

A forum for healing in Portland, Ore.

Written by

Tuesday, 08 September 2009 10:22



I have been on the road for awhile, so this post is late in coming, but I wanted to make note of a [wonderful event](#) that was held last month in Portland, Ore.: a "Collective Sharing and Healing Forum" sponsored by the [Cambodian-American Community of Oregon](#). It is the second event of its kind in Portland and happened to coincide with a trip to my hometown.

I have to admit, before I traveled to Cambodia I did not know much about the Cambodian community in Oregon. My mother has taught English as a Second Language in Portland for years, and she has had numerous Cambodian and Vietnamese students in her classes, but I had no idea that CACO was so vocal and well-organized.

The August forum, which was held at Portland State University and focused on the Khmer Rouge tribunal, boasted an impressive selection of speakers and discussion panels. Highlights included "Conversations with Khmer Authors" (such as activist Theary Seng and former U.S. Ambassador Sichan Siv); "Shared Suffering, Shared Resilience and the Cambodian Diaspora Victims' Participation Project," presented by [Professor Leakhena Nou](#); and a description of the Khmer Rouge tribunal by scholar Craig Etcheson. Several participants flew from Cambodia for the event.

Portland-based filmmakers from [Spin Film](#) also screened an Oral History Project on which they have been collaborating with CACO. The documentary featured young Cambodian Oregonians learning about their parents' and grandparents' experiences under the Khmer Rouge. After the screening, Cambodian immigrants and their children probed issues raised by the film in greater depth.

While many of the day's discussions were very emotional, I found the conversations with Khmer authors particularly moving. Ronnie Yimsut, who [miraculously survived](#) the massacre of his entire family by Khmer Rouge cadres, earnestly described how, as "a skinny kid of 15," he later killed a Khmer Rouge soldier "out of pure hatred."

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[Kilong Ung](#), author of *Golden Leaf*, explained how he had to go to Starbucks -- a public environment -- to control his emotions when he wrote.

"Every time I write a sentence, I cry," he said.

There is no doubt that the impact of the Khmer Rouge years is still fresh in Cambodian immigrant populations, especially as the tribunal makes headlines throughout the world. If more diaspora communities could follow the model set by CACO, I think it would truly benefit those who experienced the trauma of Democratic Kampuchea, as well as their American-born children and grandchildren.



* *Pictured: Former U.S. Ambassador Sichan Siv and activist Theary Seng during a "Conversation with Khmer authors" (above); different generations of the Cambodian-American Community of Oregon discuss the ramifications of the Khmer Rouge tribunal (at right).*

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