

Lena Ngor was born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts of Cambodian and Chinese heritage. Her motivation to effect positive change developed at an early age. She was exposed to different standards of living during her daily travel from her middle class neighborhood to her babysitter who lived in public housing. Her circle of friends at the private school she attended was homogenous. During a trip to Cambodia “I saw a little girl selling trinkets and this man complemented her ability to speak English, she replied, ‘no sir, I don’t speak well. I need to know this much to get this money.’” The girl did not think of English as a way to become better educated just as a way to get by due to her circumstances. These and other travel experiences to Southeast Asia and Europe inspired her to concentrate in Political Science and International Relations. “I like diplomacy and being in an environment where different nations come together. This way I can get to the core of change.”

Change is a theme encouraged by her parents. She grew up with many religious influences; Muslim, Baha’i, Buddhism. “My parents encouraged me to have an open mind and empowered me to choose a religion when appropriate.”

She considers herself a “homebody with strict parents” so she pursued college as an opportunity to learn and experience what she didn’t in high school. Now as an undergraduate, she is involved in a wide range of activities. To learn more about her Cambodian heritage she became involved with the Cambodian Student Association and held leadership positions for three years. She also held progressive leadership roles in the Asian American Student Association as Freshman Liaison, Secretary, and two term President. She is part of Bed Time Players, a peer sexuality education troupe through the Center for Health Promotion where she performs skits to promote healthy habits pertaining to sex, relationships, LGBTQ acceptance and communication. She also works for the Fine Arts Center and was promoted to stage manager where she is responsible for preparing the shows tending to lights, sound, and props. In addition, she is the Co-Editor and Chief of the RealizAsian Magazine as part of AASA. “What other chances am I going to get to even do a quarter of the things that I do here in UMASS?”

During her first year as president of the Asian American Student Association she made the executive decision to collaborate with the Black Student Union to hold a winter ball which was a cross-cultural semi-formal night. “This was a way for each of group to showcase their cultures. This event was the first of its kind.” In the planning of an event of this magnitude, when groups are not used to collaborating, challenges are expected to happen and people are going to feel nervous about the outcome. “It was very inspiring to have people come up to me and say that the event was great and whatever made them nervous was unfounded.” These are the kind of events and experiences that help break cultural barriers, because at the end we are so much more similar than we are different. She encourages student leaders to join together so we can share ideas and become stronger as individuals, as friends, and as a community. “People should feel less afraid to step out of their comfort zone fear is stopping them from experiencing something new and great.”

Lena assumed leadership positions as a student but her primary aspiration is to work for the United Nations (UN), non-profit organizations, or non-governmental agencies. She took the first step to be considered for a UN job by interning with its Archives Department in New York City last summer. She knew that she had to have a United Nations experience in order to become a bonafide worker in this humanitarian organization. “I like diplomacy and having an environment where people works at a place of understanding, and where different nations come together for one purpose. This way I can get to the core of change.” Lena stated with conviction.

On a personal level, Lena pushes herself “to grow as individual and [her] mindset is: to avoid reckless things because there is too much at stake, be aware of pictures on Facebook, uphold strong moral standards for myself but never let it hinder relationships.”

Lena invites anyone interested to join the Cambodian Student Association. The group meets on Thursdays at 7:15PM. The Asian American Student Association meets on Tuesdays at 6:00PM. Ingor@umass.edu