

COVER STORY

Grove's three sisters

How the Praks survived a living hell and bought the American dream – a hair salon

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It's a typical morning at Grove Avenue Salon, which sits just east of Westhampton Theater, Phil's Continental Lounge and Hampton House in a gray, two-story stucco house-turned-business on the north side of Grove Avenue.

Parked out front are the typical West End variety of Volvos and SUVs. The front porch is wide, and the door seems almost always open for customers.

Inside, it's a typical salon. In one beauty chair sits a middle-aged woman getting a haircut. In a rush, she cut her own hair and has stopped by the salon to have her hair trimmed. An older, more matronly lady, asking about the weather after the winter drought, is in for a perm.

As U2 plays quietly in the background, the salon's co-owners, sisters Sunnary, Stephanie and Amanda Prak chat about what to donate to the St. Christopher's auction, about a busy spurt on weekends, and about opening early to catch customers before they head downtown.

As they talk, they dash about washing and cutting, stopping occasionally to answer the phone. On the surface, the Prak sisters appear to be typical salon owners.

Appearances, however, can be deceiving. Most of the customers have no idea what the Prak sisters endured to get there. Indeed, in an era when some say the American dream has expired, the story of the Prak sisters' long, painful journey from Cambodia to Richmond proves the ideal is still very much alive.

Like many small, immigrant-owned businesses, Grove Avenue Salon is a family affair. Stephanie Prak worked at the salon for seven years before the sisters pulled together their savings, and took out a loan from F&M Bank to buy the salon last March. Amanda, who was a pharmacy technician, joined her sister just before they purchased the shop and sister Sunnary had been doing nails at a salon called Nail Perfection for five years.

A year after buying the salon, the sisters are just beginning to build the business.

"None of us here have the education that will get us far in life," Amanda said. "This is about the best we could do. We are from a family of eight

when we came here. We did not have anything to start with. Our parents did not have any money to get us to go to school.”

The sisters bought the business after the shop’s previous owner decided to sell.

“The three of us put our heads together and thought we would take over the business and hopefully we will make something out of it and have the American dream for our kids,” Amanda said.

Longtime customer Mair Conrad is a great fan of the salon, and in particular, of Stephanie Prak.

“She’s a very admirable woman, too honest to believe,” she said. Many customers, Conrad added, say the sisters “dropped out of heaven.”

Reality is quite the opposite. Stephanie and her sisters have endured a living hell. They not only survived — they thrived.

At first, paradise

Thirty years ago, America was the furthest thing from the minds of the Prak sisters.

Their story began in a quiet river town in Cambodia called Battambang, a place known for rice paddies, palm trees and French colonial architecture.

For most of the 20th Century, Battambang was a quiet French colonial town on the Sangker River almost 200 miles from the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh.

The Lonely Planet travel guide calls the Battambang of today an “elegant riverside town, home to some of the best preserved colonial architecture in the country.”

In Battambang, the Praks led a normal, upper-middle-class life. Their father, Suntara Prak, was a teacher, and the family was fortunate to have household help.

“He was an educated man,” said Amanda Prak, now 32. “They have some like — babysitters. That was before the war. I was too little to know all that.”

Sister Stephanie Prak, 36, recalled that it was idyllic.

“We had a good life — a happy childhood,” she said.

Eventually, however, the happiness turned into a nightmare.

The town was on the main road to neighboring Thailand and became a target of the infamous Khmer Rouge guerrillas, who imposed a massive re-education program. The Khmer Rouge, under leader Pol Pot, aimed to eliminate class status and abolish religion, commerce and education. The guerillas destroyed whole towns and forced residents onto state agricultural communes and into slave labor.

In the process, more than 1.7 million Cambodians died from hard labor, execution and starvation under Pot's rule, according to the Cambodian Genocide Program at Yale University. The death toll was about 20 percent of the country's population. In the process, the names Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge became synonymous with torture and mass murder.

At the end of 1974, Battambang fell to Pot.

"One morning, it was just like a Sept. 11 thing — unexpected," Amanda recalled. "That morning they said on the loudspeaker you have to leave home, now."

Amanda Prak recalled the day was stormy, with dangerous tornadoes. A flying hunk of sheet metal nearly struck her aunt's head as they fled.

"We were chased out of our home," Amanda said. "And then our lives were like completely over."

After the Khmer Rouge arrived, the older people who could not move were left behind to die or be killed.

To survive, the Prak family sought refuge in the countryside. Because their father, Suntara Prak, worked for the government as a teacher, the family became suspect. They went into work camps and were forcibly separated.

"They were going to kill all of us, execute, because they know," Amanda said.

To survive, the family had to pretend that they were the children of an uneducated fisherman. Under the Khmer Rouge, educated people were considered a threat.

"You don't have to be a teacher — you could be able to read or write, [and] you are the enemy," Amanda remembered. "My father had to play himself as a retarded man."

Erasing memories

They destroyed all surviving evidence of their former lives.

"We have to burn all kind of paperwork, even photos, baby pictures. None of us have those," Amanda said. "Every memory had to be erased. They would have killed you if they found out you would have some kind of document."

The Praks were one of the lucky families — nine out of its 11 members survived, even though the family was forced to split up

The genocide that the Praks survived was immortalized in the Oscar-winning film "The Killing Fields." The sisters say that even though the 1984 movie seemed realistic to them, their reality was much worse.

"We could write a book this thick," Amanda said, gesturing with her

fingers as wide as a dictionary. "We got so lucky and it was like the man upstairs was watching over us. Because we all were suffering during the five-year period. None of us were together."

