

Cambodian “Year of the Horse” New Year Event
Cambodian Buddhist Temple
Tacoma
April 19, 2014

We are together today to celebrate the Year of the Horse. What a great turnout. I am happy to see so many members of the strong and vibrant Cambodian community in Pierce County join in this wonderful celebration of Cambodian food, song and dance. Happy New Year to each of you. May the Year of the Horse bring you happiness and great prosperity.

I would like to recognize a few dignitaries who are sharing a part of their Saturday with us. I see state Senator Steve Conway is here, former state senator and now U.S. Congressman Derek Kilmer from the Sixth District; Tacoma Mayor Marilyn Strickland, Milton Mayor Debra Perry and other distinguished guests, it is very nice to see you.

We have a longstanding motto in my office: “Helping Kids Grow Up Healthy in Safe Communities with Opportunity.” The premise of the motto is that if we can provide a nurturing and safe environment for our youth, then we are doing a lot of the right things which cannot help but lead to a positive outcome for the entire community. In my remarks I am going to tell you why I think we can all learn a lot from the hard-working, industrious and caring citizens who make up the Cambodia community, and how communities in general can work together to be both strong and full of opportunity.

I have long admired the Cambodian people. Cambodian-Americans are a part of the demographic fabric that makes Washington such a wonderfully diverse and culturally enriched state. So many Cambodians were forced to flee their ancestral land under extremely tortuous circumstances, and many came here as refugees. There are now about 40,000 people of Cambodian birth or descent living in the state of Washington – many here in Tacoma and greater Pierce County with another large enclave in South King County. Some of you have risen or are in the process of rising from challenging circumstances.

We are often challenged, as a state, as a nation and within our individual communities. We see in the state of Washington communities that form and grow together and help each other, especially in times of need. That happens within the Cambodian community, and we have seen it time and time again in our state, especially during times of catastrophe. We witnessed this most recently in Snohomish County after the devastating mudslide which instantly claimed the lives of some 40 people and counting. Before the slide most people in the United States, and even in the state, had never heard of the tiny town of Oso. Now everyone in the world knows about Oso, and we have become as familiar with the phrase “Oso Strong” as we became with “Boston Strong” after the marathon attack a year ago.

People from around the world have reached out to assist with the Oso search and recovery efforts, and to help the families who lost homes and loved ones in the mudslide to get back on their feet. In my capacity as acting governor I signed the initial state emergency order on March 22, then later I was involved – distantly - in a small community-to-community effort to help the victims.

You see the Chinese family associations in Seattle are often at odds with each other. But about a week after the slide, the leaders of these same family associations put aside their differences, banded together and collected almost \$17,000 to help the mudslide victims. They did so in solidarity and to show caring and compassion from one community to another. My small part was to participate in a ceremony where the Chinese leaders handed their donation to the United Way of Snohomish County. It was incredibly powerful to see the expressions of caring and gratitude.

As a state and as a nation we reached out to Cambodians when they were in need. When the Cambodian people were confronted with one of the worst and bloodiest civil wars in the history of humankind – one that resulted in the deaths of as many as three million of your countryman by the terrorist regime of Pol Pot, many eventually found asylum in the United States.

There are thousands of stories of heartbreak and escape from that horrible place and time, as well as stories of people helping people. Some of you may have heard the story of my friend Darren Pen, one of the main organizers of today's celebration. Even if you have heard Darren's story, it is one that bears repeating because Darren was both a victim of circumstance and tragedy and later, like many of you, was able to move on and eventually triumph over some pretty awful experiences.

Darren lost both of his parents, his two sisters; age five and eight, and a one-week old brother in the Killing Fields of the Khmer Rouge, leaving him and a sister to fend for themselves as orphans. They had to scrounge for food wherever they could find it, and it wasn't always good. His mother and father were brutally murdered about a week apart from each other. His two younger sisters and brother would later die from eating poisonous fruit.

When he was 16 Darren was arrested and held in a "re-education" camp. One night while his captors were carting people off to kill, Darren decided to take his chances by running into a pond, thinking he would rather die by drowning than being hit over the head with a blunt object. He made it across the pond, but was eventually captured and confined to a prison where he suffered some terrible atrocities.

They tied him behind a horse in a way that he would have to run backwards as the horse trotted forward. They buried him underground at 4 a.m. so that only his head was showing and left him there all day. The only thing that saved Darren from dehydration was a series of light rain

showers. After that he fell unconscious for two days, leaving him to wonder when he finally awoke whether he was trapped in hell. He eventually escaped and found his way to the Thai border and was able to join other refugees in a camp where he stayed for the next five years.

