

Santa Ana counselor holds rap session for Cambodian kids

By Darith Keo
The Orange County Register

SANTA ANA — One by one, a gathering of 20 Cambodian children shared their feelings about adjusting to life along South Minnie Street.

One boy nervously confessed that he'd disappointed his parents by receiving a C in English. A pair described how they participated in a schoolyard brawl.

A 13-year-old boy wiggled his foot as he admitted how he just kills time since dropping out of a Cambodian dance class. He liked the class but said the taunts of his peers forced him to quit.

"I threw rocks at the train, graffitied my name on the back wall of my apartment and argued with my parents," he said. His friends laughed.

But Chea Lim was there to help him.

"Don't laugh," Lim told the children in his peer-counseling group. "It took a lot of courage to confess what he did."

Lim's sessions are part of the youth program he founded at Cambodian Family Inc. in 1984.

Held afternoons Monday through Thursday and on Saturdays, Lim's youth program draws 94 children from the Cambodian community in this corner of Santa Ana, a tiny street of two-story apartment complexes and a rising crime rate.

In the program, children ages 7 to 15 spend an hour learning Khmer, the Cambodian language. They also talk over their problems and help each other learn how to avoid gangs and drugs, set goals, and respect themselves and others.

Traditional Cambodian dance classes, cultural awareness sessions and field trips also are part of the program.

Government grants and other funds are drying up, but Lim and three other adults continue volunteering their time to keep the program going.

"Sometimes I feel very frustrated and want to give up, but I keep pushing myself because if I quit, I lose," said Lim, 35. "Teaching them Khmer helps them discover who they are. I hope I can affect their lives somehow."

Lim left Cambodia in 1979, a few months after the Vietnamese defeated the Khmer Rouge. In 1981, after two years in Thai and Indonesian refugee camps, Lim, his parents and seven brothers and sisters came to the United States.

During the communist Khmer

Rouge regime, Lim said, children were brainwashed to adore weapons, hate their parents and abhor school. He thinks a similar situation appears to be happening in the United States.

"Children think it's OK to steal and kill," he said.

Bridging the cultural and language gaps between Cambodian children and their elders can help develop better self-esteem and understanding of the needs on both sides.

Lim said he hopes to be able to give students a good place to do their homework.

Still, he said, children here are very lucky compared with those in Cambodia.

"I preach the same message to them every Saturday — they're much better off than the kids" back home, he said.



Dave Yoder/The Orange County Register
Phalla Kong, 9, right, and her sister, Keang Kong, 7, watch skits at a Christmas party held last year by Cambodian Family Inc.