

Laos



Wat Lao Buddhavong, dedicated in July 1993, is located on 58.7 acres about 40 minutes from Washington, DC in Catlett, Virginia, near Manassas. These pictures were taken the year before at the Lao New Year's Ceremony held on the property.

(clockwise from top left)

On this altar is a Buddhist flag, U.S.A flag and the old Kingdom of Laos flag (used from 1952 to the fall of the royal government in 1975 when the Communists took over)

Phouratsamy Naughton was instrumental in bringing the monks from Thai refugee camps to the United States to serve the Indochinese community.

Money trees are visual reminders for Buddhist temple members of building-based or specific project-based needs for fundraising.

Worshippers bring foods from home to the temple as offerings to the monks who in turn bless the foods as well as the givers through chanting in unison based on Pali text.

Phouratsamy Naughton

Phouratsamy Naughton, called Phou, originally came to the United States in 1958 to accompany her father, a congressman from Laos who was invited by the United States government. She attended Immaculate Junior College in Washington, DC. Upon graduation, she returned to Laos, where she worked for the United States Information Agency (USIA) as a librarian and translator for the student exchange program run by USIA. In 1962, she returned to the United States to work at the USIA's Voice of America program as an announcer and translator for the radio program broadcasted in Laos. At that time, a Lao woman could not leave the country by herself, so her parents arranged a marriage. After three years, Phou returned to Laos with her husband and two children. She worked part-time at USIA again. Her husband was deployed in the Lao army to the front line and was reported missing in action in 1968. Around that time, Phou ran for congresswoman but lost the election. She went

back to working for USIA and met Cliff Naughton who she married, and with her children, they moved to the United States. Phou again worked at the Voice of America broadcasting to Laos.

In 1976 Southeast Asian refugees started pouring into the United States. Phou was able to sponsor her brother's and sister's family, and worked with other Lao refugees helping them to become settled in their new home. Her husband's job caused him to travel a lot and because of Phou's obligations to her family and the refugees she could not go. This put a strain on their marriage and they divorced. Phou was instrumental in establishing the Lao Buddhist temple, Wat Lao Buddhavong, now located in Manassas, Virginia. It was through her efforts that the monks were able to leave the Thai refugee camp and resettle here. She, herself, became a Buddhist nun. At the temple, she works with the youth to teach them about their Lao cultural heritage.

"The American community has a lot of communities making America."



Kathy Prasith learned traditional Lao dance at Wat Lao Buddhavong from Phouratsmy Naughton. She shared a bedroom with her sister in her family's home in Arlington, VA.

"The American community has a lot of communities making America. And even though we're new, not even maybe fourteen, fifteen years old, when the refugees started coming in, but we are part of the community. America, as a whole, each community should know the other community, who else is around you, in order to work together."

"I remind the children that we should be a healthy community, a good citizen of community. In order to build our community, we have to come together and learn a lot of things, and we have to be good. Having identity is important. Our Lao culture is something we have to keep. I think human beings are the same, but the culture makes them different. The same as in this country. It's open to different cultures that all [come together and form] this country America. That's why we're always American. We are Lao women American, Thai women American, Chinese- or Vietnamese- American women or Asian-Americans. We have different cultures to contribute to the mainstream of America."

"We do build our community one way or another. Luckily, we have the monks to lead, and we do all listen to what they say. The monks are everything to the people. If the family is unhappy, they will call the monks. The monks have to give them advice. Buddha, the teaching also said you have to be flexible. You cannot be rigid. You have to adapt your life to the situation that occurs right then."

"I taught my children how to do the Lao dances. I learned it in school in Laos and I know a few dances that I can teach them and I always have music with me. So I taught them, the two of them, brother and sister, at home here in the U.S. And they performed at the school bazaars and at church festivals—the Lao dances. And then we became more involved when the refugees came and many churches asked the dancers, my children, to perform to help raise funds to sponsor more refugees. So we got more involved and then I said to my kids that the two of them were not enough. We have to have more dancers to provide according to the need of the community."

Bounsou Sananikone

Born in Thailand, Bounsou attended Lycée Pavie in Vientiane, Laos, and law school in Hanoi, Vietnam, in what was then French Indochina. Later, the Lao government sent her to the United States to do a study of the education system. From 1957 to 1975, Bounsou worked in social services, promoting women’s advancement and improving education systems and living conditions of villages in Laos. She also worked with the Red Cross, the Peace Corps and many other organizations as a volunteer. She served as the founder and president of the National Women’s Association, and was the only woman appointed to the Royal Lao Academy of Arts and Literature. Her last position in Laos was as the assistant director of Social Services for Lao Public Health. In 1975, when Laos fell to communist rule, Bounsou and her husband, Major

General Oudone Sananikone, and four of their children fled to Thailand by crossing the Mekong River. At that time her other four children were all studying abroad. In Bangkok, Bounsou and her husband used their connections to try to come to the United States, but the U.S. government was not yet accepting Lao refugees. Finally, with funds from the Tolstoy Foundation for plane tickets, they were able to get out.

In America, Bounsou put her skills to use helping the Indochinese refugee community. She worked as extension agent with the Arlington County Social Services in Virginia. She was also an accomplished artist, known for her delicate watercolor and pen-and-ink paintings. At age 94, Bounsou passed away peacefully at her home in Virginia.



"The future belongs to you: you build it yourself today."

"It's difficult to express as wife, as mother, as citizen, as people who love her or his own land. Mountain, river, the tomb of our forefathers, the trees, the dogs, cats and belongings... But a person who understands, who accepts, the reality of the event, we come with hope and more courage and accept the situation. Yes, and all the time in my heart, from long time ago, this time of being victim of events, my heart, my hope, so big that I can do something for others, to be useful for my compatriots, for my people."

"But this time I feel a little inferior to the others, because I have no home, no dishes, no anything to

cook, but we manage. And in 1976, I start working and [am] very good and useful for my people who need to go to the supermarket, who need to talk on the telephone, pay bills, to take children to school. So I start working for refugee folk at the Career Center [in Arlington, VA]. And, that time, you know, I feel I am not alone. I am not alone to suffer, to think that I am a victim. The whole Indochina, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, we are in this, we have people in the same boat. We lost our countries the same month, the same period of time since the other regime came. So I survive by working hard, working hard, forget myself, let myself go into the flow, the current of being useful,

of thinking others are like us, living together, thinking of Iraq and other lands in trouble. So we survive like that."

"Sometimes it is difficult, it's a confusion, a fighting of feelings inside—trying to accept life, but another thing, push me to face life as a person who is homeless. Homeless, no future. At the same time, it give to us the comfort, the future belongs to you: you build it yourself today. Hope is always [there] as long as you breath any pure air—as long as you can escape from the enemy."