

Cambodia means a lot to me. In 1982, I worked for 6 months as a Pediatrician for the International Rescue Committee at Khao I Dang (KID), a large UN run refugee camp on the Thai Cambodian border. This camp was created as a processing center for people fleeing the brutal Pol Pot regime and hoping to emigrate to a third country. Most likely all the Cambodians who came to the US spent time in Khao I Dang. I still feel very invested in Cambodia and the Khmer people.

What does this have to do with Kavanaugh? As many of you know Kavanaugh has a long-standing commitment to Social Justice. The Social Justice teams supported by Rabbi Josh have made immigration one of our key areas of community work. Among other things, we are part of a coalition of Jewish religious organizations known as the Jewish Coalition for Immigrant Justice – Northwest (JCIJ). Not long ago a call went out from JCIJ, asking for folks to attend a Clemency and Pardons Board Hearing in Olympia on Thursday June 13. I was there with 50 other people from around the community, Olympia residents, faith group members, and people from the Cambodian community to serve as witness and support a man, Mr. Sok K. To understand his story, one needs to go back to the time of Khao I Dang.

When the US accepted Cambodian refugees, those people were granted Permanent Resident Status – a green card. They could then, on their own, apply for citizenship. Many in the Cambodian community did not and thus comes their current jeopardy. The administration's efforts to deport non-citizens has impacted the lives of many of our neighbors here in Washington. Mr. Sok K is one such man. He came to the US as a 6-year-old, likely via KID at the same time I was there. His father had died in the refugee camp, so his mother and his two siblings came to Puget Sound to join other Khmer people who also had found their way here. Seattle has the third largest Cambodian community in the US. As a 19-year-old school dropout Sok became involved with a Cambodian gang and drove a car that used in an armed assault in which one man was shot. He was caught, declined a 2-year plea bargain and was sentenced to 12 years which he served in Walla Walla prison. "I was a dumb kid," he testified. While in prison he got a GED and has been a model citizen since his release. Because of his prior

conviction, despite his serving his time, subsequently becoming a contributing member of his community, having a life partner, caring for his handicapped mother, raising his “step daughters” and finding ways to earn a living despite the challenges of his prior felony, he is in a category for deportation. His and other similar cases have further traumatized the Khmer community who have already suffered unbelievable trauma. He is required, since his release, to report quarterly to ICE and is subject to immediate arrest with subsequent deportation each time. In prior years an average of 45 people per year were deported to Cambodia. In 2018, 110 were deported with a “plan” to increase that to about 200/year. For more complete discussion about what is happening to Cambodian immigrants in our state see this excellent [article](#) from the Tacoma News Tribune.

The Clemency and Pardons board meets quarterly for two days. The 5 members, chosen from the law enforcement community as well as diverse citizens, review cases and make recommendations for pardon or commutation to the Governor. Governor Inslee has already granted pardons to a number of Cambodians in similar circumstances. An attorney representing Sok presented his story to the 3-judge panel. We heard testimony from Sok, his sister, a cousin, and his step daughter. The board chair asked who in the audience were there to support his cause. The entire room raised their hands. **Our presence there meant a lot.** The board chair rightly noted that Mr. K had served his punishment, was remorseful and deportation would be a “life sentence”. He did not deserve it. When the chair announced the board’s recommendation for pardon the audience exploded in applause. Sok went around and shook everyone’s hand, with hugs and moving thank-yous. It was great to see that sometimes American justice exists. **We won.**

In these hard times it sometimes seems difficult to find a personal way to make a political difference. We can all be proud that Kavanaugh members are involved in immigration issues. One way you can help is serving as “accompaniment” to people during bond and pardons hearings or supporting immigrants when they leave detention. It doesn’t take much to make a big

difference. There are planned trainings in the fall for people interested in helping with “accompaniment”.

If you’re interested in helping in any of these ways, please contact Rabbi Josh (rabbijosh@kavana.org), Libby Cohen (lcohen71@gmail.com), or me, Chuck Cowan (chuck.cowan.md@gmail.com).

