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## SA youth leader wins \$25,000 peace prize

October 27, 2009 | By DOUG IRVING

SANTA ANA – A community leader who has made it her life's work to inspire young people in one of this city's most desperate neighborhoods has won a \$25,000 California Peace Prize.

Phalen Lim speaks from experience when she tells the kids at The Cambodian Family that they can make a better future for themselves. She escaped with her family from the killing fields of Cambodia and came to Santa Ana as a refugee with almost nothing.

She's 36 years old now, with a master's degree in counseling, and on Wednesday she will become one of three Californians to be recognized with the peace prize this year. But she spent her childhood on a work commune in Cambodia, under the brutal regime of the Khmer Rouge, and her earliest memory is of hunger.

"Look at what you have, rather than what you don't have," she tells the kids at The Cambodian Family, a service organization that encourages leadership, health and academics. "Work with what you have."

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The California Wellness Foundation, a private group whose mission is to improve the health and wellness of Californians, will present the peace awards on Wednesday night in San Francisco. It applauded Lim as an "integral leader in an agency that combats gang violence and promotes cultural pride and understanding in Santa Ana."

Lim is the fourth Orange County winner of the California Peace Prize and its \$25,000 cash award. Her brother, Chea Sok Lim, won in 1997 for his work with The Cambodian Family. An attorney from Brea received the prize in 2005 for her work on firearms regulations, and a Santa Ana school principal won in 1995.

Lim oversees youth programs at The Cambodian Family, helping first-graders with their homework and high-school seniors with their life goals. Most of the kids come from the surrounding neighborhood in east Santa Ana, where drugs are common and gangs are a way of life.

"She's passionate, and she has a lot of compassion," said Sundaram Rama, the executive director of The Cambodian Family. "She's an amazing woman. She does great work."

She was born in Cambodia, and was 2 years old when the Khmer Rouge began clearing the cities in 1975 and ordering people into the countryside to work. She remembers that there was never enough porridge to eat. Her mother tells her that she cried constantly, terrified by the sound of gunfire.

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Her family was fortunate. Her mother and father, her three sisters and four brothers – all survived. By some estimates, close to 2 million people died under the Khmer Rouge, victims of execution, starvation and forced labor.

She escaped with the rest of her family. They slipped across a river into territory held by the Vietnamese, then made their way to refugee camps in Thailand, then Indonesia, then Singapore. Lim still remembers the first apple she ever had, at a camp in Singapore, and how strange it tasted after her sparse diet of porridge.

They reached Santa Ana in 1981 and found two one-bedroom apartments for all ten of them and a cousin. Lim enrolled in the third grade, even though she couldn't yet speak English. And she started going to a community center for help with her homework or dance lessons – The Cambodian Family.

She's been there ever since, first as a volunteer helping to organize holiday toy drives, later as a youth counselor and program director. The names and faces have changed – The Cambodian Family now serves many more Latinos than Cambodians – but Lim's message to them has not.

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She talks about the importance of family, because it was family that got her out of the bloody Cambodia of the Khmer Rouge. And she talks about working hard to get somewhere, because she knows what it's like to start with nothing.

She works with about 60 kids at any given time, but she points to four of them as a measure of the mark her organization makes. Those four graduated from high school this year. Three have already enrolled in college, and the fourth is planning to next year.

Lim plans to invest some of her peace prize money in her son's education, and spend some on the kids at The Cambodian Family. For days after she got the call telling her that she had won, she worried that it had all been a mistake, that they had the wrong person.

"I must have done something good to deserve it," she says now. But she's quick to add: "It's not just about me. It's about the work that I did and about the people that I serve."

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