



KOMMALY CHANTHAVONG

Laos

2015 Ramon Magsaysay Awardee

Citation for the 2015 Ramon Magsaysay Award

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Over half a century of war and authoritarian rule has ravaged Laos, resulting in large-scale destruction, loss of lives, and a country that remains one of the world's poorest. Yet it is a testament to the Laotian people that despite all this, here greatness of the human spirit has not been extinguished.

Born into a farming family, Kommaly Chanthavong lived through all her country's tragedies. Losing her father in the Indochina War, she was a refugee at age thirteen, walking barefoot over six hundred kilometers from her village in eastern Laos to Vientiane to escape the bombings during the Vietnam War. Through sheer perseverance, she pursued her studies in Vientiane and in 1966 earned a nursing diploma; in 1972 she married and raised a family. After the communist takeover of Vientiane, life was extremely difficult and she had to walk long distances from village to village buying and selling goods between Laos and Thailand.

Through these turbulent changes, one thing remained constant for Kommaly—her love for silk weaving, which she learned from her mother when she was only five years old; in fact, fleeing her village in 1961 all she took with her were heirloom pieces of woven silk handed down from her grandmothers. In Vientiane, seeing war-displaced, rural women in desperate need of work, she used her meager savings to buy looms, and in 1976 started in her home a weaving group of ten women, whom she called the “Phontong Weavers.”

Thus began Kommaly's valiant efforts to help women earn a living and revive Lao silk weaving, a deeply esteemed tradition rapidly disappearing because of the convulsions of war. Her original group grew to become Phontong Handicraft Cooperative—a network of Lao artisans now spanning thirty-five villages and connecting over 450 artisans. Impressed by her success, the Lao government leased to Kommaly in the early 1980's forty-two hectares of land in northeast Laos for use as a silk farm. It was barren, heavily bombed-out land, littered with unexploded landmines that Kommaly and her group had to personally dig out before they could start planting trees. This has since become Mulberries Organic Silk Farm, dedicated to the revival of Lao silk production, with hectares planted to mulberry trees, specially-built temperature-controlled buildings to house all stages of silk production, a large garden providing raw materials for natural dyeing, and a cattle-raising area producing manure as organic fertilizers. Since its establishment, the farm has trained over a thousand farmers and weavers and has created over three thousand jobs.

But Kommaly's initiatives went even further. In 1990 she started Camacrafts, a non-profit project that markets traditional Lao and Hmong handicrafts, working with hundreds of women in twenty villages. Three years later, she created Mulberries, a social enterprise that initiates income-generating projects around traditional arts and crafts, including the production of mulberry tea, wine, and soap. More than two thousand villagers in five provinces have benefitted from this. In 1993, the Lao Sericulture Company was launched to oversee and manage Kommaly's many initiatives. Her amazing work has covered the whole cycle of silk production, from growing mulberry trees, raising silkworms, creating natural dyes, to training, research, provision of tools, and local and international marketing of highly-prized handmade silk items. Despite numerous adversities, she has traversed villages to personally teach and encourage weaving, and to patiently set up silk houses where young women and men can weave world-class products. The soft-spoken Kommaly says of her decades-long work, “Our goal is to strengthen the position of women by giving them a dependable income and thus improve the chances of their children.” Clearly, she has done this—and much more.

In electing Kommaly Chanthavong to receive the 2015 Ramon Magsaysay Award, the board of trustees recognizes her fearless, indomitable spirit to revive and develop the ancient Laotian art of silk weaving, creating livelihoods for thousands of poor, war-displaced Laotians, and thus preserving the dignity of women and her nation's priceless silken cultural treasure.

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Nationality	: Laotian	
Date of Birth	: 16 March 1944	
Civil Status	: Married	
Spouse	: Noulime Chanthavong	Occupation: Advisor, Phontong/ Camacrafts Handicrafts Cooperative and Lao Sericulture Company, Laos
Children	: Bobby Vosinthavong	Occupation: General Manager, Phontong/Camacrafts Handicrafts Cooperative and Lao Sericulture Company Manager, Lao Silk & Craft, Melbourne, Australia
	Souphaphone "Po" Chanthavong	Occupation: Designer, Mulberries, Laos
	Sompasong Loc Chanthavong	Occupation: Marketing Manager, Mulberries, Laos



Educational Background

1971	Training in Nursing (6 months), Sriracha Hospital, Thailand
1966	Diploma in Nursing , Ecole des Infirmiers et Infirmieres, Laos

Employment/Professional Background

1993-Present	Founder and Manager, Lao Sericulture Company (Mulberries), Laos
1976-Present	Founder, Phontong/Camacrafts Handicrafts Cooperative, Laos

Honors/Awards Received

2011	International Women of Courage Award, United States Department of State, Washington D.C., USA
2011	'Special Achievement Award' to Kommaly Chanthavong for her creative and inspiring work over many decades in preserving the environmental and cultural benefits of Laos' long tradition of community sericulture, The Samdhana Institute, Global Greengrants Fund and International Funders for Indigenous Peoples, Vientiane
2005	1000 Women Nobel Peace Prize Nominations, Peace Women Across the Globe, Bern, Switzerland