

TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA

■ Polo



Most Honored Elder recipients Sary Khaav (left) and Jess Osilla (second from left), master of ceremonies Ronault L.S. "Polo" Catalani (third from left), and Asian Reporter Foundation scholar Phoebe Huynh (right) participate in a blessing ceremony during The Asian Reporter Foundation's 16th annual Scholarship & Awards Banquet. (AR Photo/Jin Huang)

# Our history, these rivers, that generous sea

## The Asian Reporter Foundation's 16th annual banquet

The honorable Sary Khaav took me aside for a moment, a small moment during the loud jostle and sweet joy that is The Asian Reporter Foundation's annual heritage night celebration.

With a grace so characteristic of our grandest elders, Grandpa Sary softly said, "You know today, this day, April 17, was the day Khmer Rouge forced us all out of our cities?"

It wasn't really a question. He was not really asking me to answer. He was not waiting for me to embarrass myself with my ignorance.

On the contrary, Grandpa's hand on my shoulder, his tone of voice, expressed only the sincerity of a teacher and the matter-of-factness of an unmitigated truth — "You know today, this day ... was the day ..."

On that awful day, the one Grandpa was nudging me about, screaming crazy Khmer Rouge (Red Cambodian) army boys swiftly emptied the nation's cities; immediately executing educated and noncompliant neighbors. They suddenly forced an entire shocked society — old and ill, able and disabled, babies, teenagers, and aunts — on the road, on foot, to crude farm labor and public works projects. City lives like yours, like mine, disintegrated into countryside nightmares. Four dark years of them.

The date Grandpa Sary passed me, almost confidentially, April 17, 1975 — is a spiritual equivalent to the mass execution of Jewish innocents under Nazi German rule; the brutal bludgeoning and hacking of Tutsi innocents under Rwanda's Hutu regime; the terrifying murder of working and shopping New Yorkers on that bright

blue morning of September 11, 2001. Ampun'illaah.

And I didn't know that. That April 17, that awful day, was this day. Not in my cluttered mind, not in my distracted heart.

### Rivers of redemption

As our evening celebration rolled on, in our packed party room on the boulevard named for Reverend Martin King, Jr. — just six city blocks from our generous Willamette's silty shore, and only seven miles more before she braids into our other grand matriarch, River Columbia, and together flow another 80 urgent salmon miles to that vast Pacific clockwise sweep of people, commerce, and ideas that brought Grandpa Sary safely here — I hoped, I sincerely hoped that all of these River City blessings might've soothed this grand man's broken bones. Maybe a little.

Indeed, as our raucous banquet room rose to honor Grandpa Sary Khaav, escorted by Portland city commissioner Amanda Fritz — as we rose in reverence for lovely Grandma Sivheng Pao, escorted by city commissioner Nick Fish — as we stood in gratitude for that most dignified Pinoy, Grandpa Jess Osilla, escorted by Multnomah County commissioner Loretta Smith — our entire gathering hoped, sincerely hoped, that the contributions of these three discerning leaders of local democracy, might just reassure our grand elders that their unimaginable suffering back home, that their unfathomable uncertainties upon arriving here, are all now redeemed. Maybe in part.

And maybe, finally maybe, after Grandpa Sary and Grandma Sivheng and Grandpa Jess blessed one after another, a long line of unabashedly ambitious young Asian-American scholars — maybe our

muscular elders went home, their grand souls assured that it is in fact their big lives, that we have built our fortunes on. Our health and wealth, our future security, we construct daily on the shore of their sea of sorrow. Insh'allaah.

### Ocean of tears

Like I said, the honorable Sary Khaav took me aside for a moment that night, a small moment during the big jostle and joy that is River City's annual Asian Pacific American heritage celebration.

And with a grand elder's characteristic grace he said, "You know today, this day, April 17, was the day Khmer Rouge forced us all out of our cities."

It was not really a question. There was no real need to answer.

Our response, Portland's humble response, was elegant Sivheng Ung stepping on stage to complete the circle. On this shore, Mdm. Sivheng was among the 14 pioneering families that formed the Cambodian-American Community of Oregon, an award-winning refugee resettlement and integration association. On the far shore, she was Grandpa Sary's serious little student, back in his high school, back before The Dark Years. She and he survived the Khmer Rouge Genocide, while millions did not.

They found each other here, at this auspicious place, on this confluence of our generous river matriarchs and our deep blue circulating sea.

