

And Do You Feel Like This Is Your Country?

Peggy Saika Interviews Sipfou Saechao

SAIKA: I'M PEGGY SAIKA AND I'M EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF APEN — THE ASIAN Pacific Environmental Network — which is a community organization concerned with environmental justice for Asian and Pacific Islanders. Today I'm talking to Sipfou Saechao, who is 16 years old and a 10th grader at Richmond High School in Richmond, California, on the San Francisco Bay. Sipfou has been part of our girls program for almost two years. So Sipfou, tell us a bit about yourself.

Saechao: I was born in Taiwan. I was two and a half when we moved to Sacramento. My aunt and them lived in Sacramento. When I was five or six, I moved to San Pablo. I only have a mom. My dad died. We were coming home from my ceremony on the freeway, and my dad was driving. My uncle was in the passenger's seat, and in the back was me, my mom, my brother, and my cousin. And then my dad, he accidentally bumped into the curb, so then the car won't start. So my dad and my uncle got out of the car on the freeway to look for a phone. My dad went across the street, I mean across the freeway, to find a phone. Then my uncle looked up and he saw this big ol' truck coming and then my uncle yelled, but it was too late. So the driver accidentally crushed my dad and the top half of his body was like hanging from the freeway. He was 37. I have one brother. After my dad died, the three of us moved to San Pablo. My mom stays at home and takes care of us.

Saika: How did you get involved with APEN?

Saechao: The Asian Pacific Island staff came to our school. I was at Helms Junior High. There was an orientation for Laotian girls, so our teacher excused us out of class to go to the orientation. And they said that there was a program, like to help us understand ourselves and our community. I had just finished eighth grade and I didn't have anything to do in the summer, so I joined the APEN program in the summer of 1995.

The first week was hard because I didn't know anyone in there, and we didn't really know each other. So it was, like, hard trying to fit in 'cause everybody was thinking, "What am I going to say?" and all that stuff. And we were really

PEGGY SAIKA, a longtime community activist, is executive director of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN, 310 8th Street, Suite 309, Oakland, CA 94607).

SYPFOU SAECHAO is currently junior class president at Richmond High School and an active member of the Laotian Organizing Project.

uncomfortable. But as the weeks went by, we started to talk and hang out, and we got closer and we became sisters. There were 12 of us.

Saika: And what kind of things did you learn that first summer?

Saechao: At first I didn't know any of the girls. And I thought they were like just like any other girls you know, who didn't really care. They just wanted to pass by. But then we all really got into it. We were really committed. They were fun and I trusted them.

Saika: And what did you learn in the program?

Saechao: I learned about reproductive health, about my environment, gangs, violence, and we learned about toxics in the community. I did a little survey about fish — you know, what fish our people are eating and where it comes from.

Saika: And what did you learn about yourself?

Saechao: Well, all my life in school I never stood up for myself. I had low self-esteem. I just let anyone say whatever they wanted and I didn't really care. But after I joined the program, I started noticing that I was sticking up for myself. I talked when I wanted to. I asked questions when I didn't understand, and I had higher self-esteem and I was talking about myself.

Saika: At the end of that first summer program, you got to go to U.C. Berkeley to participate in an international global youth seminar. What was that about?

Saechao: It was a week at Berkeley, where you have to take like actual college classes that taught us lots about our environment, and community organizing, and how to teach other. We all went for a whole week. We went to different classes and it was really interesting. We learned a lot.

Saika: And you were able to meet...

Saechao: ...new people from around the world.

Saika: And how do you feel about all of this now, after two years?

Saechao: [Laughs.] I think it has helped me a lot to understand myself and my community — like how to care for it, how to get help when I need it, and where to go.

Saika: When you look at what's going on in your own community, what do you think?

Saechao: Well, most of the time I'm in school, so I don't think about it. I just block it out 'cause it's too much to handle. And there's not a program or a group within the school that could help us to understand and to teach others to cope with it. So we can't really do anything about it.

Saika: What kinds of problems do you see in the school?

Saechao: Racial tension, violence, drugs, weapons, and just immature people...and there's a lot of pressure on girls, especially Laotian girls, because we're living two lives. At home we're supposed to be a kind of housewife, and at school we're supposed to do what's expected of us by our teachers. So we're listening to one person at home and listening to a different one at school. It's also hard because the guys get more opportunities, and the girls often get put down by guys that say we are not smart enough or we're not strong enough.

Saika: What about in the community, what kinds of problems do you see?

