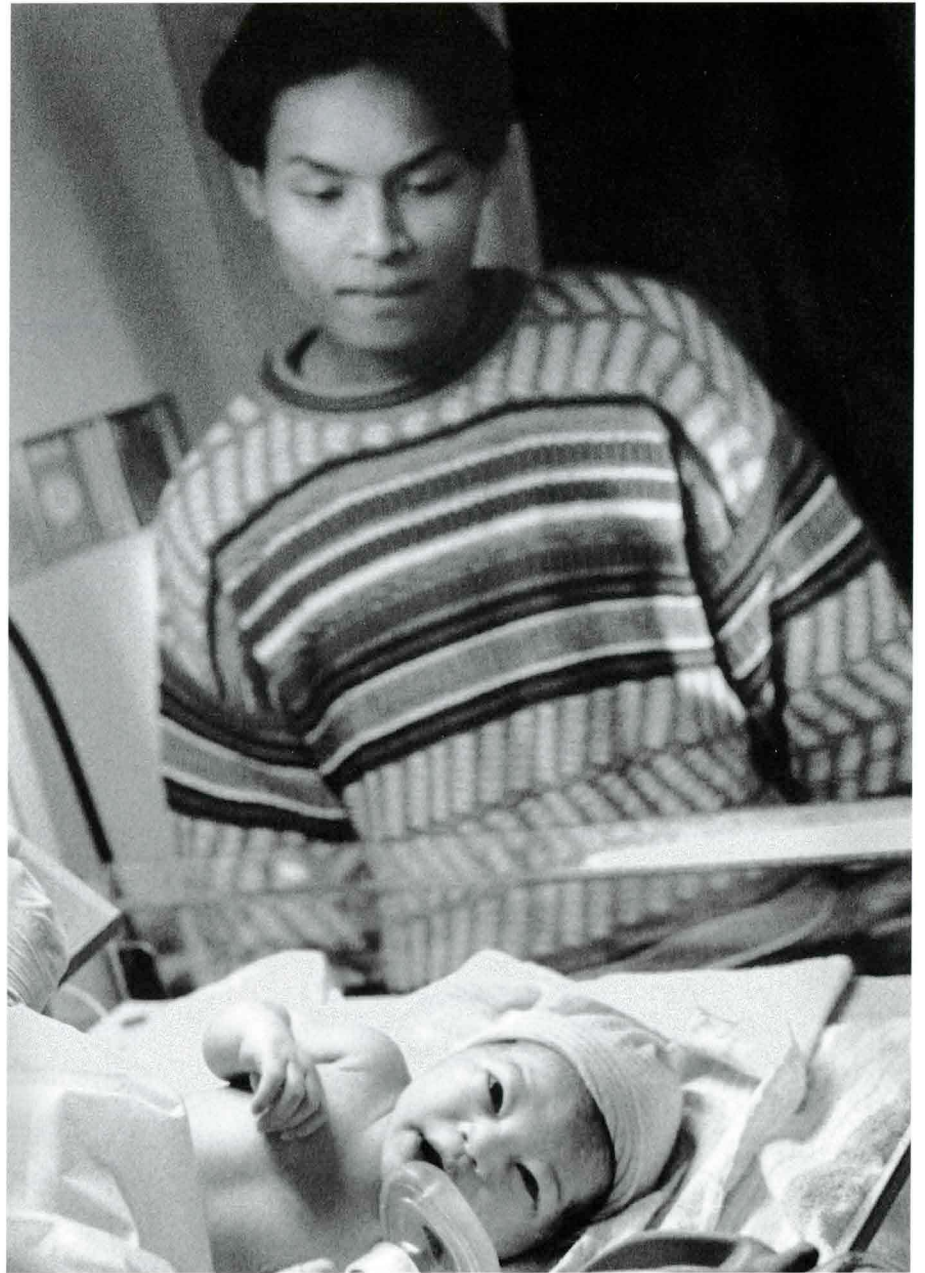




“After I had Gavin, his grandparents gave me an herbal mixture to drink everyday so the milk would keep flowing. One time I thought I had no more milk so I took some of the herbal drink and the milk *poured* out of me. They had me take daily herbal steam baths to rid my body of impurities, and they put a hot, heavy rock on my stomach to flatten it and to help me heal quickly. These are Cambodian customs.

