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Tang, Kouy Oral History Interview (Cambodian): Asian and African American Residents of Holland

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Interview with
Kouy Tang
Cambodian Resident

Conducted July 12, 1994
by Donna M. Rottier

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

DR: I need to start out with a few formal things. Like I said, I'll ask you the same questions I ask everybody else. You can talk about them as much as you like. The date is July 12, 1994. This is Donna Rottier and I am interviewing Kouy Tang in her home in Holland, Michigan. Could please repeat your full name for the record on tape?

KT: My name is Kouy Tang. I live in Holland in 328 Waverly.

DR: Could you please state your date and place of birth?

KT: I was born on [date removed], 1956, in Cambodia.

DR: When did you first move to Holland, Michigan?

KT: In September, 1979.

DR: Is Holland the first place that you lived in the United States?

KT: Yes.

DR: Could you begin by describing a little bit about your life in Cambodia, or growing up in Cambodia and what it was like for you? Did you live in a rural area or an urban area, in the city or the countryside?

KT: I lived in a city.

DR: Which city?

KT: In Battambang.

DR: What did your family do there?

KT: My father sells in the market, sells pork.

DR: Did you go to school in Cambodia?

KT: Yes.

DR: For how many years?

KT: Seventeen.

DR: Why did your family leave Cambodia?

KT: Because Cambodia is Communist. We don't like that. We have nothing, no food, and then we want to get out of Cambodia.

DR: Who did you leave Cambodia with?

KT: My husband and his brother and his sister.

DR: You were married in Cambodia?

KT: Yes.

DR: When were you married?

KT: I was married in September, 1974.

DR: Did you have any children in Cambodia?

KT: Yes, I had one child in Cambodia. He was born in the Communist time. He was sick, no medicine, and he died.

DR: I'm sorry to hear that. Where did you first go when you left Cambodia?

KT: Go into Thailand. We walked from Cambodia to Thailand.

DR: How long were you in Thailand?

KT: Six months.

DR: Were you sponsored by a family or an organization to come to the United States?

KT: Yes. A Christian Reformed Church in Holland Heights.

DR: Did you know anything about Holland before you came here?

KT: No.

DR: What did you expect to find?

KT: We don't know anything when we left from Thailand. We thought you come over here, you work.

DR: What did you find then once you got here to Holland? Did the church that sponsored you help you to find a place to live or work?

KT: Yes, the church helped us find a job and to find a place.

DR: Where was the first house that you lived in Holland?

KT: First time I got here I stayed with my sponsor two weeks. Then I later on moved to 11th Street.

DR: How long did you live there?

KT: I lived one year, and then I moved down 8th Street for four years. Then I got money and I bought a house.

DR: Is this the house that you bought? The one that you're living in now?

KT: Yes.

DR: What was your first job in Holland?

KT: I worked at Prince Corporation.

DR: Do you still work there now?

KT: Yes.

DR: What do you do there?

KT: I work on the finish line sun visors. I make sun visors.

DR: How much English could you speak when you first came? How well could you communicate with people?

KT: I first came and I can't speak at all. Then my sponsor teach me how to speak. And then I go take Community school a couple months.

DR: The job that you have working at Prince, how is that different from or similar to what you did in Cambodia?

KT: Here it's a lot different. When I lived in Cambodia, I never worked. I always stayed home and go to school. After I married, I just stayed home, too, after I married.

DR: What does your husband do here?

KT: He works at Prince, too.

DR: Have you had children since you moved here to the U.S.?

KT: Yes. I been here four weeks and then I had a baby. I pregnant from Cambodia.

DR: Did you have just one child?

KT: I had two children.

DR: How old are they now?

KT: Now my daughter is fourteen and my son is thirteen.

DR: What sorts of hopes did you have for your children knowing that they would grow up in the United States?

KT: I hope my kids have a lot of school, education.

DR: How do you think that your children's lives have been different growing up in the United States than if they had grown up in Cambodia?

KT: I think it's almost the same. When the kids grow up in Cambodia, they always go to school every day. It's almost the same over here.

