

The Providence Journal

GOOD-NEWS

For Cambodian refugee family in RI, first Thanksgiving a chance to be grateful for freedom

Menghong Phly and his family fled political persecution in Cambodia



[Jonny Williams](#)

Providence Journal

Published 5:07 a.m. ET Nov. 27, 2024 | Updated 7:27 a.m. ET Nov. 27, 2024

PAWTUCKET – This Thanksgiving, in many homes across Rhode Island, families busied themselves preparing a traditional turkey meal. Some turned to recipes kept in the family for generations, while others did a last-minute online search and picked the first one to show up.

Menghong Phly did neither. In fact, Phly and his wife, Rachana Bun, had never heard of Thanksgiving before arriving in Rhode Island from Cambodia two months ago with their two children. But they are celebrating the holiday in their own way.

For a meal, Phly turned to his training as a chef and his Cambodian roots: Instead of a traditional turkey recipe and stuffing, he opted for a roasted poultry dish with chili and satay, a seasoning mix that contains curry, coriander, turmeric, nutmeg, star anise and garlic, among other spices. Usually used on chicken, the seasoning mix gives the meat a robust golden color and flavor – perhaps not a traditional Thanksgiving meal, but an appetizing one, nevertheless.

From Cambodia to Rhode Island

A week before Thanksgiving, Phly sat on a worn beige couch in his new apartment in Pawtucket and pondered what it is like living in Rhode Island.

He answered, in Khmer, with an apprehensive side glance to his 4-year-old daughter, Chhorchhing, who was performing risky pirouettes from the couch to the floor.

“It feels like living in the fridge,” he jested through a translator.

Across the room, a white space heater, cranked on high, blew hot air in seeming agreement with him.

Phly did not trade balmy Cambodia, with its lush mountains and jungles and striking ancient ruins, for Rhode Island simply for a change of scenery. He is a refugee, who, after fleeing to Thailand, was recently resettled in Rhode Island through the help of the Refugee Dream Center, a nonprofit in Providence. Earlier this year the center also helped resettle his brother in the state. (So far this year, the Refugee Dream Center has resettled 38 refugees and asylum seekers in Rhode Island.)

Things in Cambodia were complicated – and dangerous – for Phly and his family. (Even after fleeing to Thailand they faced the threat of smugglers who kidnap fugitives and haul them back to Cambodia.) He and 12 other members of the opposition party in Cambodia were detained in March of last year and charged with forging documents to register a new party.

On paper, Cambodia is a democracy with free elections, but critics of the ruling party, the Cambodian People's Party, argue there is no freedom of speech or assembly for those who oppose its rule. Reports have emerged of opposition party members being assaulted and some even being imprisoned for insulting the country's monarchy on social media. Phly says the ruling party barred him and other activists from forming a new party to challenge it in last year's elections.

Phly, a photographer, got involved in politics after witnessing injustice through the lens of his camera. He joined the opposition party, but quickly found doing so came with consequences. He estimates that the government has imprisoned about 200 people from the party.

“We need peace,” Phly said.

He remains committed to advocating for democratic values back in Cambodia, but going home, for the moment, is not an option: The government has blacklisted him and issued an arrest warrant against him.

Grateful for freedom

Phly is now trying to build a life for himself and his family in Rhode Island. His first priority was to learn English. Every week, he and his family go to classes at the Refugee Dream Center, and they also receive tutoring from Brown University students.

His wife, Rachana, is training at a nail salon in Pawtucket, and his son Chhorkorng – who, like any 7-year-old, loves playing Minecraft – has started at an elementary school.

For the couple, what matters is that their children grow up in a society where they have access to a good education and health care. Above all, they want them to enjoy freedom of speech.

Though new to the Thanksgiving celebration, Phly already sees how gratitude can help heal divides in fractured societies.

“If we had this ceremony in the world, we can give love to each other,” Phly said.

“[And] if you love me, we can get peace in our society,” he added.

His hope is to one day take Thanksgiving back with him to Cambodia and celebrate it with his countrymen. But for now, it is an opportunity to be grateful for newfound freedom for him and his family.