“I went back to school a month after Gavin was born. I graduate pretty soon and I can’t wait for the senior prom. Having a baby does make it more difficult, but I love him with all my heart. He’s my ‘pumpkin pie in a pea pod.’”

—Ry

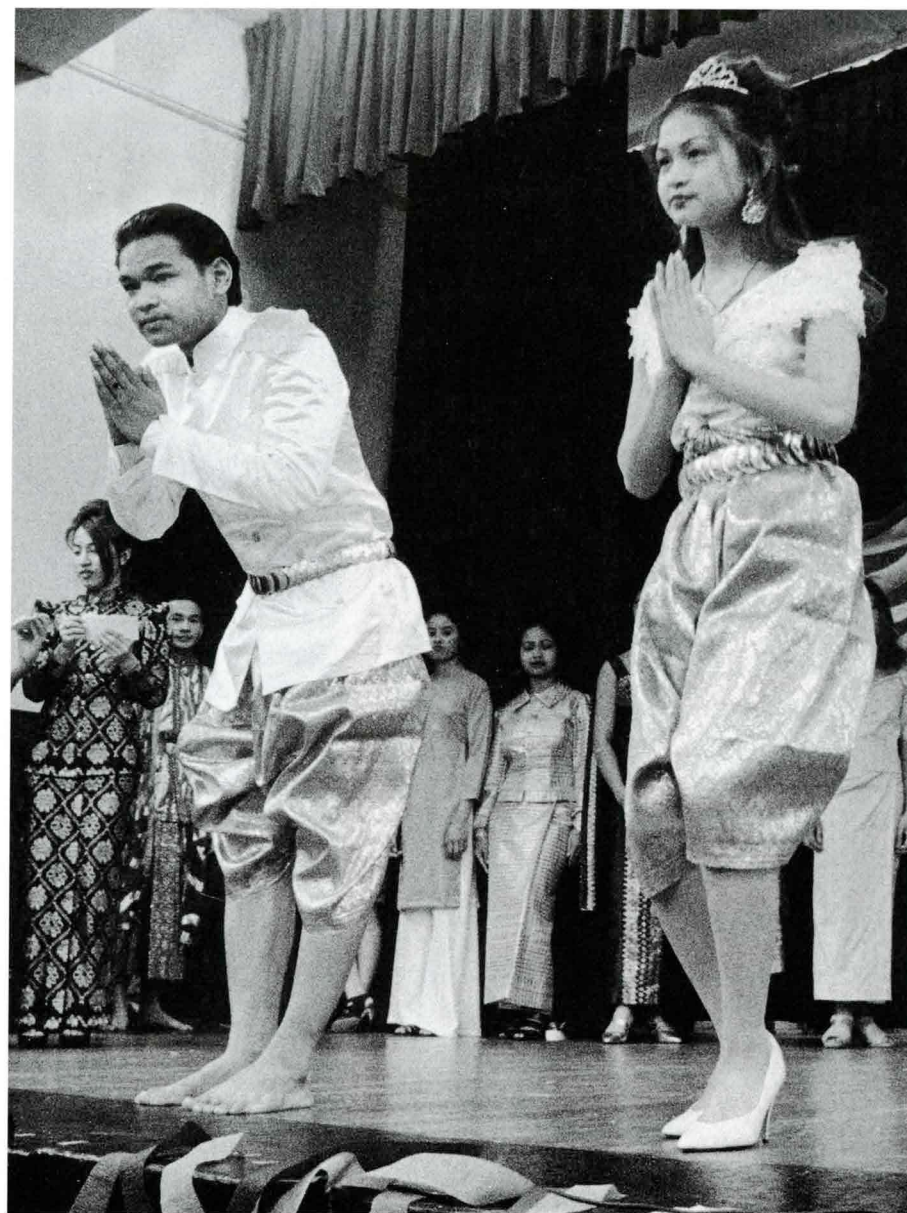




“In Cambodia I was a teacher in a private school. Here I teach K to 7th grade. Most kids in my class are from broken families. Every time that the kid have a problem, I call their house but nobody answer, nobody home. But some parents are very good. They transport the kid from home to school but the kid go in the front door and get out the back door and the parent never know that. The administrators say “where do we put the bad kid?” I say let the parent be responsible. They should not put bad and good together in the classroom. If you have fresh meat in one bucket and you put bad meat in with it, all the meat spoil together. . .same thing in school.

