

# CHANRITHY HIM



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Chanrithy Him is a child survivor of the Genocide in Cambodia. She experienced unimaginable trauma when she lost both her parents and five siblings during Pol Pot's regime. Today, she finds strength in telling her story and sharing a part of her culture through the medium of dance.



'The sight of someone dressed entirely in black would also trigger a memory – the uniforms of the Khmer Rouge. And for a moment it could paralyse me as if I was under a spell... Memories seep back to me in ways I hadn't imagined.'

Chanrithy was born in Takeo Province, Cambodia in 1965. She was four when the Viet Cong invaded Cambodia in 1969. Chanrithy and her family were forced to leave their home and became displaced around Cambodia. Due to a lack of medical care during the displacement, she lost her brothers Bosaba and Tha.

Chanrithy was ten when the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975. She and her family were forced to move to a labour camp in Year Piar village. Upon their arrival, Chanrithy's father was taken away and executed because he was an educated man. Despite their grief Chanrithy, her mother and seven siblings were forced to work in labour camps. The conditions were appalling and they were forced to do hard agricultural work, with only a small amount of food to live on each day. There were many times when they received no food and would have to risk their lives to find something to eat. They were often punished if they were found looking for food or trying to grow their own food in the labour camps.

Due to the lack of food and gruelling work, many people became severely ill but did not have access to medical care, including Chanrithy's siblings Avy and Vin who fell ill and died. Chanrithy's mother also died during this time when she became too ill to work and was moved to a hospital which had inhumane conditions; she was later murdered by the Khmer Rouge. Chanrithy was distraught at the death of her siblings and later, her mother. When her older sister, Chea, whom Chanrithy idolised also died, she felt utterly helpless and alone. She says, 'Part of me was angry and I wondered why didn't the world care? Why didn't the world do something to help us?'

When the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia in 1979 and ousted the Khmer Rouge, Chanrithy and her surviving siblings fled Cambodia and were moved around a number of refugee camps. Although some of them were able to study and work, times were difficult as there was little food and it was often a dangerous place. Eventually, their Uncle Seng, who had fled the country before the genocide, learned of their presence in the camps. He was determined to move his family to a safer place and started the process of applying for their citizenship to the United States.

In 1981, their uncle's request for citizenship was accepted and at 16, Chanrithy began her journey to the United States. Upon arrival, she reflects 'I couldn't believe that I had arrived in America. It was like a dream and I felt guilty that my parents and siblings didn't survive'. Chanrithy recalls that moving to America was very distressing for her, due to the language barrier and the difficult transition into a new culture.

Despite the challenges, Chanrithy was determined to continue her studies and attend summer school. However, Chanrithy's memories of the genocide would haunt her daily and she often found it difficult to see her peers with their parents. This sadness and grief made her determined to succeed and she excelled in her education.

During her time at Brigham Young University in Hawaii, Chanrithy suffered from severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She recalls watching a documentary about Ethiopia where people were shown starving. They looked skinny and frail which triggered memories of the Khmer Rouge using starvation as a tool to weaken their prisoners. Realising that she was not getting the right support in Hawaii, Chanrithy transferred to the University of Oregon where she later completed her degree in biochemistry. Around this time, Chanrithy started to tell her story to her friends and peers and decided to write about her experiences in a book.

During her studies, Chanrithy was recruited by Dr William H Sack to assist with the Khmer Adolescence Project. The project explored war trauma that many young people had experienced under the Khmer Rouge. Dr Sack found it difficult to recruit Cambodians for the study because there were sensitivities around understanding the culture and trauma of the individuals. Chanrithy was able to empathise with them and helped increase participation in the study. However, it became increasingly hard for her to listen to her fellow survivors' traumas whilst dealing with her own.

In 2000, her award-winning memoir *When Broken Glass Floats* was published and she was inundated with requests to speak at events. Chanrithy decided to dedicate her life to raising awareness about the Genocide in Cambodia and has since spoken at schools and conferences around the world, including Cambodia. Often, Chanrithy has the opportunity to incorporate a Cambodian classical dance called the *Blessing Dance* into her talks to teach people about Cambodian culture.

'Telling my story gives me a sense of personal justice because I have exposed what the Khmer Rouge and other world leaders have done to Cambodia'. Although Chanrithy has found some solace in telling her story, reliving the horrors of the genocide is hard for her and she plans to stop.




Chanrithy continues her passion for writing and has since written her first novel for young adults called *Rise of the Golden Aura*. It will be released on 7 January 2017, the 38th anniversary of the end of the Khmer Rouge regime.

Find out more...

Genocide in Cambodia: [hmd.org.uk/cambodia](http://hmd.org.uk/cambodia)

More information about Chanrithy: [hmd.org.uk/chanrithy](http://hmd.org.uk/chanrithy)

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