



Kilong Ung on the Reed College campus in Portland. He graduated from Reed in 1987.

PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ

Forgiving the unforgivable

Kilong Ung survived four years of hell before coming to Portland where he turned his anger into hope

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

When Kilong Ung strides past hundreds of thousands of Grand Floral and Starlight parade spectators this June, most onlookers won't realize he survived one of the most horrific atrocities in human history.

Marching ceremoniously alongside members of Portland's distinguished Royal Rosarians, Kilong's glistening \$2,000 uniform is the antithesis of the tattered long-sleeved shirt and dirty pair of shorts he wore for four years as a slave laborer during the Cambodian genocide.

For more than a century, the Royal Rosarians have been a hallmark of the Rose Festival and served as Portland's official goodwill ambassadors. They greet politicians and dignitaries at the airport, represent the city at festivals around the Pacific Northwest and raise money for children's programs through their foundation.

Members are accomplished; many are business owners and managers or hold high-ranking positions in local government.

Kilong was a young refugee, new to America and living with a foster family, when he first saw the Royal Rosarians marching in the Grand Floral parade.

Glowing brightly in their double-breasted, cream-colored suits, white-banded straw



boater hats, white gloves, white shoes and red ties, the Rosarians captivated Kilong, and for years he would dream of one day joining their ranks.

Kilong had been struck with a similar sense of wonderment several years earlier and halfway around the globe when he first saw Khmer Rouge soldiers march past him in a parade of a different sort.

In their dusty black guerilla fighter uniforms, red-checkered scarves and AK-47s, their impressiveness was exciting to Kilong, who was just a boy.

It was April of 1975, and these soldiers had just emerged victorious from Cambodia's long civil war.

At the time, Kilong lived in a wood and straw house perched high above the ground on stilts in the city of Battambang with his parents and five of his seven sisters. An

in-law and his nephew also lived under the same roof.

He was especially close to his only younger sister, Sivly Ung, nicknamed "Ali." Even at a young age, he had taken on a guardian role for Ali, enrolling her in school when he was only in fourth grade himself.

While Kilong doesn't know exactly when he was born, he estimates he was 15 years old when the war ended, but he had the appearance of a 10-year-old.

He remembers residents of Battambang celebrating the end of the war, with many believing the Khmer Rouge would be good for Cambodia.

Unlike his long-held infatuation with the Royal Rosarians later in life, Kilong's adoration for the Khmer Rouge soldiers would quickly fade.

Soon after the war's end celebration, he saw a group of the soldiers humiliate a man in the street near his home. After berating and threatening the half-naked man to the point of urinating on himself, they shot him in the head, killing him instantly right before Kilong's eyes.

The Khmer Rouge regime and its Marxist leader, Pol Pot, are notorious for what followed.

They transformed the entire country of

See FORGIVING, page 5