

## Living for Another



*TL, is a lady in her late 50s. Born and raised in Cambodia for her early years, she moved to America in search for a more prospering life and environment. She currently works at St. Francis Hospital along with her husband, with two young children she works hard in order to support her family. I interviewed my mom in order to develop an understanding of her story. Prior to the interview I had little to no knowledge of my mother's past, yet I knew she had a story worth listening to. The interview was conducted in the comfort of my bedroom, recorded via smart phone.*

*[Note: Underlined words are sounded out Cambodian words translated to English]*

*[At 9:45 PM, with a dimmed lamp, the room was lit with a warm orange tinted color. In the background, a heater was running, warming up to a comfortable temperature. My mother chose to lay in my bed and I settled in my office chair, faced towards her. I reached my hand out in front of me to begin recording]*

**Me:** Mom, where were you born exactly?

**TL:** Born noul(in) Cambodia, Krong Siem Reap.

**Me:** When you were growing up, who took care of you? Was it your birth mom or ma-yeay(Grandma)?

*I knew my mom was adopted at some point in her life by her aunt, who I call ma-yeay(Grandma) but I wanted to clear up exactly how it happened.*

**T L:** I born, it is my birth mom, and then I'm three years old, I have ma-yeay(Grandma) adopt me. My adopt mom and birth moms are cousins.

**Me:** *How come you were adopted, why couldn't you stay with your birth mom?*

**T L:** Because my birth mom live in the village, and then my adopt mom lived in the city, she lived better. So then ma-yeay sralanh khnhom(because Grandma loved me) and ma-yeay yk ma mok(Grandma took me to go) cheamuoy ma-yeay(live with her) Since I'm born, I live with my mom only I'm three years old, and then after that, my adopt mom bring me all to the city, I don't know. (My mom added "I don't know" in order to explain that she was so young when she moved with her adopted mom, she didn't understand what was really happening and just went along with it.)

*When my mom mentioned that her biological mother lived in a village I knew exactly what she meant, I had gone to Cambodia in the first grade when I was six years old as a family vacation. It was my first and last experience meeting my biological grandmother from my mom's side. My grandma lived in a small village with houses built purely out of wood, floating above the ground with support beams made of logs holding up the huts.*

**Me:** *What was it like to live in the cities of Cambodia?*

**T L:** I stay home and play with the kids, my neighbors. I only played just in front of the house, not going far away. And I clean, take the broom clean the house every morning and stay home just ma-yeay(Grandma) teach me to clean.

*When my mom described the times where she played with the kids around the neighborhood, it reminded me of when I played with kids in my neighborhood. My mom would restrict me to only play in the front yard where she could see me from the window of the kitchen. I wondered if my mom's hard working and disciplined nature came from the upbringing of my Grandma.*

**Me:** *Did you live with anybody else? Or was it just you and ma-yeay(Grandma)?*

**T L:** Ma-yeay(Grandma) adopted two more kids and opened up a sewing business in our house, ma-yeay(Grandma) was a seamstress. She would have customers and students at our house, buy and learn from ma-yeay(Grandma).

*I understood now, my mom owns multiple sewing machines in our garage with a designated place to work. As long as I could remember, she had clients who would come to her to help make specific adjustments to suits and dresses. Sewing had always been my mom's special skill.*

**Me:** *What happened to ma-yeay(Grandma) own blood children? Did they not live with you?*

**T L:** We live together, and then when the middle school, they change, move the house. So kaun ma-yeay(Grandma's children) from one to five, they five grow up live in Phnom Penh. Go school in Phnom Penh. Me and the two other kid ma-yeay(Grandma) adopt, we live together. I'm the youngest, they like ten years old when I'm five.

**Me:** *Hetoavei ma-yeay(How come Grandma) adopted kaun kmeng chraen(so many kids)?*

**T L:** Pbe Proh ma-yeay(Because Grandma) good heart, try to help people poor. And then they mom give ma-yeay(Grandma) kid. And then stay in the city, can work and study, grow up well, they go back family and help family.

*With the brief details of ma-yeay(Grandma), I soon took noticed to the nurtured values and nature my mom shared with ma-yeay(Grandma). My mom has done many acts of kindness throughout her life, considerate and helpful acts. When it came to people, she always tries to find ways to help out. I'm proud and appreciate my mom for always trying to teach me and my brother these positive traits.*

*Me: Did you always just stay home and help around? Or did you go to school later on?*

**T L:** I'm six years old when I go school. Sala srope Khmer(School in Cambodia) 7:00 they start school, but in srope Khmer(Cambodia) 7:00 start school, is very hot. Not cold and dark like Tacoma. And at 11:00 we off from school, we go home we walk. Then we eat, cook, after we eat we take shower. Then 1:00 we go back school again, until 4:00 we come back.

