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# 8,000-mile, 30-year journey brings Cambodian émigré to DCMA

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**Defense Contract Management Agency employees come from all walks of life, including civilian experts and uniformed and retired military.** From coast to coast, around the world, the agency's diversity fosters fresh perspectives and new approaches. Meng Kuoch, DCMA Boston, is one of the new contract cost/price analysts hired to renew the agency's cost and pricing capabilities.

Kuoch's expertise is grounded solidly in a degree in finance and accounting

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and her 21 years as an auditor with the Defense Contract Audit Agency. While there, she performed various types of audits and provided support as requested by contracting officers from all military departments, DCMA and other federal agencies. She came to DCMA, saying, "Supporting warfighters by helping ensure supplies and services get to them on time at fair and reasonable prices has always been important to me. At DCMA, I feel closer to the warfighter and know that my contributions can make a difference."

At DCMA, Kuoch interacts with the various buying commands, as well as internal customers such as DCMA administrative contracting officers. She said, "We analyze contractors' cost proposals and provide advice and insight to our contract negotiators."

"Our internal customers have, one-by-one, built up a level of confidence in her," Al Rutledge, DCMA Boston contract cost/

price analyst supervisor, said. "She is my go-to person."

It is not only her experience at DCAA that provides her motivation and drive to excel at DCMA. Like each employee, she has a unique path that brought her to the agency. Her path began in the 1970s in Cambodia under the authoritarian regime of the Khmer Rouge.

## Life in Cambodia

"Most of my memories of Cambodia were not good," she said. "I didn't see my parents often. ... The rulers, they kind of brainwash you. They treated you like animals."

She recalled her two younger sisters as well as aunts and uncles — all among the estimated 2 million victims of the Khmer Rouge's brutality. Kuoch was separated from her family and, like the rest of the population, placed into controlled populations based on her age. Though she was only 14 years old, Kuoch understood

the regime's nature. "In Cambodia, you could say something in the morning and disappear by the afternoon."

Nevertheless, when her dad, Mok Khun Kuoch, approached her with a plan to escape through Thailand and, ultimately, go to America, Meng said, "I didn't want to leave my mother behind, and I told my dad I didn't want to go."

"My late dad understood what it meant to come to America. He had always said, 'I want you to have a better future.' Now, he said, 'We have to do this. It's for your future. You'll understand later.'"

Today, she reveres her father for his heroism, wisdom and for leading her and her brother to America, even though he left his wife and everything that he knew behind. With help from the American Red Cross and Catholic Charities, he escaped with his family from Cambodia into Thailand in 1979. Kuoch said that he became both her dad and her mom; she would not see her mother again until they were reunited in America in November 1994.

### Feeling the freedom

Kuoch and her family flew from Thailand, destined for Logan International Airport in Boston. The journey, more than 8,000 miles, ended June 21, 1979. As she disembarked the plane, she realized that she did not understand what anyone was saying or asking her to do. But amidst the confusion, she felt other emotions.

"Everything is enormous here. There were so many people. So many cars," Kuoch said. "I realized what I didn't have in Cambodia when I put my feet down in the U.S. — *freedom*."

Her family continued the final leg of their journey to Providence, R.I., by bus. There they met with a member of Catholic Charities, who helped them establish their life in America. Because Kuoch arrived in June, she was able to attend the Adult Education Program class for non-English speakers that helped her learn English before attending high school in the fall. For the next two-and-a-half months, she spent hours a day in class drilling, listening with headphones and learning a language that she never dreamed she would need to know.

"I was very fortunate to meet lots of people like my teacher, Ms. Betty, who

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took an interest in me," Kuoch said. They helped her learn and inspired her to strive for more education.

Kuoch worked in a factory making light switches after school throughout her high school years, and she took a full-time position during her senior year. While attending college, she worked for her father at his restaurant. When exploring career options, she initially thought she might become a secretary or a typist, but once she learned to type, she realized she wanted to do something different. She continued her education, ultimately finding the skill set that would bring her to DCMA more than 20 years later.

She chose to pursue a career in accounting and finance because, "Numbers can't fool me — numbers are the same around the world. A number is a number," Kuoch said. Her expertise allows her to

provide pricing support to contracting officers and advise them on cost accounting standards non-compliances, cost impacts, withholding of funds for deficient business systems and similar complex issues.

"If I am able to help somebody, that makes me really happy, and I feel like, 'mission accomplished,'" she said. Though she has only been with the agency for a little over a year, she has already become a mentor to another cost/price analyst. She not only mentors at DCMA; she also volunteers in her community, helping new immigrants from Southeast Asia by translating and assisting them with their paperwork. She also volunteers with a Buddhist temple to teach youth about language and culture.

Kuoch dedicates her work, life — everything she has accomplished — to the person who made her life possible: her father. "He brought us to America, helped us realize our dreams, teaching us that hard work has its own rewards and, lastly, live below your means but within your needs," Kuoch said. "I'll always be thankful for the sacrifices he made; he is my engine, my inspiration. I now understand what he meant about my future in America." 



Meng Kuoch, now a Defense Contract Management Agency Boston contract cost/price analyst, poses with a sculpture in a park after arriving in the United States. Her father, right, brought her and her brother from Cambodia to the United States for the freedom and opportunities they would find here. (Photo courtesy of Meng Kuoch)