

Sopheap and Sophear Hang

Sopheap is twenty-one and Sophear is nineteen. They were both born in Phnom Penh. They are the eldest children of Seng Kim and Thay Hor Hang, also a contributor to The Survivor Project. The sisters feel very fortunate, and proud of their parents, for their survival as an intact family.

Under the Communists, Sophear and Sopheap did farm labor, as did all members of their society old enough to walk. They also helped look after their younger siblings. They were responsible to do this work if they wanted to receive food. There was no education of any kind, although Sopheap was old enough to have started in a private French school before the fall of Lon Nol. But the sisters remember very little about their life in Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge.

In Santa Rosa, they have made friends of all descriptions as they progressed through school. They have been active in sports activities while pursuing their studies energetically. Today, Sopheap is a student at Sonoma State University. She enjoys psychology, sociology, and multicultural studies. She is planning to teach elementary school and to go on for a master's degree so she can teach junior high school later. Sophear is studying psychology and child development at the Santa Rosa Junior College. She also plans to teach elementary school.

They are both very concerned about communication between cultures. They feel it is very important for teachers, especially, to understand a child's ethnic background and how it influences the child's behavior and style of communication. They hope to contribute to this understanding as teachers themselves.

To view the photographic and oral history exhibit, please continue to scroll to the next page.



We were born young and then the war changed us.

When we were forced at gunpoint to get out of the city, the Khmer Rouge said, “After three days you can come back and then live normally.” But the journey went on and on. Some people just abandoned their kids by the side of the road. I knew my parents would not allow that to happen.

By the time I was seven years old, I learned how to do all kinds of hard work, which no kid would do, to earn my food. There was no schooling – that’s why I cannot read or write Cambodian. If our parents hadn’t played dumb, they could have died. If you had lighter skin, or glasses, they’d think you’d have to be educated. But our parents taught us not to judge people by how they looked.

School here was like a room with a thousand eyes staring and you’re an object to them. We didn’t feel angry at the people doing it, we felt sad for ourselves. “What’s wrong with us?” We were very determined to learn to communicate.

I'm proud of who I am and that I'm not afraid to express my feelings to anybody. If you want to learn from other people you have to reach out to them – be yourself, open up and give them a chance.



How kids learn and grow and do the things they do is fascinating to me.

At first, being young, we just followed our parents.

All the kids in this world react the same way to any disaster like the Gulf crisis. As we traveled out of our country to get to the Thai border, we saw dead soldiers lying in the road. We asked, "Why is he here?" And for our parents to explain that is very hard. We didn't think about the future. If our parents said "It'll be okay," we said, "Oh, okay."

But when our relatives were taken away, the Pol Pots said they were taking them to be educated – and we knew that was not the case.

In Thailand we learned to get along with anybody. If a person is rough with you, ease it out with them. If a tiger fights a tiger, you don't get any results. Negotiate, or just walk away. Then our parents told us that we were coming to the United States: "It's a wonderful place, you can do anything you want..."but we already know this is not true.

My children will be American, but I'll also want them to know where their roots are. Because America is not where I came from.