Illuminating Inequities:
My Encounter With Arn Chorn-Pond

“All you need to do is look at someone and ask what is wrong. Say I love you.”
– Arn Chorn-Pond

Today was a beautiful day. When I woke this morning, I had no idea that by tonight I would be in tears reflecting on the amazing experience of speaking with a truly gentle, genuine, and beautiful human being. A few weeks ago, I had no idea who the Khmer Rouge were. I would not have been able to point out Cambodia on a map. Above all, I would have had little knowledge about the existence and exploitation of child soldiers. Yet two weeks ago, I was given an assignment in my English Methods class that would change my view of the world and warfare forever.

Our class was asked to read one of the books that had been nominated for the Young People’s category of the 2012 National Book Award. I skimmed the vague summaries of each of these titles and found myself drawn to a modern book about teenage issues that I would read in any other setting. However, when I went to the bookstore, this title was not in stock. Then my second choice was not in stock… and lastly, my third choice was unavailable. Finally, I picked up a book by Patricia McCormick called Never Fall Down. From the summary, I understood that this was the true story of a child who was separated from his family and forced to work in a labor camp, and later forced to become a child soldier. Considering my own reading interests, I did not want to read this book. I have never considered myself a history buff and I was aware that this would tell the horrific history of the Cambodian genocide of the 1970’s. However, this was the only National Book Award nominee available, and I would have to read it. What happened next
was unexpected. As I read, I fell deeply into the tragic and terrible world of Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge regime. I finished the book in one day: a day of tears, knots in my stomach, and constant questions about the existence of evil and the oppression of good. Through this book, I learned so much about the Cambodian culture and the genocide that eliminated so much of its people. After this rollercoaster of a read, I was left wondering, “What can I do?” That is when I heard that Arn Chorn-Pond, the narrator of this horrific true story, was coming to speak at SUNY Oswego’s Global Awareness Conference two short weeks later.

This morning I woke in my Sheldon Hall dorm room excited about Arn’s speech tonight. Throughout the day, I had imagined questions that I would ask Arn if I had the chance. Yet I wondered how someone who had overcome such a horrifying childhood could speak to one person about his experience, let alone a crowd of strangers. My friends had known how much I had been anticipating this event. They saw my reaction to the book and heard my plea for them to read the story as well, as they forcibly do with many other books I have read. Therefore, another event took me by surprise. My boyfriend Kevin walked into my room and said, “Guess who I just met.” After I asked whom, he replied, “Arn Chorn-Pond, he’s staying in one of the rooms downstairs.” I was in disbelief. This was my chance.

“I need to meet him!” I said. Then I picked up my book and did something that I never imagined I would do, I went on a search for a Cambodian ex-child soldier through the halls of my dormitory. The short conversation with him that followed will never evade my memory. I told Arn Chorn-Pond that I had been building a unit based on his story that would allow students to explore the themes of peace and conflict on greater scale. I wanted to expose students to the horrors of this old world in a tough but enlightening way, in order to promote the need for peace.
I needed them to hear the story of the boy soldier who overcame extreme adversity and found a way out through his own voice. Arn hugged me, held my hands and said, “Bless you.” That is a moment I will never forget, and definitely not one that I imagined would happen when I woke this morning.

Tonight was equally as amazing. Arn’s speech was gentle, yet powerful, and had many SUNY Oswego students in tears. He told us about his experience with strength and tenderness. He told us how he watched his siblings die. He explained to us the power of music as a coping tool. He described the unimaginable confusion of seeing small children with guns. Most importantly, Arn told us what we could do to promote peace and prevent violence. He asked us to look at recent shootings and think about the pain felt by those perpetrators. After listening to Arn, we now understand that someone could have listened to them before they got their guns. Someone could have asked them what was wrong. Someone could have said, “I love you.” Someone… could have been, and still can be, any one of us. This is something that I will bring into my own lessons, as it is surely a lesson that I will never forget.

After the speech, Arn hugged me again and signed my copy of *Never Fall Down*. He wrote:

> To Ashley
> Thank you for listening to me – my story
> and thank you for all the friendship and love
> take care,
> Arn

I will never forget this night or the lessons I have learned from Arn’s story. Thankfully, I now know what I can do. While no one can ever undo these horrific events, we can share stories to
increase awareness and lessen the possibility of hate-fueled events. We can learn from these large-scale disasters and analyze our everyday encounters with injustice. Specifically as educators, we can ensure that Arun’s story is never forgotten, and that we are illuminating both everyday inequities and small instances of hope and peace. For these lessons, I am forever grateful.