

**W**HEN THIDA KEM was 6 years old she didn't graduate from kindergarten or learn her ABCs. She didn't even go to her friends' birthday parties. Actually, there weren't any parties to go to. Thida (pronounced *Tēda*) was born October 15, 1969, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. As a young child, she witnessed the Communist take-over of her country. Today, she is happy to be living in the United States, but memories of her homeland — and the family she left behind — are still painful.

"Only my immediate family came to the United States," Thida says. "My other relatives are still in Cambodia. We receive some letters, but it is so painful to read their letters. They don't have enough money, food or medicine."

Reflecting on her own situation, Thida continues, "I live in America, where everybody is free. I have a lot of freedom, but half of me is back in Cambodia. I miss my family very much, and I'm so worried and concerned about them because they are waiting for us, here, to lead them out."

For Thida and her family — father, mother, two brothers and two sisters — the journey to America was long and hard. First, they lived in Khao I Dang, a camp in Thailand. From there, they were flown to the Philippines, went through a language- and cultural-orientation program, and then were assigned to a U.S. community. On January 5, 1981, they reached their destination — Long Beach, Calif.

At age 11, Thida began her formal education. It was her father, Pich Kem, who made sure that his oldest child would receive the best education possible. Thida began her studies by taking one class in the fifth grade. She also studied with a tutor that year and the next. Together, they worked on Thida's English.

"I had to study more to catch up with the other students," she says. "I could understand the language pretty good but not like Americans. Americans finished their homework in one hour; I took two hours to finish mine. And I had to help my brothers and sisters. It's a lot. I mean, when I look back I can't believe how I did it all. I never thought I could be, like right now, going to college."

A prepharmacy student, Thida finds university life "different" and the transi-



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*Thida Kem*  
Freshman, Prepharmacy

tion from high school to the university "difficult." In the beginning, she had a job at the Fresno Health Clinic, working as many as six hours a day. Thida quickly discovered that something had to change.

"I was so depressed. I would come home at seven after work and then I'd have to eat. At nine I would start doing my homework and wouldn't finish until two in the morning. My mom started worrying, so I quit my job."

Thida, one of about 20 Cambodian students on campus, still struggles with the English language and says that if her professors speak too fast when they are giving lectures, she gets "lost." On the other hand, she shows no sign of any language barrier when she adds, "Grammar is really a pain."

Even though she's amazed by the rapid pace of university life and wide-eyed at the very idea that she is expected to cover "one whole book for one class in one semester," Thida is determined to finish her education.

"I'm going to try my best, and I'm going to do it," she says. "There is no way I can quit, because I'm the oldest one in the family. I have to set an example for my brothers and sisters. Sometimes it is very hard for me, but I have in mind that if I can be a pharmacist, I can help my people back in Cambodia. They suffer horribly. Right now there's not much I can do, but I keep hoping that in the future I will be able to help my people. A pharmacist can help people get well from sickness. That's why I want to be a pharmacist."

Thida Kem