

Sengkham and Phikoun, OB Nurses



OB 1965 Nursing Class with instructors and OB officers. Phikoun is on the back row, extreme left. Sengkham seated on first row, second from right.



OB Vientiane members at Wattay Airport, Vientiane, 1960s, welcoming a visiting dignitary. Sengkham in center, 5th from left.

At 2004 school reunion in Chicago, USA, Phikoun at center with schoolmates.



Pannhasith and Bounleuth families at funeral rites in Portsmouth, England. Tony Bounleuth is at extreme right



Sengkham, 1960s

Two of our Mekong Circle colleagues, Sengkham Pannhasith Bounleuth and Phikoun Ackathai Keomahathai, passed away over the summer of 2015. Both nurses, Sengkham was 69 years old and Phikoun was 73. Both succumbed to cancer. Sengkham died on August 25, 2015 in England while Phikoun died on July 5, 2015 in Georgia, USA,

They were classmates at the OB School of Nursing in Vientiane, Laos, completing the two-year course in 1965. In their high teens they shared a dormitory behind the OB House in That Luang, and trained in the OB Vientiane Hospital, a ten-minute walk away. Those times forged bonds after they fled their war-torn country.

In 1974 Sengkham settled in the coastal city of Portsmouth, a major port of the British Royal Navy, 64 miles south of London. In 1975 Phikoun immigrated to Virginia USA, three young children in tow. They joined a Lao exodus estimated at hundreds of thousands, fleeing from the uncertainty of the Communist takeover of the country in 1975.

Altogether six classes graduated 148 nurses, 35 of whom started expat lives in the USA. And out of those the most number --12 -- came from the 23 graduates of class 1965. Apart from America, they sunk new roots in various other places -- Canada, France, Australia, Thailand, England. Sengkham missed the first reunion of their school held 2004 in Chicago during the 5th Mekong Circle biannual reunion (yes, a reunion within a reunion!). But 20 of their colleagues from all classes, some with their spouses, were there, hugging and hugging amid squeals of delight and misty eyes -- precious time at last to revive memories of 40 years ago. They were in their young 20s doing their ward rounds, and now suddenly they were face-to-face in their matronly 50s.

While a number of our Lao nurses jetted to their second homes, others risked deaths along with their spouses and their young children, during secretive crossings by small wooden canoes of the Mekong River to Thailand in the dead of night. Soldiers patrolled both sides of the river bank. Those able to make it were likely to find themselves languishing for month or years in Thai refugee camps, awaiting resettlement, enduring extremely inhospitable camp conditions, as they told me. Starting new immigrant lives in the USA demanded as much perseverance, at menial jobs at first, before they were able to build on their nursing skills to gain comfortable livelihoods for their families.

Phikoun was born November 21, 1941 in Nongkhai, a Thai town across the Mekong River from the border town of Thadeua in Laos. After her high school years in Thailand and completing the practical nursing course at OB, she joined the teaching staff as a nursing instructor. For a time she and Sengkham worked as nurses at the clinic of the United States Agency for International Development located at the housing compound for American personnel known as Silver City in That Luang right across from the OB Vientiane hospital.

In 1976 she and husband Adul, with three young children settled in Charlottesville, Virginia. She worked as a practical nurse at the University of Virginia Medical Center in Charlottesville while

Adul was hired as a respiratory therapist. Phikoun retired in 2001 to devote herself fulltime in managing three Charlottesville restaurants she owns, specializing in Thai cuisine. The couple has since divorced. Eddie their eldest son is a businessman in Charlottesville; daughter Nithnoy Bradley is a nurse practitioner residing in South Korea; youngest son Dr. Nok Keomahathai practices medicine in Rome, Georgia.

Send messages in care of Dr. Nok Keomahathai at 4370 Oglethop Loop NW, Acworth, Georgia 30101 USA.

Sengkham was born April 12, 1946 in the Nong Duang district of Vientiane City, Laos, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Thit Theung Pannhasith. In Portsmouth, she worked in St. Mary's Hospital. She is survived by her husband Tony, a department manager with Intercontinental Hotels Group which has several properties in Portsmouth, including seven Holiday Inns. A sister Chanseng Pathammavong lives in Georgia, USA. Married in Vientiane in July 1974, they have a daughter Sharon and a son Christopher, both living in London, and four granddaughters.

Messages can be sent to Tony Bounleuth at 42 Clydebank Road, Buckland, Portsmouth, Hants PG2 7QG, England.

By Pete Fuentecilla