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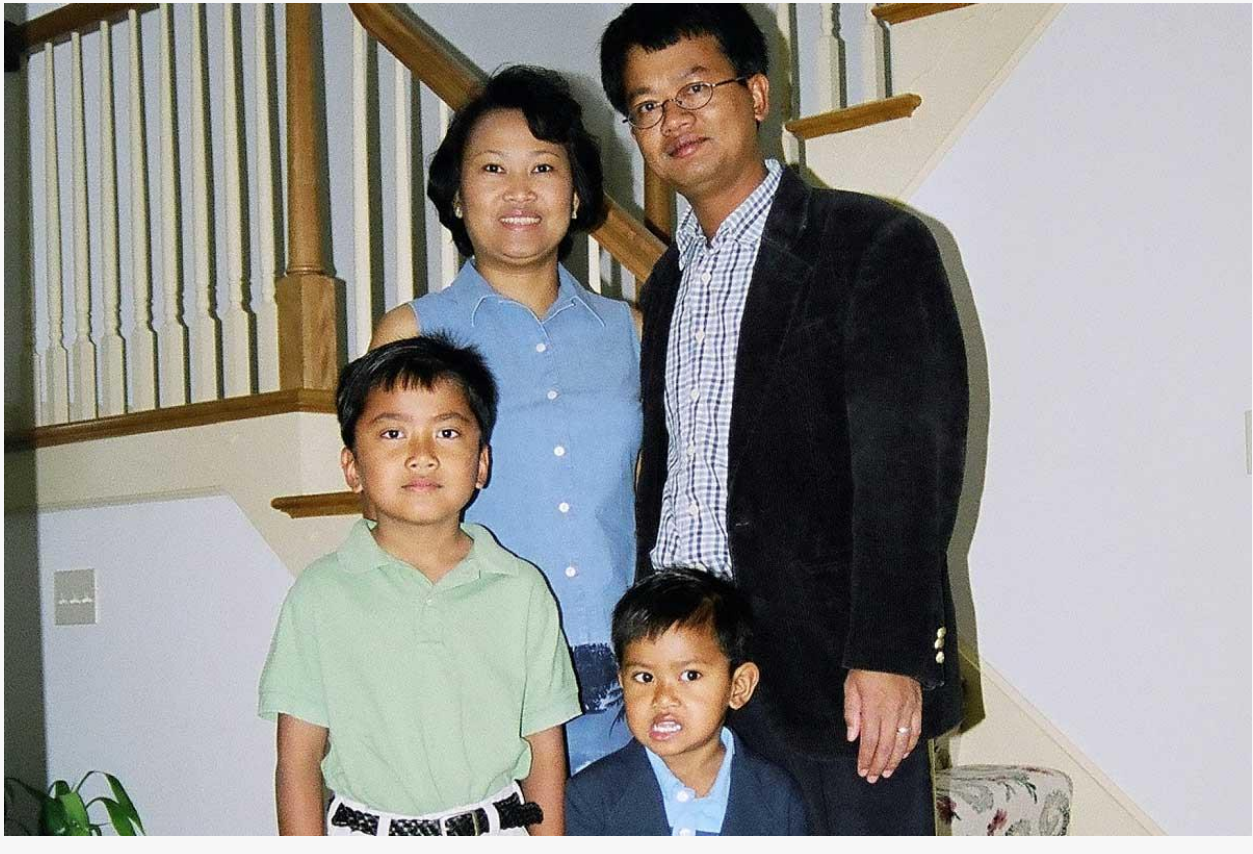




As Second-Generation Americans, We Aren't as Different from Our Parents as We May Think

By Narvin Chhay
UCF Forum columnist
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Our parents may have different dreams than us, but the one thing we will always share is the desire for a better life.



Narvin Chhay (young boy in blue) and his family stand in their home circa 2003-04.

My parents were both born in Cambodia; my father in 1965 and my mother in 1968. They spent their younger years there, but when a communist regime called the Khmer Rouge violently attempted to take control of the country between 1975 and 1979, my

parents made their way out of Cambodia, escaping what went on to be known as “The Killing Fields.” Eventually, they immigrated to the United States.

In elementary school, I never liked the idea of being different from my classmates. I was the only person of color in my school, but I did my best just to fit in. I almost resented my ethnic background; I didn’t care to learn about it and I really just wanted to be like the other kids in school. I specifically remember having a tough time understanding why my parents always hated when I would complain so much.

Now, at the age of 20, I am ashamed of my younger self for being so ignorant. After listening to my parents’ experiences and all they have endured, my perspective has changed so much. I would complain about what was for dinner, although when they were younger they went days without food, literally dodging bullets just to live to see another day. They looked death straight in the eyes regularly as kids — making it out alive really was nothing short of a miracle.

In my teenage years, however, I learned the most about the cultural differences of an Asian country such as Cambodia and the United States. My mother, who now works in the health field, would often push me to also join the field and become a doctor. I didn’t completely fancy the idea, but I went with it for a while. I thought about the background my parents had, and their idea of the American dream: Get a stable job, make good money, have beautiful children, and someday send them to a nice college so they can do the same.

I wanted to live a life that was comfortable, but deep down I had a hunger for an extravagant life with an impact lasting for generations. For a while, that sounded good enough for me. I just wanted to make my parents’ hard work pay off.

As time went on, though, my experiences in American society led my heart down a different path. I wanted more; more than just a stable job and a family. Reaching for the stars wasn’t the most common philosophy in a traditional Asian household, but I couldn’t help it. My American dream was different than my parents’, or so I thought.

A few months ago, I had a conversation with my father, who is an architect, about this. I asked “Why aren’t there any famous Cambodian actors? Or athletes? Or big-time business owners?”

He told me, “It’s because for the past few decades, our people have been focused on surviving. What happens next is up to you.”

My jaw dropped. He was right. It wasn’t that my parents didn’t want me to dream. They just wanted to make sure I didn’t have to worry about the stuff they did when they started off in this country. I think after what they’ve gone through, they have the right to think this way. We both want to gain massive success in this country, they just had a different definition of success than me.

Ever since, I began to realize that our American dream wasn't so different after all, we just had different beginnings. I think a lot of second-generation Americans like myself have needed to hear that, but there hasn't always been a voice to tell us. It is up to us to become that voice, to make sure that immigrants and their children understand that they are not alone in the journey to success in America.

“To me, being American isn't about where you're from or what you look like, but to always have the desire to grow and live better lives every single day.”

As second-generation Americans, we need to embrace our history rather than try to ignore it in an attempt to become “more American.” To me, being American isn't about where you're from or what you look like, but to always have the desire to grow and live better lives every single day. Those of us whose families are just getting settled in this country may not have the most representation in pop culture or in the daily media, however I see this as another reason to work even harder to change that.

A lot of us aren't told very often that we can be whatever we want to be. The lack of unreserved support can add up over time, eventually becoming your reality. Let this be your message to never let that happen. Our parents may have different dreams than us, but the one thing we will always share with them is the desire for a better life. Like my father said, where our people end up in the future is now in our hands.

And those whose families have lived in America for much longer than I have, please be aware of my story and the stories of millions of other immigrant families. Help them grow and help them realize their own dreams.

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