*Me: Oh, how did that work? Did that mean you had to walk back and forth to go to school twice a day?*

**T L:** Because, srope Khmer(Cambodia) they study, they not change teacher like U.S. In srope Khmer(Cambodia) study one class, study for couple hours. Only one teacher, study in one room until you go back home. Then you have new teacher when you come back at 1:00.

*Me: Well, then in the afternoon, how did ma(Mom) get home?*

**T L:** Walk, a lot of student walk together. Some student have bicycle, but ma(Mom) walk with friend. We walk distance same like us house go to gym (2.1 Miles, Maybe she was trippin).

*I had considered the privilege of my upbringing. Since I was a kid my parents always provided me transportation to school and back home via car. My parents gifted me and brother a comfortable life, their only desire in return was for us to study hard and be well.*

*Me: How long did you stay in School? How many years did you finish?*

**T L:** I finish only up to Second Grade. I am seven year old before Khmer Rouge start.

*Me: How come Khmer Rouge stopped ma(Mom) from going to school?*

**T L:** Because Khmer Rouge come they have power and kaphleung(gun), they force people out, move away from city to jungle. For one month they allow two people per house in city. Ma-yeay(Grandma) stay in the city and choose to keep me with her. The two kid she adopt they kick out. The city very quiet, everything shut down. One month past, everyone get kick out and separate. Kid go with kid, old people go with old people.

*Me: Where did the people go?*

**T L:** Everyone move into camp. They have the leader wake everyone up same time. Eat same time. Shower same time. Work same time. For me, they make the kid all go farm and pick the food. Very hard, because, long time work and very little to eat. Even if you hungry, you cannot eat. I stay in the camp work four years.

*Me: Were you scared when it all was happening?*

**T L:** Yeah, they kill, kill like they kill fish. You live in the farm, you do something wrong, like they not give you enough food to eat, you hungry right? You kind like, you steal something, like cucumber plant or pumpkin, and you so hungry. You know, cucumber not so big, so you pick and you hide to eat. They kill you. And one family wrong, they kill all.

*I was very surprised by what my mom was telling me. I've always knew she had to live through Khmer Rouge but never really got details of how it was until now. Her description of "kill like they kill fish" hit me, maybe it was the simplicity of the phrase, but I got the impression of the ruthless violence the soldiers had against Cambodian citizens. This kind of treatment is one that I could never*

*imagine. I was born and raised in Tacoma, Washington. I lived a peaceful life, with constant shelter, food, and water. I never had to worry about losing my parents or “if there will be food tomorrow”. I thought about how incredible it is that my mom is still here. I sparked a new layer of respect for my mom.*

**Me:** *How did you get away from the camps?*

**T L:** I not know whole story, but Vietnam war come in srope Khmer(Cambodia) and everyone run away from camp, try to find family. Four year I work in camp and escape, I go back to ma-yeay(Grandma) house in the city. She find me and we go move to Vietnam. A lot of people go Thailand, so we go decide go Vietnam.

**Me:** *What was it like having to travel to another country in search for escape?*

**T L:** Bong(Cambodian term, used for referring to older people(respect)) Thavin mom(My Cousin’s mom) before Vietnam War, already away from srope Khmer(Cambodia), she rent the house and pay Vietnamese man to go look for family, who still alive and who die. They come with car and pick us up go Vietnam. Very dangerous, we run away back to Vietnam, have to hide. If they catch you try to run away they shoot you. When they find us, we go with Ma(mom) Bong Kylee (Another one of my Cousin’s). We arrive in Vietnam, Bong Thavin mom rent, pay people to let us family sleep at night. During the day, we go find sell in the market place for money and food. But then at night, the family, we wait in the house. We know, because the soldier come Vietnam look for anyone refugee. The family wait at night and run away hide until morning. I stay in Vietnam, live like that for almost five year.

*I reflected and tried to imagine what my mom was describing. I thought of just how difficult it was to be in that situation. Recently the day of the interview I had watch a documentary on poverty in Guatemala. Have seen the documentary, it was made more clear imaginably to understand what my mom had to go through. In the past, I’ve asked my mom how she could speak Vietnamese, she always simply replied that she lived there for years. Never did I think it would be so miserable though.*

**Me:** *How did you make the transition from living in Vietnam to America? And what kind of struggles did you encounter?*

**T L:** After five years in Vietnam, the family go to refugee camp. They allow refugee go move to America but have to study. I stay one year studying in the camp, I study to learn English, write and read. After one year study I take test. They have four group A, B, C, D. Our family we study hard very smart. They put us Group C. Refugee study they take test, if pass you go into A, B, C, or D. Group A and B you have to study another six months before they allow you go America. But our family only have to study three months and then pass.

*I always wondered how my mom was able to get to America. I assumed she was poor and didn’t have the means to make the move to America. My mom being an immigrant to America having to learn English stuck with me. I was impressed of my mom for having learned English competent enough to move to America in less than two years. It was an astonishing story I never would have thought of. My mom’s story of her journey to America helped me realized just how much she’s been through. I yet again developed a new layer of respect for her.*

**Me:** *How did Ma(mom) have the money to move to America?*

**T L:** They pay for me move to America on the plane. I land in the Tacoma Airport. This is like my souvenir, they give me this jacket before I leave.

