

Sokun Slama:  
A Difficult &  
*Lovely* Life

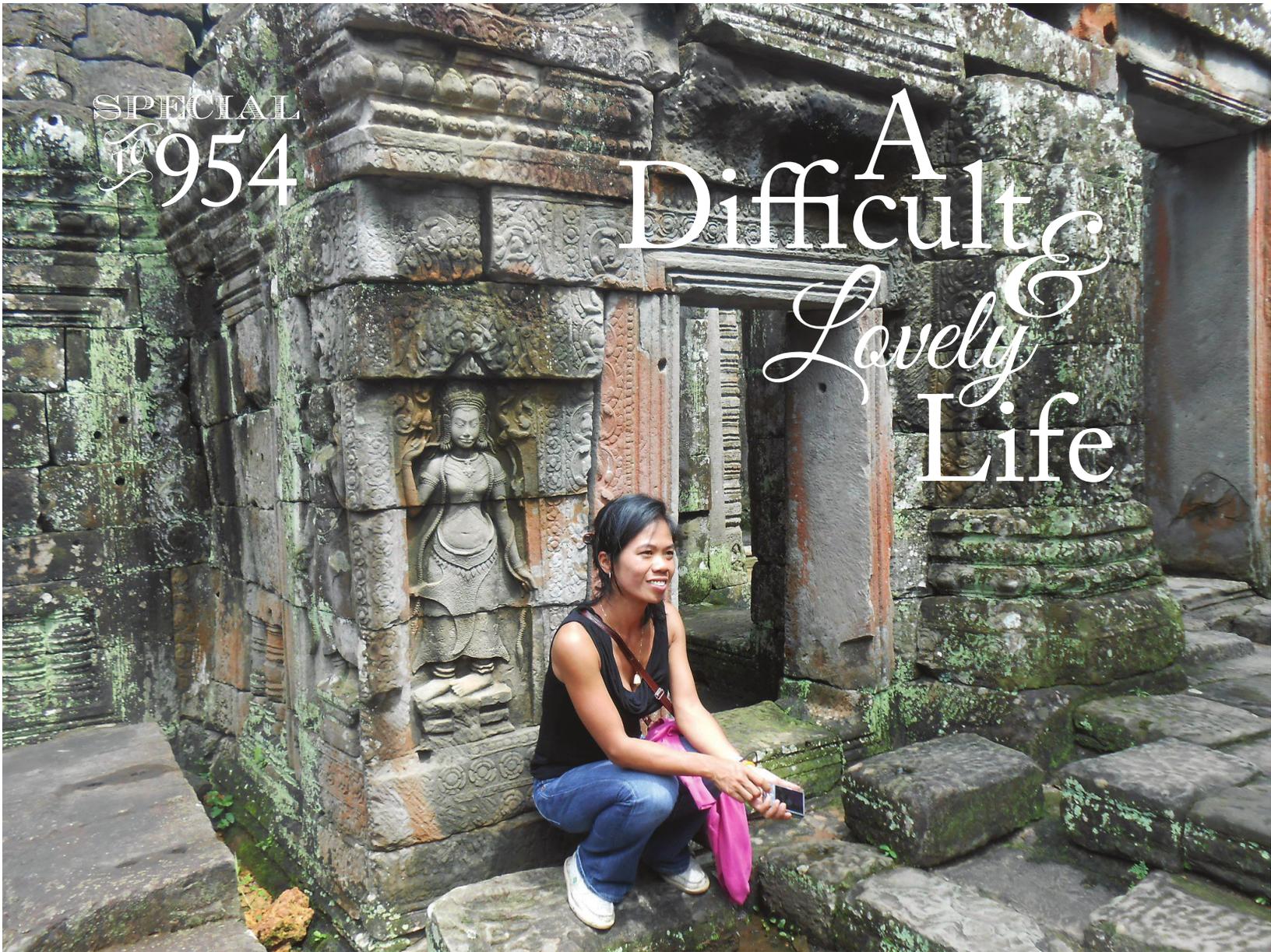
9  
54  
EVERY  
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MILE OF  
COLUMBUS  
COUNTY

