

Local business woman survives Khmer Rouge terror

By Lindsey Hilty
Staff Writer

When Lakota East junior Narady Von Nida gave a speech to her class, she suspected her mother's story would impact her peers.

"It can really touch people's lives and inspire them," she said.

It was that day in speech class that Narady Von Nida said her classmates truly understood the diversity in their school.

Narady explained to the class there are no baby pictures of her mother. However, the image of what she must have looked like — half-starved and without clothing — will forever be in the back of Narady's mind as life problems come her way.

"I really look to her as an inspiration," the 16-year-old said. "Family friends, hope and hard work can get you through anything."

Childhood

It was 1976 when 4-year-old Konitha Von Nida was placed in the line of concentration camp workers. She said her mother's ruse had saved her from execution. By holding a paper upside down, Somavy Sary had convinced members of the Khmer Rouge, a communist guerrilla group, that her family was illiterate and no threat to the rebels.

Von Nida said her grandfather, Soy Sok, was a general taken in the night and presumably killed by the Khmer Rouge. Her grandmother lasted only six months in the camp. Von Nida's parents were sent away to construct bridges and she was left in the care of her 5-year-old uncle, Mathearo. Together they worked 18-hour days and then spent long nights secretly searching for food.

"Every morning we wake up, we eat grass — literally grass for three years and whatever animal we can find, we

Cambodian Immigrants entering U.S.

1979: 6,000	1983: 13,115
1980: 16,000	1984: 19,851
1981: 27,000	1985: 19,097
1982: 20,234	1986: 9,789

Total immigration from 1975 to 1995 is 147,228

Source: U.S. Committee for Refugees

2005 U.S. Census Bureau for Butler County Ohio

Total population: 323,660
Foreign born persons: 9,147, or 2.7 percent
Naturalized citizen: 4,374
Not a citizen: 4,773
Entered 1990 to March 2000: 4,195
Entered 1980 to 1989: 2,275
Entered before 1980: 2,677

Butler County foreign-born population by region of birth:

Europe: 2,119	Oceania: 10
Asia: 3,998	Latin America: 2,067
Africa: 385	Northern America: 568

eat," Von Nida said.

Because the grass was taller than the children, they could hide while harvesting the tiny edible particles of grass.

"We were more afraid of dying than anything else," she said. "To me, it's just you see so many killing every day and to me I just think its normal."

Search for freedom

After escaping and arriving on the Thailand border in 1979, Von Nida said her reunited family took refuge in a camp where they lived under a tarpaulin for six months and then in a shack for five years.

Then a sponsor, New Burlington Church of Christ near Mount Healthy, agreed to take the family into the United States to join Von Nida's aunt. She arrived Jan. 28, 1985, in Cincinnati.

Jim and Thelma Stephenson, former members of New

Burlington Church of Christ, had developed a refugee sponsorship program. A parishioner funded the ministry and about 100 refugees from several countries took residence in the five church-sponsored apartments, Jim Stephenson said.

Stephenson said he remembers Von Nida and her family well, and he tried to encourage them when the community was often unkind.

Von Nida said it was the kindness from the Stephensons, who started a church for Cambodian refugees, that inspired her to cope when people threw eggs at her father, spit in his face and threw rocks.

"I couldn't get to the bus stop without kids beating us up," she said.

In 1988 the family moved to Price Hill in hopes of finding peace. Then Von Nida was

married to a neighbor at the age of 15.

"I remember I was in the 8th grade and my teacher says, 'This is the first time in my life I will have a bride in my class.'"

Von Nida gave birth to three children and was rarely permitted to leave the home. After 10 years, she filed for divorce, but was ostracized by her community for shaming her family.

A happy ending

But her story, Von Nida said, has a happy ending. She is owner of two Studio Nails stores. And she met an American man, Christian Von Nida, who introduced her to what she now views as a normal life in America.

"He is the greatest thing that happens to me," she said.

Christian Von Nida said he fell in love with his wife because of her desire to serve others. He said through her, he has learned to give more of himself.

"I hope it doesn't take a refugee fleeing from a tyrant to be sweet like Konitha," he said.

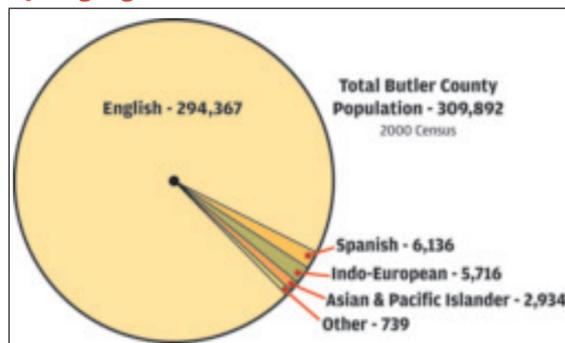
Last month Von Nida took the test for her citizenship. She still gets emotional talking about her past, but she said now she focuses on helping others find joy in life.

"To see a person who is still so optimistic and cheerful after all she's faced, is inspiring," said Pam Perrino, a customer and now friend. "After you've traveled through the jungle with no shoes on and run out of your home from horrible things, it just shows, wow, what do I have to complain about."

Von Nida said she can't complain.

"A dream is worth waiting for," she said. "As long as I'm happy, as long as my kids are healthy, I am fine. What I have today is beyond my dream. I think it's a pretty good accomplishment from eating grass to living in Liberty Twp."

Butler County population 5 years and older by language - 2000 U.S. Census



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau

Graphic by Michael P. Minor

Butler County population by race - 2000 U.S. Census

Subject	Number
White alone or in combination	306,882
Black or African American alone or in combination	18,972
American Indian and Alaska Native alone or in combination	1,996
Asian alone or in combination	5,961
Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islander alone or in combination	250
Some other race alone or in combination	2,746
Butler County Population - TOTAL	332,807

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau

Graphic by Michael P. Minor

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A special thanks to VORA Tech Park for use of their beautiful walking path, the Badin Band for its energy and fun spirit, and to all 300 walkers who joined together to raise mental health awareness in Butler County.