*[She points to the jacket she was wearing, playing with the jacket displaying the material to me]*

**Me:** *What was it like transitioning to America from Vietnam?*

**T L:** Before I came to America, we already had family in Tacoma, I'm like 16, 17 years old, I'm not too sure, around there yes. Ohm Tohm(Eldest Aunt) took ma-yeay(Grandma) under her care, and I stayed with ma bawh Bong Thavin(Cousin Thavin's mom) take care of me, give me home. At this time, Bong Thavin(Cousin Thavin), he only little baby.

**Me:** *What about school? You said you studied at Stadium High School.*

**T L:** Yes, I live with ma bawh Bong Thavin(Cousin Thavin's mom) and go school. After school I come home help take care of Bong Thavin(Cousin Thavin) and clean the house.

**Me:** *Did people treat you differently because you were an immigrant?*

**T L:** No, everyone, they not do anything.

**Me:** *So they just left ma(mom) alone?*

**T L:** Mmhmm

*I had thought maybe my mom just never noticed. I found it hard to believe nobody treated her differently, "there's no way she didn't get bullied" I thought. My mom is a women with rarely any insecurities, she has too many responsibilities and important things to worry about, maybe that's why other's foul behavior never bothered her personally. It would have hindered her responsibility to work for the families living.*

**Me:** *How come you didn't graduate from High School ma(mom)?*

**T L:** I want to study until I finish complete. But, ma bawh Bong Thavin(Cousin Thavin's mom) tell me to stop. I stop studying because I need to help family work, for money, for living, family business. I worked under ma bawh Bong Thavin(Cousin Thavin's mom) until 1998, I meet your dad. I marry your dad in 2000 and move out away from ma bawh Bong Thavin(Cousin Thavin's mom) house.

**Me:** *How could you afford to move out and get married if you were poor?*

*[I said this assuming my mother was still struggling economically]*

**T L:** Your dad had a job at the time. He had an apartment and car. But his job, is not good. He can make money yes, but not very sure. Sometime he have job sometime he not work. So I look around for job and applied for St Francis Hospital, Ohm Tohm chouy khnhom(Eldest Auntie helped me) apply for the hospital.

*This is when I felt like I had a full general summary of my mom's life, Realizing that she had been working in the same Hospital since early 2000's to the present 2022. Now I was just wondering how my brother and I came about.*

**Me:** *What about dad? I know now, he works with ma(mom) but what about before, and hetoavei ba tow thveukear cheamouy ma(how come dad started working with you?).*

**T L:** Baba(dad) used to work for pull in the boat to the dock. Very close to apartment we live in, so when I get job at the Hospital, Baba chiah kng tow thveukear(dad would ride a bicycle to work) and I drive his car to work. And then, when I have your brother, 2002, ma(mom) and baba(dad) work the same time, ahnung hetoavei gamoun(that's why before) you and ahiugh(older brother) do babysit, until ma(mom) ba(dad) finish work. So, baba(dad) apply for Hospital for second shift. That way, when ma tow thveukear, baba(dad) can take care of you kid.

*I had never thought of it until now. I remember the time, not specifically, but around the age of eight, my parents stopped bringing my brother and I to our aunt's in the morning before they left for work. It was my father's change of job that allowed me and my brother to stay home. "There's a lot of things that my parents have done for the sake of me and Leon, much to appreciate" I thought.*

**Me:** *Is there anything you want me and ahiuigh(older brother) to learn from ma(mom)?*

**T L:** *I just hope, for you and your brother, work hard, stay healthy. You work hard to survive, one day ma(mom) and ba(dad) no more work, you need to be able to support yourself.*

*My parents, especially my mom, have always held high standards for me and my brother. Although it's a pain to get through their standards, I appreciate the way they've raised us. I like to think me and Leon have been raised by my parents in a way that's made us capable of great things. I hope to one day, live and be the one supporting my parents instead.*

**Me:** *Okay, arkoun ma(thank you mom), yeung huaye(we're done).*

*[Finishing the Conversation at 11:07 PM, my mother turns to put her sandals back on. She stands to leave with her hand on the door knob]*

**T L:** *Ma(mom) tow ilauv cheung(going now then) okay?*

**Me:** *Yeah sure, goodnight ma(mom).*

**T L:** *Goodnight gon(Young Child).*

*I was left to my own thoughts, the room still cozy. I walked towards my bed and fell into my mattress face first. This interview has helped me not only grasp a better understanding of my mom's past, but a better image of how my family came about. The aunts and uncles I knew, I never really understood who they were beyond just "This is your uncle/aunt". Khmer Rouge is a tragedy that my whole family went through before arriving to America. It's an significant event to take note of. I now understand why I was born and raised in America rather than Cambodia. I felt deeply grateful for the hardships that led to my privileged life.*