

# Cambodia



Ground breaking ceremony for construction of a new temple building for Wat Buddhikaram in Silver Spring, Maryland.

The temple is both a place of worship and a community center for the Cambodian community. Classes are offered in Khmer language, Cambodian classical and folk dance, music, and chanting, as well as citizenship training and English classes for the elderly.



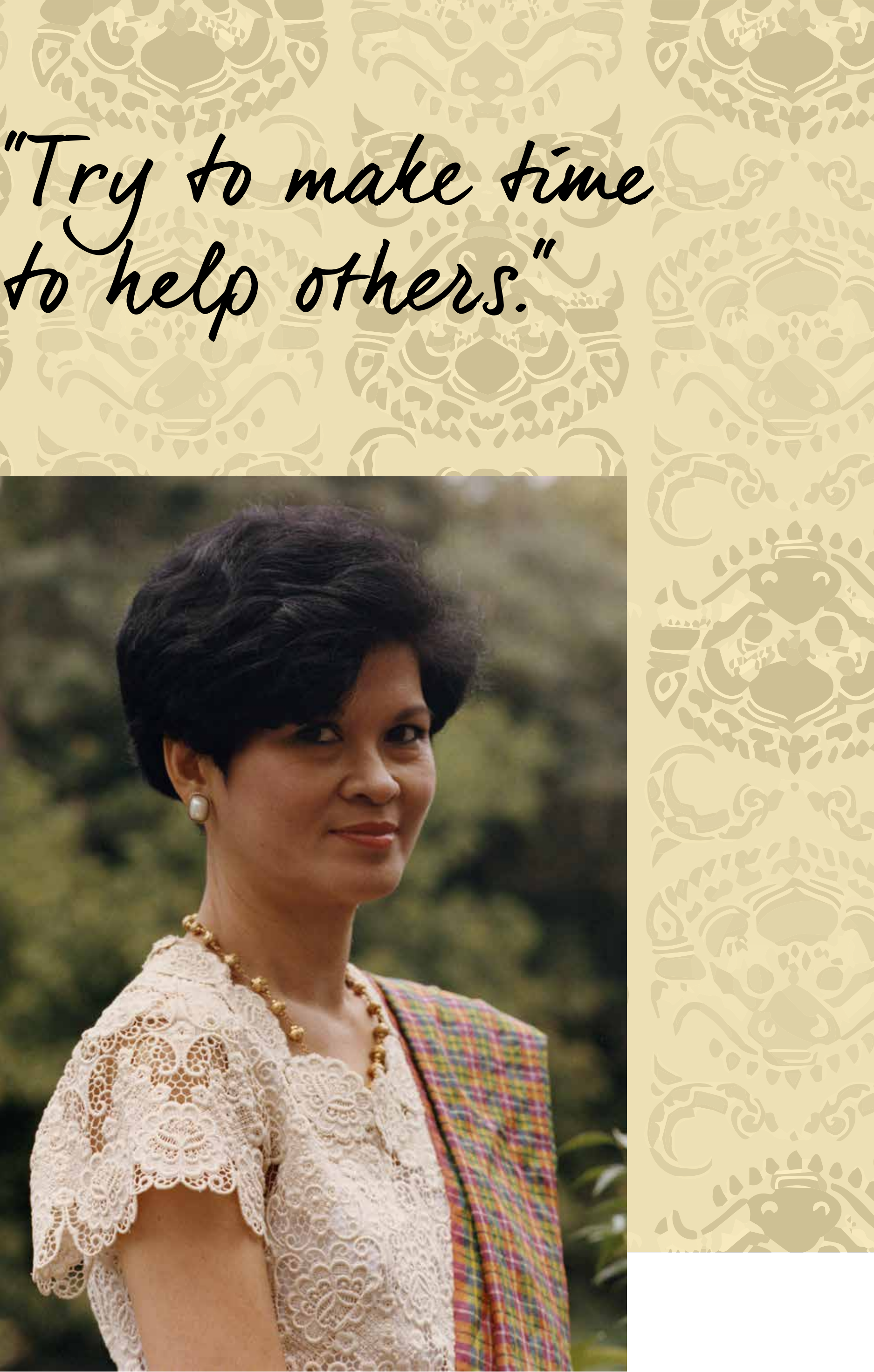


# Lany Tan Lang

Lany was born in Battambang Province, Cambodia. In 1964 she came to the United States through a student exchange program, encouraged by her friend Kim Chantharit, a journalist who was going into political exile because of an article he wrote against Prince Sihanouk. They stayed with Lany’s sponsors in Albuquerque, NM. She planned to study and then return to Cambodia to teach, but shortly after arriving, Cambodia cut off diplomatic relations with the United States, and she could not return. The following year Lany married Kim and they moved to Hawaii, where she studied linguistics at the University of Hawaii, and gave birth to their daughter, Phalla. Two years later they moved to the Washington area, where she worked teaching khmer language at the Foreign Service Institute. In the mid-1970s there was an influx of Southeast Asian refugees to the DC area. To help, Lany volunteered with Arlington Refugee Services teaching English. In 1984 she went to Catholic University to get



a master’s degree in social work, working during the day and studying at night. After graduation, she was hired by Prince George’s County (Maryland) Mental Health Department to be an outreach worker with the Cambodian community. She was the first Cambodian woman to work as a mental health clinical therapist in the Washington area. Lany has consulted on mental health issues affecting Cambodian refugees throughout the United States and in Thailand. In 1990, she went back to visit Cambodia for the first time after 26 years. She was devastated by what she saw, but turned her deep sorrow and anger into action by speaking out and organizing aide for Cambodia. Lany is also an artist. She started her art work in order to teach others about Cambodian culture. She creates silkscreen prints depicting images from the murals at Angkor Wat temple in Cambodia, and from classic Khmer literature.



“Try to make time to help others.”

“I think I live in the world with pain. The losses that I have been through and the anger in me that I can not get back there [Cambodia], so I have to create my own little world here [through my art].”