“Discipline is number one for the kids. The way we educate kids in Cambodia, we let them understand that this is part of life skills. We start in the 1st grade. We create song, we create poem. . .I love my mommy. . .I love my daddy. Step by step if you reinforce every day, the kid have no problem when they grow up. I educate my daughter, I told her to read books, I encourage her to read—I believe the more she read, the better she understand. I hope she will be a role model for my family. She told me she wants to be a doctor. I cannot see into the future but I hope it comes true.”

—*Mr. Sokhan Yang*

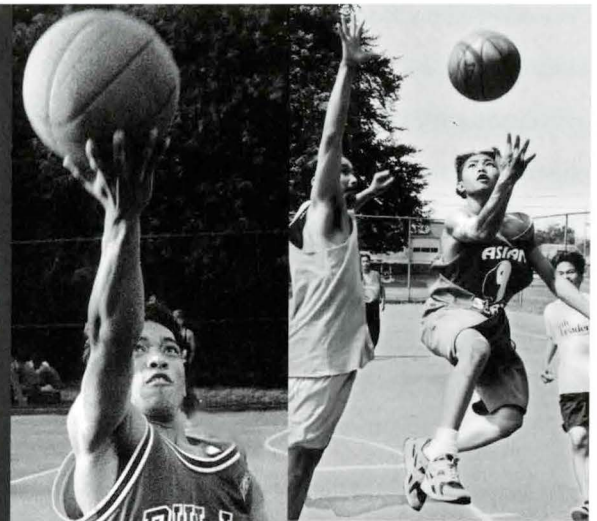
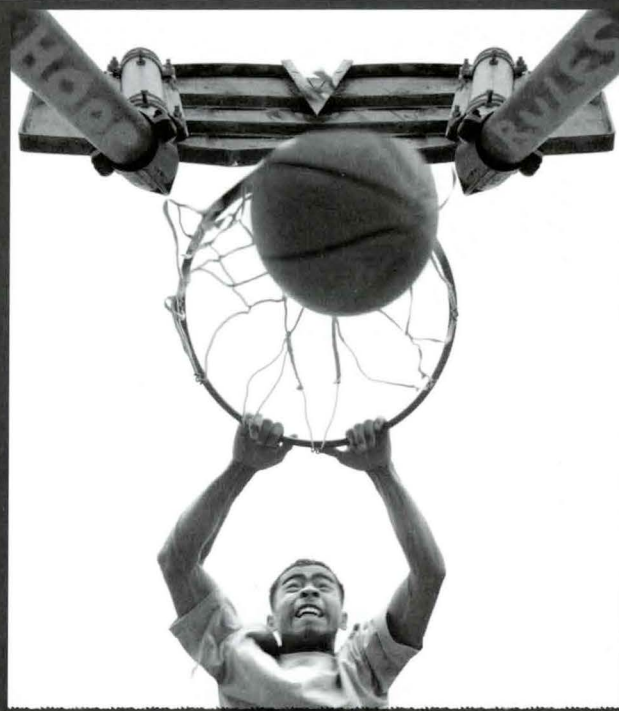
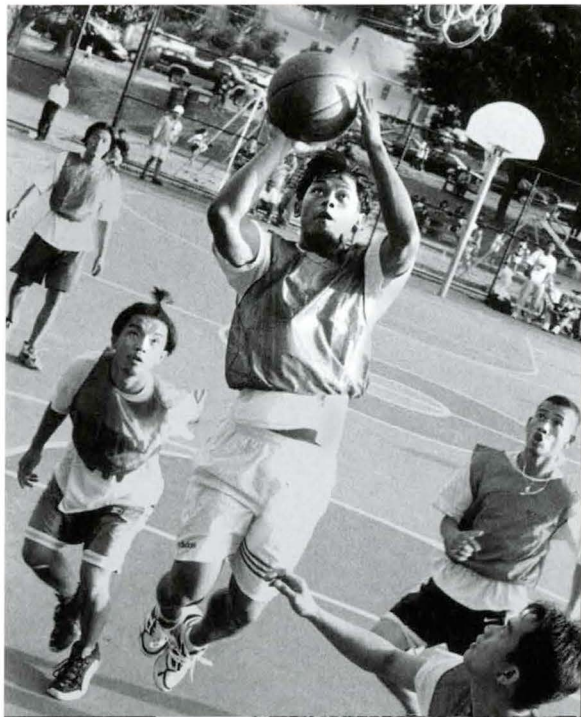


