

# Interview of Lang Paul

**A: Interviewer: Debra Williams**

**B: Interviewee: Lang Paul**

## Interview Summary

*Paul Lang was born in 1970 in Phnom Penh. In this interview, he provides insights into his family's background and recounts experiences residing in Thai refugee camps before relocating to the United States. He reflects on the challenges of assimilating into American life and describes growing up in America before having a family of his own. He particularly highlights his gratitude to have learned about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which he feels has enriched his family life and instilled commendable values in his children.*

A: OK. My name is Debra Williams, and we are here representing the Cambodian Oral History Project from BYU. Is it alright if we interview you today?

B: Yes.

A: Awesome, so today is November 13th, 2021. So, first question, what is your full legal name?

B: Paul Lang.

A: Excellent, are there any names that you were called outside of that, when you were growing up?

B: Um, my Cambodian name is called Phalla, that's my given name. So, when I became a citizen, I changed it to Paul.

A: To Paul, yeah. Awesome, how do you spell that?

B: Phalla, is spelled P-H-A-L-L-A.

A: And in Khmer, how do you spell it?

B: I don't know. [Laughs]

A: That's OK!

B: I used to.

A: That is OK! Do you read and write Khmer?

B: No, I just speak Khmer, yeah.

A: Very good. Do you know any other languages besides Khmer or English?

B: A little bit of Spanish.

A: Nice, very good.

B: A little bit, yeah.

A: Do you remember where you were born?

B: Well, I was told I was born in Phnom Penh Capital, Cambodia. That's what I was told by my Mom.

A: And how old are you this year?

B: I'm 51. [Laughs]

A: Which year were you born?

B: I was told I was on October 1, 1970, but due to—my mom remarried to an older gentleman, so I was reduced to 1969—on my record. But my mom told me I was born in 1970. So that's—we'll go from there. [Laughs]

A: Do you know the Khmer year, like the Zodiac year?

B: Oh no, I don't—I have no clue what my Khmer year is exactly, yeah.

A: OK. Are you married?

B: Yes, I am, yeah.

A: When were you married?

B: 1996.

A: What is your wife's name?

B: My wife's name is Molly Duong.

A: Molly Duong, and where is she from?

B: Cambodia also.

A: She's from Cambodia, wow.

A: What do you remember from when you first met?

B: Well, I met through a friend through San Jose. I saw a picture, so I said, "I want to meet her." [Laughs]

A: Were you married in the church, like in the temple?

B: No, we marry in the—um, actually, at home. Yes—in the traditional way.

A: Like a Khmer wedding?

B: Yes, yes.

A: Oh wow! That's amazing. How many siblings do you have?

B: Oh well—I got two sisters, which one passed in the Khmer Rouge and another lives in Texas. And I got, um, two half-brothers and one half-sister.

A: Oh, OK.

B: They live in San Jose. And my sister—that is, you know, my mom and dad, she's in Texas, and the one that passed was in the Khmer Rouge.

A: So, where do you fall?

B: I'm the oldest one.

A: You're the oldest?

B: Yes, I'm the oldest in the family.

A: Very nice. So, do you know when your parents were born?

B: No, no I don't, yeah.

A: That's OK. What are their names? Your mom's name—

B: My mom's name is, by record, is Sarim.

A: Sarim?

B: Yes, Sarim—S-A-R-I-M. And Ouk—her last name is O-U-K. And my dad's name is Thach Vireak, which is her first marriage.

A: OK.

B: And my stepdad—his name is Leang Leng.

A: Leang Leng?

B: Yeah, that's my—that's my stepdad, yes.

A: That's neat. So, your stepdad, was he also born in Cambodia?

B: Yes, yes, he was born in Cambodia—yes, and also my dad, of course. He was born in Cambodia also, yes.

A: And are they all from Phnom Penh?

B: No, my dad—I was told probably he's from Phnom Penh and my dad was from Battambang. You know, my mom's first marriage—yes, correct.