While in the refugee camp Darren met and married Christina. They had two children and Christina was pregnant with their third when they were able to secure an American sponsorship and find their way to Chicago. Darren enrolled in a university and was able to secure public assistance to support his young family. One day he was robbed of his wallet containing the 250 dollars in cash that he needed to pay his rent. Out of desperation Darren, who weighed just 110 pounds, chased the much-larger robber through an alley and into a store, where his assailant quickly disappeared into a crowd and could not be clearly identified, even after the police came.

The next day Darren took a long bus ride to a government office to try to turn in a claim in hopes of regaining his lost rent so his family would not be evicted, only to be told that he could not claim it without a police report. Since he had not thought to get a police report, he left in frustration, empty-handed.

When Darren told the story of his robbery to his classmates at the university, they felt so badly for him that they raised not just the lost \$250, but \$1,200. Darren was overcome with joy and thankfulness.

The whole episode would be an important lesson to Darren, who would make his way to Tacoma where a friend lived in search of a job as a lay minister. Instead he would find work as a Cambodian interpreter for DSHS and for the court system. In the process he discovered that there were a lot of people just like him who needed a helping hand but could not communicate their needs. He also learned the likely reason the public assistance office in Chicago had not been able to help him without a police report: it was widely known and assumed that people made false claims for drug money.

Darren would also take a job with a U.S. Army Special Forces academy at Fort Lewis, providing tips and information on how they could protect themselves while working in hostile situations in Asia. He provided interpretation services for law enforcement, helping fellow Cambodians learn how to report crime so they would not have to go through what he did in that public assistance office in Chicago. He would help Cambodian parents explain things like why they punish their children in the way of their culture to Child Protective Services when faced with allegations of child abuse, and help his fellow Cambodians understand other culture-related barriers too.

Darren now works for the Safe Streets Campaign in Tacoma as a community mobilization specialist. He is also a commissioner representing Pierce County for the Washington State Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs, serving as the state outreach liaison.

He is president of the Khmer Community of Tacoma and has served on many local boards and groups over the years. Along the way Darren and Christina became American citizens. Their three children, Krishel, Michael and Samuel, now adults, each completed their university education and are well into great careers with Seattle area corporations.

So Darren is someone who overcame enormous odds by setting some good goals and letting others help as necessary. He invested heavily in education and now sees his hard work and years of sacrifice pay off in many ways.

As I'd stated Darren is just one example of an immigrant now living the American Dream. There are countless more examples. Some of you may know of my own background, moving from place to place when I was a child before settling down with my single mother and three siblings in the Salishan housing project here in Tacoma.

Our mother would not accept welfare assistance but we were living in government-subsidized housing, and that is what really kept us together. She took a hand up, but not a hand out. Back then, in the 50s and early 60s, about two thirds of the families living in Salishan were Caucasian. In recent years Salishan has become a "first home" for scores of first-generation Americans who have come here, including many who have immigrated from Cambodia and Vietnam.

I do not consider my background in Salishan in any way different than had I grown up in a more affluent neighborhood. The route I took to the lieutenant governor's office, while not at all traumatic, is in some ways not too dissimilar from the one that led to Darren's success in his community, and of that that many of you have taken.

The American Dream is available to anyone, rich or poor, immigrant or native. It really comes down to determining what you want to do in life and simply taking the initiative to reach that goal. I contend that it is still easier to do that in America than anywhere else in the world.

It's all about the choices you make, accepting the help of those who want to help you, and, in turn, mentoring others in their journey. It is about opening your eyes to the possibilities in life then going down the right path to get there.

What applies to individuals also applies to communities. I say Cambodians in Washington can too be known as the Cambodian Strong. You have already overcome some great hurdles, but there are still more to conquer. You can continue to work with law enforcement, within your community organizations and with groups like Safe Streets to fight drugs and crime. I recommend that you do whatever it takes to reach out to your young people – your own children and the children of others – to help make positive decisions that will lead them to become

contributing, productive adults, especially by keeping them away from harmful mind-altering substances and gangs.

Model good behavior. Set goals as communities that are easy to achieve, and then work together as a community to reach them. Help others when they need help, just as the Chinese community did for the people of Oso. At the same time, have fun together, celebrate as you are doing now and work to keep your culture and traditions alive. We are all better for that.

By doing this you will stand apart from other communities. When you embrace each other, and embrace the values that have made America the strong nation we are, then America shall embrace you.

Again, Happy Year of the Horse. Since we are in a Buddhist temple I will close with a simple quote from Buddha: We are shaped by our thoughts; we become what we think. When the mind is pure, joy follows like a shadow that never leaves. Thank you.