



Exhibit on Cambodia's killing fields focuses on local survivors

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Dary Mien was about 6 years old in 1975 when the Khmer Rouge took over her Cambodian homeland.

At least that's what age her mother told her she was. The family was forced to burn all records like birth certificates as they were coerced into a cruel collective where people were murdered for any sign of holding onto an individual identity.

Children, including Mien, were separated from their families and forced to work picking up cow dung. Their parents dug ditches or worked in rice paddies. Torture, starvation and rampant disease were woven for nearly four years into the daily lives of those living under Pol Pot. An estimated 2 million died in what was later called the "Killing Fields."

Mien and her family escaped to Chicago in 1981. Thirty years later, Mien is a driving force behind a powerful museum exhibit at the Cambodian American Heritage Museum and Killing Fields Memorial, 2831 W. Lawrence, called "Remembering the Killing Fields."

"This is saying we may not choose to live in the past, but the past lives in us," said Mien, executive director of the Cambodian Association of Illinois, the 31-year-old social service group that opened the museum in 2004.

The exhibit started five years ago and 70 miles away in DeKalb. Northern Illinois University professor Judy Ledgerwood, a cultural anthropologist specializing in Cambodia, and a small group of students began compiling oral histories from Chicago-area Killing Fields survivors.

"We had to go over that there were important issues about opening up these very difficult topics," Ledgerwood said about training the students. "It was also difficult for students to hear about some of these stories at the time."

As that group graduated, new students stepped in, transcribing the stories, selecting quotes for exhibit displays and crafting video interviews with six survivors. Those videos now play on monitors throughout the museum exhibit.

For Lauren Bell, who was an undergraduate from Mundelein when she started working on the project, the experience changed the trajectory of her education. She added a Southeast Asian studies minor and is now in graduate school at NIU in anthropology.

“Just the things that these people survived and that they’re still telling their stories, it’s incredible,” Bell said. “It really made me rethink my own life.”

NIU grad student Shay Galto, originally from Wheaton, said the project was more powerful because of the local connections.

“So often we hear of these crimes against humanity and it’s very far away and we can’t relate,” Galto said. “When it’s a survivor living close to you, it grounds the experience.”

The Cambodian immigrant community in Chicago numbers only about 5,000 but for decades was intent on building a memorial to those who died in the Killing Fields. Under Cambodia Association of Illinois founder and president Kompha Seth, the group raised more than \$1 million to open the museum and memorial, which features glass panels etched with the names of victims of the Khmer Rouge who have relatives now living in Illinois.

With the Killing Fields exhibit, a new generation of Cambodian-Americans wanted to ensure their history was heard, said Lucy Ascoli, a member of the advisory committee who did fund-raising for the museum.

“The reason this happened is because the young Cambodian-Americans wanted it,” Ascoli said. “The young adults wanted their history told.”

For Mien, focusing on the survivors’ stories was paramount. Board members discussed running a fund-raising campaign with the exhibit but ultimately decided to let the exhibit stand on its own.

“We just wanted to focus on the survivors’ voices,” she said. “This is the one time that the board of directors and staff and museum advisory committee really wanted to keep the sense of dedicating it to the more than 2 million lives lost and the voices representing some of that.”

They also strived to make the exhibit, which manages to convey the horror of the situation without being overly graphic, to be accessible to anyone, even those who could not find Cambodia on a map.

“It’s about a dialogue between a community of survivors and the general public,” Mien said.