A: What do you remember about your grandparents?

B: What I was told, my grandmother— [Pauses] passed away when my mom was five years old. And I knew my grandfather—I mean, he passed in the '80s, but he can't talk, he can't hear. In Khmer, they call it Koh [Khmer word for mute]. Yeah, and that's my grandparents, so I don't know where they're from, or where they're born.

A: Is that your grandparents on your mom's side or your dad's side?

B: It's my mom's side. And my dad's side—I just knew him also briefly. On my dad's side, grandma passed so I don't know her also.

A: Do your parents speak Khmer and English?

B: Yes, well both my Dads speak Khmer and English, and my mom, not really. [Laughs] Khmer.

A: Just Khmer. [Laughs]

B: And I think my stepmom speaks a little bit of English and Khmer.

A: Do either of them speak Thai or Chinese?

B: Oh no, because my stepdad speaks French—

A: Oh, he speaks French.

B: And English.

A: Why does he speak French; did he live in France?

B: Because in Cambodia, they were a French colony—

A: Oh, OK.

B: So, back then, they all taught French. Yeah, so the older generation had to speak French. You know the educated ones, yeah.

A: Can he read and write?

B: Yes, he speaks Khmer fluently—read and write. And also French and English.

A: Wow!

B: Yeah, that's my stepdad.

A: So, when did your parents leave Cambodia?

B: Um my dad—my real dad. He left in 1975, because he was a high-ranking military officer, so he had to leave. If not, he'd be captured and killed. And I believe my stepfather, he was a pilot. And he had a picture with his superior, but it was an American, and he hid it. Yeah, so he didn't leave until when I left from the refugee camp. I believe it was '81—1981 when all our family left Cambodia, yeah.

A: How long were you in the Thai refugee camp?

B: Well, from my understanding we left Cambodia for me, you know—um, with my step-grandmother in 1979. So, we left the refugee camp in '81, so looking about two years in the refugee camp, yeah.

A: So about how old were you when you lived in the refugee camp?

B: About eight years old when I was in the refugee camp, because I was born 1970—and the country, the Khmer Rouge fell in 1979. So, I'm looking there between eight—seven or eight years old. Yeah, based on my birthday.

A: Did you learn any Thai while you were there?

B: No, because we were moving from camp to camp, so there was no way that we able to learn any Khmer or Thai you know? So that's—yeah that's unfortunate.

A: So, what do you remember about the Thai refugee camps? I know you were very young.

B: Well, basically not much, when you're young you just go with the pace of life. You know when chaos, when there was fighting occurring, we just hid ourselves. You know, we go to the Thai border, but we go into deeper Thai. Yeah, fortunately my dad was able to connect with some of the Thai. We called them our family, Khmer call it ម្តាយធម៌ ឪពុកធម៌ [a mother or father figure that takes someone in]. So yeah, so when the fighting break, we just hide, and after it stop, you come back to normal life. So yeah, I was fortunate that my dad, he know French and English, so he was able to work for the non-profit UNICEF back then. So, it was good, yeah. We get enough, I guess we get enough to eat and stuff like that. But he's a

really honest person, so I respect that.

A: How many children did your parents have when you were in the Thai camps?

B: Me, my sister in Texas, that's two of us, and also one was born in the camp—well actually, I have two half-sisters from the second marriage of my Mom. So, one was born in the camp, so three of us. So, yeah—three of us in the camp. She was born later before we left the Thai refugee camp. So, myself and my stepsisters on my new dad's side.

A: So, you said you were about 7 when you—

B: Yes, about—well, when I was at the camp, I was about 8 years old, 8 or 7. So, when I—so, 8 plus 2, so I'm assuming when I came here in '81, I was something like 10 years old when I got here to the states. Yeah, I'm not good at math though. [Laughs]

A: That's okay, neither am I. So, when you came to the United States, what was that experience like?