“When I was in high school I fell in love. One day I came home late. That day my boyfriend dropped me off and my mother questioned me about skipping school with him. I was afraid to stay home because of my father. My sister and I would be whipped just for having boyfriends. I went to a friend’s house and didn’t come home for a week. After that my parents made us get married. The parents feel that the guy that takes you away loses your virginity. I didn’t know anything about sex. I was 17 and he was 16 when we got married. We lived with my mom and both went to school.

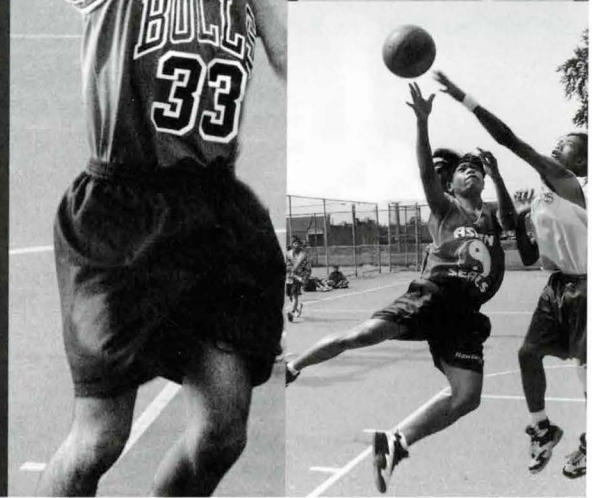
“One night he went out to shoot some pool and he never came home—he got killed that night. I was a widow at 19 with two kids. After he died, I went into a despair of life. I wanted to die but people told me you have to be strong. I try to keep myself busy. I started working as a physical therapist in high school. Now I want to graduate from college. . . I know I’m going to lead my kids in the right way.”

—Chhoeun





**BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT**  
5PM SIGN-UP · WEDNESDAY · AUGUST 7  
ROBERTO CLEMENTE PARK



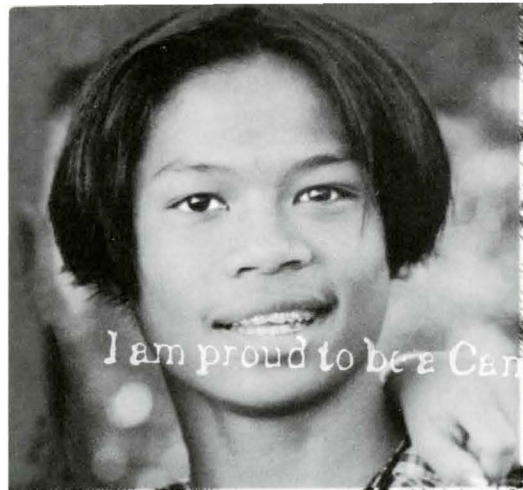
“In my family, my parents never really talked to us about growing up. My father didn’t really associate with anyone. It’s been hard for us kids. He works 3rd shift; he’s tired all the time. When he did talk to us, he lectured. He doesn’t teach us the right way to grow up. . . only lectured about being good.

