

“Who I Became”

Overview

“Who I Became” is the story of Pounloeu Chea, a first-generation Cambodian American. He and his family escaped from Cambodia in the early 1980s and settled in San Francisco. Five years ago, his father returned to Cambodia, leaving behind his wife and three sons. A year ago his mother joined his father. Since she left, Pounloeu was found guilty of driving stolen cars intended for export and placed on parole. About to become a father, he has to hold a job and stay out of trouble to avoid being sent to jail or shipped back to Cambodia. What will he make of his life when all he knows is displacement and the street life common among the children of many Southeast Asian immigrants in his community?

Curriculum Connections

The film may be used in US history, literature, anthropology, sociology, and ethnic studies courses to explore issues related to immigration, assimilation, poverty, and education.

Central Question: What tools, opportunities, and understandings are needed for an immigrant to become an American?



Director: Mike Siv & Pounloeu Chea
Credit: Mike Siv

In 1975, a Communist named Pol Pot and his guerilla army, the Khmer Rouge, overthrew the government of Cambodia and systematically killed about two million people as part of their efforts to rebuild the nation as a Communist state. They targeted artists, minorities, urban dwellers, people with some education, and the middle class. As the terror spread, towns were emptied, schools closed, and temples destroyed. In 1979,

Reread the short story by Sandra Cisneros on page 00. How is Pounloeu’s neighborhood like the one she describes? How do you account for differences? What images did you have about Pounloeu’s neighborhood before he took you on a tour of it? What surprised you about the neighborhood and the people who live there? How did his tour change your perceptions of him and his friends?



Create two identity charts for Pounloeu—one that shows him at the start of the film and other at the end of the film. Compare and contrast the two charts. What aspects of Pounloeu’s identity have changed? How do you account for those changes? How do the two charts help explain the title of the film: “Who I Became”? What does Pounloeu’s story suggest about the way individuals grow and change?



Marian Wright Edelman, the founder of the Children’s Defense Fund, has written, “Too many people—of all colors, and all walks of life—are growing up today unable to handle life in hard places, without hope, without adequate attention, and without steady internal compasses to navigate the morally polluted seas they must face on the journey to adulthood.” To what extent does her observation apply to Pounloeu? Who are the individuals, groups, and institutions in the film that help him “handle life in hard places”? How much courage did it take for him to accept their help so that he could change his life? What motivated him to make the change?



Pounloeu Chea displays a certificate showing that he completed his job training program
Credit: Pounloeu Chea

Vietnam invaded Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge responded to the attack by arming children and sending them into battle. Most did not survive. Pounloeu and his family managed to flee the country. They lived in a refugee camp in Thailand for a time before coming to the United States. How do you think the chaos of his earliest years may have shaped Pounloeu’s identity? What effect do you think his parents’ return to Cambodia had on the way he saw himself? How may it have strengthened his ties to the people in his neighborhood? In what sense does he see them as *family*? What do they offer him that he cannot seem to find elsewhere?