

officials and were put through a series of medical examinations and vaccinations before being allowed to pick their new outfits provided by the Goodwill.

"We were so thrilled by the wealth and generosity to which we were being exposed to. These were the first real clothes I had owned in eight years. I felt like an American angel." Oni smiled at the memory.

As time went on, Oni moved to several places and experienced many hardships in

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Oni Vitandham

school and in her new surroundings, the hardest was learning English.

"I just wanted to live my new life day by day and be a survivor," she explained. "I am very fortunate to be here now and have the amazing opportunities as everyone else." Opportunities were at her fingertips and the young Cambodian was extremely ambitious. In 1988, Oni moved to Long Beach where she graduated from Long Beach Poly High School and was awarded a scholarship for an essay she wrote about her life and academic goals as an ESL (English as a second language) student.

Oni decided to attend Long Beach City College in August 1996, but found herself un-

prepared for the demanding standards of higher education.

"I had a lot of trouble pronouncing words clearly and understanding things in my text books," Oni said. "I took a lot of drama and speech classes which gave me more confidence to speak in front of my peers."

Unexpectedly, Oni became pregnant in 1994 and put college on hold for a while. She was not married, and was so frightened by the idea of motherhood, she tried to abort the baby by drinking too much alcohol. She was then taken over by a sense of responsibility and unknown forces that ultimately changed her mind. She worked hard through her pregnancy and was beaten and abused by her unborn child's father. She soon learned that she had been pregnant with twins – one had not survived due to the beatings.

"Although I felt extremely apprehensive about having a child, I am so glad that God intervened and stopped me from aborting my daughter. I named her Keachiny, which means 'queen' in Khmer," Oni said looking down to pass occasionally. "She brought a kind of love into my life I had never experienced before."

Today, at the age of 42, Oni has become an inspiration to many young people and her homeland with the book she wrote about her life's journey entitled, "On the Wings of a White Horse." The book's title came from the legacy of an old Cambodian tradition. "The significance of the white horse is transformation, purity and power. When we would see the white horse appear on the mountain top, it was a release of pain and stress and a sign of hope for the people," Oni explained.

She admits that she never thought about



writing a book, but after telling several people about her experiences, she was encouraged to do so. It took Oni 22 years to write the book and today, it is sold in several college bookstores and is used in history and English classes at LBCC. The book has gained world-wide recognition and is still selling steadily after three years.

"I don't care about the money, I just want it to affect one person at a time. It is passed on by word of mouth, one student at a time," Oni said. "I want women to understand the values of love and I want to empower women to become great leaders."

Oni plans to pursue a degree in law and to keep spreading her story. Although the conditions in Cambodia have only slightly improved, Oni says she has no plans to go back to Cambodia in the near future.

"I just want to keep it distant. I have no anger in my heart and I believe everything happened to me for a reason. History may repeat itself, but it is up to us to change it, not repeat it," Oni said. "It's wonderful to be able to live the American Dream, but not if you don't value it."