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Pech Family: Kun Tuy (Middle)

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STOCKTONSpeaks!

KUN TUY

Imagine a fifteen-year-old girl forced to work in the fields seven days a week from five in the morning to seven at night. In California today such a young woman would be going to school to learn about herself and about life's opportunities!

At fifteen, Kun Tuy dreamed of teaching dance. Instead, Kun was put to work by the Khmer Rouge in the rice fields in the mountains of Cambodia. Kun received no money and little food for her labor. The Khmer Rouge ruled by suppression and killing in anticipation of establishing a communist regime in Cambodia.

It was not uncommon for the Khmer Rouge to beat people without cause, take valuable possessions, and burn religious artifacts. However, Kun's religion survived and kept her company when she was alone in the fields or in the jungle. The Khmer Rouge separated Kun from her mother for five years; religion sustained her during these dark days.

Kun recalls horrific experiences, resulting in chronic nightmares that left her in terror and brought on tears that would not stop. She remembers a pitch-black night when she stumbled out to get a drink of water from a nearby stream. As she felt her way, she saw people sleeping alongside the bank. The next morning, when she awoke, she realized that the people were not asleep but instead were dead. Their blood had flowed into the stream from which Kun had drunk the previous night.

The Khmer Rouge had taken away her days of innocence, leaving only her personal faith to provide hope for the future.

Kun came to the United States at sixteen. Her family was part of the second wave of refugees to leave Cambodia. When she arrived, she was made to feel embarrassed because she did not speak English. At school she

was ridiculed and spat on, reducing her to tears yet again. However, these torments could not break her strong spirit. Instead, they motivated Kun to learn English quickly, and in a short time she was speaking the language. While Kun would like to forget such childhood memories, they built her character and made her stronger.

At Catholic Charities, a non-profit social services agency, Kun received sound advice from those with whom she worked. They told her to go to school, to get a high school diploma, and to find a job. She understood this to be the way to become an adult in her new land. This was the path to becoming self-reliant and strong for her family in America.

In Cambodia, the tradition of the string around the wrist separates the girl from the woman. If a girl is wearing the string, it signifies that she has started menstruating and is now a woman. Kun kept her string a secret until, at eighteen, she became engaged. Surprised, her mother asked if she was ready. Sheepishly, Kun told her mother that she had been ready for some time. Her mother then embraced her daughter as a woman indeed.

Soon after Kun married, she knew she would have to continue school as well as take care of her three siblings, and to cook for her family and her new husband. She learned to juggle these priorities, as well as a new set of demands which arrived with the birth of her own children. The responsibilities of adulthood seemed to cascade upon her all at once.

As the years passed, Kun and her children were able to attend school together. In time, Kun received her California nursing certificate, one of her most valued achievements. She continues to be an active member of the Cambodian community and hopes that someday her children will understand the struggles of her past and the opportunities American has provided.

The child of a soldier and a rice field worker, Kun overcame adversity after adversity to achieve the freedoms taken for granted by so many in the United States. Kun is pleased that her family will now have these freedoms without her

struggle. Still, she reminds them: "Life is not easy. Make good choices and love yourself."

Author: Lindsey Gaines

Interviewer: Marilyn Gallup

Ethnic Group: Cambodian American

Generation: Middle