



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

News Release

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GOVERNOR

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MENTAL HEALTH SUCCESS STORY TO AIR ON PBS

HONOLULU - A locally produced documentary chronicles the mental and emotional challenges faced by a man displaced by the Vietnam/Cambodian war and how a new mental health recovery model, emphasizing consumer self-determination, helped him find his way home.

“Years of Darkness” airs on PBS Hawaii December 2 at 9:00 p.m.

In 1971, the 14-year-old Sam Khong enlisted as a gunner in the Cambodian Navy. In 1974, at age 17, as a part of a program providing military assistance to Cambodia, Sam was sent to the United States for additional military training.

When the Khmer Rouge took the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh in 1975, Sam was in military training in Texas. He could not return to Cambodia because he would have been killed. Cambodia was sealed off from the rest of the world and Sam had no idea whether his family was dead or alive. U.S. - Cambodia military ties were severed and Sam was on his own in America.

Sam survived the war physically, but was a casualty nonetheless. Sam experienced a psychotic break and was diagnosed as severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms. Sam felt isolated and alone. He has been suffering with his cultural isolation and mental illness for 30 years. His condition left him lacking the skills required to return to Cambodia and to track down his family - although he felt a strong desire to do so.

(more)

Sam eventually moved to Maui where he became a client of Mental Health Kokua and the Adult Mental Health Division of the Hawaii State Department of Health. Following Sam's lead, his treatment team determined that it would be beneficial for Sam to return to Cambodia to confront his past and see if any members of his family are alive.

The treatment team decision was consistent with a new "Model of Recovery" that emphasizes consumer self-determination in deciding their own treatment goals. Sam stated that this was the first time a mental health system had listened to what he needed to recover.

In March 2003, Sam traveled to Cambodia with his treatment team and a small film crew. "Years or Darkness" is the story of Sam's journey to Cambodia and back.

A short feature at the end of the film demonstrates further the power of the mental health consumer community and recovery movement. In the piece mental health consumers are empowered by taking on the challenge of restoring thousands of gravesites of patients who were buried on Hawaii State Hospital grounds. It is yet another inspirational example of consumers seeing the light after "Years of Darkness."

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