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Eap, Leang Oral History Interview (Cambodian): Asian and African American Residents of Holland

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Interview with
Leang Eap
Cambodian Resident

Conducted August 8, 1994
by Donna M. Rottier

1994 Summer Oral History Project
The Asian-American Community in Holland, Michigan

DR: This is Donna Rottier. The date is August 8, 1994, and I am interviewing Leang Eap in her home in Holland, Michigan. Could you please repeat your full name for the record on tape?

LE: Leang Eap.

DR: Thank you. And your current address?

LE: 1097 Legion Park Drive

DR: And your date and place of birth?

LE: I think it was in Battambang, Cambodia. [date removed], 1979.

DR: When did your family first move to Holland?

LE: I'm not really sure, but I think we got to California and then we moved to Hamilton and stayed there for three years or so. Then we moved here.

DR: Do you remember anything about living in Cambodia?

LE: Actually, I was born there and I stayed there three days. My mom was fleeing away from the country.

DR: Who did your mom leave Cambodia with?

LE: My dad and his brothers and sisters, which are my uncles and aunts, my grandparents on my dad's side, and my sister. Then I think my mom's sisters came later on.

DR: What sorts of things have your family told you about their life in Cambodia before they came here?

LE: They said it was harder than it is here and that they do more to help out their parents. And over here we have too much freedom.

DR: What did they do in Cambodia?

LE: My dad had a lot of jobs in business such as bicycle repair, stereo rentals, retail sailing, taxi, and fanning. and my mom just helped her parents out around the house and working the fields.

DR: What prompted them to leave or escape from Cambodia?

LE: The shootings and the killings and how there was no freedom to talk or say what you would want to. My dad's sister I think was killed with her husband or her boyfriend because they were just saying things about the government. I think they would come to your houses and they listen to you. So the next day they were killed.

DR: Was your family sponsored by a group or an organization to come to the United States?

LE: Yes, by the Hamilton Christian Reformed Church.

DR: Was that to come from California to here, or was that to go to California?

LE: I'm not sure, but we fled to Thailand because the U.S. government took in refugee names to find sponsors, which was the church.

DR: Do you know how many years you lived in California?

LE: Not very long at all. I don't think we lived there.

DR: How then did your family find out about Holland?

LE: Since we moved to Hamilton, we thought it was maybe nicer out here. The sponsors helped my parents look for a job. They found them in Holland, so they had to live here to work.

DR: How old were you when you came to Holland or Hamilton?

LE: Maybe like three years old to Holland, but to Hamilton I was six months.

DR: Since your family moved from Hamilton to Holland, have they always lived in this house?

LE: No, we lived in two other houses.

DR: What do your parents do?

LE: They're both factory workers at Prince and Haworth.

DR: Have they worked there since they moved here?

LE: My dad did work at Baker Furniture.

DR: Do you go to school in Holland?

LE: Yes.

DR: What year?

LE: I'm going to be a sophomore at Holland High School.

DR: What have your experiences been in the school there?

LE: I think it's really good. The French teacher is really, really good. I've learned a lot from her. My other teachers there have been pretty good also.

DR: What are your plans after you graduate?

LE: To go to college and maybe get into law and maybe later on be a judge.

DR: Have any other members of your family gone on past high school?

LE: My sister's going to college this year at Oakland University.

DR: Have other of your family members gone to school here or taken classes at Community Ed.?

LE: Yes. My grandparents and my parents, my aunts and uncles used to go there, when we were fairly new to the country.

DR: Does your family belong to any community organizations?

LE: No.

DR: Do you go to church in Holland at all?

LE: I usually go to Central Avenue, but our family usually goes to Hamilton Christian Reformed Church.

DR: Was your family Christian in Cambodia before they came here?

LE: No, I don't think so.

DR: Have they ever talked about their religion or their religious life or how it was different there than it is here?

LE: I still think that it's mostly Buddhist than Christianity here. It's like half and half. I'm in between them, I guess.

DR: Would you call yourself a Buddhist or a Christian, or would you call yourself something else?

LE: I say I'm both, half and half.

DR: How do you define being both? What parts do you take from Christianity and what parts do you take from Buddhism?

LE: I believe some of the stories in the Bible are pretty much true, but I think it's kind of Buddhist because I think there's reincarnation and all.

DR: When you tell people that, how do they generally respond to you?

LE: They usually don't say anything, but they might say, "Oh, that's weird."

DR: Would you say your beliefs are typical of most Cambodians that live in Holland?

LE: Yes, I guess since they've been exposed to the belief of Jesus and all now, maybe it's gotten into some of them I think.

DR: Do you know any Cambodians who convert to Christianity and then talk negatively about Buddhism?

LE: Yes, it is now. There's, I think, a Cambodian pastor [Socheth Na], and he has a church now in Graafschap. When there's like a New Year's party, it's organized by either the Buddhists or the Christians and they could get into a lot of trouble, and my parents just don't want to even go to either of them because they don't want to decide between that.

