

U.N. Ambassador Recalls Cambodian Past

By [Claire Shapiro](#)

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The typical American biography does not begin in Cambodia—but then again, Sichan Siv is not the typical American.

The Cambodian immigrant and former United States ambassador to the United Nations shared excerpts from his life story at a reading and book-signing event in Teachers College's Milbank Chapel hosted by the college and the Cambodia Project Tuesday evening. Siv, SIPA '81, described his autobiography *Golden Bones* as "an American story, an American dream." The event was organized as part of Siv's current book tour, and a major event for the Cambodia Project, which is linked to Columbia.

Just a few years before sitting in a classroom as a student at the School of International and Public Affairs, Siv was on the ground in Cambodia in 1975 when the communist Khmer Rouge took power. Working for relief and development organization CARE, Siv faced a dilemma as his educated status put his family at risk. So, with his mother's advice to "never give up hope, no matter what happens," Siv left them, and headed toward Thailand.

Siv recounted his harrowing journey through the Cambodian jungle, and spoke of his luck in finally reaching the border. From Thailand, he traveled to the U.S., arriving just before the bicentennial. While watching fireworks on the Fourth of July, Siv had a realization.

"I said to myself, 'this is a beautiful country,'" he said. Siv worked his way through a series of jobs, and then attended SIPA on a full scholarship. He described his experience at SIPA as one of the most "productive investments" of his life.

Interested in American politics, Siv volunteered in George H. W. Bush's 1988 presidential campaign, ascending to deputy assistant to the president for public liaison and ultimately attaining the post of deputy assistant for South Asian affairs in the state department. When George W. Bush took office, he nominated Siv to be ambassador to the U.N. Economic and Social Council. From 2001 to 2006, Siv represented the U.S. in the General Assembly and the Security Council.

Siv's visit to the University reflects the relationship between the school and the Cambodia Project. Established by General Studies graduate Jean-Michel Tijerina in 2006, the organization includes Columbia graduates, and undergraduates may also become involved.

Nettra Pan, CC '12 and vice president of the Columbia chapter of the Cambodia Project, said that many members of the club are interested in not-for-profit work, and in Cambodian issues. "One of my greatest passions is helping Cambodia," Pan said.

Despite his many achievements, Siv spoke frankly with audience members.

"I didn't want to visit a painful past," he said, explaining his reluctance to write an autobiography. He found the experience to be "liberating" and "therapeutic" all the same.

Along with other events, the Cambodia Project is spearheading a program to aid education in Cambodia. Construction of its first school is slated to begin this winter, and plans for another two schools are in the works.