“Sunny and I support each other like sisters. Living with a group of friends is like being in a family—we’re never embarrassed around each other and we share everything.”

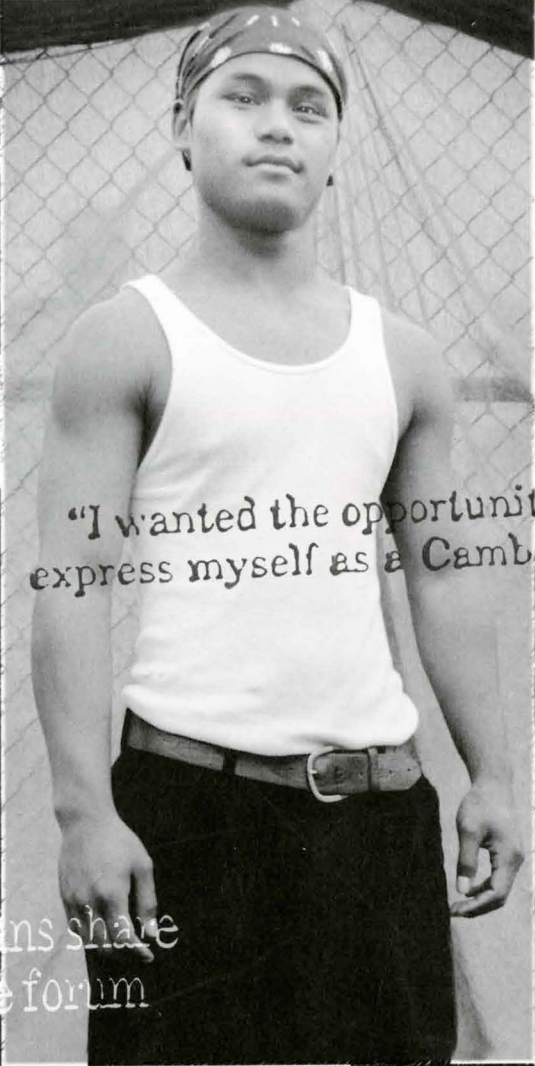
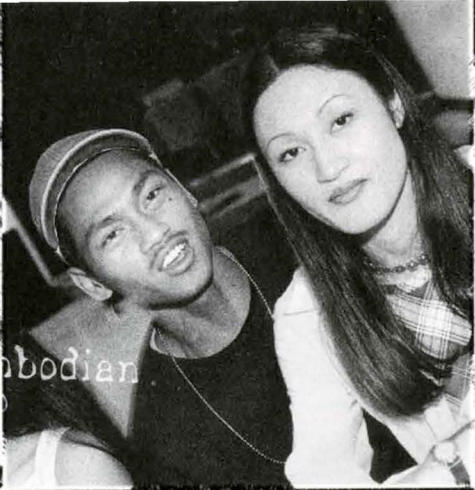
—*Chhouk*



