

Ambassador Sichan Siv
Remarks at Naturalization Ceremony, Presided by Judge John Primomo
The Alamo Plaza, September 17, 2014

(As delivered)

Thank you very much your honor for the kind introduction.

I am very grateful for the privilege you bestowed upon me in sharing the American Dream with our new citizens. I thank our common friend Justice Barnard for bringing us together. I appreciate her and Justice Angelini for gracing us with their presence.

There is an old saying that behind a good man there is a great Texan (*Laughter*): my wife Martha who is everything to me and simply the best. (*Applause*) As we celebrate this week the 37th anniversary of our wonderful friendship, love, and marriage, we are even more delighted to be here with you for this historic occasion.

Congratulations to all. To honor your new lives, there is no better day than Constitution Day/Citizenship Day, and no better place than The Alamo, where 189 people sacrificed their lives in thirteen days of bloody battle for freedom.

This is what makes America strong: we came from many to become one: *E Pluribus Unum*.

I was not born in Texas, but I got here as soon as I could. (*Laughter*) In fact, I was a naturalized Texan before I became a US citizen. (*Laughter*)

I was born on the other side of the planet, in Cambodia when it was under French rule. France was the mother country, the symbol of Western civilization, until 1953 when Vice President and Mrs. Nixon visited. Then our teachers told us that there was another country (*Laughter*) much bigger and farther away than France, called United States of America

My father died when I was nine years old. Knowing that education was important, my mother worked very hard to send me to the best school in the kingdom. She sold lotus leaves which people used to wrap produce bought in the markets. She instilled in me since childhood the wisdom of "never give up hope, no matter what happens."

My first job as a flight attendant let me travel to many places, including China in 1969, at the peak of the Cultural Revolution. I never thought that what I saw there would reach my homeland a few years later. The Cambodians fought against the Vietcong and North Vietnamese communists, and against the Khmer Rouge.

On April 10, 1975 in an address to the joint session of Congress, President Ford announced that the options were few and the time was short for Cambodia and South Vietnam. Two days later, I was told to be at the U.S. embassy within one hour, if I wanted to be airlifted out of Cambodia. Concerned about the plight of a few thousand refugee families stranded in a province, I went to meet with the governor. When I arrived at the embassy, I learned that the last helicopter had taken off thirty minutes before.

Five days later, the Khmer Rouge turned Cambodia into a land of blood and tears. They killed people who wore glasses: a sign of education. They killed civil servants, military personnel, teachers, nurses, business people, anyone who had not been with them during their revolution.

My mother gave me her wedding ring, a scarf, and a bag of rice. She told me to run and no matter what happens, never give up hope. I rode a bicycle for three weeks using fake passes and false excuses to get through the Khmer Rouge checkpoints. They captured me near Thailand,

tied my arms behind my back, and were going to kill me that night. A truck driver saved my life. He vouched that I was an innocent person, wandering around, looking for my family.

There were only two kinds of people under the Khmer Rouge: those who had died and those who would die. Cambodia was a huge camp where people were forced to hard labor 18 hours with one bowl of rancid soup a day. At night, I never knew if I would be alive the following morning. When I woke up to face another day in hell, I was determined to make it to freedom.

Early 1976, the Khmer Rouge were looking for a crane operator. I raised my hand even though I had never been in a crane in my life. I knew it would be used to pick up timber along the Thai border and the job would increase my chances to escape. I burned small candles, put a blanket over my head, and studied the instructions. That could have cost me the life if I were caught reading, and reading something in English.

On February 13, 1976 I was alone at the back of the logging truck. I could not jump to the left or to the right as the driver or the guard with an AK 47 would have seen me through the rearview mirrors. I crawled on top of the truck all the way to the back and dropped myself behind it. I was caught on a piece of lumber and was dragged for a few hundred yards before I was flung off.

I ran, walked, crawled, and swam for three days having nothing to drink or to eat. I fell in a booby trap—a deep hole full of pungy sticks, sharp bamboo poles. They were supposed to catch the unlucky victims at the stomach or the heart. I am tall for a Cambodian, so the sticks hit me at the legs. I was severely wounded, but I was not killed. I pulled myself out of that hole and limped along until I got to Thailand where I was jailed for illegal entry. I was transferred to a camp where some three thousand refugees lived in an area the size of a soccer field. It was hot and filthy. Many suffered severe mental depression, spending the days feeling sorry about the past and worrying about the future.

I organized English classes to help them out. It was a win-win proposal. They were able to get some English before moving to their new countries: Australia, New Zealand, Canada, United Kingdom, United States. And they were able to keep their minds off the sorrows and the worries.

