

Remembering the Killing Fields

Reporter: Doualy Xaykaothao

Memorial Day for Cambodian veterans took place last month on the 38th anniversary of the rise of the Khmer Rouge. This communist regime took control of Cambodia between 1975 and 1979, killing an estimated 2 million men, women and children.

“We try to teach the new generation to remember, to understand, but they are more American,” says 67-year-old Kanno Nuon, a survivor of the Cambodian Genocide.

He escaped to Long Beach three decades ago, but back in Cambodia, under the Khmer Rouge, he worked in a labor camp for three and half years. During this time, he says, he witnessed executions, torture, and he himself nearly starved to death.

“That time [was] very hard for me,” Nuon says. “I still remember everything about my hard time with the communists.”

Bryant Ben, president of The Killing Fields Memorial Center in Long Beach, says many decades have past, but for him, he remembers everything as if it took place yesterday.

“The picture you see here is my oldest brother,” says Ben. “His name is Sarun Ben.”

The brothers were imprisoned in a makeshift Khmer Rouge labor camp, at a temple in the Cambodian countryside. The last time the brothers saw each other, Ben was about to have rice soup for lunch. His brother managed to get close enough to slip him some anti-diarrhea pills.

“He came, sneak behind me, he gave me some medicine,” Ben recalls. “He said this is all, that’s what he has, take care of yourself, he told me ‘take care.’ ” That was the last time Ben heard from his brother.



[Enlarge](#)

Courtesy Doualy Xaykaothao

A framed photo of 25-year-old medical student Sarun Ben, who was killed by the Khmer Rouge for being an intellectual.

Among those on the regime’s hit list were intellectuals, college students like Ben and his brother. During an interrogation, Ben lied about his studies. His brother Sarun did not. The Khmer Rouge killed Sarun, and would also execute Ben’s father, four of his brothers and sisters.

“I really don’t know about the genocide, “says Jenna Koy, a senior at Long Beach Polytechnic High School. “Cause my Mom doesn’t tell me about it, and my grandma don’t want to tell me about it. They probably don’t want us to know how their lives used to be in Cambodia. I just don’t ask them.”

But during an informal teach-in at Long Beach City College, Koy learns why some first-generation refugees have difficulty talking about their past.

Guest speaker Victory Heng explains that he used to tell people the Khmer Rouge killed his father, but for the

first time, he admits before an audience of several hundred people that his father actually committed suicide.

“No, my father was not a coward,” Heng says. “My father was a hero, and a preserver of our lives.”

Sarah Pol-Lim, executive director of United Cambodian Community, organized the event, in part because she says studies by the Rand Corporation showed Cambodian refugees still struggle with major depression and an unusually high rate of PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

“The ripple effect of that PTSD doesn’t [just] go to [the] second generation,” Pol-Lim says. “It will go to [the] third, fourth generation, if we never talk about it.”

Another guest speaker, Judy Green of Temple Israel, shares her experience as a second-generation Holocaust survivor. As a child, Green says, she knew little about the Holocaust, but she felt the absence of her grandparents.

“So I asked my Mom, what happened to my grandparents,” Green says. “And my mother’s face turned in such a way that I never asked my mother that question again.”



[Enlarge](#)

Courtesy Doualy Xaykaothao

Cambodian Americans in Long Beach leave small bags of rice and messages of love for those killed by the Khmer Rouge.

More than three decades years later, Green’s mother slowly began to talk about the day when her father was taken away by Nazi soldiers, and never seen again.

“It is a long time before you can begin to come close to conversations where there’s great pain,” says Green.

But those conversations, Green adds, start the process of healing a community that has lost so much, and so many.