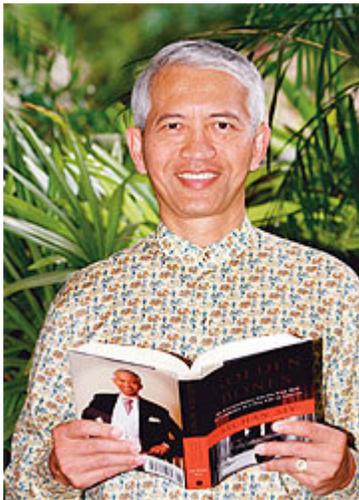


'NEVER GIVE UP HOPE'

Killing Fields survivor Sichan Siv took his mother's advice to achieve the American dream

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In 1975, Sichan Siv survived the Killing Fields in Cambodia while the rest of his family did not. The following year, he sought refuge in the US with only \$2 (70 baht) in his pocket. He worked hard - picking apples, serving ice cream, flipping hamburgers, driving a taxi - and eventually furthered his studies. Thirteen years later, he fulfilled the American dream. He was offered a job at the White House and later became a US ambassador to the United Nations. To him, his late mother was the wind beneath his wings and her words "Never give up hope" has always been inspiring and uplifting.



Killing Fields survivor and former US ambassador Sichan Siv: 'The most precious lesson of life is 'Never give up hope.'

"My mother was the most influential person in my life," Siv said. "My mother told me to never give up hope. Mae [the word "mother" in Khmer] gave me life, love and hope."

Born in 1948 in Pochentong, Cambodia, Siv is the youngest son of police chief Siv Chham and his devoted housewife, Chea Aun. He was an enthusiastic student and bookworm.

In his new book, *Golden Bones: An Extraordinary Journey from Hell in Cambodia to a New Life in America*, his life in Pochentong seemed like paradise, free of worries, with protective parents and a loving upper-middle-class family around him.

After graduating from high school, he worked as a flight attendant for Royal Air Cambodge for a couple of years. He continued his studies until obtaining a bachelor's degree in law and economics and liberal arts and humanities from the Royal University of Phnom Penh.

Later, he taught English in a high school. (He is fluent in several languages, including French.) Thereafter, he worked for the Cooperative of American Relief Everywhere (Care) organisation until the Khmer Rouge, the communist guerrilla group led by Pol Pot, took power of Cambodia in 1975. The Khmer Rouge then began its genocide by imprisoning, enslaving and killing the educated or anyone who disagreed with them in what they called "purification programmes".

Siv became a target of the Khmer Rouge for working on Care's programme to distribute food to half a million refugees. Even on his last day with Care, he arranged food and medical supplies for 3,000 refugee families in a remote province. That's also what caused him to miss a US evacuation helicopter by 30 minutes.

A few days later, he and 15 family members, along with three million fellow Cambodians left their homes with enough belongings for a few days, as ordered by the Khmer Rouge soldiers.

"There were 16 of us - our mother, Sarin, Sichhun, Peou, and their children. We departed on the evening of April 17, 1975, the first day of peace. It was to become the darkest night of our lives," Siv recalled.

Later, all of them were put in a slave labour camp where they had to get up before dawn and walk for one hour to join more than 5,000 other forced workers to build a dam.

"At that time, I felt my background would endanger us. She [mother] told me to leave so I left all of them," Siv said.

He recounted the moments he bid farewell to his family.

"I 'saw' Mae saying, 'May you be protected by the merits I have earned in my life.' She also added, 'Never give up hope' without moving her lips ... it was the most heartbreaking moment," Siv says in his book.

Thereafter, he began his escape by bicycle across Cambodia. "Along the road northward, the sight of decomposed corpses shocked me, even though they had become a familiar sight since our flight out of Phnom Penh the month before," he recalled.

His journey lasted for three weeks until he was captured and sent to a Khmer Rouge work unit where he and many others had to work while receiving only one meal a day.

"[I was] working 18 hours a day at gunpoint, enduring incessant threats, watching while other struggling wretches fell to their knees and faces-first into the mud," he wrote in his book.

With no other choice, Siv fled again instead of waiting for death. Without food or water for three days, he was almost killed while trying to jump from a moving logging truck and wading through a landmine-filled jungle.

"And with every step, I could feel the guiding, loving presence of Mae ... 'No matter what happens, never give up hope!'" recalls Siv in his book.

It was Friday, February 13, 1976, when he reached the Thai border village of Prachin Buri. He was briefly jailed for illegal entry into Thailand and later sent to a refugee camp where he spent months as an English teacher. While waiting for permission to seek refuge in a third country, he spent a few weeks in the monkhood at a Thai temple.