“I feel that I am very lucky to pick this country as my second homeland. This country is full of opportunities. I always think that if I am back there [in Cambodia], I’ll probably be selling bananas or whatever, I don’t know. Have about 12 or 13 kids and probably be run down—look like an 85-year-old woman. Probably be very quiet. This country gives me so much opportunity that I can verbally express my own opinion. I can do a lot of things. I can get up in the morning and if I decide to do something, I say, “This is what I want,” and all I have to do is to work very hard and pursue it, and I got it. I don’t need to know the general or the chief of province in order to get that, to get through to somebody. I don’t need to work that hard. This country is so full of opportunity, and sometimes it scares me. This opportunity it gives me so much and I enjoy so much the freedom of taking all this for granted. And yet, what if someday I go back there?”

“I look at [Southeast Asian] men more prone to psychiatric problems, more vulnerable than women. Women more flexible. They accept how it comes.

But men take it very difficult because their role has changed. And women more independent from man, and that makes man feel abandoned by women. Also, the skill that man possess back home is not transferable in this culture. Rice [is] considered the best skill back home for man. And then woman have no skill but really to do everything and really to learn. That makes it very difficult for a man to see his wife go out there and bring rice back to support the whole family. So I have more men complain about this problem than women. .... Change is not easy for everyone of us, men or women. It’s very difficult. It takes time. It takes a lot of courage to change. It takes a lot of stress for them to do all this and a lot of anxiety. I changed. Every time [there is a] chance for me to go out there, I have anxiety. I said, “All the men do the same thing.” I think if you understand that and accept that and know that they’re going to have this kind of change, this kind of anxiety, and share with them, I think, that’s helpful.”

“First of all is to accept yourself who you are, then love yourself. Then the last thing is to share with others. In other words, I want to say try to make time to help others. That’s all we need. That’s all about America. Be yourself.”

