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Cambodian death camp survivor Chath Piersath narrates his experiences while playwright Tom DeTitta listens in Americus on Monday. Piersath, 27, will collaborate with DeTitta in a play that explores the loss of childhood in Cambodia and is scheduled for a winter quarter production at Georgia Southwestern State University's Fine Arts department.

Play to explore death-camp survivor's experiences

By HAL MCKENZIE

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Losing one's freedom is bad enough, but victims of war and tyranny are often robbed of their childhood as well, in some ways a more terrible loss, because while freedom can be restored, a lost childhood cannot.

Chath Piersath, 27, a survivor of the Cambodian death camps, is working with playwright Tom DeTitta of Americus, author of "And Grace Will Lead Me Home: The American POW Drama," on a theater production that will explore the loss of childhood just as DeTitta's play, currently playing at Georgia Southwestern State University's Fine Arts Theater, focuses on the loss of freedom. The working title of the upcoming production is "United Nations Foreign Aid to Cambodia: Searching for Childhood in Cambodia," and will premier during the winter quarter at GSW, DeTitta said.

Piersath and DeTitta were interviewed on Monday in DeTitta's apartment in Americus shortly before Piersath returned to his residence in Lowe, Mass.

When the communist Khmer Rouge took over Cam-

bodia in 1975, Piersath was five years old, the second youngest in a family of four brothers, three sisters and his mother in the village of Nymit, Battambang province. His father, a soldier with the Lon Nol government, was killed in the war.

"It was hard for us. We traded everything for food, and when we ran out we didn't have food for awhile. We had to eat wherever we could," Piersath said.

Soon the true horror of the Khmer Rouge "agrarian program" took shape. "They evacuated us to the countryside. We were already in the country, but they didn't like us being in our homes," Piersath said.

Then they broke up families, moving people to different work camps according to age. "I didn't understand - I was only a child. They made the young people of one age go there, and another age go over here. ... During that five years, I was in the children's camp," Piersath said.

The children were made to work all day and attend

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indoctrination sessions at night. "We were working from five in the morning until six at night. After that we had to come to a meeting ... It was 'comrade' this and 'comrade' that, and you had to report. If anyone seemed lazy, you had to point them out," Piersath said. Those "pointed out" were deprived of food or given harder work.

The work included digging irrigation ditches, loading dirt, building dams, scaring crows from the fields and sowing rice. "There was plenty of rice, but they didn't give it to us. We didn't know where it went. Later they said all the rice went to China," Piersath said.

Piersath did not witness the mass executions that characterized Khmer Rouge rule, but he saw children die of malnutrition. "I didn't see any killing, but it was lack of food ... Some of my friends witnessed the killings. Some of them were forced to do the killing themselves," he said.

In 1979, when Piersath was 10, the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and deposed the Khmer Rouge regime. In his province, "The Khmer Rouge dropped everything and left, and the children started running," he said.

Searching for his family, he first found his younger sister, then their mother; then the three of them searched for the rest. His oldest brother and his family were killed, but the rest of Piersath's family was eventually found alive.

Piersath's family made it to the border town of Aranyaphretet, and from there into Thailand to a refugee camp, where they applied for immigration to the United States.

After spending six months in a Philippines transition camp, Piersath wound up in Boulder, Colo., sponsored by the Presbyterian Church, living with an American family.

Until then, Piersath had never received any education, even in his native language. Starting school in the fifth grade, however, he gradu-

ated from Denver West High School, then from World College West in Petaluma, Calif., with a degree in international service and development. He also became a naturalized U.S. citizen.

In 1994-96, Piersath returned to Cambodia as a human rights worker. Fellow worker Robin Mauney introduced him in 1995 to Tom DeTitta, director of World Communities Center for Community-Based Theater based at GSW. DeTitta was working with the Cambodian Min-

istry of Culture and with the United Nations Childrens Fund interviewing child prostitutes, which had become a burgeoning problem in the main cities as impoverished rural parents sold their children into prostitution.

Looking at the current situation in Cambodia, "I get very angry and sad about the whole situation. These are people who have been wounded. A healing process has to be done in order for that country to go anywhere in the future," Piersath said.

"I was thinking what can I do as a Cambodian, to start with the healing of my own wounds, then help others heal theirs. ... There is so much rage there. What I can do with my anger is turn it to something good I'm at that level now," he said.