Mdm. Sivheng stepped forward and placed a kukui lei around her teacher's neck, upon his broad-broad shoulders.

Rivers of tears. An ocean of joy.

**Maybe our muscular elders went home, their grand souls assured that it is in fact their big lives, that we have built our fortunes on.**

Another year of celebrating us.

### The Asian Reporter's Expanding American Lexicon

**Ampun'illaah** (Indo patois from Koranic Arabic): May God have Mercy on our bones and our souls.

**Army boys:** Khmer Rouge soldiers who turned on Cambodian civilians were substantially kids armed with automatic weapons and awful ideology. Teenaged guys everywhere are particularly adaptable to the violent roles bad leaders assign them. Without military discipline and without command accountability for international standards of warring, Khmer Rouge Army conduct (1975-1979) rapidly descended into unrestrained crimes against humanity. The Khmer Rouge Tribunal was established by a 2003 agreement between the U.N. and the new Royal Government of Cambodia to try the most senior political leaders, producing painfully mixed results. Tribunal proceedings continue.

**Discerning leaders of local democracy:** Our Asian Reporter familia, our Asian and Pacific islander communities, are deeply obliged to our city commissioners, Nick Fish and Amanda Fritz, to county commissioner Loretta Smith, for expressing their respect for our elegant and muscular community elders. Thank you for engaging our activists in rub of local democracy. We will make America proud.

**Grandpa** (Old World and American ethnic minority): Addressing with respect and affection someone of the grand elder generation. A communal expectation for the addressee to fulfill the role of an esteemed elder.

**Insh'allaah** (Koranic Arabic): God Willing. An expression of existential surrender to God's wisdom and mercy, and a humbled admission of our misunderstanding of, and our smallness in, our wondrous universe.

**Kukui lei** (Hawaiian): Also called kukui ano (seed), the fruit of Tahiti and Hawai'i candlefruit tree. Ceremonially gifted, symbolizing light, hope, and renewal. Extracted oil used as fuel for wicked light.

**Pinoy** (Tagalog): Overseas Pilipino.

## My Turn: Breaking the silence

Continued from page 6

"The entire city comes to a halt," said Louis. At the close of the commemoration, in the evening, people light lanterns and place them on the water. She said the "thousands of lanterns floating" represent the bodies that were found in the water.

Even though *Breaking the Silence* is a detailed performance of Japanese-American history, Louis says she wants the play to be a metaphor about the discrimination and exclusion of any race. She doesn't want it to be an exclusive story just about the Japanese-American experience.

At age 64, Louis entered graduate school. Five years later, in 2007, she received her Ph.D. in creative writing. At age 76, she still takes the travelling play to other communities. She's also on a new adventure — starting an Asian-American studies program at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. She intends to bring her play there next year for a conference on the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. Louis also wants

to bring the Hiroshima peace activists who sponsored the performance of *Breaking the Silence* in Japan to be honored guests at the conference.

Louis explained that in all the places where *Breaking the Silence* has been performed, everybody understands the themes of discrimination in the play. "Towns without traffic lights understood," she said. "It isn't my writing. It's the stories."

Playwright Nikki Nojima Louis will be in attendance for the *Breaking the Silence* presentation and talkback held in Portland. The free, 70-minute reading, which takes place at 2:30pm on Saturday, May 31 in the Ellyn Bye Studio at the Gerding Theater at the Armory, features music and performances by Michelle Fujii and Toru Watanabe of Portland Taiko and actors Hata, Heath Hyun Houghton, Wynne Hu, Samson Syharath, and Larry Toda. The Gerding Theater at the Armory is located at 128 N.W. 11th Avenue in Portland. To learn more, call (503) 445-3700 or visit <www.pcs.org>.

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|   | 2 |   | 9 | 1 |   | 7 |
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Difficulty level: Easy #74693

**Instructions:** Fill in the grid so that the digits 1 through 9 appear one time each in every row, column, and 3x3 box.

Solution to last week's puzzle

Puzzle #83944 (Hard)

All solutions available at <www.sudoku.com>.

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| 9 | 1 | 4 | 8 | 3 | 6 | 5 | 7 | 2 |
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| 8 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 9 | 5 | 7 | 2 | 6 |
| 3 | 2 | 9 | 7 | 6 | 1 | 4 | 8 | 5 |



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The staff at The Asian Reporter wish you and your family a safe and happy Memorial Day weekend!