

Where Have All Our Nurses Gone ?

By [Pete Fuentesilla](#)

Two and a half years after the first team of Filipino OB doctors and nurses started seeing patients in 1957 in an open air clinic near the grounds of the That Luang shrine in Vientiane, a brand-new hospital was dedicated on June 1960 a few minutes walk away. It had 60 beds and various diagnostic services as well as a dispensary. But it sorely lacked skilled Lao help to assist bedside nursing, run lab tests, prepare X-ray readings, help in the dental, pharmacy, outpatient and dietary sections.

In particular there was critical short staffing in nursing aides. Hence, even as the foundations of the new hospital were being laid, a quick course to train them was started by nurse Petra Sismaet Duruin. Within a year they were ready and helping. Nonetheless the crush of patients and plans to expand bed capacity foretold the need for more help. It was time to think about an extended course to turn out more Lao nurses.

A two-year program began in 1961. When the last class graduated in 1969, more than a hundred young men and women completed the course -- 28 in 1963, 19 in 1964, 30 in 1967, 20 in 1968 and 32 in 1969, the last class. For our Lao nurses, it was a tough course to begin with. Competitive qualifying tests were given at all OB hospital provincial sites, and the best were sent to Vientiane. For the 1965-1967 class, 30 qualified out of 148 candidates.



OB School of Nursing, graduating class of 1963-1965, together with their instructors and OB officers. In their 18s or 19s then, the nurses are now in their mid-50s. We remember and called them by their first names: First row (l-r): Khaimouk, Samnaw, project manager Vitoy Naranjo, instructors Petra Duruin, Cecile Datu, Vicenta "Toots" Calderon and Joji Naranjo, assistant project manager Boni Gillego, Sengkham, Rabieb. Second row: Chanpraseuth, Siphone, Pukham, Khamfong, Susada, Somlack, Khamchanh, Phousavong, Tongchai, Lamoun, Manivanh, Phengsy. Third row: Phikoun, Khamkhouang, Thongphan, Chom, interpreter (name unknown), Khambai, Phet, Bounkhong, Bounthan.

The chosen few knew they were a special class. In the 1950s and 60s, Lao nurses in practice were trained abroad - in Hanoi, Saigon or Bangkok. And most were one-year auxiliary nurses. The OB School of Nursing was the only school in the country that conducted a full two-year course. The instructional staff -- BSN-degreed Filipino nurses compressed their four-year Philippine college curriculum into a program that was heavy on practical clinical skills learned on the ward floors of the OB Vientiane Hospital. Classroom lectures were assisted by interpreters. An English language course provided facility in basic

conversational vocabulary which became essential when they interpreted between Lao patients and the newly arrived Filipino doctors and nurses, still struggling with the Lao language. Two Filipino artists - Tony Liwag and Leila Lareza, produced poster-sized anatomy and physiology training aids. In time, a number of the graduates proved so talented they themselves served as instructor assistants in the classroom and in the wards.



Susada (5th from left, second row in class photo) on a visit to Vientiane in 1993, stands in front of the OB hospital, renamed in 1975 with the sign shown: "Vientiane Municipality, Settathirath Hospital." Susada worked in OB Vientiane and in OB Vang Vieng. She left Laos in 1975, then immigrated to the USA in 1980.

Dormitories behind the OB House, a 10-minute walk from the hospital, served as their home for two years. Many were residents of Vientiane and could return to their parents on weekends. Those recruited from the provinces looked to the day after graduation when they would return there to help staff the OB hospitals. Dormitory life together with the rigors of tests and clinical shifts forged bonds among them and their instructors after the last graduates had passed each high point of their training -- the candle ceremony, the capping ceremony and that graduation group photo, all of them lined up in their starched uniforms, diploma in hand, proudly beaming.

Just as exultant were their teachers - among them nurses turned educators such as Joji Naranjo, Cecile Salarda Datu, Ampie Malolos, Fely Montoya Navera, Minerva Erese, Norma Opiniano, Lolit Delaon, Pat Garde, Jovit Revilla. Teaching life-saving skills to teenagers with mostly a Grade 6 schooling had required a lot of patience. Students and teachers alike still remember with awe and admiration the high standards set by the hospital's director of nursing and education Vicenta "Toots" Calderon, who had a masters degree from New York's Columbia University's School of Nursing.

In 1975, uncertain of their future with the new Communist government, many of our Lao nurses joined the exodus across the Mekong river to Thailand and beyond -- France, Canada, Australia, England and the USA. Others stayed on to assist the French-trained Lao doctors from Mahosot Hospital and the armed forces who were assigned to the Vientiane hospital after the departure of the Filipino staff in the same year.

