

Union City Middle School students are about to undertake an extraordinary civics lesson by helping their school custodian, Keo Sok gain his citizenship. UCMS will launch this project January 28 at the beginning of the second semester with an all-school assembly. State Representative Bruce Caswell will address the students about citizenship and community service, and encourage them to embrace this project.

Before Keo Sok came to Union City in 1980 he had escaped unimaginable brutality in his homeland of Cambodia. His remarkable story underscores the importance and privilege of United States citizenship. In the midst of the Southeast Asian conflict that Americans know as the Vietnam War, the Khmer Rouge, a communist guerilla group led by Pol Pot, took over Cambodia, a small country surrounded by Viet Nam, Laos, and Thailand. This brutal regime used genocide to eliminate the educated, the wealthy, Buddhist monks, police, doctors, lawyers, teachers, and former government officials to establish control and create an idealized agrarian communist society. It is estimated that 2-3 million men, women, and children were murdered or died of overwork or starvation during the 1975-1979 reign of the Khmer Rouge.

At the age of 15 Keo's entire family (father, mother, and baby sister) was murdered by the Khmer Rouge because his father was a high-ranking Cambodian military official. In the midst of this horrifying event quick thinking spared Keo. He made up a different name and told the Khmer Rouge soldiers he wasn't a member of the family. Keo was then taken to a work camp outside of Phnom Penh where he was held for the next 4 years. The Khmer Rouge enforced strict policies where workers labored in the fields for 12-18 hours a day without adequate rest or food. Foraging for additional food was punishable by death. Keo recalls many horrifying incidents including "meetings" at the camp where prisoners sat in a circle and soldiers would randomly shoot and kill people.

In 1979, at the age of 18, Keo began his harrowing escape from Phnom Penh to Thailand. Caught between the invading Vietnamese Army and the retreating Khmer Rouge, Keo traveled at night through dense jungle, rice paddies, and mountainous terrain. His only strategy for escaping Cambodia was to "follow the sunset" through the infamous Killing Fields where the remains of thousands of his countrymen were dumped by the Khmer Rouge. After surviving many atrocities including four gunshot wounds Keo made it to Thailand where he lived in a refugee camp.

The refugees who poured into Thailand were a testimony to the suffering in Cambodia: Undernourished, exhausted, and often like Keo, alone and without family. Witnesses to the exodus grappled for a way to describe what they saw. They could only invoke the names of Auschwitz, of Dachau, of Bergen-Belsen. Many crude, squalid refugee camps sprang up along the Thai border. Hundreds died in the first horrid weeks. Even here the refugees faced many threats and mistreatment by Thai officials who resented the influx of refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

At a Red Cross processing center Keo was given the choice to immigrate to the United States, France, or Japan. Keo's first choice was France because he had been taught the French language

in school. After 6 long months at the refugee camp he and his new wife were sent to the Philippines and 4 months later received word that they were going to the United States. The Sok's ended up in Union City through the sponsorship of the Congregational Church, Methodist Church, and Burlington Church of God. Penniless, unable to speak English and completely unfamiliar with western culture, they lived in the home of Danny and Martha Biteman until Keo was able to find work at Union City Industries, and acclimate to this new life. For the past 27 years Keo has remained in Union City to work and raise his four children David, Tina, Angela, and Lela. He began working part time for Union City schools in 1989 and has worked full time since 1996.

Keo would very much like to become a United States citizen, and students and staff at Union City Middle School are committed to helping him achieve this goal. The naturalization process includes a \$675 application fee, fingerprinting, an interview, a written and oral English test and a 100-question U.S. History and Civics test. In preparation for the test a daily question will be posted in the school cafeteria and students will be responsible for helping him learn the answers. Teachers will also incorporate the information into their classes and provide opportunities for students to develop teaching tools to teach Keo as well as each other. Staff volunteers will also provide tutoring and support for Keo. Not only will the students learn the information that all naturalized citizens must know, they will also have the profound experience of helping their friend and realizing the true value of citizenship.