



PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ

**FORGIVING, from page 5**

didn't know how to cross the street, turn on a faucet or use a toilet. He was placed in a special education class.

But Kilong learned quickly and started to acclimate to his new-found American culture. He soon became good friends with a classmate named Scott Easter.

Easter's parents invited Kilong to come live in their home, and it was his new American parents who took him to his first Grand Floral parade in the early 1980s.

When the Royal Rosarians marched past, Kilong saw spectators standing up to salute them. People applauded and cheered. The Rosarian leading the group waved a large American flag.

"You're an American, it's a flag, you respect the flag and all that stuff," said Kilong. "But it has a different meaning to somebody who was supposed to be dead in the killing fields."

Kilong had no idea who these men were, but to him they stood for peace and prosperity. "The ultimate American dream," he would later recount.

He told his foster family at that very moment that someday he wanted to be that man in white waving an American flag in the parade. It was a wish that seemed preposterous at the time.

Through the help of administrators who saw his potential in high school, he was invited to attend Reed College, graduating with a degree in mathematics in 1987.

He went on to earn his master's degree in statistics from Bowling Green State University, where he said he began to feel like his former self again – the outspoken sociable kid growing up in pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodia.

His first job after college was with Anderson Consulting, a multibillion-dollar Fortune 500 company (now Accenture).

He married his college sweetheart, Elizabeth Roe. She now goes by Lisa Ung.

The couple had two children. His son, Kilin, is named for his father, and his daughter, Kila, was named for a brother who died before he was born.

Kilong continued his successful career in the corporate world and eventually built a large, luxury home in an affluent neighborhood – an affront to his former communist captors.

But he suffered from depression and post-traumatic stress as he struggled with his identity and his past traumas.

After 20 years in the U.S., he traveled back to Cambodia to see the sisters and the country he'd left behind.

While he was there, an old friend from the labor camps told him that for \$800 he would kill a notorious Khmer Rouge leader that had put Kilong's family through hell. His friend knew where the man was, and he

needed the money.

Kilong seriously considered taking him up on his offer. He had long-dreamed of having murderous revenge on the Khmer Rouge.

But he realized he was at a crossroads, and he declined.

"They killed over 50 of my relatives, they starved both my parents to death, and they put me in a slave camp for almost 5 years," said Kilong. "I forgave them. So today, what can another person do to me that I cannot forgive?"

"The Khmer Rouge should have killed me, at the very least. They destroyed my faith in humanity, and yet here I am. When you go through something like that, you can turn out to be a really bad person, or you can turn out to be a decent person. You have a choice."

Kilong was conflicted about his material gains. He had so much, but when he visited Cambodia, he saw that his friends and family had so little.

He decided to change course, refocus and give back to the Cambodian community.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, there were 4,424 Cambodians living in the



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*Kilong Ung marches as a Royal Rosarian in the 2016 Starlight Parade. He joined the Royal Rosarians 10 years ago, the fulfillment of a dream he had since seeing his first Grand Floral Parade in the early 1980s.*

Portland and Vancouver, Wash., metro area. Kilong said community leaders estimate it's closer to 10,000.

Portland's Cambodian community is among Multnomah County's "most distressed communities," according to a 2012 report from the Coalition of Communities of Color and Portland State University.

The report found 44 percent of the local Cambodian population had received less than a high school education, and roughly half could barely speak English. It also revealed nearly half were low income, with a quarter falling below the federal poverty line, but only 13 percent were receiving any public assistance.

In 1994, Kilong's sister, Sivheng, co-founded the Cambodian-American Community of Oregon in Beaverton, where she continues to teach younger Cambodians about their cultural heritage.

Kilong decided to volunteer with the organization and became its president for several years. He worked diligently to give the Cambodian community in Portland more visibility and credibility.

"I wanted people to know we exist," he said.

Kilong and his wife decided they would sell their fancy house and 80 percent of their belongings. They moved their family into a small, sparsely furnished two-bedroom apartment instead.

