

ROTTANA PRAK

“Have you finished the laundry?”

“The kitchen needs to be cleaned now—do you hear me?”

“Could you go ahead and put away those dishes?”

All over the country, at this very moment, parents are asking questions just like these. And all over the country, at this very moment, teenagers are turning up their headphones, or heading for the door, fast, or hunting for a younger brother or sister to stick with the work.

Or—if they’re like Rottana Prak, they’re simply saying “yes.” Rottana is a typical student at Stagg High School. She likes to spend time with her friends. She enjoys music and movies. She’s into skateboarding and X-treme sports; she’s a teenager. But she’s also a teenager who knows her roots. She knows what her parents and her family endured in Cambodia as their beautiful homeland was shattered by war and the brutalities of the Khmer Rouge. Every day was a struggle, and the simplest act of finding food was a major challenge. She knows how much strength it took for them to survive and then to leave their homeland behind.

Do the dishes? Take care of the laundry? Sure!

It’s not as if her parents ask for her help to punish her. They ask because they know that at age sixteen, she’s not a child anymore. Work means responsibility, and responsibility means maturity. Rottana is happy to cook meals for the family and to show that she’s mature (and that she’s a good cook, too!). Because she’s reliable, she has earned her parents’ trust and respect.

Has earning that trust changed her life? Yes! Her parents no longer worry as much when she goes out. Good parents like Rottana’s will always worry some, of course . . . that’s their job. But Rottana enjoys the freedom that comes

from being treated like an adult. “I’m mature enough to do my own things!”—and her parents know it. They may worry a little, but as time goes by, it’s less and less.

Having her parent’s trust isn’t just important to her for the sake of gaining freedom; it’s also important because she loves and respects *them*. They’ve worked hard for their six children, raising them to honor their heritage, their Buddhist faith, and their family ties. Family vacations are one of her fondest memories, and reunions are always fun times that allow her family to celebrate their solidarity.

Within a large family unit, Rottana’s parents have been steady, loving role models. Her mother is employed at a charitable organization that serves the community, and she models the value of working to help others. “Laziness doesn’t get you anywhere,” Rottana’s parents have always taught her, and this is wisdom they live by. Rottana values her mother’s character. “I hope my adult life will be like my mother’s, because she is an inspiration to me.”

Yet while she knows she will work hard, just like her mother, she has her own plans for a career. Right now, skateboarding is her love. Maybe she’ll be a pro-skateboarder and inspire young people to achieve their dreams—or maybe, she’ll open her own skate shop. With the values she’s been taught and with the support of her family, she envisions a bright future. Still, for the time being, it’s dishes and laundry.

There is a particular mark of maturity she’s eager to achieve—and she’s working on it right now: getting a driver’s license. With a license, she can help her parents even more, by doing errands and driving her younger brothers and sisters places they need to go. Being able to drive will also make Rottana’s tutoring job at Oak Park Arts Center easier.

And it will get her to the skate park faster!

Author: Amy Smith

Interviewer: Alma Riego

Ethnic Group: Cambodian

Generation: Youth