



**KOMMALY CHANTHAVONG**  
Laos

*2015 Ramon Magsaysay Awardee*

## KOMMALY CHANTHAVONG

Over half a century of war ravaged Laos, resulting in large-scale destruction, loss of lives, and a country that remains one of the poorest in the world. Yet it is a testament to the people of Laos that despite all this, here greatness of the human spirit has not been extinguished.

Born into a farming family, seventy-year-old Kommaly Chanthavong has lived her country's tragedies. Losing her father in the Indochina War, she was a refugee at age thirteen, walking barefoot over 600 kilometers from her village in eastern Laos to Vientiane to escape the bombings during the Indochina War. Through sheer perseverance, she pursued her studies in Vientiane and earned a nursing Diploma in 1966; in 1972 she married and raised a family. After the Independence and establishment of the People's Democratic Republic of Lao, life was extremely difficult and she had to walk long distances from village to village buying and selling goods between Laos and Thailand.

Through these turbulent changes, one thing remained constant for Kommaly—her love for silk weaving, which she learned from her mother when she was only five years old; in fact, fleeing her village in 1961 all she took with her were heirloom pieces of woven silk handed down from her grandmothers. In Vientiane, seeing war-displaced, rural women in desperate need of work, she used her meager savings to buy looms, and in 1976 started in her home a weaving group of ten women, whom she called the “Phontong Weavers.”

Thus began Kommaly's valiant efforts to help women earn a living and revive Lao silk weaving, a deeply esteemed tradition rapidly disappearing because of the convulsions of war. Her original ten weavers grew to become Phontong Handicraft Cooperative—a network of traditional Lao artisans which now spans 35 different villages and connects over 450 artisans. In the 1990s, the Lao government, impressed by her success, leased to Kommaly forty-two hectares of land in northeast Laos for use as a silk farm. It was barren, heavily bombed-out land, littered with unexploded landmines that Kommaly and her group had to personally dig out before they could start planting trees. This has since become Mulberries Organic Silk Farm, dedicated to the revival of Lao silk production, with hectares planted to mulberry trees, specially-built temperature-controlled buildings to house all stages of silk production, a large garden that provides raw materials for natural dyeing, and a cattle-raising area that produces manure as organic fertilizers. Since its establishment, the farm has trained over a thousand farmers and weavers and has created over 3,000 jobs.

But Kommaly's initiatives went even further. In 1990 she started Camacrafts, a non-profit project that markets traditional Lao and Hmong handicrafts, working with over 400 women in at least twenty villages. Three years later, she created Mulberries, a social enterprise that initiates income-generating projects around traditional arts and crafts, including the production of mulberry tea, wine, and soap. More than 2,000 villagers in five provinces have benefitted from this. In 1993, the Lao Sericulture Company was launched to oversee and manage Kommaly's many initiatives. Her amazing work has covered the whole cycle of silk production, from growing mulberry trees, raising silkworms, and creating natural dyes, to training, research, provision of tools, and local and international marketing of highly-prized handmade silk items. Despite numerous adversities, she has walked from village to village to

personally teach and encourage, and to patiently set up silk houses where young women and men can weave world-class products.

The soft-spoken Kommaly says of her decades-long work, “Our goal is to strengthen the position of women by giving them a dependable income and thus improve the chances of their children.” Clearly, she has done this—and much more.

In electing Kommaly Chanthavong to receive the 2015 Ramon Magsaysay Award, the board of trustees recognizes her fearless, indomitable spirit to revive and develop the ancient Laotian art of silk weaving, creating livelihood for thousands of poor, war-displaced Laotians, and in the process preserving the dignity of women and her nation’s priceless cultural treasure.

## 2015 Ramon Magsaysay Awardee

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### Personal Data

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Awardee	: KOMMALY CHANTHAVONG	
Nationality	: Laotian	
Date of Birth	: 16 March 1944	
Civil Status	: Married	
Spouse	: Noulieme Chanthavong	Occupation: Advisor, Phontong/Camacrafts Handicrafts Cooperative and Lao Sericulture Company, Laos
Children	: Boby Vosinthavong	Occupation: General Manager, Phontong/Camacrafts Handicrafts Cooperative and Lao Sericulture Company, Laos
	Souphaphone “Po” Chanthavong	Occupation: Designer, Mulberries, Laos
	Sompasong Loc Chanthavong	Occupation: Marketing Manager, Mulberries, Laos

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### Educational Background

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1971 (6 months)	Training in Nursing, Sriracha Hospital, Chonburi Province, Thailand,
1966	Diploma in Nursing , Ecole des Infirmiers et Infirmieres

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### Employment/Professional Background

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1993-Present	Founder and Manager, Lao Sericulture Company (Mulberries), Laos
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1976-Present Founder, Phontong/Camacrafts Handicrafts Cooperative, Laos

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**Honors/Awards Received**

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| 2011 | International Women of Courage Award, United States Department of State, Washington D.C., USA                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 2011 | 'Special Achievement Award' to Kommaly Chanthavong for her creative and inspiring work over many decades in preserving the environmental and cultural benefits of Laos' long tradition of community sericulture, The Samdhana Institute, Global Greengrants Fund and International Funders for Indigenous Peoples, Vientiane |
| 2005 | 1000 Women Nobel Peace Prize Nominations, Peace Women Across the Globe, Bern, Switzerland                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |