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270 MILLION PROJECT RAISING AWARENESS AND FOSTERING ACTION

Kim Sandara and Aleena Inthaly from Legacies of War
Reflect on the Vietnam War Era Bombings

Transcribed by Elizabeth Skalka 12/28/21

Kim Sandara: Hi, I'm Kim Sandara. I am a Lao and Viet American making artwork centering around the exposure of the Secret Wars.

Aleena Inthaly: Hello, my name is Aleena Inthaly and I am the Chief of Staff at Legacies of War. Legacies of War is an advocacy and education-based organization that focuses on the mission of raising awareness about the history of the American Secret War in Laos and to advocate for the clearance of unexploded bombs as well as victims assistance to provide spaces for healing the wounds of war and to create a greater hope for a future of peace.

Kim Sandara: I learned about the history of the Vietnam War-era bombings in Laos through my parents. I grew up always hearing about the bombs. Hearing about, "Oh we don't go back because it's dangerous. We don't go back cause there's bombs." And I figured like "Oh, okay, that makes sense." I thought every child actually, of immigrants, experienced something like that, where they couldn't go back to their countries because of bombs. But then, when I grew older, I realized that it was very downplayed [chuckles]. It was so normalized in my family to just know about the bombs that the more I learned about the more ogling it became, and the bigger of a deal it became. I watched my first documentary on it with my dad and it was centered around the Hmong experience in Laos and then a little bit about where Hmong people are in America and I was really baffled. I couldn't believe that the Lao government could be so corrupt in chasing these people down like they are animals because they helped the American soldiers during the Vietnam War. And at the time I was only a teenager so I didn't quite understand the whole war, and how it happened, and what they were fighting about, but I felt a little traumatized by the images I saw in that documentary which- I don't even remember the name to, but- I remember them filming a child that got hit with mustard gas on the floor crying, and honestly that image is scarred in my mind forever. So it would never leave me. But I waited about ten years until I could delve back into the topic.

Aleena Inthaly: There are three main ways that Legacies of War serves its mission. It's what we call our pillars: history, healing, hope. The first, with history, you know, we try to advocate for the commitment by Congress and the administration to take this issue seriously and to continue to allocate funding to go towards clearance and victims assistance, while also educating the American public as well as the international audience about this issue as a whole. The second, is providing and opening up spaces for healing. Legacies of War uses art, culture, education, community engagement, and community building to bring people together and create healing and transformation on the wreckage of war. The last is hope. Those two pillars really build that foundation for hope, and we try to bridge communities together so that we can work to bring this issue to the stage through a variety of different platforms and networks. This is how we remind the public that we're all a part of the same tapestry, working for the same cause and same goals.

Kim Sandara: What shocked me the most in my research is- there's not one factor but, as I opened the book more and more with the Secret Wars it all is shocking. The fact that it's the most bombed country in human history per capita- like, more than World War I and II combined- was shocking to me. How small Laos is in comparison to how much it got bombed is shocking to me. The fact that people lived in caves to like avoid the war for years and years without, like, a sense of time for how much time was going by and just kind of like checking out the landscape, that was shocking to me, and it was shocking to me that those people still died when they came out because there were hidden bombs. Some of them at least. And it's really devastating. And it begged me to talk about in my work because for a long time I avoided identity work because I thought it was too specific and I didn't want my work to be dated anywhere. But then I grew to figure out that all artwork is dated and anchored in something and it's time to face that part of my identity that I've been avoiding or not wanting to explore- probably because it is so shocking and scary.

Aleena Inthaly: From 1964 to 1973 the United States dropped over 270 million cluster bombs on Laos, making Laos the most bombed country per capita in history. This leaves over 80 million unexploded bombs, also known as unexploded ordnance or UXO, still left in the country. We try to prioritize at Legacies of War that this issue needs to be rectified as soon as possible. That's why we advocated so hard for US funding to go towards clearing and demining these unexploded ordnance as well as other remnants, as well as providing assistance for victims and their families. We want to make sure that the future of Laos allows the population there to thrive, to be able to farm their land in peace, walk to school in safety, and pave the path that is safe for future generations.

Kim Sandara: I incorporated my research on Laos first by just taking in documentaries, readings, trying to connect with other Lao people, reaching out to Legacies of War, and just sponging it in for a while. Like, I started my research in 2019 and I allowed myself time to really linger in that research because I didn't want to make artwork too quickly about it, where I hadn't processed it, or I was doing something not true to myself or true to my work. So the intersection that I found was with my dad's old music and my nostalgia with that music, where I really hated it as a child because it was slow and I didn't understand it and I didn't understand my dad very much- though he had a lot of trauma and would always tell me about his stories of swimming across the Mekong River- and that's all I really knew. And I reconnected that like he could be so shaken by that experience that he needs that kind of slower music that's kind of beyond his age. But I took that, and I took the fact that I do music paintings and combined that and started experimenting with Dura-Lar layers and painting where there's like one layer of childhood American music that I listen to a lot and one layer of the childhood music I heard from him- well in my childhood anyways, where I like disconnect that from who I am but it truly still is. Like, if I hear his music anywhere I'll think of him and I'll think of my time as a kid and how I grappled with identity then, because I grew up around basically no other Lao kids that weren't related to me, or the one family friend, and that definitely affected how I saw Lao culture. I still wanted to be connected to it but there's some things where I was, probably like most other immigrant kids, not wanting to connect to because I wanted to assimilate and not be different. And that can be a challenge when there's no one of your culture around you that's not literally your family.

Aleena Inthaly: A lot of our collaborations are built on this mutual desire and commitment to the goal of a bomb-free Laos for the future, and so we encourage, through our partnerships, and through our community-building initiatives, to really sort of come together and put together our ideas and creativity and how we can best tell the story of this piece of history. And in telling the story, how are we healing from that collectively and building a brighter future for those who will come after us? Legacies of War was actually founded on the basis of the discovery of drawings that were made by refugees who were fleeing their homes in Laos during that time. And being the sole keepers of that important piece of history, you know, it has really inspired us to find other people in communities who have these stories to tell as well, who have not been able to share those stories. And I think Kim is a great example of that. We have also worked with many different filmmakers who are part of refugee diaspora communities. We have worked with authors, poets, and community leaders who are paving the way. I think the more we tell the story, the more complete our tapestry becomes. I always use that as a visual. That every single part of the history that we're trying to share and raise awareness about is all a part of a tapestry that

we're all a part of, and that's what makes this work so so so important and significant, even today.

Kim Sandara: What I want my viewers to understand most about the artwork is that the piece is ongoing and it's changing. The *270 Million Project* is 270 paintings that all represent one million bombs that dropped on Laos during the Vietnam War and each time a painting is bought there is a third of the money goes to Legacies of War or goes to COPE. Legacies of War is based in the US and they advocate for funding, education about the bombs, to try to remove them, inform their viewers, cultivate a community that is educated and cares about it. And they work with people like me who are interested in wanting to help in my own way as well. And the other part goes to COPE which is a facility in Vientiane- which is where my dad's from, it's the capital of Laos- and they basically help people who have been affected by bombs and may need new prosthetic legs or arms and physical therapy and community building. They're also kind of a center for education because they have their own museum as well that talks about the bombs, and I hope to visit it one day. So far I haven't caught any donations for them yet cause it's a certain exact half for Legacies and then another half for COPE and COPE is the later half so, I just finished the paintings in October of 2021, which is very exciting, but that doesn't mean that the piece will stay the same. Every time it moves in space it looks different depending on how many paintings are bought and how many of those bought paintings put a blackout in the map of everything. And it also changes as it takes up shape in different spaces. So I want that idea to settle with people and help them think about their own things that they want to heal from and how it is always changing and always growing and learning. It's more than just about one cause. The cause definitely is a part of my identity and it's a part of things I care about, but the greater theme of the work is about healing and community and what we can do as a collective when we take the time to learn about each other and learn about our histories. And also educate other people on our histories where there might not be education accessible to everyone.

Aleena Inthaly: There are three simple ways that people can jump right in and help us take action. The first one being to purchase one of Kim's paintings of the *270 Million Project*, as well as check out some more of her amazing amazing work. It all still ties into the awareness that we're trying to build together as partners. But also, along those lines, please donate to Legacies of War and contribute what you can. Every little bit goes towards fueling our mission and really moving forward our progress. The second is, please follow us on social media and online. We are on Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and we also have a newsletter. That brings me to the last point. We want to hear from you! We want to hear those stories. We want to collect testimonies and oral history. We want to record every single bit of information that we can to help inform us when we go and advocate on the hill, and we want you all to be

there. So please reach out to us directly on our website at www.legaciesofwar.org and contact us because this is the first year actually that we've accomplished all 50 states, we have advocates in all 50 states, and we want that to grow and grow and we really need the community to be behind us, we can all do it. Together we can get the job done.

This year has been an absolutely triumphant year despite all the challenges of being in a pandemic and not being able to operate the way that we used to, there's still been a lot of impact in 2021. We can now say that 1% of Laos is clear of UXO. In 2020, 92,299 pieces of ordnance were destroyed. That's over 90,000 explosions that will never harm a child, injure a gardener, or take a parent from their family.

Along with that, we are in a position to secure 45 million dollars in FY 2022 that will go towards UXO clearance and victims assistance, so we have successfully, you know, gotten Congress to write that in their budget, now all we have to do is wait for approval, but it's already 5 million dollars up from last year's commitment of 40 million dollars. We also have 36 caucus members now a part of the UXO and Demining Caucus in the United States House of Representatives. And also: Fifty states! We got fifty states! Advocates from all 50 states writing to their congressional members in our grassroots campaign, that's about 3,800 letters written to Congress, in a week. I know next year we can do more, but we need everyone's help to do that.

Lastly, some other notable wins is that we launch the Legacies Library, a collection of books, films, articles, and oral histories vetted by Legacies of War that tell the story of the American bombing of Laos and its neighbors. The mission of the library is to tell the living story of the Secret War, ensuring that it is no longer just a footnote in American history. That means there are nine author interviews that we conducted as part of the library and three film screenings as well. And Legacies of War also received a humanitarian award given by the ambassador of Lao PDR, Ambassador Anlavan- Khamphan Anlavan- this has been the first of its kind to ever be given to Legacies of War and it's been a great honor to receive a humanitarian award from the government and to be recognized for the work that we do and our advocacy efforts to secure funds. The consistency and the resiliency of our educational work, to ensure that the history of the Secret War is never forgotten.

Kim Sandara: Thank you so much for making time