B: Well basically, I mean it was a new country and the language, and the food, but I was able to live in an isolated—one building, and it was a nice location. You know, next to a baseball field and a police station, and I wasn't able to—I wasn't friendly. I had to make, you know, friends really quick. You know, I played sports, so I would make friends playing football and baseball, I would make friends really quick. So, it was nice, it wasn't that bad of an experience from when I grew up—from when I came to the United States.

A: What was the experience like for your parents?

B: I mean, they got adjusted. I think my dad was OK but he spoke English and he understand that he would get—he would work at the household that he translated for, you know, refugees. He spoke Khmer and so he wouldn't ask, but that he translate for them. And my Mom, I guess, you know, she gotta work a job also. But I always wonder—well, she liked assembly jobs because it doesn't require a lot of English, and language is a skill, you know, just basic assembly work. Yeah, so that's what they did until I finished high school and left here and came here to California.

A: How long have you lived in California? Just since you—

B: Well I left New York when I graduated high school. Yeah the reason I'm here is that because my Dad left since 1975 and some network gave my Mom—[she] knew that he was here. So, I don't really know my dad, you know, I never knew him and stuff like that, so my Mom wanted me to come to visit him to see what he looked like, you know? But I resisted, I didn't want to because he was like a stranger to me. But, you know, with all the push and shove I decided to come here, so I met him. Then when you meet a stranger, you know if I looked at him strike home, Dad, I kind of blinked and called him Uncle. [Laughs] So, that's how it is, yeah it wasn't a good experience. I came here, and you know, he owned a donut shop so maybe just—you know, I worked when I go to high school and stuff like that, and I'm assuming that maybe he could give me an old car or something like that, maybe just go to school. You know, two years at city college and transfer for four years. But I guess my dream and goals didn't happen within about less than a year, they got evicted from their home—I was homeless. You know, my dream and goals for my Dad that I never met for 20 years, I'm expecting some goal and dream, you know? But I've been out homeless, not on

the street, but I was fortunate to have a good friend that take me in, here and there. And I was grateful and blessed that he took me in when I had no job, you know. I think I was like 19 years old, and it was a good goal and dream that you had, you know, and expectation. But it fell apart, so he took me in and we carpooled to school. And finally I found a job, then I went to rent a room—a shared room back then was \$300, now it's \$1000 a room, it's just a room to sleep. So basically I had no transportation, we carpooled with him to go to school. So somehow I would afford a car, a used car and get myself to work. So that's why I came here, to California.

A: And you said, did you meet your wife here in California?

B: Yes, while going to work and stuff like that, you know, I met my wife through a friend, you know, and we got married and stuff like that. It wasn't, you know, a marriage that, you know—a good marriage. But we didn't get a good upbringing, you know, and she didn't have a good upbringing so we should learn on the go. Yeah, there was no core value that was taught to us. There was no core value that was taught to her; the reason they don't know they cannot teach. I learned that late in life, you know, so I accepted that. You know, back then, I wasn't—you know sometime when you—in New York, sometime when you come home you lock the door. You locked the key, locked the door, but when you come back though, you can't unlock the door. You know why? Because they didn't pay the rent. Right, it's not the first time, right? You know, I say "Why?" I locked the door and left, and so I can't get in. So yeah, you know, that's how life is, you know. Right now in New York, I told my daughter, "You're lucky you have your own room." Over there I lived with 10 people, well, 10 people and two bedrooms and one bathroom. And right now my daughter, she got a room for the queen bed, and she's still so small. So yeah, I wanna share that a little bit. But you know, you learn, like the Lord said, you learn. He put that in front of you so you grow and be stronger. So I share that with my daughter and others that I meet, you know, what I have gone through.

A: How many children do you have?

B: I have two daughters, one is Melina and is 25, and Lily just turned 17. So she's graduating high school in May so she can't wait to grow up. I can't—I want to slow down but she wouldn't.

A: She wants to grow up.

B: Yeah, well I'm blessed to have those there in my life, yeah.

