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'I call Wallingford my birthplace of freedom'

Local family helps Cambodian man go from Wallingford to the White House after he escaped slave labor camps

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WALLINGFORD - Sichan Siv escaped the "killing fields" of his native Cambodia to eventually be appointed deputy assistant to a U.S. president.

That was in 1989, under the administration of President George H.W. Bush. In 2001, Siv was named a delegate to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights and later that year named U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

It turns out that Wallingford provided the turning point in a life that brought him from genocide in Cambodia to service in the White House.

"That's where I started out as a free man," Siv said on the phone recently from his home in Texas.

"I call Wallingford my birthplace of freedom."

Siv will return Thursday to talk about his new book at the public library, the place where in 1976 he first began to explore and learn about his new country. The title of the recently published book is "Golden Bones: An Extraordinary Journey from Hell in Cambodia to a New Life in America." "Golden bones" is a Cambodian reference to someone who possesses incredible luck, and Siv's life certainly fits the description.

"When I got to Wallingford I was quite exhausted," recalled Siv. "But I was full of hope. I was a free man. The future was going to be brighter here and I was going to forget the painful past."

"I didn't know anyone when I got here, but now I have many friends and I have friends all over the country and the world. That is a blessing." Siv led an early life of privilege in Cambodia, where his father was a police commissioner. Siv was a college graduate and teacher, and worked for the U.S. humanitarian organization CARE. From the time he was a teenager, he said, he'd had "great admiration for America."

The fortunes of Siv and his family, however, changed with the ascent of the communist Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot's murderous regime. Siv later learned that most of his family, including his mother, who urged him never to give up hope, was brutally murdered.

Because of his work with the U.S. relief agency, Siv had the opportunity to be with the American evacuation when, after years of war, by April 1975 the communists were closing in on Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital. He missed the last helicopter out by 30 minutes.

Siv was sent to slave labor camps, which he endured for 10 months before making an attempt to escape. While working on a logging crew, he jumped from a truck near the Thailand border and wandered through the jungle for three days before he saw people wearing brightly colored clothes and sneakers, and women and men together, which would not have been allowed in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, and realized he had escaped to Thailand. He was 27.

\$2 and a case of malaria

The Whirlwind Hill Road home of Bob and Nancy Charles is across the street from where Nancy Charles' father once ran a dairy farm, called High Meadow Farm. Their expansive property retains a bucolic charm, with rolling hills and a placid pond, and they now run a bed and breakfast there.

They spent two five-year stints in Thailand, first in the late 1960s, when Bob Charles was the Peace Corps regional director for the northeastern part of the country. They returned in the early 1980s, when Bob was director of the Peace Corps in the entire country.

In Connecticut, Bob Charles, now 70, ran a Hartford planning agency that helped local groups gain access to federal and state programs.

One day in 1976, Nancy Charles got a call from her college roommate, June Magnaldi.

Magnaldi, in Sri Lanka by that time, had learned that one of her CARE assistants in Cambodia had managed to escape and was teaching English in a Thailand refugee camp.

She wanted to know if Bob and Nancy would consider sponsoring his move to the United States.

Because they had lived in Thailand, the couple felt they were familiar enough with the culture that they could provide a supportive environment and that Siv "would feel welcome," said Bob Charles.

"I had survived a brutal year of starvation, exhaustion, fear, horror and terror," writes Siv in his book. "But my future was full of promise and innumerable opportunities for a successful life. I looked forward to the challenges of a great society, which guaranteed freedom and peace to all people of goodwill."

Before he left for the U.S., Siv had also fulfilled a promise made to his mother by becoming a Buddhist monk.

What Bob and Nancy Charles didn't know was exactly what date he would arrive, and when a taxi brought Siv to Wallingford from New Haven's Tweed Airport, they were at the Dairy Queen with their two young children.

When they returned, they found Siv talking outside with a neighbor. He wore a polyester suit and carried a small cardboard suitcase. Other than that, all he had was \$2 and a case of malaria.

But eventually they would discover that Siv also had something else that would carry him a long way, noted Bob Charles.

Holding the lettuce

"He had an uncanny knack for connecting with people," he said. "And each person leads to something better."

Siv spent a half-year with the Charleses, and to this day is considered part of the family. They helped him find his first employment, as an apple picker at a nearby orchard, and Nancy Charles helped him get his driver's license and his Wallingford library card.

At the library, Siv recalled, "I was an armchair traveler."

"My initial transition to life in America was made easier for me thanks to the Charleses' warmth and kindness and their knowledge of Asian culture," writes Siv in his book.

It did not take long for Siv to strike out on his own. Not satisfied with apple picking, he found employment at a Friendly's restaurant, in Middletown, and also secured an apartment there.

Though he spoke English, he found some of the vernacular puzzling, and recalls being particularly flummoxed by the phrase "hold the lettuce," which at first he thought should be taken literally.

After his first Christmas in America, in 1976, Siv told the Charleses that he had decided to move on. That meant to New York City, where he started work at a restaurant but then became a taxi driver. Eventually, he gained admission to the Columbia School of International Affairs, and also gained the attention of prominent Republicans. He became a U.S. citizen in 1982.

During Siv's stay with them in 1976, a presidential election year, the Charleses said he was very curious.

"He always asked questions that we couldn't answer," said Nancy Charles.

The couple has a scrapbook, given to them by Siv, titled "From Wallingford to the White House, 13 years."

While Siv's book took seven months to write, he said he'd actually been working on it for 30 years.

"I was very reluctant at the beginning, because I didn't want to relive a painful past," he said. Then he began to recognize that the book could be a way "I could get it out of my system." "The minute I pushed the 'send' button to my editor, I felt liberated," Siv said.

"Man of golden bones"

Siv returned to Cambodia in 1992 as a

representative of the U.S. government. Those in his father's village who remembered him called him the "man of golden bones."

"The villagers believed that my mother, sister and brother had been killed there, clubbed to death by the Khmer Rouge. Completely speechless and overwhelmed with sadness and sorrow, I had a Buddhist memorial service performed on the spot."

- Sichan Siv, about his return to Cambodia in 1992 as a representative of the U.S. government

"The villagers believed that my mother, sister and brother had been killed there, clubbed to death by the Khmer Rouge," he writes. "Completely speechless and overwhelmed with sadness and sorrow, I had a Buddhist memorial service performed on the spot."

Siv, who just turned 60, married a Texan and now lives in San Antonio. His focus now is promoting his book, and he says working on it gave him "a taste for writing." He's now working on a piece of fiction, which he describes as a political thriller.

He also still visits Wallingford once a year. When he was working at the United Nations, he would bring fellow ambassadors for get-togethers at the Charles home.

This will be his first trip back this year.

"I enjoy going back there, especially to Bob and Nancy's house," he said. "The landscape and scenery is so idyllic."

The Wallingford library is looking forward to his visit as well.

"I'm very excited to meet him in person," said Beth Devlin, the community services librarian.

"I knew the Wallingford library was one of the places he would go to when he first came here," she said. "What a place to help you get acclimated to a new town and a new country."

Siv's talk and book signing takes place at 7 p.m. Thursday in the library's community room.

Bob and Nancy Charles of Wallingford sponsored Sichan Siv, a Cambodian refugee, helping him start a new life in Wallingford. Siv eventually became a U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. He will speak Thursday at Wallingford Public Library about his new book, "Golden Bones: An Extraordinary Journey from Hell in Cambodia to a New Life in America."

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