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USF professor works with Cambodian immigrants to teach them English, help them heal from war

By Nora Heston Tarte

A University of San Francisco professor is working with Cambodian immigrant men to help them learn English and adapt to their new homeland.

Brad Washington, an assistant professor at USF, volunteers with the Center for Empowering Refugees and Immigrants in Oakland as an English language literacy facilitator.

The center, founded by Mona Afary, opened in 2005 to replace a another program, preventing an abrupt end to services.

"It has been incredibly rewarding to see these men and women — survivors of the Khmer Rouge genocide, who for years have lived with depression, anxiety, flashbacks and nightmares without any support — come together as a loving community," Afary said.

The ultimate goal of CERI, a group whose mission statement is to improve the social, psychological and economic health of refugees affected by war, torture, genocide and other forms of traumas, is to create a culture where Cambodian clients will make plans together and will work to build a safe, inclusive, empowered and loving community, Afary said.

CERI counts therapy sessions, support groups, medication management and social work among its efforts. Groups of 15-20 refugees meet weekly to share their lives with each other, chant, pray and meditate with Buddhist monks, socialize and learn English.

Mostly, Afary said CERI makes them feel like they belong somewhere, and as a result, many clients of CERI have become leaders in their communities.

"It has been amazing to watch the community grow," she said.

The nonprofit depends on volunteers, like Brad Washington, an assistant professor in the International and Multicultural Education Department at the University of San Francisco's School of Education. As a volunteer English language literacy

Center for Empowering Refugees and Immigrants

For more information, go to www.cerieastbay.org or call (510) 444-1671.

facilitator with CERI, he runs a weekly men's English as a Second Language (ESL) class at CERI.

Some of the men who attend Washington's class resisted going to ESL classes for decades because they were convinced that they would never learn English. However, now they are thriving.

"After nearly two years, my greatest accomplishment with CERI is to have seen the learners take control of the curriculum by guiding me as the facilitator to what they deem necessary and important to acquire in the context of their lived experiences," Washington said.

The men within the program are vocal about their desire to reconnect with their children and other Cambodian youth, who have spent their entire lives in the U.S. and have disengaged with the rich family, cultural and linguistic history important to the refugees.

"It is my hope that the men I am supporting can communicate and be advocates for their community through the medium of the English language to educate those who do not know Khmer or lack a background in Cambodia to explain their traditions, cultures and representation in Oakland," Washington said.

In order to effectively teach English to the group, Dr. Washington encourages class participants to teach him about their first language, Khmer.

"Although they were initially hesitant 'to tell the teacher what to do,' I received the trust and blessings of the community to explain why it would be important for me to learn more about their first languages," he said.

The purpose of this



COURTESY OF CENTER FOR EMPOWERING REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS

University of San Francisco Assistant Professor Brad Washington, seated second from the left, works with the Center for Empowering Refugees and Immigrants to teach Cambodian men English.

teaching technique is to build upon the group's language foundations, Washington explained.

"Discounting any learner's knowledge of communication in acquiring English as an additional language be it in the languages they already have acquired or their knowledge of English... would be a poor reflection of an instructor to build upon the foundations they already possessed."

Washington said he is often asked why his class is only open to men. In response, he shared what he has learned from the refugees; that the language forum lends itself to imagery, reflections and memories from the atrocities in Phnom Penh, a topic not openly discussed in the Cambodian refugee community.

"In some ways, the realities of those experiences fall along gender lines," he explained.

CERI offers classes for women, as well, including a gender-specific support group led by Afary and

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Brad Washington, a volunteer English language literacy facilitator with the Center for Empowering Refugees and Immigrants

ESL classes taught by volunteer Penny Edwards, an associate professor in the Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies at University of California,

Berkeley who lived in Cambodia for two years.

CERI also offers services for Cambodian youth, including weekly groups that present a

platform to talk about their struggles and get support.

"CERI is where they eat, have their birthday celebrations and dance together," Afary said. "When they need help understanding the larger Oakland community and how to navigate public systems like benefits, legal systems, social security, etc., they come to CERI and they know they will get help."

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