

Recovered Identity: Cambodian immigrant transcends her painful past, and helps others

By Erin Hoover Barnett
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Photo Credit: Fredrick D. Joe / The Oregonian

Mardine Mao came to Oregon as a Cambodian refugee in 1981 and has blossomed from a behind-the-scenes helper to president of the Cambodian-American Community of Oregon. "We've seen what she's capable of, and we know she will inspire so many people," says Chanly Bob, the group's board chairman.

The years are like shadows she could never really grasp:

Growing up in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. Her brother forever separated from her family. Her sister dying. Forced labor in rice fields. Then, at age 14, escaping to Oregon with her mother.

As a teenager in Milwaukie, Mardine Mao was happy to forget. She yearned to say she was from Hawaii or the Philippines, anywhere but Cambodia and the darkness she associated with it.

But as she matured, Mao, now 41, discovered that embracing her identity and sharing the details of that painful time is the road to empowerment.

Cambodians in the Portland metro area and beyond are coming to the same realization as a community. Most of Oregon's more than 5,000 Cambodians fled the Khmer Rouge, yet many have suffered silently with the rage and anxiety of post-traumatic stress, some struggling to assimilate and nurture American-born children and grandchildren.

Now refugees such as Mao -- a child during the Cambodian genocide and so best able to move on -- are leading the cause to build the community's future by unburdening its past.

Mao became president of the Cambodian-American Community of Oregon this summer and is launching an oral history project. As a U.N. tribunal in Cambodia finally brings members of despot Pol Pot's killing machine to justice, Cambodian youths in the metro area will record their elders' experiences under the Khmer Rouge.



Photo Courtesy of Mardine Mao

Mardine Mao (then Mardine Ung) stands with her mother, Sa Im Thun, for their official photograph at a Thai border camp in 1980 after escaping Cambodia. Mardine was 13.

The city of Portland has gotten behind the project with a small grant and has asked the Cambodian participants to share the documentary they produce with neighborhood associations, educating a wider audience about the genocide, recovery and resilience.

For Mao, a resident of Washington County's Cedar Mill area, the project offers a chance to unlock her own story and tell it to her teenage sons for the first time. The story of how she came to lead this project shows not only her blossoming but the blossoming of her community.

"We're not excited about opening up," says Mao. "But I think we have a responsibility to educate the general public and the world -- and especially our own children."

Mao sits at a friend's downtown coffee shop in a blue silk top and jeans. Her calm face, framed by dark hair, offers little hint of her troubled past.

She is still piecing her story together, drawing out her stepfather, in whom her mother confided. Mao's mother died in 2002 before Mao had the courage to ask about their time in Cambodia.

Mao was born Mardine Ung in 1967 in Phnom Penh, the capital, where her father directed a government-owned newspaper. Her father hoped to move the family to Oregon but died before it was possible, leaving his wife to fend for three children when Khmer Rouge troops took over in April 1975.

Mao's mother gathered Mao and her younger sister, Srey Touch, for the forced march to a village 30 miles away. Mao's older brother, Sovathara, was with relatives. They never saw him again.

Mao, just 8 then, believes she was sent to a school to learn the regime's philosophy and work in a rice field. Her mother was also pressed into field work. Mao learned from her stepdad that when she was allowed to visit her mother, she brought ambok (rice cereal) that she had squirreled away. Mao knew her mother was starving.

The only clear memory Mao has is of lying ill on the floor of a thatched hut with many other sick people. Someone gave her a pink pill.

"I'm like blank," she says. "I keep asking people, 'When you're 8 or 9 years old, do you remember everything at that age?'"

The regime targeted the educated and upper classes. An estimated 1.5 million Cambodians -- one-fifth of the country's population -- were starved, worked or shot to death in what became known as the killing fields.

The Vietnamese invasion in 1979 plunged the country into chaos. Mao's mother fled the village with Mao and Srey Touch. They returned to the city only to find that their relatives had all perished.

Returning to the village, the family squatted in a machine shed. Srey Touch fell ill. When she died, they rolled her small body in a woven mat and buried her.

With nothing left, Mao and her mother followed others to the Thai border, fearful of Khmer Rouge soldiers hiding from the Vietnamese.

"I imagine her holding my hand and running at the same time, barefoot in the jungle," Mao says, a flicker of pain passing through her dark eyes.

A friend of Mao's father from Oregon traveled to the refugee camps and found Mao and her mother.

Mao arrived at her uncle's home in Portland, in the Mount Scott neighborhood, knowing no English. But at 14, she knew one thing: She wanted to put the past behind her.

"I think for a long time I thought I was a bad person," she says, "because I wanted to erase my identity and, as a result, my memory."

Mao and her mom settled with another relative in Milwaukie.

Mao kept quiet in class at Milwaukie Junior High, afraid to ask questions. She remembers scrambling to look up words such as "cell" and "dissection" in science class while her peers cruised through the text.

Yet she took in a lot. She looked in awe at women driving cars with one hand on the steering wheel. She had never seen women drive.

Mao pursued accounting after high school. She felt comfortable in the background.

She married Mony Mao, a civil engineer and fellow refugee, in 1987. Two years later, Mony helped form the Cambodian-American Community of Oregon.