DR: How do you feel about the schools in Holland and the education that your children have gotten there?

KT: I've never been to school here. I don't know much about that.

DR: Are you a member of any community organizations--any groups or activities outside of your work or family? Do you attend a church?

KT: Yes. I have Sunday School. I think I have only Sunday School, and sometimes I go take class at Community School.

DR: What sorts of classes do you take there?

KT: I did before, but not right now.

DR: You mentioned Sunday School. What church do you go to?

KT: I go to Sunday School, at Christian Holland Heights Church. I went a couple years. Now I'm working and too busy, and then I just stop.

DR: How is that church different from the way you practiced your religion when you lived in Cambodia?

KT: It's different. When I lived in Cambodia the religion is Buddha. Then it's different. We go not many times to pray to Buddha. Only just sometimes, when we had time. But right here you have to go every Sunday, and every Sunday you have to go to church.

DR: Has your religion or faith itself changed at all?

KT: It's hard for me to say. I still have my Cambodian faith, but I still like going to church. I like the people, talking to the people.

DR: Are most Cambodians Buddhist?

KT: Yes.

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

KT: Yes. We still have New Year and that day, Memorial Day, we still have that.

DR: How do you celebrate those?

KT: New Year, we just get whole family together. Then we have a large dinner. We just get some, in wrapped up red paper, money in there and then just give to the kids.

DR: How have you gone about teaching your children about your Cambodian culture or heritage?

KT: Yes, we still teach them.

DR: What do you do to teach them that?

KT: Sometimes the kids right here, they don't know what is here: "How come you gave me the money?" It looks like a present, like over here Christmas, your parents give you the present. But in my culture you just give the money, for good luck.

DR: How much contact do you have with other Cambodian people who live in Holland? How many other Cambodian people do you know who live in Holland?

KT: Yes, I know some, but some not.

DR: Do you know many Asian people from other Asian countries in Holland?

KT: I know only a couple.

DR: What changes have you seen in Holland since 1979?

KT: It has changed a lot in Holland. First I get here and then it's really small; there's not many people. Now a lot of people, and then they build, like around here. It was all woods, now they're all buildings. It's growing in Holland.

DR: Are there more Asian people or Cambodian people moving into Holland?

KT: Yes, we have a lot now. Some have moved from California. Some move from Chicago. They have a lot of jobs over here.

DR: Why do you think they move to Holland? What is it about Holland that makes them want to move here?

KT: It's easy to find jobs. Over there it's hard to find jobs.

DR: Have you noticed or experienced yourself any racial tension or discrimination against yourself because you're from Cambodia? Has anyone treated you negatively or said negative things because you're Asian or different than they are?

KT: No.

DR: How do you think the community of Holland has responded to the Asian people living in Holland?

KT: When Cambodian people first got here, they had a lot of church sponsors; they were all church sponsors. Help them find jobs, help them find a place to live.

DR: Now are most Cambodians that come over still sponsored by the church?

KT: No, not any more. They are sponsored by families.

DR: Has your family ever sponsored another family to come over here, or helped another family settle in Holland?

KT: Yes, some that sponsor--like they have a parent in Cambodia--and they sponsor to come over here.

DR: Do you still have family that live in Cambodia?

KT: Yes, I still have my sister over there.

DR: Has she ever wanted to come to the United States?

KT: Yes, she wants to come over here, but it's hard to sponsor right now. I don't know how long, they take so long. When you sponsor only like husband, or your father, or your mother, it does not take very long. When you sponsor your sister, it takes a long time.

DR: Do you hope that someday she will be able to come over?

KT: Yes.

DR: Why has your family decided to stay in Holland?

KT: I like it in Holland. Is here a lot of nice people, and easy to find jobs. People like each other, don't hate, no gangs.

DR: That's all of the questions I have. Those are the questions that I ask everyone who I interview. Is there anything more that you'd like to tell me about yourself or that you think I should have asked, but I haven't?

KT: No, I think it's pretty good.

DR: Thank you very much.

KT: You're welcome.