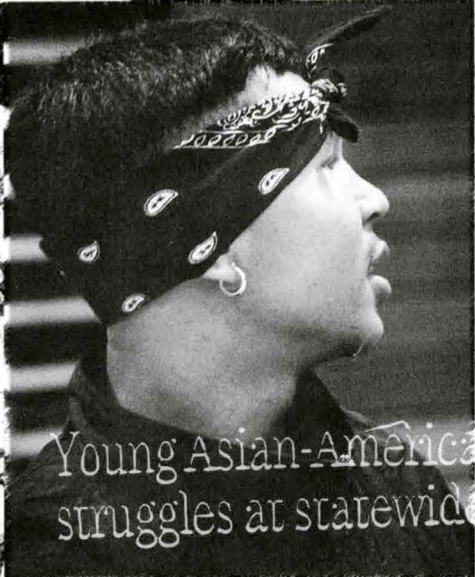
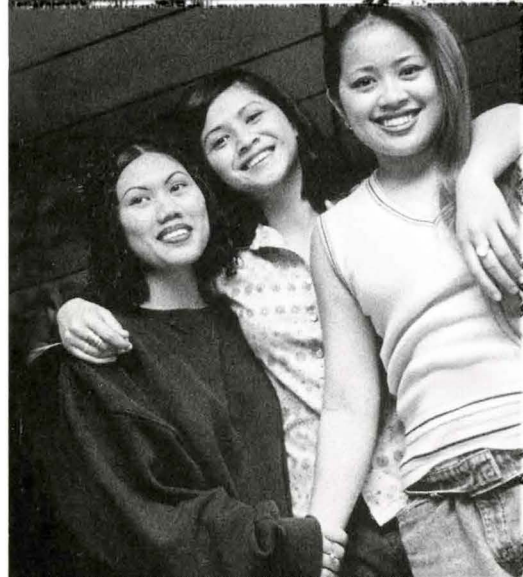
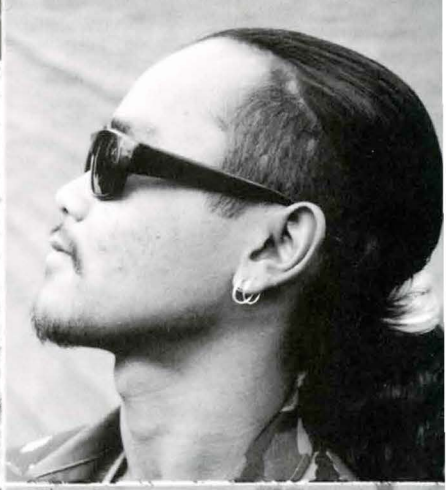




