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Memories of Killing Fields Motivate O.C. Peacemaker

Counseling: Chea Sok Lim is honored for anti-gang efforts in Cambodian American neighborhoods.

December 03, 1997 | TINI TRAN | TIMES STAFF WRITER

Chea Sok Lim fled the killing fields of Cambodia only to discover violence in the middle of his new Orange County neighborhood.

He vowed to fight it and is now being recognized for his efforts to keep Cambodian youths focused on education and away from gangs and violence.

Lim, 40, was one of three people statewide named Tuesday by the California Wellness Foundation to receive its 1997 California Peace Prize, which includes a \$25,000 award. The annual honor is given to individuals who have made outstanding contributions to their communities in preventing violence.

As the youth coordinator for the Cambodian Family Inc. in Santa Ana, Lim has worked on intervention and prevention programs with teens and young adults.

"The pain and suffering, the torture that I saw and went through, stayed with me," he said. "I think that helped shape me and shape my commitment to these kids."

Lim arrived in the United States in 1981 and initially got a job as a teacher's aide. Working with students convinced him he needed to devote himself full time to Cambodian youths. He became involved with the nonprofit organization in 1982 and became a staff member in 1985.

"Our goal is to help them stay focused in school and avoid the bad influence that plagues their neighborhood," Lim said. "For me, it's a combination of wanting to help the Cambodian kids succeed, and remembering the past, when the Khmer Rouge didn't allow kids to go to school."

He said he sees similarities in the way that the Khmer Rouge trained youths to be violent and the way gang recruiters go after young kids today.

The Cambodian Family, which also serves adults and families, provides a variety of educational and prevention programs for the roughly 100 youths who come by weekly.

The other winners this year are Barbara Amado Rivas of San Diego and Police Cpl. Malcolm "Jerry" Williams of Oakland. Each will receive a prize of \$25,000 from the Foundation at an awards banquet Friday.

Rivas, a community college teacher, has spent three years as a violence prevention counselor for San Diego County. Williams set up a community policing office in the Lockwood and Coliseum gardens housing projects.

Since the Wellness Foundation was established in 1992, it has provided \$182 million in grants to improve community health, prevent violence and prevent unwanted pregnancies.