A: So, what is their birthdays?

B: Melina, my oldest one is November 4th 1996, and Lily is May—let's see, she's gonna be mad at me. [All laugh] May 16, 2004. Yeah, she's gonna be mad at me. [All laugh] Yeah, I just celebrated my daughter's 25th birthday, it was good, yeah.

A: Are both here in California?

B: Yes, they're both here. Yeah, they hang out with my wife, I will lose when we vote—they always win. Three to one. So it's good they are a blessing in my life, so it's joyful.

A: That is joyful. So, I wanted to ask you, when did you join the church?

B: I joined the church—it's good I remember, it was September 31st, 2012 and my birthday is October 1st. So I can't forget that, it's a blessing. So yeah, it's a blessing in my life that I was able to learn, and to share, you know? And to share with others, yeah. So it's a blessing in my life that I joined the church and am able to take my daughters there and they're taught to be good girls, you know? So I'm blessed to be a member of the church.

A: So tell me a little bit about your conversion story, how did you decide to join the church?

B: Um, you know what, to put it simple, I know that I was born Cambodian, so I'm thinking that we are all kinda Buddhist. But we don't really—we are Buddhist but we don't go to temples. We don't practice, we don't read, we don't write—we can't read anyway. The only time we go to the temple is if there's a holiday, and just for the food. So the only time we go to the temple, you—so basically my conversion story is pretty simple because in life, my daughters, they have no place of worship. My business mentor told me, "Paul, there are three lines that you have to have to make your life right. One, is God. Two, your family. Three, your business school. If you mix that up, your life will be out of line." So when I heard that, I have a job—I have a family and I have a job but I have no religion to go to. I was Buddhist, but it was just my—but then I prayed about it, I joined the Jehovah's Witnesses when I came here, the Christians who took me over to go over to their place. I know basic praying, so I prayed, before I knew about Joseph Smith, I didn't know that before, so I prayed, you know, which religion I should join. And one day, you know, my wife told me, "Honey, there's a Cambodian New Year celebration going on at church." So let's say it was on a Friday, so I just came from the gym. You know, I was in my sweats, I took a shower so I said, "No, I'm not going," you know, I'm not going. I said, "So you go ahead." Then something—but [when] she left, something you could call, prompted me—I didn't know about that—to go. So I got up, I got dressed and I went in there. And I remember vividly that I opened that big door to the big gym and I felt the love from there, from the people and you couldn't hold the Spirit back there, you know. So, I loved that and my wife invited the Elders to come to church and stuff like that, to the church and the lessons, you know, I took the lessons and I learned and they asked me to [be] baptized for months, I said no. Because for me, if I commit to something, I commit, I [don't do it] just to say something, so I said, "No, there's something I need to give up before I say yes."

A: Yes.

B: So I was able to give up that, you know, because at the time I was not working. So I wasn't paying tithing. So like, I couldn't join the church because it's a requirement for you to pay your tithing. So I would get work, and I would pay my tithing, you know, that I said "Yes, I'll be baptized." So the reason I joined the church was because I received the [pamphlet] For the Strength of Youth. So, when I would go to other churches, they teach about just God only, but when I saw the Strength of Youth, you teach about [inaudible] of your life. So I said to myself, "This is a good place for my family." Because I have a daughter that needs this information, this knowledge. At first, I joined because of the value of life that the church teaches. Because I was not—I didn't know about Joseph Smith, I don't know too much about the Gospel, but I know when I read, the value they taught about association, education, purity, just to name a few—so, you know—and fitness. So that is what I fell in love with. Then after that I learned as I joined the church, I grew, I learned the knowledge about the Gospel. The reason I love the Gospel is that what I have, what I know, I could add

value to others, because people don't know. They might know the church—they were called Mormons back then, but they don't know the real deal, what our church can offer. So that's why I fell in love with first, was with the core values that taught about life. Then after that when I learned the Gospel about our Savior and Jesus Christ, that would be a plus for me. So, I'm grateful—the reason I joined, it's not bad for me, what I learned last is that it's not about life—it's that, how many people are better because you live. I said to myself, how many people are [saved] because the Savior lived and died and lived again. Right so, that's why I believe, that's what I like, you know, so much about our Gospel, it's not for yourself, but to be shared with others. You know, especially our second generation of Cambodians, they really need this Gospel and what it taught and the core values. So yeah, that's why I joined the church.

