



He survived "Killing Fields," now he wants to lead Cambodia

Steve Maynard; steve.maynard@thenewstribune.com

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A Tacoma social worker wants to be elected prime minister of Cambodia.

Impossible? Don't mention that word to Daran Kravanh.

Kravanh survived and escaped the Khmer Rouge slaughter in Cambodia that killed his mother, father, six brothers and a sister.

After living in Tacoma since 1991, he wants to lead his homeland, challenging the regime of Prime Minister Hun Sen.

"I want to change the Cambodian society from bad to good," Kravanh said.

His campaign had its first fundraiser Sunday in Tacoma at the Landmark Convention Center. Three young Cambodian women in colorful costumes honored him with traditional folk dances once reserved only for the Cambodian royal court.

About three dozen friends and supporters listened to his wife, Bree Kravanh, read from "Music Through the Dark," her book about Kravanh's account of surviving the Communist Killing Fields.

In between readings, Kravanh played the accordion, the instrument whose forbidden music he played to charm soldiers and somehow avoid death. And pausing often to rub his eyes, he talked of those terrible years when music was the only sanity amid the horror.

He recalled the words of a friend who was killed by the Khmer Rouge: "Play music. Music is powerful. Play until you die."

Jarret McGill, who works with Kravanh at the state Department of Social and Health Services, was there to support his friend and contribute to his cause. "He's probably the most giving person I've ever met," he said. "He would be good for Cambodia."

Chanday Nourn, a former Cambodian general and police officer who fled to America six years ago and now lives in Tacoma, said Kravanh has support locally, in Cambodia and elsewhere in the world.

Added Ted Savun, a former leader of the Cambodian association in Florida and now a community college instructor in Olympia: “Daran is the guy who likes human rights. He likes justice and freedom. He would go to Cambodia to free the country.”

Bringing change to his homeland means fighting poverty, adding jobs and promoting social justice, Kravahn said. And it means defeating Sen in the July 27 election.

Kravanh, 50, said he’s already an official candidate for prime minister, the country’s top elected position. He registered his own political party in Cambodia, the Khmer Anti-Poverty Party, with himself as its candidate.

On a visit to Cambodia last year, Kravanh said he gained the 6,000 registered supporters required to form the party. He spoke at a conference last April on the Khmer Rouge era. Leading Buddhist monks told him then, ““I want you to be a leader of this country,”” Kravanh said.

He’s opened a campaign office in a house in Phnom Penh.

Kravanh said there are at least two other serious candidates competing against Sen.

Kravanh’s trying to raise money to go back to Cambodia in February to have a convention for organizing his supporters and campaign. He plans to return in March for a debate. And then, he plans to go back in June and stay through the election. If he wins, he’ll stay in Cambodia and leave his job as a social worker for the state.

Kravanh has been a leader in Tacoma’s Cambodian community and has helped organized Bon Om Tuk, a water festival that honors Cambodia’s boat racing tradition.

Speaking forcefully during an interview, Kravanh explained why he’s running for prime minister.

He witnessed people suffer during the Khmer Rouge regime before it fell in 1979. More than 2 million Cambodians were killed or died of starvation or illness during the reign of Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge tyrant.

But still, Cambodia suffers from poverty. The United Nations says Cambodia is the eighth least-developed country in the world.

“I saw the people suffer,” Kravanh said. “I cannot stay still.”

Bree Kravanh wrote “Music Through the Dark” before she and Daran married a year ago – when her name was Bree Lafreniere. She overcame her own doubts about her husband’s dream of becoming prime minister of his homeland.

“At first, I thought this was impossible,” said Bree Kravanh, 48.

Now, she said, “There’s no other good candidate that’s speaking to what people want and need desperately.”

After Sunday’s event, Kravanh said his supporters will have fundraisers in Oregon and California.

Kravanh concedes his candidacy appears to be a longshot.

“I’m not a politician,” Kravanh said. “I’m a peacemaker.”

“A lot of people laugh at me because I don’t have enough money,” he said.

“I have the capacity, I have the ability and I have the energy,” Kravanh said. “I will win.”