Pol Pot was driven into the jungles by the North Vietnamese in 1979.

"When the Vietnamese troops went in Cambodia, it was sort of like they were rescuing us but they just like go in there and everybody fled," Amanda said.

They came back home to their house in Battambang, but the only thing left was a concrete stairway.

"We came back after five years to the place ... that we used to live," explained Stephanie. "Everything was gone, empty. The house was torn."

Not only was there no food, but the war still raged. Their father told the family that they must take a chance and leave for the border with Thailand. They brought almost nothing except for some baggage, clothes and a brand-new baby brother, Watathanak, who was only 3 months old.

"My mom put him in a sack," said Amanda, who with the family crossed many rivers and fields on foot with the newborn. "He got drowned so many times" it was a miracle Watathanak survived.

They had no idea that there were refugee camps ahead.

"We have to take chances," Amanda said. "All of our journey — it was risk-taking. There were land mines everywhere, and people getting blown up. We were walking on corpses.

"We traveled by foot for three days and three nights eating the same rotten food," Amanda said. "We didn't have anything for money, so in order to survive my father and older sister — I was too little to help with anything — they would carry buckets of water to sell and make a little bit of Thai currency to buy a little bit of food, some bread. It was a long journey."

Even worse, there was uncertainty.

"We didn't know where we were going to end up," Stephanie said.

The family lived for three months in the jungle along the border, surviving by selling sticks of wood and buckets of water. With that money, their mother, Seourm Uy (Cambodian women don't take their husband's last names), could go to the market and buy chickens. She took them home, selling half of them for profit and keeping the rest.

"It would just keep us from starving," said Amanda. "It was not enough to eat, but we managed."

When they moved into a permanent camp, their father returned to teaching for about \$10 a month. Their mother worked at a sewing factory day and night for about \$20 a month. They foraged in the mountains to find wood and grasses to eat.

"We eat almost anything — we just take chances," Amanda said. "That's

how we lived for two years.”

At the camp, even water was rationed. And the chicken they were given was picked over.

“They would take all the good meat to sell and we would get what’s left over,” Amanda said. “We call them a ‘bombed’ chicken because all you see is just a little bit of meat stick to the bones. ... We make the best out of it.”

The sisters still talk about their ordeal.

“All of us, we still have a lot of anger,” Stephanie said. “What’s happened then — we think about it. Last night — she and I — we just sat and talked and were watery-eyed. It will never go away.”

Hard times in Richmond

Their family’s break came in 1981 after two years at the camp. The family was so big that it was hard to find a group that would sponsor it. By chance, all eight were sponsored by River Road Church-Baptist, which brought them to Richmond.

At first, they lived in a shelter. Eventually they found a home near Horsepen Road in Henrico County, where many Asian immigrants lived.

When the family first came, it struggled. Their mother and sister Sunnary walked to work as maids at the Hyatt House on West Broad Street. The father worked at the old Rehrig factory making shopping carts.

The family of 10 lived in a three-bedroom house. The first big purchase was a beat up Chevrolet Nova.

At Crestview Elementary School, Amanda, at 12, was the oldest fifth-grader there.

“The teen-agers — they would come out at night,” Amanda said. “They trash our house — they punch our tires. We’d all get name-called and in the morning catch our bus to school in the morning, pulling our hair. After a while I learn the language and help defend myself.”

The family stayed in Richmond for five years, but moved to California on the advice of a family friend, who thought there were more opportunities there.

“So they went there and [were] not making anything and then we go through 1992 Los Angeles riots,” Amanda said.

“It reminded us of the war,” said Amanda, who graduated from high school in California. “We were like — we were going to go through this again?”

So they came home to Richmond. Now, however, they had the skills they needed to get into the salon business.

In California, Stephanie studied hair coloring. Eventually, she joined Todd's Hair Technique, a well-known Grove Avenue salon in a bungalow near Libbie Avenue.

As she proved herself, the owner, Cheryl Todd, pushed to see Stephanie take over the salon.

"She worked six days a week. She's a hard working woman. And it's not that easy for her to just to give up and say, 'OK, you can have this,'" Amanda said. "She knows that if she worked that hard, we would work that hard, too, to keep on going."

The salon is a family business, even though only Sunnary, Stephanie and Amanda work there. One brother, a graphic designer, did the logo and signs. Their father, while retired, takes care of the children. Even going to a hair trade show in Williamsburg or Crystal City is a challenge — someone must always keep the business going.

'Have to keep going'

A few times, when business was slow, they thought about giving up.

"There are some days we say, 'We just want to give up because someone wanted to buy the business from us,'" Amanda said. "And then the next thing we say — no. We can't do it. We have to keep on going, we have to be strong about it."

They take no breaks, and pray for busy days.

"The busy days we smile — it's just like 'work, work, work,'" Amanda said. "We don't care if people keep us to 9 or 10 o'clock at night."

Longtime customer Conrad said the salon has built a strong following, based on Stephanie Prak's years of experience. Not only does she run the salon ably, Conrad said Stephanie is a great hair colorist who prices the salon's services well.

With Stephanie's experience running a salon and the determination born of a proud family history, Conrad can't see how the salon could fail.

"They've got too much pride for that," Conrad said.

Now American citizens, the family has taken several trips back to Cambodia, though the trips are filled with painful memories.

"We cry a lot, not just because we see our relatives, we are seeing other people suffering," Amanda said. "We consider ourselves lucky. We are in paradise and they are still in hell."

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