Mardine Mao steered clear of leadership roles. Speaking up in Cambodia was never rewarded. Politics meant corruption and power-seeking. So when her husband rose in the late 1990s to chair the Cambodian community's board, she stayed on the sidelines, buying raffle prizes, cooking and cleaning up after events while raising the couple's sons, Perrin, 13, and Davin, 18.

"I still had the mentality that this is something that is a job for a man," she says.

Then something changed.



Photo Credit: Thomas Boyd, The Oregonian

Davin Mao, 18, mixes an active school and social life at Sunset High School with his leadership of the Cambodian-American Community of Oregon's youth organization. He says he's proud of his mom and her new leadership role. Here, he talks with his mom about schoolwork in the family's home in Washington County's Cedar Mill area.

In 2006, the state removed a young Cambodian girl from her parents in Washington County and thrust her into foster care. The family didn't know where she was taken or how to get her back.

Community leaders asked Mao to help the family. Mao learned that the girl had gone to school with a bruise after an older brother threw a Coke can at her. Authorities got involved when the girl, bright and precocious, told a school counselor that her parents disciplined her by smacking her hand with chopsticks.

Mao explained to the social worker that this is common in Cambodia and that the parents didn't understand that it was considered abuse in the U.S. After three months, the state let the girl go home.

The family's attorney, Ronault "Polo" Catalani, says Mao made all the difference in the emotional, adversarial process.

"She listens carefully. She lets them get all of that breath out and then she'll talk," Catalani says. "She doesn't shout. She just tells you. There's something just very factual about the way she presents and very fair."

Mao shared the experience during Khmer Heritage Night at a Southeast 82nd Avenue banquet hall in December 2006. She was a minor speaker on a roster that included former Gov. Barbara Roberts and Mayor Tom Potter. She read a prepared speech and says no one expected much until she opened her mouth.

"Something happened to me earlier this year that changed how I feel about volunteering and my outlook on life," she told the hundreds gathered. She relived for her audience the moment when the little girl walked back through her family's front door.

"Her whole face lit up the entire room. She couldn't stop smiling," Mao told them. "I was overcome with joy."

The experience, she said, crystallized her realization that she could make a difference and helped her see that embracing -- not shunning -- her heritage is what emboldened her.

"Now I am more confident and more outspoken than ever," she told them. "Ladies and gentleman, we have a community that provides all these opportunities."

The audience burst into applause.

Mao still carried a burden.

She never got to process with her mother those years in Cambodia. She never got to ask her mother how she survived.

She shared that regret last year at Portland's Khmer Rouge Tribunal Forum at Portland State University, an event that Mao and the community organization helped to organize.

The event gave local refugees a chance to talk about their memories, many for the first time. Mao encouraged attendees to pass on the stories to their children before it's too late. The children need to know their family history, she told them, to know who they are.

"That's what I was struggling a long time with in my early days," Mao says now. "I wanted to be somebody else. Now, with just being part of the community, I kind of found myself. I'm a Cambodian American."

Mao also believes that a wider audience can benefit from knowing the stories of immigrants in their midst. She challenged herself to broaden her audience in classes this year at PSU. For one project, she told classmates about her mother's struggle in Cambodia and how hard her life was compared with Mao's.

Afterward, classmates surrounded her with praise. Instructor Vicki Reitenauer says some of them didn't know about the Khmer Rouge atrocities.

"They left knowing some bit of it and, in a more subtle way, being more enlarged human beings than they were when they went in," Reitenauer says, "and Mardine was a big part of that."

Mao will graduate from PSU this spring after 20 years of taking classes. She changed her major from accounting to human resources. She says she wants to work more with people.

And she is ready to help more members of her community tell their stories.

The community will begin the oral history project this winter with 20 youths and elders. More will follow. A PSU history professor is training participants to elicit memories sensitively.

Catalani, the attorney, co-chaired a city of Portland committee that chose the project for a \$10,000 grant. The Northwest Health Foundation is considering a \$50,000 grant.

"Cambodians have done an incredible job of caring for their own as the tension of their experiences simmers as depression or boils over into rage," he says. "Now they can share what

they endured with a larger audience. ... We are all humanized by the sorrow of these people and the persistence of people. We recognize in those faces our beauty and our pain."

Mao hopes the project will provide an important piece of family history for her own sons. Her oldest, Davin, is president of the community's youth organization and will be among the first to conduct interviews, drawing out his parents, his mom's stepfather and his dad's parents.

Davin says he has always thought his father's experience under the Khmer Rouge was more difficult than his mother's. But he admits he doesn't really know much about what his mother endured because she doesn't talk about it.

He has, however, noticed the change in his mom. He remembers her speech at Khmer Heritage Night.

"Maybe," he says, "she's found her calling."

[Erin Hoover Barnett](mailto:erin@cacoregon.org): 503-294-5011

MARDINE MAO

Age: 41

Family: Husband Mony Mao, a civil engineer; sons Davin, 18, and Perrin, 13

Leadership: President of the Cambodian-American Community of Oregon, which provides cultural, educational, recreational and other services for the more than 5,000 Cambodian Americans in Oregon. Learn more at www.cacoregon.org.

Community: Cambodians in the metro area are concentrated in Southeast and North Portland, Washington and Clackamas counties, and Southwest Washington

Oral history project: Cambodian youths will interview elders about their experiences under the Khmer Rouge. A documentary about the project will be shared through community groups. To learn more, call Hun Kim at 503-412-8933.