*Sicuan Sisters*  
Know What's  
Good For Their  
Ailments

Boys  
& Girls  
Homes:  
Coming  
home to  
stay



# A Difficult & Lovely Life



*Sokun at the temples of Siem Riep in Cambodia*

## AREA CHEF SUCCEEDS IN SPITE OF TRAGEDY AND CHALLENGE

by WALLYCE TODD

### The trees cast their shadows

over the family on the run. The Cambodian jungle was where Saroeun and Kim-I (Ting) Nuon and three of their four children had been forced to flee. They had to leave the village near the border of Thailand that they'd called home for too short of a while. The father of four, Saroeun had left one sick son with his sister to care for, bid his aging parents goodbye, and taken his remaining family into the nearby forest. With a rice pot, some medicine and the clothes on their backs, they moved where concealing shadows and surrounding vegetation would hopefully provide them shelter and safety.

One of the daughters who ran with Saroeun and his wife was Sokunvathany — known now as Chef Sokun in Whiteville. A beautiful woman who is immensely talented in the kitchen and beyond, Sokun cannot

speaking long of those frightening childhood years without her eyes welling and her voice getting swallowed up in her grief.

Had they not escaped, Sokun's family would have likely met death in their home. Saroeun was known to be a teacher, and Kim-I was from a merchant family with Chinese heritage. These were professions and an (wealthier) ethnic connection that were deeply hated by the fear-delivering Khmer Rouge, who came into power and implemented the Cambodian Genocide between 1975-1979.

While the Khmer Rouge was in power, even the tree shadows would not provide enough camouflage and protection for Sokun's family. It was a devastating season in history, giving birth to the stark and horrifying reality known as "The Killing Fields" (2,000,000 killed).

Sokun's brother, just one year younger than

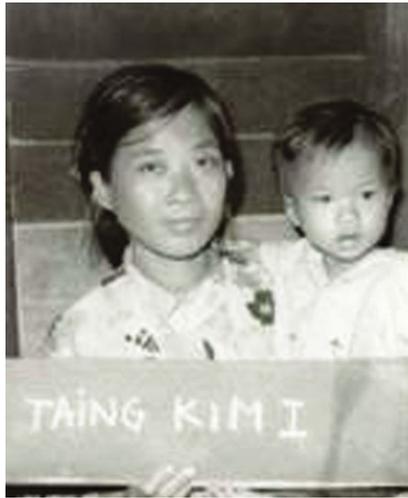
she, lived only a month and half in the jungle with his family. His parents had generously shared some of their medicine with others in need, and when he contracted dysentery, his little body was not able to survive on the amount of meds left in his parents' possession. The family grieves his death to this day.

Sokun sorrowfully shares: "The school where my dad taught before the war later became a prison where torture and awful things happened. The whole country became a grave. The image that is coming to me very often is one person cutting a dead person up because they needed meat; they were so hungry."

After her brother died, Sokun, her sisters and their parents were still trying to survive in the forest when they encountered a group of Khmer Rouge guerilla soldiers. Her dad knew if he claimed to be a teacher, he and his loved ones would likely meet their demise...



*Sokun's mother before she was married. This photo of Kim-I is the only picture Sokun's family has from their life in Cambodia.*



*Sokun's mother, Kim-I, and sister, Sopheap, who was born during the time of The Killing Fields. It was taken upon arrival to the Thailand dispatch camp.*



*Sokun, with the nameplate given to her for identification pictures at the Thailand dispatch camp, right after her family was finally able to flee Cambodia.*

so when asked what he could do, he told the soldiers he could cook for them. They answered: "O.k. if we like your cooking, we won't kill you."

Thus began the years of Sokun's family being forced to work for the Khmer Rouge regime. The family's meager rations were

supplemented by the food Saroeun would steal to keep them nourished enough to stay alive. Because the Khmer Rouge moved around a lot, Saroeun, as a cook, had to travel with them. One additional daughter was born during this time, and the threat of malnourishment was always high. Toward

the end of Khmer Rouge regime, both he and his family were located back near the Thailand border. Sokun's dad got a message to her mom, and the whole family stealthily made it across the border and into a refugee camp there.

The dispatch camp became a bridge to a



*Sokun reunited with her grandmother for the first time since her family fled Cambodia when she was a child.*

“I, at a young age, knew what starvation was like. Now, I can’t take things for granted.”