# Sisopha Mai Chavez & Bopha Mai Ram

The Mai sisters came to the United States from Cambodia in the early 1980s. Their road to freedom was not easy. During the Pol Pot regime, the family was separated, and the Khmer Rouge killed their father, three brothers, and two sisters. Three years later, the two sisters, Sisopha and Bopha, unbeknownst to one another, both joined a long parade of people walking west. Neither knew where she was headed, only that there was supposed to be rice there. During the 25-day walk, Sisopha and Bopha accidentally discovered each other! It took them a while to recognize one another as Bopha was extremely skinny and Sisopha was bloated from water. Neither had shoes and their clothes were tattered rags. In the Nong Samet refugee camp on the border in Thailand, they took turns walking through the camp looking for family members. They discovered their brother, Someth, and sister, Aukia. They were in Nong Samet about a year and then moved to Keladan, a processing center, where they stayed six months. Before the Communist takeover, Someth had worked as a waiter at a restaurant frequented by foreign journalists. His ties with these journalists, and his knowledge of English, helped the family get to America. He worked translating for the U.S. immigration officers at the camp, and began writing a book about his experiences.

Before walking to the Thai border, Bopha was in a Vietnamese refugee camp Battambang, where she married a fellow Cambodian. Three days after arriving in the United States, she gave birth to her daughter, Towie. Bopha, her husband and baby, Sisopha, Aukia, and Someth at first shared a small apartment in Maryland. In Cambodia, before the Pol Pot regime, Sisopha had gotten a college degree in agriculture and had danced with the Royal Cambodian Ballet. At first in the U.S. she worked as a domestic, but decided that she wanted more freedom and money and so got a

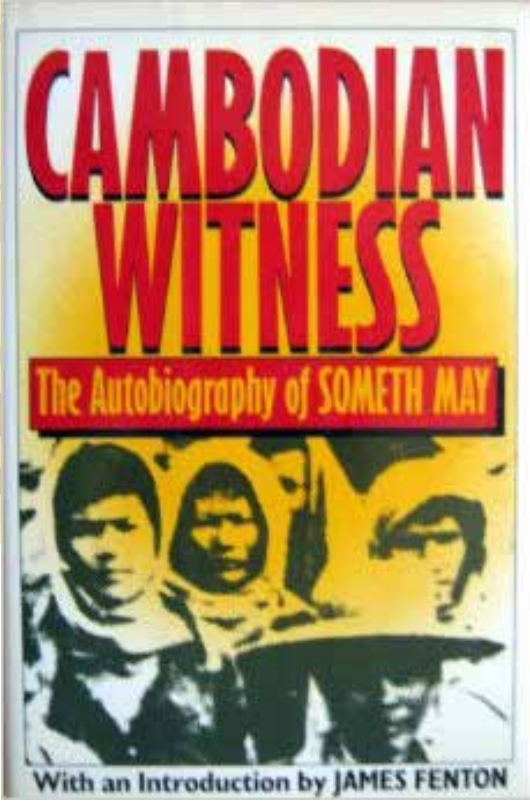
job at a restaurant. It was there that she met Francisco Chavez, a Salvadorian refugee. They married and had two children. The families stuck together, all working hard, scrimping where they could, and pooling their resources. Together they moved to an apartment in Falls Church, Virginia, and within a few years bought a six-bedroom house. Meanwhile, Someth, with the help of an English journalist friend, moved to England to study medicine. While there he finished writing his book, *Cambodian Witness*, and it was published.

The family continued to work as a unit, cleaning office buildings at night while holding daytime jobs in a variety of restaurants. In 1985, their pooled savings, along with funds sent by their brother from his book’s publication, were \$30,000. It was enough to purchase the store, which they named the *Asian Grocery Market*. They convinced Someth to return to help them. They each continued to work a night job while running the store during the day. Within two years, they had paid back the \$60,000 they still owed the previous owner. The *Asian Grocery Market* is open seven days from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Their customers are a mix of Asians, Latinos, and Anglo Americans. In 1990, the family bought a large new house in Dale City and rented out their old one.

When the family was separated in Cambodia, their mother and a sister were in Vietnam collecting rents on farmland they owned. At their store, the Mai siblings would ask customers who had recently come from Cambodia or Vietnam, if they had seen or heard anything of their mother. Finally, one customer said that they knew where she was in Vietnam. Working through the legal system to bring their mother and sister to America was the next step in family reunification. In February 1992, after seventeen years of separation, the remainders of the Mai family were reunited at National Airport in Virginia.



“I sell rice for the gold.”



