



Oni Vitandham survived the Cambodian genocide and is giving her people a voice with her book *On the Wings of a White Horse*.

A Story of Survival

By Jenny DeBain
Photos By Oscar Alcaraz

“As a child I saw my people starved to death, tortured, and brutally executed. To this day, these tragic and gruesome events remain clearly etched in my mind. When I close my eyes, I see my Godfather taking his last breath, I see the bodies of infants and children lining the gutters, and I see the pain that was written on every member of Cambodian society during the insurgence of the Khmer Rouge. I will not try to forget the past, but instead I will turn these memories into something positive.”

Her face and her name may not be known, but LBCC student, Oni Vitandham was once an orphan who suffered horribly in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge Genocide. As a young child, she witnessed things no human being should ever have to witness. Her story of survival is not unique – every Cambodian man, woman, and child faced the same horrors as Oni. Many are not willing to speak about the terrible losses and pain they suffered. With her book, “*On the Wings of a White Horse*,” Vitandham tells the truth of a silent generation and looks to the future to raise awareness for generations to come.

Oni was born in a cave and raised in the deep jungles of Cambodia in the Kompong Speu Province until she was 14 years old. Her mother, while pregnant, lived in the cave with friends of her father while they tried to stay hidden from the communist forces that wanted them dead. She died during childbirth. Oni was taken in by family friends, who were appointed by her father to raise her. She lived a generally happy childhood during her early years, admitting she was like any other child of a curious and slightly mischievous nature.

“The caves and the jungle was the true image of beauty and love. I remember a marvelous sense of peace that draped itself about the place. I had no idea of the destruction that was soon to come,” Oni recalled.

Life for Oni and her family soon took a dramatic and violent turn and their peaceful existence was destroyed as the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia. In 1975, Lon Nol and his American-backed regime toppled and the forces of Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, took

“It’s wonderful to be able to live the American Dream, but not if you don’t value it.”

Oni Vitandham

control. Initially, the Cambodian people rejoiced, thinking the war was over. Within a few days things took a chilling turn and looting and violence began.

“What began as a plan to return the country to a simpler life, soon mutated into blatant genocide. An entire society was destroyed as millions of innocent Cambodians lost their lives for crimes that were as small as not knowing the English language,” Oni explained.

She escaped to America with a few other refugees after living a tortured life in several transit camps. The flight was arranged by the U.S. YMCA and carried them through many stops, the final destination being Houston, Texas. They were greeted by American YMCA