On June 4, 1976, one month before the Bicentennial, I landed on this Promised Land with my mother's scarf, an empty rice bag and two dollars. I was exhausted and sick, but I was full of hope. I tried to adapt myself to America, so that America would adopt me. Adapt to be adopted. I did everything that came my way to the best of my ability. I picked apples in Connecticut. I ate a lot of apples, enough to last for a life time. (*Laughter*)

I worked in a fast food restaurant. I had never seen a hamburger in my life. Suddenly, I was hearing "rare," "medium rare." (*Laughter*) When I was holding the lettuce, the trainer said "hold the lettuce." (*Laughter*) It took me a while to understand she did not want me to put the lettuce on the burger. (*Laughter*)

Next stop: New York, New York! At a street corner of Manhattan on a cold January day of 1977, I noticed at the back of yellow Checker cabs the sign "Drivers Wanted." I called and was told to go and take a test. It was all about directions: How do you get from Madison Square Garden to Yankee Stadium? I had no idea where these places were, much less how to get from one to another. So I just checked the boxes. (*Laughter*) I returned the sheet to the examiner. He looked at the boxes. He looked at me from head to toe, he shook his head, he sighed, and he mumbled "you passed." (*Laughter*)

So I became a taxi driver. In 1977 you did not need to know where you were going. *(Laughter)* You only needed a strong horn and good brakes to navigate the traffic. *(Laughter)* I was amazed that New Yorkers could communicate in sign language, *(Laughter)* sometimes with just one finger. *(Laughter)*

With a scholarship from Columbia, I did a master of international affairs in a year and a half, and worked at several places. In the eighties, Martha and I were introduced to the Reagans and we began to receive invitations to The White House. None topped the one on July 13, 1988 when I was a Rose Garden dais guest of President Reagan and Vice President Bush. The thought never crossed my mind that I would be working there a few months later.

Interested in American presidential politics, I had already volunteered for the Bush campaign. After his election, President Bush asked me to join his staff.

I walked in to work at The White House on February 13, 1989, exactly 13 years from the day I jumped off that truck in the jungle. I made it from the killing fields to The White House in such a short time, thanks to the American Dream. I became the first American of Asian ancestry to be appointed deputy assistant to the President of the United States.

Under President Bush, the Cold War ended. The Soviet Union fell apart. Eastern Europe became free. Germany was reunited. And there I was at The White House seeing history taking shape in front of my eyes. It was quite overwhelming.

In 2001, President George W. Bush appointed me an ambassador to the U.N., after unanimous confirmation by the Senate.

We--the United States--have triple responsibility: we co-founded the UN, play host (New York is the world's largest diplomatic community), and we are the largest benefactor to many UN programs.

When my colleagues from 191 countries looked at me, they saw you. They saw America, her greatness, her strength, her future. Each time I pronounced, "On behalf of the president and people of the United States," that was my proudest moment.

America is never a conquering power. We turned the ashes of Europe and Japan into parliaments and prosperity. Our men and women continue to make the ultimate sacrifice so that others may have freedom.

We help solve food crises and refugee problems, respond to earthquakes and tsunamis, care for women and children, improve health and education, protect human rights, give voice to the voiceless, build institutions, and link people around the globe. We breed democratic prosperity.

We are doing all this, not to be popular. We are doing it because it is right, because we are Americans, because it is our duty to honor our country.

As new citizens, you have both rights and responsibilities. You are provided equal justice under the law.

First and foremost, you should register to vote and cast your vote on Election Day.

I encourage you to get involved: Look to see, listen to hear, learn to live, love to give.

I came to America knowing no one. As Martha once remarked, I make new friends all the time. And I learn something new every day. A fourth grader in Virginia taught me to describe my life in one word: Hopeful. A 90 something swimming coach in New Braunfels responded to my greetings with "I am too blessed to be stressed." Then, there is Marjorie Rich, born in 1912 when Arizona and New Mexico joined the Union. She will be 102 next month. One of her favorite lines is "please forgive me for my ingratitude, for not being thankful enough."

Sometimes, bad people want to do you harm. Forgive them, but forget not. Do not do anyone evil to evil. Problems come and go. They are speed bumps that will disappear in the rear view mirror soon enough. What doesn't kill you will make you stronger.

Be upstanders, not bystanders. As Einstein said: "The world is too dangerous to live in not because of the people who do evil, but because of the people who sit and let it happen."

President George H. W. Bush said on June 22, 1989 that, "Any definition of a successful life must include serving others." I immediately joined the Civil Air Patrol and have been a volunteer since.

Please contribute your time, talent, and treasure to society. There is nothing stronger than the heart of a volunteer, according to General Jimmy Doolittle.

Help to educate people, eradicate their ignorance, emancipate their spirit.

My mother told me that "happiness is something you cannot keep unless you give it away." Life is more beautiful when you care and share, when you move forward and you bring somebody along.

Each of us can do so much. Together, we can do much more.

We came to this world with nothing, and we will leave it with nothing. But we can leave it a better place.

I wake up every morning, thankful to be living in this unique country of ours: the world's greatest nation, where we can have the right to dream and the opportunity to turn our dreams into reality; where everyone can have a happy home with faith, family, friends, and freedom.

So my fellow Americans, be well, be wise, be worthy. Be flexible and able to adapt to difficult circumstances. Follow your passion. When you do well, don't forget to do good.

May God bless you and may God continue to bless the United States of America!

(Standing ovation)

The program was followed by photos with Judge Primomo and each of the 247 new citizens and families from 45 countries.