

Project Explores Cambodian Experience

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A generation of Cambodian-Americans is growing up in Long Beach unaware of the brutal circumstances that brought their parents here.

But a new project aims to tell, through art, the story of surviving the Khmer Rouge's killing fields. The goal is not only to educate the newer generation — and hopefully bridge the divide made larger by silence — but also the community at large. This Friday, the Long Beach Cambodian Arts and History Project kicks off with the world premiere of "The Journey Across the Mine Fields to America" at the Found Theatre.

The play by Long Beach resident Chantara Nop tells the story of a young girl's escape from the Cambodian holocaust. It's something Nop remembers vividly.

"I just run, the same way, through the jungle," said the 52-year-old Long Beach city employee. "We run during the night and sleep during the days. 400 to 500 miles by bare feet. Mines were everywhere. I still picture in my memory. That's why I want to write it down, document it. If I not talk, who's going to talk, who's going to tell?"

From 1975 to 1979, more than a million Cambodians lost their lives at the hands of the communist regime. Hundreds of thousands made their escape through the jungles. Not all would survive the harrowing journey. But for the many who did, they would make a new home in the United States, and in Long Beach. This city has the largest Cambodian population in the world outside of Cambodia.

Nop was one of the few immigrants who, despite the pain, shared their story openly. Art was his release. He worked with the Found Theatre in the 1980s when the fledgling downtown theater was producing Cambodian reinterpretations of Shakespeare and also plays about the killing fields. Found Executive Director Virginia DeMoss recalled that audiences were sparse for the latter plays.

"It was just too soon, too hard for them," she said.

It remains difficult, Nop admits — after writing the play, he had a nightmare where Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot aimed a gun at him — but it's important to tell the story.

"Kids should learn what their parents are going through," he said. "They have to understand each other. I saw a lot of families break apart because the kid doesn't respect the parent. They don't know the parents had to sacrifice their lives."

Many children don't know the story because their parents have kept silent about what happened. Long Beach resident and survivor Bryant Sokphanarith Ben said he never wanted his son to know the horrors he faced. But nightmares haunted his sleep and he would wake up screaming. The screams would wake his son.

"It's hard to tell him how they die, how they killed my family," said Ben, who was 19 when the Khmer Rouge took power in Cambodia. "It's hard to translate that story."

But he decided to tell his story, not just to his family, but to whoever would listen. He spoke at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. He also got involved in a RAND research project that interviewed hundreds of survivors living in Long Beach. The results were published in August 2005 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* relating the experiences to post-traumatic stress disorder.

While his nightmares persisted, a more pleasant dream evolved, one where he opened a museum to educate people about the Cambodian experience during the Khmer Rouge. Ben sees the Long Beach Cambodian Art and History Project, of which he was an organizer, as key to reaching that goal.

"This project is the first step to the larger project," Ben said. "This gives me energy to do whatever I can do (to build a museum). It is a start."

The project is funded through the California Community Foundation's Visual Arts Initiative. It is a collaboration with the Cambodian-American Leadership Foundation; The Found Theatre; the National Conference for Community and Justice Southern California, based in Long Beach; Facing History and Ourselves, a national education and professional development program that aims to "promote development of more humane and informed citizenry;" and Program for Torture Victims, which works with survivors.

In addition to the play, the project includes an oral history and photo exhibit from the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma. "Courage and Resiliency: Cambodian-American Women in America," which depicts the lives of 10 Cambodian women, will hang in the Long Beach Main Public Library beginning March 4 and continuing through April 30. Organizers say that's just a start. They are working with the Long Beach Unified School District on curriculum in the high schools.

"Journey Across the Mine Fields to America" — a musical play performed in the centuries-old Cambodian art form known as Lakhon Yike — is at The Found Theatre, 599 Long Beach Blvd., this weekend and next. Show times are 8 p.m. Feb 17, 18, 23, 24 and 25, and 2:30 p.m. Feb. 19 and 26. Tickets are \$15.

The show is free to students 18 and younger with their school I.D. The show is not suited for children younger than 6.

For tickets, call the Found at 433-3363.

