

Cambodian immigrant turned ambassador brings poetry back to Wallingford

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WALLINGFORD — Nowadays, Sichan Siv spends the bulk of his time either traveling the country and world to speak about his work or writing about whatever is on his mind. “I’m having fun,” Siv said while letting out a laugh. “I’m doing everything. I travel quite a bit ... and I do a lot of writing.”

Siv, a former town resident, will return to the Wallingford Public Library on Wednesday, June 5, at 7 p.m., to talk about his new book of poetry, “Golden Words.” The 38-poem book features various poems written in different languages. He began watching the sunset and sunrise. It made him think of his past and his upbringing, which was the inspiration behind writing poetry.

“When I was growing up in Cambodia, most of the rules of etiquette, culture, how men and women should behave were all written in poetry,” Siv said. “We all studied those rules ... in poetry. It was a part of my educational upbringing.” With themes of love prominent throughout the entire book, Siv said he decided to dedicate “Golden Words” to his mother and the Cambodian king crowned 900 years ago in 1113. “The whole book is dedicated to my mother because she was born on April 13, 1913,” Siv said. “If she were alive, she would be 100 years old.” Siv’s mother and most of his family were brutally murdered by the Khmer Rouge. He makes an effort to return to Wallingford at least once a year. It’s the place where he was able to start a new life and escape the slave labor camps and killing fields.

Growing up in Cambodia, his father was a police commissioner. Siv was a college graduate and teacher and worked for the U.S. humanitarian organization CARE. With the rise of the communist Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot’s regime, Siv’s life changed dramatically. Since he worked for CARE, he had the opportunity to evacuate with America. However, Siv missed the last helicopter by 30 minutes. He worked in a labor camp for 10 months before escaping into Thailand. He was eventually brought to Wallingford by Bob and Nancy Charles. Bob Charles had been the Peace Corps’ director for Thailand and ran a planning agency in Hartford to help local groups gain access to federal and state programs.

Siv served as a U.N. ambassador under President George W. Bush from 2001 to 2006. He has held a few events at the library, drawing a large turnout of town residents and individuals from all over the state. Beth Devlin, community service librarian, said so many people come to hear Siv speak because of his story. “His story touches so many other people. It’s a story of hard work and survival and tragedy,” Devlin said. “It touches people throughout our communities. Everyone took something from his stories.” The easiness to relate to his story is the very reason why Siv enjoys the events, he said.

But Siv, a man who “enjoys interacting with people,” said it’s not just his story. “It’s not my story. It could be your story, anybody’s story — anyone can relate to it,” Siv said. “It’s an American Dream story ... I made it from the killing fields to the White House in 13 years and that can only happen in America.”

Over 100 people have showed up for his previous appearances at the library, Devlin said. While it’s free, those who are interested in attending are encouraged to reserve their seats by calling the library at (203) 265-6754.