– Chef Sokun



With Bou Meng, one of only seven survivors of the infamous prison, located in the complex where Sokun's father formerly taught. Sokun and her sister, Sophie (for whom the Whiteville cafe is named), met this artist, who survived only because he could accurately draw the image of the totalitarian, Pol Pot.

new life in Europe. For Sokun and her family, their new home was found in France, where they arrived on July 7, 1979. Sokun was 7 years old, and to this day she recalls very little of the years before her life in France.... her mind just refuses to remember.

Her dad's work ethic and desire to provide for his family motivated him to go from being a car factory worker to a security agent, to a controller and to a taxi driver, to an owner of a taxi business. He bought a house and added another daughter and another son to the family. Additionally, he strengthened his business for 20 years or so before selling his company and retiring.

Like father, like daughter. Sokun has found success in working hard and cooking well. Her ability to make mouths water from

her unique culinary creations began at young age. When she was young, Sokun found her way into the family kitchen. She recalls:

“I think it was one day when my mom was not at home, my dad came from work and he was tired and when my dad's friend came, I decided to cook for them, so they would not starve,” she says with a grin that gives sparkle to her intelligent eyes.

Continuing, “But when I brought in all these dishes, they ate the food and were quiet. The next day, they called my Mom for the recipe (because it was so good). From then on, I cooked every day. I helped my mom. In our family, we ate mostly Cambodian food, and I started doing more French food and then Italian food. Every chance I had, I was in the kitchen making some different

dessert, and my mom complained that the kitchen was always dirty.”

Well-utilized kitchens paved the way to an ongoing love affair with food and its preparation and flavor. It was when she was ordering ice cream and coffee in a café on the Champs-Elysees in Paris that she first saw her future husband, Guillaume Slama, who was waiting for the sandwich he had ordered.

Guillaume, himself, is the son of a mother who was a young Jewish girl in Nazi-occupied Netherlands. He recounts: “Sokun's family and my family have a lot of parallels. My great-grandfather was Jewish and was killed in a work camp. My mom's family were Jewish survivors, so they had nothing when WWII came to an end. My dad was born in



*At the temples of Siem Riep*

Tunisia. Shortly after Tunisia became independent, he and his family came to France. My family and Sokun's family all came to France with nothing and had to start afresh."

Guillaume and Sokun have started afresh several times. First they began life in France as newly married couple. On New Year's Eve 1997, they moved to America to live and work in Atlanta. In 2006, they purchased a mansion in historical Washington, Ga., and turned it into an award-winning bed and breakfast. They followed up in that area with the purchase and/or management of several other eating establishments. In 2009, they moved to Whiteville, where they now operate two businesses: The New Southern Kitchen (fine dining) and Sophie's Café (a casual eclectic eatery).

Life in America has not always been easy. "In 2008, the economy crashed," Guillaume recalls. "Everything tanked and we lost everything. We lost the business and the home (in Georgia). We had 35 employees at the time. Our income dropped by 90 percent."

When an opportunity arose (initially via Jessie Fisher) to move to Whiteville and begin a restaurant in Columbus County, Guillaume and Sokun made another new beginning. Their investment in the area is earning them a reputation as respected restaurateurs, committed community members and educated entrepreneurs.

Guillaume and Sokun agree: The people in Columbus County "have embraced us here and really, truly, genuinely want us to succeed, which (we) think is wonderful." The dedicated chef delights in affirming, "I want to share my passion for food and wine with people."

Yet accompanying that passion is a reality check. Sokun states: "I, at a young age, knew what starvation was like. Now, I can't take things for granted. We felt you must earn to get a job... earn the right to work. Earn

a living. People – who have not suffered and struggled – don't understand that. They take things for granted."

In recent history, her family received a sweet blessing they'll never take for granted. About five years ago, they reconnected with the brother who had been sick and had to stay with his aunt while the others fled to the forest. Sokun met him in Cambodia in 2012. The family discovered he was not only alive and well, but that he, too, was a professional chef. Cooking good food seems to be an inherited interest or a genetic gift.

When asked, Sokun summarizes her childhood and the ensuing challenges in this way: "Life is hard, but it is beautiful." 🌸



*Sokun at New Southern Kitchen restaurant in Whiteville*

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