"I love him and I respect him, not because he's my brother but he's the kindest human being," said Sivheng, who today works for Portland's Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization.

"I don't know if he'd want me to say this, but at his house, he has this one couch and one dinner table and one TV – that's it. He never buys anything more than that, just the necessity. He said he'd rather give money to help other people. His wife is the same way."

Shortly after his book was published, Kilong met Tim Leatherman, of Leatherman tools, at a book reading. Leatherman, impressed with Kilong's story, asked him what he wanted to do next, now that he'd written a book.

Kilong told him he wanted to build an elementary school in Cambodia.

Leatherman wrote him the check that enabled him to establish a foundation to do just that.

Kilong believes education can help prevent another genocide in Cambodia.

"When you are educated, you are less likely to be recruited by propaganda and lies – you will have some degree of critical thinking. Many of the Khmer Rouge just did what they were told," he explained.

"It is mob thinking and propaganda – those are really, really dangerous, and I've seen that leading up to the Khmer Rouge, and even now there are some propaganda going on in Cambodia and new generation may get fooled."

Since its establishment in 2010, the Golden Leaf Education Foundation has built four schools in remote and economically depressed areas of rural Cambodia. It plans to break ground on its fifth elementary school this month.

"Quite often the school ends up becoming the community center," said Ray Dilschneider, board president of the volunteer-run foundation.

"Kilong's all about doing good things for

the kids, I really respect his drive," he said.

When Kilong visited the foundation's first school two years after it was built, he saw that the government ran a power line into the village to give the school electricity. A political office and medical clinic had also since moved in.

"My intention is not just building schools, we want to actually bring the spotlight to the village," Kilong said.

Kilong and his foundation have donated school uniforms, rice and hundreds of bicycles to the villages where the schools are located.

He recently traveled back to Cambodia again with a documentary film crew.

His is one of several stories being featured in "Risking Light," which is in post production and due for release at film festivals this fall. The theme of the film is "forgiving the unforgivable."

Director Dawn Mikkelsen said she hopes to screen in Portland sometime next year.

Today Kilong owns a State Farm agency, with an office on Southeast 82nd Avenue. He sits on the board of his foundation and is a member of the Rotary Club of Portland.

But it was a chance meeting with former Portland mayor Tom Potter in a parking lot that would pave the way to fulfilling a life-long dream.

Kilong was walking into the Barnes and Nobel at Clackamas Promenade to do some last-minute Christmas shopping in December 2004, when he spotted then mayor-elect Tom Potter exiting the building.

"Chief Potter?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Potter.

"Congratulation on the election," said Kilong. He thought that would be the end of the exchange, but Potter began to ask him questions. Soon the men were engrossed in conversation, and Kilong was telling Potter all about Portland's Cambodian community.

Kilong invited Potter to a Cambodian American Community of Oregon event. The two have been friends ever since, and Potter helped Kilong to give the Cambodian community more visibility by attending their events, and even mentioning Kilong's efforts with the organization during a state of the city address one year.

When Potter learned of Kilong's dream of becoming a Royal Rosarian, he introduced him to a Rosarian that he knew, a former Prime Minister of the organization, Ray Hanson.

When asked the prerequisites to becoming a Rosarian, Hanson replied, "good moral character."

"I interviewed him and thought he was a good guy," said Hanson, "and I decided to sponsor him. He's a truly excellent example of a person who gives back to the community."

Ten years ago, the Rose Festival Queen knighted Kilong an official member of the Royal Rosarians at Washington Park.

He remembers soon after, when he marched in his first Grand Floral Parade, he quietly spoke to his father's spirit as he fought back tears, saying, "I made it. I told you I'd make it. Here I am!"

On June 2, as Kilong marches in the Starlight Parade, he will be at the helm of the Royal Rosarians, dressed in white from head to toe, proudly carrying the American flag.