



# Lyma Nguyen



*Lyma is certainly making a name for herself. For the last six years she has been working tirelessly, with little support and without any financial reward, as Independent Counsel representing the ethnic Vietnamese victims before an international tribunal prosecuting the most senior leaders of the Khmer Rouge. The offences include genocide, crimes against humanity, homicide, torture and religious persecution. In recognition of her dedication and achievements, Lyma was awarded the Prime Minister's Executive Endeavour Award earlier this year.*

*Can you tell me a little about your work?*

The first two years of my pro bono work involved multiple trips to Cambodia to interview survivors who had been positively targeted for extermination. One initial challenge was gaining the trust of my clients in order to access their stories. Victims of genocide simply do not trust everyone. Being able to speak their language enabled me to communicate with them without interpreters which was a great advantage. Some had not spoken for more than thirty years about their experiences. When they did speak, they spoke of horrific crimes – mass deportation to Vietnam, torture, cannibalism, rape, mass execution of family members, details about methods of killing and torture that would make any ordinary person wretch and cry. They also feared repercussions for speaking to me and I therefore had to explore various protective measures for the group.

*You have been doing all this work voluntarily. How have you been able to manage?*

Well, it has certainly had its challenges. The reality is that victims of atrocity crimes do not have the capacity to pay

for legal representation. All my work has been done in parallel with my work as a Commonwealth prosecutor here in Darwin – before I go to work, on evenings and at weekends. Most of my trips to Cambodia were conducted on my annual leave and at one stage through a seven month period of leave without pay. Finding the time to do the work and with little external support has been a struggle. Also, appearing fairly young and being a female lawyer means that regardless of your abilities and hard work, there will always be issues with earning respect on your merits. It has certainly been a lonely journey at times. Few of my friends in Darwin know what I do in Cambodia and few in Cambodia know of my domestic life in Australia. I have to say I do feel tired!

*What started your interest in human rights issues?*

People often think that my interest started because I was born in a refugee camp in Indonesia but I actually have few memories of that time. I believe an interest in human rights starts with having an open mind and a curiosity to observe and critically analyse the state of affairs around you. Reading a lot in my childhood, and becoming the

president of Amnesty International at my high school and university, helped me to develop an acute sense of human rights, both as a concept and as a call for action. However contrary to some fantasies of my youth, it has become clear that human rights work is not all glorious. If one is serious about the work, it is usually blood, sweat and tears in settings marred by political challenges and limited resources.

*What hopes do you have for the future?*

It is important not to rely solely on the legal proceedings. Complementary activities beyond the advocacy work is necessary to ensure that even if the crimes against this group do not make their way into the legal record, they will make their way into the historical record.



Zoe Marcham