DR: Do you have much contact with other Cambodian people who live in Holland?

LE: Yes. One of my good friends is Cambodian.

DR: Do you have much contact with other people from other Asian countries who live in Holland?

LE: Not very much, not as much as I hear my cousins from California talk about. Over there the majority is Asians when they go to school, whereas here in Holland we're more of a minority.

DR: Does your family celebrate any special Cambodian holidays or traditions?

LE: Yes. We celebrate all New Years, which are Chinese and Cambodian New Years.

DR: What have your parents or other family members done to teach you about your Cambodian heritage or culture?

LE: By the food and the language and just our ways of doing things, and of having respect for elders and when you meet people.

DR: Are you fluent in Cambodian?

LE: Not very, but I can understand it and sort of speak it, but I can't write it. But I'm in the midst of learning it.

DR: Are your parents teaching you? Are you taking classes?

LE: My parents are teaching me.

DR: How do you think your unique background makes you different, if it does?

LE: I guess by being exposed to all this, and my parents just not knowing really, not having the idea of what it's like to be a teenager here. That's what makes it so different and hard for them to understand me. Like having so much freedom, and being rebellious and all.

DR: How do they deal with those things when it does happen?

LE: I guess it's hard for them. I kind of understand where they're coming from. I'm supposed to keep my culture and be like this and that because I'm Asian. But I also have to argue, well, I am in America and it's different, and I'd like to do some other things that they do, too, and experience what it's like and not have said before I die, "I haven't done that and I wish I did."

DR: If you had to categorize yourself, would you say, "I'm an Asian" first, or would you say, "I'm an American" first?

LE: That would be really hard. I've never had anyone ask me that question. I would be right in the middle, I guess.

DR: Do you think that you might ever someday go back to Cambodia to visit relatives or to visit the country?

LE: Yes, maybe, if it was safer, more secure, with the government and all. But I don't think I would go there to live.

DR: Have you ever experienced discrimination or prejudice against you because you are Asian?

LE: Yes, there will always be that no matter what. Sometimes when the people don't, it makes you feel a lot more comfortable and better, and you don't really realize that.

DR: Why do you think that is, and in what sorts of specific instances?

LE: I'm not sure. Maybe because they're jealous or they're angry, or they're just taking it out on me or something. I don't really understand why because I think they're foreigners in somewhat a way, too, because they came from Europe and all.

DR: What would you say is the general attitude of people like yourself--people who have come from Cambodia but lived almost their whole life in the United States, and have parents who have come from Cambodia?

LE: It would probably be just to get along with everyone, to fit in, to look like when you're walking along and saying, "Oh, that's

just your normal person," and not how they're they're this and that, this and that.

DR: How do your parents feel about your sister going to college or you planning to go on, maybe to law school someday, or whatever?

LE: Well, of course they hope the best for us and that we go far. I think that's what the purpose of them coming here, is for us to have a better life.

DR: What do you see as the major challenges facing you as an Asian-American today?

LE: I think the hardest for me right now is dating, because I really kind of, I know what it's like and I'm experimenting with it. My parents really don't want me to because that's like a definite no and in Cambodia that's not something you do. Especially with my mom, because I think she's more stronger in keeping up with Asian culture and everything. My dad's trying to be understanding and I think he would let me except for that my mom, which is hard.

DR: How does that work, like in Cambodia?

LE: Usually the parents arrange it all. But I told me parents that when I grow older, I'm going to marry whoever I want, and they said yes.

DR: Do you know Asian people who live in Holland who still have arranged marriages?

LE: They're somewhat arranged, but their parents pick out, "Oh, I think this person would be good for you," or they hear it from

other friends and family members. I guess they kind of have the choice to choose, but it's not really like where here you search for them I guess.

DR: Do your parents want you to date only Cambodian guys? What would they say if you were to date an American, or another Asian, or someone else?

LE: At first when I really talked to my dad about it, I did start dating a Mexican guy. He wasn't really happy about it because of the reputation he's been hearing from the people at his work that are Mexicans--how they treat girls and all. He really wasn't happy with that. I was saying, "You should meet the person" and everything, but I don't think my parents really like to meet people and talk to them and get to know them.

DR: Why do you think it is that your family has stayed in Holland for as long as it has?

LE: My parents' jobs are here and most of our family is here, and I guess they're getting used to it by now.

DR: Do you plan ever to live in Holland once you get out of school?

LE: I really am not sure. I was always saying I am going to live in the safest place in the world, but I don't know if that's ever possible. I guess Holland's pretty close to it.

DR: In a lot of ways, maybe. What one thing about you do you think people who will be reading this interview should know about you?

LE: Just to be treated equally, not to hear anything, see everyone as an individual, and just to blend in.

DR: Good. That's all of my questions. If there's anything else you'd like to add, feel free. Otherwise thanks a lot.

LE: Yes.