

## STOCKTONSpeaks!

### **SOPHAT SORN**

Sophat Sorn has a great love for his native country, Cambodia. On her soil, he learned great lessons, in life and in loss. Sophat never wanted to leave Cambodia. But on October 30, 1991, Sophat and his family arrived in Petaluma, California, to start a new life. Two weeks later, the family arrived in Stockton. Now, surrounded by his children, Sophat tells stories of his lost youth, homeland, friends and family left behind...

Sophat's story begins in 1953 at his birth in Cambodia. The eighth of nine children born to a working farmer and merchant, Sophat knew what it was to work hard. He spent many days working with his parents on the farm and in the fields. The work was backbreaking, but Sophat enjoyed the time he spent with family. He dreamed of someday becoming the man his parents expected him to become.

In the early 1960s, he attended elementary school. As he progressed through his classes, Sophat earned the opportunity to attend college and study with professors from abroad. It was in secondary education and college that he learned to speak French and English, in addition to Khmer, his native tongue. Every day after school, Sophat would come home to work on the farm with his parents. However, Sophat parents valued his education and encouraged him to study hard. They believed that education would lead Sophat to a life of stability and a future in which Sophat could provide for a family.

In 1971, at the age of 18, Sophat joined the Republican army fighting the Communist regime. On the battlefield, Sophat realized that he was no longer a child. During his years of service, he was responsible for 100 or more men, most of whom were older than he was. This was an enormous responsibility for such a young man, but clearly one that could not have been his had he not reached the maturity of an adult.

Sophat served his country for four years before the downfall of the Republic on April 17, 1975. Along with millions of city dwellers who were forced out of the capital at gunpoint, Sophat was sent to work in the Khmer Rouge Economic Zone for four years. In 1983, when the country fell into Communist hands, he and his family escaped to a border camp, for fear of being sent to the "killing fields."

Sophat had grown up with aspirations of a stable life, a happy family and a profession that would help his country. In December 1983, when Sophat and his family left their home to travel to a camp along the Thai-Cambodian border, Sophat began to see his dream slip away. Instead of thoughts about a future job or home, Sophat's thoughts were on immediate survival. The journey to the camp was a dangerous one. The ruling government was looking for any excuse to frame a refuge as a traitor to Cambodia. He believes that God's help allowed him and family to arrive safely at the camp a few days after leaving their home. Even though they were thankful to have made the treacherous journey, Sophat and his family were forced to endure a border camp for eight more years.

When the chance came, Sophat and family left Cambodia for America. With their arrival in the United States, Sophat felt incredible joy. He now had the two most important things in his life, family and freedom. In this new world, he could start a new life.

He determined to teach his children about the culture they had lost. One of the ways Sophat pursued this goal was through involvement in the large Cambodian community in Stockton. In this community, he feels welcome, respected, and admired. With the help of the community, he has honored his family name and culture.

On the other hand, Sophat has chosen to depart from the community in his lifestyle. He converted from Buddhism to Christianity and has a strong faith in Jesus Christ and the second coming. Because of his beliefs, Sophat joined the Seventh Day Adventist church. Even though he no longer practices the

Cambodian traditions associated with Buddhism, Sophat works hard to remain active in Cambodian community life.

In his youth, Sophat would sit for hours after dinner, under a kerosene lamp, listening to his father's stories that so often inspired and entertained him. Now, relaxing in his home with his family surrounding him, Sophat tells his own stories of growing up. He remembers as a boy being charged with blowing a shiny whistle in the Marriage Marching Procession at his older brother's wedding. He felt great pride as he watched his father, decked out in a full police uniform, commanding the flow of traffic for his family's celebration.

Sophat also likes to pass down the advice given to him by the family elders as he was growing up. "Be a master of what you do," they would say. "Be honest and live upright," or "Grateful people never go down." Sophat uses these phrases as guiding principles to teach his children about obedience and respect for parents and elders. He wants his children to understand the importance of education and of family values. He wants his family to remember that Cambodia has a sad, but proud history. "The Cambodian people should not lose hope, for they are a strong people."

He smiles and laughs as he walks along the dusty road of his youth in his mind. He imagines that his children will grow up and tell their children stories about Sophat and his ancestors. "Yesterday is but a dream and tomorrow is only a vision. But, if we do good deeds today, every yesterday will become a dream of happiness and every tomorrow, a vision of hope. Be careful, therefore, how you use today."

Interviewer: Vaughn Lee

Author: Nancy Snider

Ethnic Group: Cambodian American

Generation: Middle