More than a score (by our last count, and still looking) have settled in the USA and raised families. A number continued nursing, or earned their RN licenses in the US, no small accomplishment when your English comprehension is not native and the culture is alien. Fortunately, the OB program was somewhat patterned to the U.S. licensed practical nursing course.

Said Cecile Datu " our nurses who settled in California started out as nursing aides and excelled in those jobs. When they showed their school transcripts to the California Board of Nursing to apply for their practical nurse licenses, the Board was surprised to see that our nurses had more classroom and ward credits than the U.S. LPN program. On that basis, the Board allowed them to sit for the licensing exams."

"I give credit to our OB nursing course," Chantaloomb Phouangmalay, now living in Aurora, Illinois, told Cecile Datu. After obtaining their LPN degrees, a number like Chantaloomb proceeded to earn RN

degrees in the US. The other RNs are Thraivan Somchay, now working in Charlottesville, Virginia; Khamsy Siharath of San Diego, California; Sounthara Sananikone of Upland, California; Sumatra Malaythong of Merced, California; Vanessa Tongma of La Crescenta, California; Bonnie Vongsavanh of Modesto, California; Rabieb Vilahong-Rpy of Springfield, Illinois; Phikoun Keomahathai of Charlottesville, Virginia.

Phikoun had arrived in the USA in 1975 together with her husband Adul and their three children. Adul was an x-ray technician, one of many OB-trained auxiliaries besides nurses (others: dental, lab, mechanics, illustrators). They both found work with the University of Virginia hospital, she as a nursing aide before obtaining her RN degree, and he as a respiratory technician. Phikoun has retired and now manages two family owned ethnic restaurants. One son is a doctor.

Adul remembers his trainer Dr. Bill Comia, Vientiane's radiologist (now living in Roxas, Oriental Mindoro) and how he himself trained his Lao counterparts who were then assigned to OB hospitals in Paksong, Attapeu and Sayaboury.

Rabieb Vilayhong-Roy settled in Chicago with her husband after arriving in the USA in 1975, worked in a nursing home before she began in 1980 as a state Department of Health counselor to immigrant southeast Asian refugees. One daughter married an American; an RN son married an American nurse.

Another nurse, Chanpraseuth Xayasouk of Rockford, Illinois, found herself similarly helping refugees, lately from Bosnia and Iraq, as an employee with a city health agency. A graduate of the 1965 class, she was assigned to OB Saravane for three years, was transferred to OB Pakse, then crossed to Thailand into a refugee camp in Ubon before immigrating to the USA in 1979. One daughter is married to an American orthopedic surgeon, another daughter, a bank worker, is married to an American employee at Merrill Lynch, the brokerage firm.

Thongba Keota's journey to Wakarusa, Indiana, like Chanpraseuth's, originated from a refugee camp in Thailand but took longer to travel. After graduating in 1965, she served with OB Vang Vieng, then returned to the Vientiane hospital. She, husband Bounkhong, also an OB nurse, and four children then languished for two years and two months in the refugee camp before a U.S. church group in Wakarusa sponsored their immigrant visas in 1981. Their river crossing by boat in the dead of night to Thailand cost a fortune "perhaps \$1,000 in gold, from our OB savings," she said. She now works as a nursing assistant in a nursing home in Wakarusa. Her husband passed away last September.

For those who chose to stay in Laos, several have scaled the heights of their profession. Bounthan Oudom, among the first graduates, transferred to the 450-bed Mahosot Hospital in 1979, the country's premier acute care facility in Vientiane, where she is now Chief of the Nursing Unit. In the same hospital, Sivone Urai Chandara, class of 1968, is the nurse manager of the Operating Room and Recovery Room. Fluent in English and French, she attended workshops in Manila, Japan and studied OR management in France for six months in 1996. A nurse named Nithaya (last name not known) is said to be an administrative director. Phengta Vongphrachant, class of 1969, became a doctor.

These are only a handful of many more of our Lao nurses. Each, when contacted, has a fascinating story to tell of how the youthful exuberance of their teenaged years as OB student nurses has not dimmed today as they reach their mid-50s. They rejoice with tales of grown children and grandchildren, and hungrily seek news of Miss so-and-so and Madame so-and-so and Docteur so-and-so (somehow the French accent prevails) -- once their mentors and then colleagues before the years and history drew them apart.

A list of those we were able to track with addresses follows. If you know of others, please contact us at Mekong Circle International, 216-27 Spencer Avenue, Queens Village, New York 11427. Tel. 718 468 3038. e-mail: fuentecila@aol.com. They would be prime candidates, if willing, to join our Filipino volunteers for the return of OB to Laos. We have already written to all of them and two have volunteered.

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