On June 4, 1976, Siv flew to the US where he was allowed to resettle as a refugee under the sponsorship of Robert Charles, and his wife, of Wallingford, Connecticut. The couple had lived in Thailand in the late 1960s and early 1970s, during which time Charles was the regional director of the Peace Corps in Khon Kaen.

According to Siv, the road to success is not paved with gold. He adapted himself to US ways so his new country would adopt him. He worked very hard without complaining.

"I lived with Bob for a few months and went to New York. I wanted to stand on my own feet. I picked apples, served ice cream, flipped burgers and drove a cab. It was not hard but challenging. I had a lot of things to learn," he recalled.

While in the Big Apple, he sent applications to several graduate schools with the hope to gain a Master of Business Administration. All the schools turned him down.

But, he did not give up. Finally in January 1980, he was accepted for a master's programme at the Columbia School of International Affairs with a full scholarship.

While packing to move to the Columbia campus, he received a letter from a friend at a refugee camp in Thailand.

"I opened the letter immediately and was shocked. My mother had been killed!" he recalled. "No one [in my family] survived. I felt totally paralysed."

Despite his deepest grievances, he managed to continue. On December 21, 1982, he was sworn in as a US citizen in Brooklyn. The following year, he married Martha Lee Pattillo, a United Nations Economic and Social Council (Unesco) worker from Texas.

His international affairs master's degree led to a position as an adviser to the Cambodian Delegation to the United Nations. With his keen interest in the US political system, he volunteered to work on George W. Bush's presidential campaign in 1988.

Thirteen years after his escape from Cambodia, Siv was appointed the US president's deputy assistant.

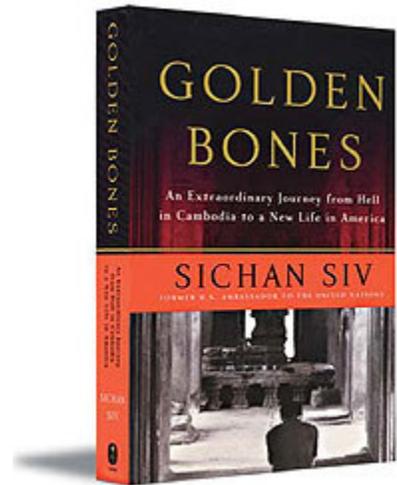
In March 1992, he returned to Cambodia. Back in his motherland, he visited the Killing Fields as well as his father's native village, Hanuman.

"Back in Hanuman, villagers gathered around me. They called me 'the man of golden bones', a Khmer expression meaning somebody with a lot of luck," writes Siv.

From 1993 to 2001, Siv worked as a consultant and director for several leading finance firms. In 2001, President Bush appointed him as a delegate to the 57th UN Commission on Human Rights. In the same year, he was confirmed by the Senate to be the 28th US ambassador to Unesco.

Since his first July 4 celebration in 1976, Siv has come a long way and proven his belief that the US is the land of opportunities.

"I am an American by choice. But, I'm proud to have Cambodian heritage - I am cool, calm and can see things positively rather than complain or whine," he said.



He admitted these qualities are derived from his upbringing, saying his mother taught him and his siblings to treat others the way they wanted to be treated, to give away happiness and to be caring and share.

As a Cambodian by birth, Siv has always tried to assist his motherland through his official and personal roles. He has helped promote awareness of problems in Cambodia, including writing a letter to US Congress.

"That's why I went to Cambodia on the trip in 1992. I played a key role in the peace process," he added.

Asked to comment on the current situation in Cambodia, he mentioned the country's "fraudulent democracy" and the wide gaps between wealth and poverty, among other problems of incompetence and corruption.

Also, Siv urged for a continued path to liberalisation, a legitimate opposition, the freedom of expression and free press in Cambodia.

"I'm hopeful the future will be brighter when they are able to address problems. The country must become more politically mature," Siv said. "The leaders should put the people's interests above theirs or their own groups."

On the topic of the dangers of ideologies, the former US ambassador called on the Cambodian leaders to be more realistic to avoid "another Khmer Rouge".

"Two million people died because of the Khmer Rouge. I want them [the leaders] to be brought to justice. I'm not a revengeful person. I just want to see justice," he stressed.

At present, Siv and his wife, frequently travel to deliver his message of perseverance and hope to people all over the world. He hopes his life will be inspiring for young generations to work hard to turn their dreams into reality.

Speaking about his book Golden Bones, Siv said, "The message is 'Don't be discouraged. Don't give up hope.' When you look back, you'll be proud."