Saechao: It's basically the same ones. It's always the guys who get all the credit and opportunity. They get more choices than girls. All we have to do is go to school, become a wife, that's it. And then there's the elders. They think that we're not serious about our communities. They think that we just want to do drugs or hang out — that we don't care about our community, our people. They don't understand that we do want to help, and we don't know where to go to find help.

Saika: Are drugs still a big problem in the community?

Saechao: Yes, especially for young Laotian guys.

Saika: What about teen pregnancy and stuff for the girls?

Saechao: A lot of girls are getting pregnant, like in junior high and high school. And they think that it's okay, you know, just, they always be bragging, "Oh I got a kid," and all that. Some of them are younger than me.

Saika: What about gangs? Is that a big problem?

Saechao: Uh-huh, there's a lot of gangs.

Saika: Even for the girls?

Saechao: Uh-huh. Even the girls have gangs. But APEN taught me that I deserve more. Like, I'm better than wasting my life being in gangs and violence.

Saika: So you feel like you have hope for the future?

Saechao: Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't. When I'm with APEN I feel like, "I could do anything." But then when I go back to the real world, everybody's always putting you down, like "You can't accomplish this. You can't do that. You did this wrong. You're a girl."

Saika: So the program is a place where you get the support and the nurturing that you can't find in other places?

Saechao: Uh-huh, because it's mostly girls working here, and women staff, and it's also because we have counselors that aren't much older than us, so they can relate to how we feel.

Saika: What are your hopes for the future? You have dreams of what you want to do?

Saechao: Sometimes I think about being a Laotian leader in my community.

Saika: You were active doing precinct work before the elections last November. You worked *really* hard against Proposition 209. How do you feel about that experience?

Saechao: It really taught me a lot because before I didn't really care much about politics. I just always felt, "Oh, they don't listen to what we have to say, how we feel, or what we really need." It's always the congressmen or whoever, they're deciding everything for us. So why should I bother when they're not even going to listen to me? But with Prop. 209, I felt like it was going to hurt my community, especially me, 'cause I want to go to college. And I felt, what if two persons are goin' up for a job, and one of them's me and one of them's a white person? And that white person's more qualified? When Proposition 209 is not there, you know, I might have a chance.

Saika: Affirmative action is really to make sure that when you are qualified, then people of color and women and other folks have a chance and an opportunity, right? It's about making sure that different groups of people are not discriminated against. So, when you were walking the precincts — and you were actually one of the top five in Youth for Justice right, signing up people against 209 — what was that like?

Saechao: It was kind of a good and bad experience. It was hard because all through the time when I was walking, I was still confused about 209 and affirmative action. All these people kept on putting new things in my mind, trying to confuse me. But it was also good because I learned how other people feel in my community, and like I got a sense of what they wanted.

Saika: And do you feel like this is your country?

Saechao: Not really.

Saika: How come?

Saechao: I don't know. Probably 'cause everywhere you go, it's white man's country, or whatever. It's always there, you know, whether it's on TV, on the radio, or whatever. They're always saying that this is my country, but they're always using their own rules. They don't really care about how I feel.

Saika: What else have you been able to do as a part of this program that you think has made you grow as a person?

Saechao: I've been able to attend different meetings that concern my community. And we're doing community organizing. Like we go to the Institute for Youth, and we're on their Board. We work with a bunch of youth from all different organizations around the Bay Area, trying to get their input and to work together on what we need and to decide who's going to do it. Everywhere I go, when people ask me, "Where are you from?" I say, "I'm from APEN." And they're always interested, you know. I keep answering their questions and at school, some of the other girls and I are always talking about APEN. We're always having activities, so then other people come around and ask us what we're doing. Then they say, "Oh, it's so fun," and, "You're really doing a good job." They always say that they want to be in a program, too.

Saika: That's great. That's really great. Are there things that you hope you're going to be able to do as a part of the program, things that you've been thinking about?

Saechao: I want to start a newsletter. By youth. Just inform the youth about what kinds of activities are goin' on in the Bay Area and make a little journal section where youth, especially Asian kids, can write in. It would be like talking, where they could feel they could trust us enough to tell about our problems, and we could try to help them resolve it.... Oh, and I also want to be a counselor. For the younger girls. I think that Americans should be thankful that the different people of the world come to America. You know, we could teach them so many things if they would just listen, like our culture, our knowledge, and our understanding.

Saika: You feel like you have something to offer and you want to be involved?

Saechao: It makes me want to be involved more. Because I'm starting to see what's happening to my community, my friends, and myself. If I'm not really doing anything about it, a lot of other people are going to say, "If you don't do it, no one else will."