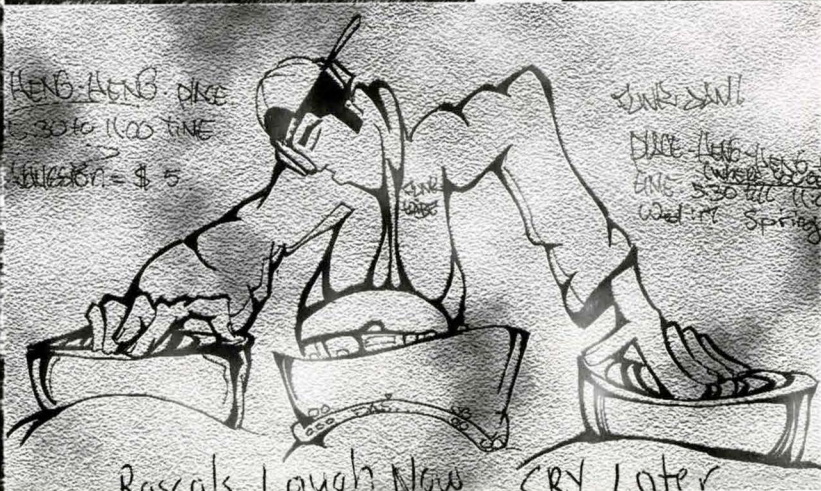
I am proud to be a Cambodian



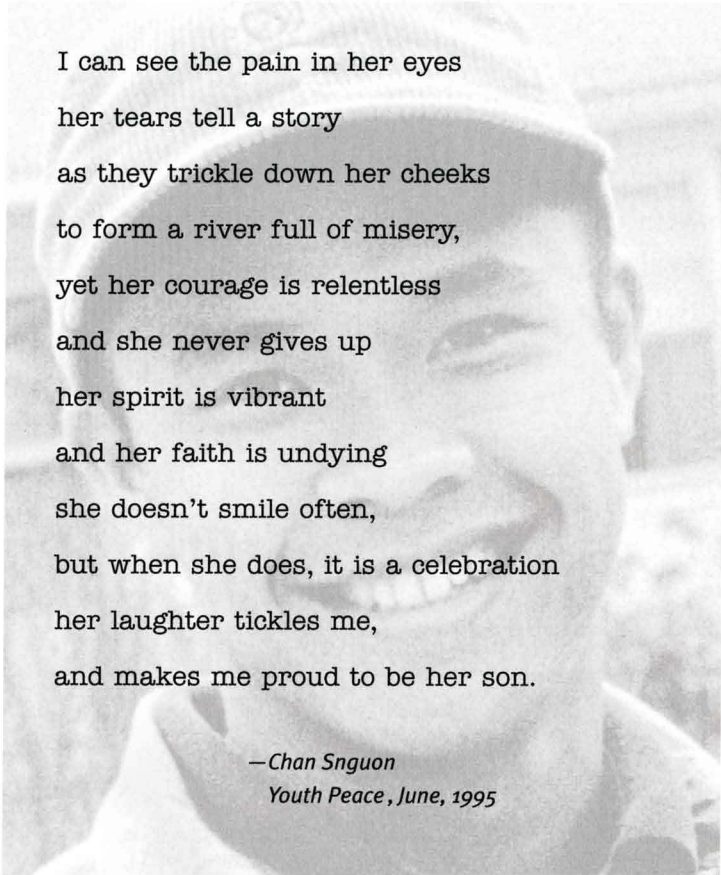
"I wanted the opportunity to express myself as a Cambodian"



Young Asian-Americans share struggles at statewide forum







I can see the pain in her eyes  
her tears tell a story  
as they trickle down her cheeks  
to form a river full of misery,  
yet her courage is relentless  
and she never gives up  
her spirit is vibrant  
and her faith is undying  
she doesn't smile often,  
but when she does, it is a celebration  
her laughter tickles me,  
and makes me proud to be her son.

—Chan Snguon  
*Youth Peace, June, 1995*

• • • • • A B O U T T H E A U T H O R S



*A special thanks to the guys down at the basketball court who allowed me to be part of the game. . .*

—JH

James Higgins and Joan Ross work as a photo/design team on documentary and editorial projects. Their first book on the Southeast Asian community, *Southeast Asians: A New Beginning in Lowell*, has been distributed worldwide, and photographs from the book have become a traveling exhibit with shows at the National Museum of American History of the Smithsonian Institution, and refugee camps in the Philippines. They are currently working on a project with San Francisco State University and the Bay Area Immigrant Literacy Initiative documenting community-based organizations in the Bay Area.

*. . .and to Ry (right) and her mom, Rav (center), who let me help coach Ry and Soeun's son, Gavin, into this world. . .*

—JR





In *Fractured Identities: Cambodia's Children of War*, James Higgins and Joan Ross trace the changes and growth among young Cambodian-Americans in the ten years since the publication of their book *Southeast Asians: A New Beginning in Lowell*.

This new Higgins and Ross book examines how the refugee and resettlement experiences affected the lives of Cambodian-American youths and how America has shaped their cultural identity. In their own voices, the young men and women describe their goals and dreams, as well as the challenges they face. Their stories—some heartening and some disturbing—are presented here in words and pictures. Insightful commentary by Sovann-Thida Loeung, Tuyet-Lan Pho, and George Chigas adds cultural perspective and historical context to the individual voices.

The images in the widely praised earlier book have appeared in exhibitions at the National Museum of American History of the Smithsonian Institution, Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy, and the Guggenheim Gallery at Chapman College in California.

# Southeast Asians

## A NEW BEGINNING IN LOWELL



BY JAMES HIGGINS & JOAN ROSS  
Foreword by Dith Pran Introduction by Hai B. Pho

### Reviewers' response to *Southeast Asians: A New Beginning in Lowell*:

"... a book of sensitive and empathetic photos of the first generation of Laotians, Vietnamese, and Cambodians to make their home here. ..."

*The Christian Science Monitor*

"... image and text come together to provide an intimate account of the struggles and joys of recent Asian immigrants."

*The Boston Globe*

"... James Higgins and Joan Ross have helped bridge the gap of understanding through their recent book ..."

*Sampan*

*A Publication of the Chinese American Civic Association*

"... we find a work such as this to be of great value in helping to represent to our students the realities of the resettlement experience."

*International Catholic Migration Commission*

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