**Bopha:** “In 1975, when Vietnamese come [Khmer Rouge led by Pol Pot occupy Phnom Penh], I would sell—but not groceries. I sell rice for the gold. [We have] no money, no anything. One day I walk and see a lady have big [rice] cake, a lot of [rice] cake. It’s so many. I don’t have anything to eat. We eat only rice soup, put a lot of water in. Ten people [to feed]. We have no food to eat. Nothing to eat. I’m so tired. Everybody eat rice soup. Not [really] soup, just a lot of water with salt. That’s it. One day [when] I’m walking, I saw a lady [selling rice cakes]. They sell a lot. I said, ‘Oh, that rice cake sell for the gold.’ I know what I’ll do. I’ll just ask her, say, ‘Can I have one?’ She gave me one. I say the lady is very nice. She gave me one, but I not eat it. I stay close to her. She sell all her [rice cakes], all gone. One piece left, one piece of gold, right? She sold hers, all gone, and she go. Only me. I have one that I didn’t eat. I sit like that. Some people come over and they want to buy it. I say, ‘Okay.’ She sell one [rice cake], one piece [of gold], right. When I sell one I sell [it for] two pieces [of gold]. [With] two pieces of gold, you can have ten cans of rice. In the morning, I come, I going to buy two pieces [of rice cake]. And then I sell that until I rich. I have big gold in the can. I dig, put it in the ground at night. And I go to the farm [to buy] and [start to] sell pickled pig.”



**Sisopha:** “She do good. Until later we [are forced] to go out [leave]. [In 1978,] the [Vietnamese] Communist [soldiers] come in, a lot of people. They take gold from us.”

**Bopha:** “After Communist Vietnamese, after Pol Pot, people kill people. That’s why we escape.”

**Sisopha:** “Not safe.”



# Sam-Oeun Tes

Sam-Oeun Tes, nick-named Rady, grew up in Phnom Pehn, Cambodia. At age 14 she began studying classical Cambodian dance with her Aunt, a master dancer of the male role. Princess Bopha Devi saw her and decided that Rady should dance the female role. Although she was considered to have a late start in her dance career, with her talent, hard work, and determination she earned a place in the Cambodian Royal Ballet, and performed throughout the country for visiting dignitaries.

Rady's uncle served as Cambodia's ambassador to the United States. In 1971 he urged her parents to allow her to come to the U.S. to live with him and his wife in

order to get out of the political turmoil in Cambodia. He arranged for her to marry Saroeum, a Cambodian working in America. Rady went to English school at night and studied to be a hairdresser during the day. Around the time her second child was born, she started teaching classical Cambodian dance in her basement. She continued to work as a hairdresser and eventually opened her own salon, which she kept for five years, giving it up to devote herself full-time to teaching Cambodian dance.

In 1980, Rady and her husband founded The Cambodian-American Heritage Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to introducing Cambodian

culture through classical dance. Her dance troupe has performed across the United States. In 1998, as part of the Apsara Ensemble, Rady with Chan Molly Sam and San-Ang Sam, received a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, an award given to master folk and traditional artists to recognize lifetime achievement, artistic excellence, and contributions to the United States' traditional arts heritage.



*"I want to keep the tradition."*

"It's really, really hard work, very hard work. I am thinking about the 45 students. Right now I am proud of myself. The first year, the second year, very hard. You teach the children dance, and you make the costumes for the children, and you're dancing yourself. You come home, you clean the house, you're cooking, and then you work as a hairdresser, too. It's how many jobs? But I was thinking that now I don't have any of my country anymore. At that time, you didn't know if you would have the freedom to go back home or what's going on. So I had to build something that's for

my country, so I was just thinking [I want] to make the world know [about Cambodian culture], in addition to making people in United States know."

"I try to do the best I can. I try to keep exactly what my teacher taught me. In my group I don't have men dance the man role. Woman dance the man role. I still keep [it] like that. I want to keep the tradition."

"I am always proud of all my students. They are born here, they don't understand Cambodian. Some parents

don't speak in Cambodian at all. I talk in Cambodian to them, and they listen, so one by one. And I sing in Cambodian. .... I say, 'You better learn step by step what I am saying.' They love it. .... Some students stay with me for ten years, some marry and move out. .... They know [the dance technique] so they teach it to the younger generation. We have a lot [of students] spread all over the place now."