

STOCKTONSpeaks!

KY PECH

There were many markers that signified Ky Pech's coming of age. Her parents gave her responsibility at an early age to help take care of their family; fulfilling that responsibility was her greatest accomplishment. She helped her family financially, earning money by working in the rice fields of Cambodia. Ky also helped her mom take care of her two younger sisters after her father died. The responsibilities that fell upon her while she was young made her realize she could no longer "fool around."

But Ky Pech did not feel these increased responsibilities signaled the end of childhood, not quite yet. Although society treated her as an adult at fourteen, in her own heart she did not feel like an adult. It was not until Mrs. Pech was married at twenty-two that she believed that she entered adulthood.

Cambodian culture has no celebration for "coming of age," but there is a custom for signifying a girl's womanhood. At age sixteen to seventeen, it is customary for girls to wear a string around their wrist for three months to show that they are available for marriage. Availability does not mean instant marriage, however. Ordinarily, a young woman will not be chosen to marry until her early twenties.

Once Mrs. Pech married, she was able to make decisions, with the help of her husband. It was the beginning of a new chapter in her life, the transition from being a part of her parents' family to establishing a new household. The young couple soon started their family; Ky Pech had her first child when she was 23. Eight more children followed quickly. As she gained more experience raising children, Ky Pech felt ever more adult.

Mrs. Pech and her husband, however, got little time to enjoy their family life because of warfare within their country. During the 1970s, Cambodia was dragged into the Vietnam War. Civil strife overcame the country and a guerilla

war waged by the Khmer Rouge resulted in a communist regime in April 1975. Once in power, the Khmer Rouge, under the leadership of Pol Pot, began systematic and indiscriminate executions of former members of the Cambodian military and those suspected of aiding the American cause, including intellectuals, skilled workers, and government workers.

The Khmer Rouge had as its stated goal to establish a rural agrarian economy—yet villages in the countryside did not escape their extermination campaign. By the end of four years, more than a million innocents had died by execution, malnutrition, and disease.

Though they were village peasants, the Khmer Rouge targeted Ky Pech's family. Because Mrs. Pech's husband had been in the army, he was killed. Three of her children had died of natural causes, prior to the Khmer Rouge. A son succumbed to starvation when the Khmer Rouge's agrarian policies and food distribution programs failed. These tragedies tested her physical strength and moral endurance.

During this difficult time, Mrs. Pech's priority was keeping her family safe. With her five remaining children and terrified by life under the Khmer Rouge, Mrs. Pech escaped from her village and hid in the jungle. She and her family ran for their lives, traveling by night and hiding by day. Throughout their flight, they were frightened whenever they encountered others, never knowing who might be friendly or perhaps loyal to the Khmer Rouge.

Water was scarce, and food even more so. The family foraging for whatever they could find to eat, Ky Pech's youngest son died of starvation in her arms while they were on their way to Thailand. After a harrowing journey, Mrs. Pech and four surviving children finally crossed the Thai border to safety, in 1980.

There she received help from the United Nations and the Red Cross while in refugee camps for Cambodians fleeing their homeland. The camps, though, were not always safe havens. Security was uncertain, especially at night. There were burglaries, extortions, rapes, and murders.

After surviving this tragic time in Cambodia and Thailand, Mrs. Pech with her family were able to move to the United States in 1982. She lived first in Los Angeles and then later moved to Stockton.

Now, Cambodia is a memory, but one that she wants to preserve. She hopes future generations will understand the beauty of their country and the tragedy of Cambodia's struggles. She seeks to prevent her family from making a radical break with their past and to leave her children with a sense of family tradition.

While her childhood had been very much like that of her parents, her children are leading lives very different from her own. One of nine children, she had been a field worker, just as her parents had been. Her father had little education and Ky, helping to support the family, did not get a chance to attend school either. Her parents lived in political turmoil while Cambodia was a French protectorate, always uncertain of their future. Echoing their experiences, she lived in fear of the Khmer Rouge.

Like her parents, Mrs. Pech did not have enough time to live peacefully because of politics. She considers herself a Buddhist, the traditional religion of the Khmer of Cambodia. It was her family's religion, but the tragic occurrences of her early adult years made it difficult for her to practice her faith.

Life has taught her, nonetheless, that even when you cannot control events, you can control how you respond to them. "Life is not easy; if you make the wrong choices, it's not going to get you anywhere. If you make the right choices, you will succeed in life, and you can do anything you want, without getting into trouble."

Now 67, Mrs. Pech wants her family and her people to remember to be careful while raising their children, to love them and to support them. She believes it's important to be a good role model for future generations. She is very proud of the way she has raised her surviving four children, all of whom now live in the United States. Thanks to her strength and guidance, she believes they have grown to good human beings.

Interviewer: Marilyn Gallup

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Ethnic Group: Cambodian

Generation: Elder