



From Refugee to UN Ambassador:

Sichan Siv's American Journey

Sichan Siv MIA '81, IF '81 escaped the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge in 1976, fleeing his native Cambodia with his mother's scarf as the only memory of his life before the conflict. Exactly 13 years later he joined the administration of George H.W. Bush as a deputy assistant to the president. Siv's career trajectory eventually led him all the way to the United Nations, where he served as a U.S. ambassador from 2001 to 2006.

On October 3, Ambassador Siv visited with fellow alumni, students, and faculty at SIPA. Humble and insightful, he spoke candidly about his life and the extraordinary path the he has traveled — arriving as refugee in Connecticut, where he picked apples for a living before moving to New York. “I came to New York City as a taxi driver” he noted. “I left as UN ambassador.”

When Siv came to the United States, he vowed to adapt so that his new country would adopt him in turn. He realized that a key step for him to better understand and be able to give back was to study at an American university. SIPA gave him that opportunity, he said, after recognizing his unique talent and drive.

Siv expressed his gratitude to the school and how formative the experience of earning his two-year MIA was, surrounded by peers who shared his passion. As his wife, Martha, remarked, “Sichan was always driven to succeed and give back. Attending SIPA proved to him that he could make it in American society.”

Asked about returning to Cambodia years after the conflict, Siv said he experienced what he called an emotional gap. “You come back to a country where everything has changed and everyone you knew is dead. “ Nevertheless, he pointed to how far Cambodia had come and how remarkable the human spirit was at maintaining hope throughout dark times.

He said he would be happy to lead a SIPA delegation of students interested in conflict resolution to Cambodia: “My country, unfortunately, experienced one of the worst regimes of the 20th century, yet it is rebuilding,” he said. “To see and understand this would be a significant experience for students.”

Ambassador Siv's story is one of exceptional perseverance. For SIPA students his perspective and desire to serve are exemplary. "Each of us can do so much" he says. "Together we can do so much more."

— Benjamin Martinez Newman, October 8, 2012



Sichan Siv MIA '81, IF '81 greets visitors. A onetime refugee from Cambodia, Siv rose to become a U.S. ambassador to the UN under President George W. Bush.

Photos by Samantha Libby

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