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Thursday, February 12, 2009 | Serving New Braunfels and Comal County since 1852

Former U.N. ambassador recalls journey

By Chris Cobb
The Herald-Zeitung

It has been more than three decades since Sihan Siv escaped the horrors and hardships of the Killing Fields of Cambodia and arrived in the United States with \$2 to his name.

And after picking apples, selling ice cream and driving a cab around New York City, he eventually worked in the White House and served as an ambassador in the United Nations.

Members of the New Braunfels Rotary Club had a chance Wednesday to hear him recount his remarkable ascendancy from near death under Cambodia's brutal Khmer Rouge regime to international diplomat.

"We were very lucky to have someone not only of his stature come here, but also someone who can remind us how lucky we all truly are," Rotary Club President-elect Sharon Staats said.

Siv, who now lives in San Antonio, stopped by the Seekatz Opera House not only to tell his story but also promote his book, "Golden Bones" — an in-depth description of his flight from bloodshed in Cambodia and eventual rise to international prominence.

The former teacher fled a labor camp in Cambodia in 1976 shortly after Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge had taken power.

"They turned Cambodia into a land of blood and tears," he told Rotarians Wednesday.

During its four-year regime beginning in 1975, the communist Khmer Rouge party killed around 2 million people, including Siv's mother and 15 brothers and sisters.

Siv persevered in a labor camp for a year before hopping on a logging truck and then making a three-day trek across the border into Thailand.

"I was sick, tired, exhausted, but my heart was full of hope," he told the crowd Wednesday.

He eventually would make a flight to Wallingford, Conn., where an American family had agreed to sponsor his citizenship. After arriving almost penniless, he worked on an apple farm and scooped ice cream for a living before moving to New York and becoming a cab driver.

In 1988, he volunteered for George Bush's campaign for the presidency.

Because of both his work ethic and incredible background, he was tapped by Bush to serve as deputy assistant to the president for public liaison and to serve as deputy assistant secretary for South Asian affairs, which he did from 1989 to 1993.

In 2001, he was appointed by George W. Bush to serve as ambassador to the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

"His journey is just incredible," Rotarian John Dierksen said.

Siv's stop in New Braunfels was one of many speaking engagements around the country he currently has planned on his calendar to promote his memoir.

Despite being somewhat reluctant to write what at times can be very painful memories, he said the response from readers has been "heartwarming."

"People thank me because sometimes they truly don't realize that America can be such a benefactor and such an inspiration for someone like me," he said.

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