A: That was beautiful, thank you.

B: Thank you.

A: So, is there anything else that you'd like to share? Maybe some of your favorite memories, just in your life that you'd like to share with your family?

B: Uh, not really. I mean, good memories—you know, when I was growing up, life was harsh, right? But only good that as you know, I got married, you know, I got two beautiful daughters and I'm able to join the church. And that's a blessing, because what you have—the experiences that you have, you have a harsh life, like myself, I might not get a good start, but we have a good ending.

A: Exactly.

B: And also the reason I'm so passionate about this is so I could share with them my experience, and also what I learned from the Gospel to share with other Cambodian generations that, you know, they don't make a mistake. I do and also they could learn the value that our church—the core values that they teach in the Gospel also. That's why I'm so passionate about, you know, being a member of our church, yeah.

A: I loved what you said, about people, they live and they die, but they can live again. So I wanted to ask you about your sister that you mentioned that passed away in the Pol Pot era. What do you know about her?

B: I don't really know her, I mean, I was five years old—five or four years old back then, and I don't really know her name. I know that she did tell me that I have another sister. And also, it's a blessing that, you know, you're able to meet her again. You know, that's—[long pause] Yeah, sometimes you never thought about that. You go through life, especially now, you don't reflect back, sometimes. You know you're the one that passed, you know, sometime we've never heard about her family history, but I guess we're here. But most people, including myself, have no time to look at it or pursue it, but well, thanks for reminding me. Yeah, yes, it's good to know. Most people don't know that when—you know, don't know that if you're gone, you're gone, but it's good to know that we'll meet them again. You know, which is a blessing.

A: We will see them again. What do you hope future generations will learn from hearing these Cambodian histories?



B: Yeah, I guess we know. I guess one thing is to do your family history. You know, go back and just that—don't forget your language. Especially you hear in Cambodia they automatically learn to read and write. But, you know, as a poor generation Cambodian here, make sure that you—it doesn't matter how old, I'm 51, so I always want to learn Khmer and read and write and especially this generation—we hope and pray that you'll have to learn your culture, your family history, also your speaking and also your literature. Without that, with no literature, no writing, no reading, no speaking or culture, no tradition—then you're nobody. So it's my message to you, that I should have done that when my daughter is younger, but I didn't know, so I wanna leave that message to who is listening here that, you know, you can't lose it. You know, you have to carry on, it doesn't matter how hard it is, you know, you have to take initiative and it could happen here in the United States. I say to our members in the branch, we have a Cambodian branch now, 30 years from now you cannot call a Cambodian branch because nobody speaks or writes Cambodian. So I hope, you know, you could understand that all branches that are out there that stay with a branch or ward—make sure we keep that going, our culture, tradition, reading and writing, that we are still Khmer. Because without that, we are nobody.

A: Thank you so much for sharing that. Well, it's been great to get to know you, Paul. Thank you so much for meeting with us today.

B: Well, thank you for coming the long way, and I appreciate, you know, your time. And I know that even though I'm gone, with this project you're doing, it's not just for me but for everyone, that you touch their lives. Even though I'm not here, but my grandkids or generations to come will see and feel and, you know, today, so thank you. And if our sister or brother asks you to interview, please, you know, invite them to your home, man. This is priceless, this is precious, and once again, thank you.

A: Thank you so much Paul! អរគុណ!

B: អរគុណ!

A: អរគុណច្រើន!

*Transcribed by Thomas Barrett.*