

At Peace in the Peace Corps

by Chhun Sun

A few days before 2014, I found myself wearing three layers of clothing and lying underneath about two tons of blankets inside a walk-in freezer of a bedroom in Azerbaijan. In front of an iPad screen, I was trying to express in words how I got to this very place.

Outside was an unknown world to many people. Just a few feet away, in another house, I could hear my host mom's daughter trying to put her 3-month-old son to sleep with an Azerbaijani lullaby. Jackals were howling into the winter air of my small village near the Georgian border, probably hungry for my host family's chickens and turkeys that were locked up outside. I was cold (*despite a wood-burning stove*) but full from a home-cooked meal and a cup of hot tea. I was well taken care of. I was happily at home.

I could be somewhere worse.
Or somewhere better, for that matter.

Before Peace Corps, I was in a good place in my life. College-educated. Well-experienced in print journalism. Single with no major attachments. A decent salary. A manageable student loan. A reliable car. Supportive family. Good friends. A 401K plan. A solar-powered apartment in San Luis Obispo. A five-minute drive to the beach.

But something was missing.

A year after graduating from Fresno State in 2006, I began seriously researching the Peace Corps. I was looking for an adventure, and the Peace Corps — which started in 1961 during John F. Kennedy's presidency — seemed meant to be.

It felt like falling in love or listening to your favorite band for the first time. I always wanted to live outside of the U.S. as an adult, and here it was: a well-respected, well-known volunteering program that sends people to different parts of the world to live, teach and learn with the locals and in return grants such benefits as medical insurance, student loan deferments and a solid resume-builder.

I'm more than halfway finished with my 27-month service as an English teacher. I can say wholeheartedly that this is the most worthwhile thing I've ever done. I don't regret what I gave up or went through to be here.

I'm a Cambodian-American who was born in a Thai refugee camp in 1981, just two years after my parents escaped the brutal grips of the Khmer Rouge — which, under the ruthless commander Pol Pot, is responsible for the deaths of at least 1.7 million Cambodians. I'm convinced I wasn't meant to be here.

My mom's first husband was murdered by a Khmer Rouge soldier, and my dad's first wife died from malaria. My parents were captured after the Khmer Rouge invasion of Cambodia in 1975 and secretly got married in a slave camp (*since such unions were prohibited by the regime*).

When the Khmer Rouge's rule of Cambodia ended in 1979, my family walked to Thailand. They accepted an offer to go to America while some of our relatives chose to stay behind. We were privileged to be in America because of the opportunities. Our relatives, I'm told, still struggle to maintain their farmlands and often ask my parents to wire money. I could have easily been part of that struggle.

But it wasn't so easy in America, either. In the mid-1980s, we were placed in the Tenderloin neighborhood of San Francisco, where I once witnessed a fatal daytime stabbing as I was walking to the corner Asian market to buy veggies for my mom. After our confidence was shaken by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake that destroyed our modest apartment, my family and I moved to Modesto. This has been our home ever since.

But the problem with growing up in a neighborhood where drive-by shootings, drug dealings and street fights took place was trying to fit in. The temptation to join a street gang was there, since some of my friends and family fell into that trap. But I just knew that was not the life my parents hoped for.

I graduated from high school and attended Modesto Junior College before transferring to Fresno State, where everything changed. I surrounded myself with good, motivated people from Fresno natives to international students. I joined the campus' Cambodian Collegiate Association.

Through various cultural events and activities and connections with a small group of Cambodians, I was reminded to not be ashamed of my upbringing. We all had a purpose. We all had a path. We all had a voice. I kept those thoughts in mind as I worked my way to a print journalism degree, with much of my time spent crafting my voice at The Collegian — the student newspaper.

Fresno State opened a life of possibilities. I remember feeling like I couldn't be tied down or handcuffed after I graduated. I had the freedom to be what I wanted. I had the freedom to go anywhere I wanted.

And here I am, in Azerbaijan.

