

# The Oregonian

**His boyhood spent in a slave labor camp, Kilong Ung survives, excels and now wishes to heal**

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For more than 30 years, Kilong Ung, a Portland software engineer, struggled with haunting memories of nearly starving in a slave labor camp, the deaths from exhaustion of his father, mother and little sister, and the extinguishing of 1.7 million other Cambodians by starvation, disease, torture and execution under Cambodia's Khmer Rouge regime.

Ung, then a boy, miraculously survived and came to the United States as a refugee, reaching the pinnacles of the American Dream: a Reed College education, graduate school, and lucrative jobs in the corporate world. But despite the successes, he could not forget.

He dreamed of creating a way to share the horrific past with his two Oregon-born children. And he wanted to honor the people who didn't survive, as well as those who helped him make it in life.

Ung decided to write a book, to simultaneously get rid of the memories and preserve them. This summer, he self-published his memoir, "Golden Leaf, a Khmer Rouge Genocide Survivor."

But the book is only a means to an end, the 49-year-old Ung said. He wants his memoir to "leverage the past" and help Cambodia. The goal: to use some of the proceeds from the book to build a school in his country of his birth. He plans to name the school "Golden Leaf." Kilong Ung After surviving a slave labor camp under Cambodia's Khmer Rouge regime, Kilong Ung became a refugee in a camp in Thailand. He came to Portland in 1980. The book describes the cruel, dirty, hunger-filled life inside a labor camp. Ung buries his grandmother, catches and eats a rat, cradles his emaciated mother, and is arrested and degraded for stealing a coconut.

When the Vietnamese drove the Khmer Rouge from power in 1979, Ung fled Cambodia by foot to Thailand with his older sister and her boyfriend. They eventually settled in California as refugees, and within a year moved to Oregon.

Because of his experiences, Ung writes that he saw himself as "a leaf at the mercy of the wind." But while other "leaves" were crushed, he persevered and became a "golden leaf."

What sets Ung apart from fellow survivors, said Mardine Mao, president of the

Cambodian-American Community of Oregon (CACO), is not just perseverance, but also a vision to transform past suffering into something positive.

"I've lost so much," Ung said, "and if I do nothing with the past, all that has happened would have happened for nothing."

Ung and CACO will organize a fundraiser in March with the goal of collecting \$50,000 for the school project. Mao is visiting the Siem Reap province in Cambodia this month on a humanitarian mission and scoping a site for the school.

Area Rotary clubs are also interested in supporting the project, said Gene Horton, a member of the Hillsboro Rotary Club, who plans to help Ung raise funds.

"I'm quite impressed with Kilong," Horton said. "He's come so far; it's an amazing story. He's forceful and dedicated enough to make this idea happen."

Ung's other hope is to inspire Oregon's Cambodian community. He has served as a Cambodian language teacher, youth mentor, and past president of CACO. Under his leadership, the organization grew and formed support groups for youth, women, and elderly, a heritage banquet, and a public forum to discuss the Khmer Rouge tribunal, among other programs.

"Many Cambodians would rather forget the past, because it's too painful to relieve the memory. Kilong found the courage to speak up," Mao said. "His work is a great example that ordinary people can do extraordinary things. It provides an inspiration to those of us that may want to share similar stories."

But perhaps Ung's biggest contribution is guiding fellow refugees into the midst of the American mainstream. He wants to serve as a bridge between the Cambodian and American communities, Ung said. His higher education, active participation in the Rotary club and the Royal Rosarians, fluent English and other achievements can be a model of success.

In the end, Ung's story is a deposition against the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge.

"A book becomes evidence," Ung said. "It becomes a legacy, a document."

His final message is of forgiveness and recovery. Ung is converting his sorrow into action: his family has put down roots in Oregon. Against all odds, "a leaf at the mercy of the wind... became a tree."

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