

Transcript of interview with Sokeo Ros

Interviewer: Katherine Long

Date: 21 March 2014

Location: Everett Dance Studio, 9 Duncan Ave, Providence, RI 02906

KL: I was wondering first of all if you could just introduce yourself.

SR: OK. My name is Sokeo Ros. I live on 348 Adelaide Avenue, Providence, Rhode Island. I am director of the hip hop dance program here at Everett Company Stage and School. I've been here since '95, '96 at the age of 15, 16 ... and we offer free classes here to those who can't afford it in the performing arts ... and I've been performing and touring since '99, been teaching since '99 and currently in school and graduating in June – hopefully.

KL: *[laughter]* Yeah...that goes for all of us.

SR: Right, right.

KL: Where do you live in relation to the pond?

SR: I live right – the street right before the pond. So – there's my street, and then there's the open parking lot – there was a Stop & Shop there, now there's a gym and [1:00] there's a high school there, and right behind the high school is that pond.

KL: When did you move there and why did you move there?

SR: Well, actually, we moved, we – before, when we came to the United States, we lived in the West End. It's a very impoverished neighborhood, a gang neighborhood, you know, drugs, prostitution and stuff, so ... we didn't actually move out until I went to high school, which was around '95 ... around '95, '96-ish we moved to the Reservoir Triangle, but when we moved, we went to Algonquin, and we still didn't know about the pond, and we were in the area. We knew there was a body of water there, we just didn't know what it was or what it was about. Nobody really ever spoke of it. We didn't actually find out until three or four years ago, when we moved two streets back to Adelaide, which is right before the pond, and then there's a big fence that says in Spanish and in English, "precaution," and stuff like that; "contaminated" ... and we saw a lot of people there, just – [2:00] I don't know if they were protesting there or just doing some kind of news – so that's when we actually found out ... so, I mean, when we bought the house, a few years ago, the realtor didn't mention anything about that. So...

KL: About what?

SR: About the pond.

KL: Really.

SR: Yeah. Or the soil. Or what's in the air. Or whatever it is, you know. So ... we were shocked when some guy came to our door and was like, "We would like to install this ventilating system so all the bad air goes out from your house."

KL: What's in the air? What's your understanding ...

SR: I'm not sure. But a lot of the houses have that ventilating system, that takes – sucks out all the bad air, contaminated air, that goes from the basement, and pulls it out from the basement. Because I guess it's in the soil?

KL: Hm.

SR: We plant gardens and stuff. I mean, we haven't died yet, but my mother, she's a gardener so she plants everything.

KL: So when you say, "we," you mean your family? [3:00]

SR: Yeah.

KL: Who do you live with?

SR: Well, we all bought the house. I live on the third floor, my sister lives on the second floor, my brother lives in the basement – which is horrible, because that's where the filtration system is at – and my parents live on the first floor. So we bought the house collectively.

KL: Is it loud? The filtration system.

SR: No. Not at all. No, you don't hear it. You don't hear it.

KL: *[laughter]* Um ... so just returning to your first memory of the pond, when you were there and people were protesting ... what did you think at the time?

SR: Well I don't know if they were protesting – they were doing some kind of news – but I was like, "What's going on here?" I mean, I heard stories when we moved here about it being contaminated, but not to that point and they were just – I don't know. We just actually passed by, and there were people standing there, saying this place is contaminated, the state needs to do something about it, or the city needs to do something about it, because there's people that live here, and it's in the soil, and all this [4:00] other stuff ... so that was like – we didn't even hear about this. At all.

KL: And how did that make you feel?

SR: Um ... uncomfortable. Because, I mean, my daughter stays with me a lot, and – and there's a high school that's right there, right where the pond is at, which is strange, and there's also a filtration system in there, so I've heard, and an evacuation system, I think? And if the toxicity level gets too high, the school gets evacuated. Um ... I haven't seen it done yet. I mean, I have seen fire drills. I've seen the kids outside, but they go back in right after, so ... that's just strange to have a high school right there. I mean, to me anyway. You know, so – and, within the high school – there's a fence, um, on my street, right, and then the high school, and then the high school, and behind the high school there's a big fence as well that looks over a dry part of the pond. [5:00]

KL: What do you think about all the fences, and all the signs on them?

SR: It looks institutionalized, for one. It looks like a jail, honestly. And, it just – well, for one, it doesn't look pretty. Um – it's not attractive, it's – well, I think the fence is needed, because people might get in there, but – at the same time, besides Holly [Ewald], what is this city really doing about that ... and ... I haven't spoken to her much about that ... I know there's some kind of thing going on where the contamination is lessening somehow, right...

KL: Yeah. Yeah, the city's trying to work to ameliorate that with –

SR: Right, but it's been there for so long.

KL: Right. It's really hard.

SR: And for the community to not – I mean, for me to move in and not really know about it, and I know plenty more who don't know about it. So ...

KL: Um – you said that your family has a garden. What do you plant in it?

SR: Stuff we eat. Like, tomatoes, chili peppers, cucumbers [6:00], squash – um – it's not lemongrass, what is it. It's a leaf, it's an Asian leaf, it's a green Asian leaf – dammit, it's a green Asian leaf, it's, um – It grows as a plant, there's thorns, we put it in soups and stuff...

KL: The only one I know is lemongrass.

SR: Then probably it's lemongrass.

KL: *[laughter]*

SR: It's probably lemongrass. Well, one of them things. And so they, we grow all that stuff, we use it, but a lot –

KL: What do you make with it?

SR: Huh?

KL: What do you make with it?

SR: Well soups, you know. And we eat our vegetables fresh. But the lucky part is that a lot of the stuff, she doesn't plant directly in the ground. I know the flowers are, though, are planted directly in the ground, roses and whatever else she gardens. But the – the stuff that we do consume, it's in buckets and she has her own dirt and soil that she buys from gardening stores or whatever.

KL: So, you're not worried?

SR: It's too late to worry now, really. *[Both laugh.]* [7:00] It's too late now, since we been doing that since we moved in like three or four years ago.

KL: So you're only going to start worrying when you sprout gills?

SR: Yeah, maybe ... gills, or an extra arm ... might be needed...

KL: What do you think would happen to somebody who went swimming in the pond?

SR: I don't know. I don't know how contaminated it is. I don't know what the levels of that is, I don't know – cuz I know there's um – there's that walkway to go fishing. I heard of people fishing all the time behind Reservoir. And I'm sure that's that same area – but they never keep the fish. I never heard of anyone keeping the fish. I hope no one keeps the fish. So, I don't know if that's connected. This is what I don't know about the place, and I live there – stuff I'm hearing through Holly and stuff like that, so I don't know what the – uh – how dangerous it is. I mean, it has to be really dangerous since they put a filtration system in your house...but not dangerous enough to [unintelligible] a school.

KL: Can you [8:00] see the pond from your house?

SR: No. But it's like a walk away. Like a two-minute walk. If that. And then there's the river – my house on Adelaide is like this, and there's the fence, the school – behind it right here, there's another street, and behind those houses there's the flowing pond or whatever. And to the side of the school there's the dried-up part of it. Where there's a big tube or something – it's industrialized-looking, it's ugly. I mean, it's very close.

KL: How do – do you interact with the pond at all?

SR: Nope. I stay away from it, especially since I heard what it's about. I don't go near it, I don't know anything of it. I haven't heard anything from the city – like they never sent no notifications to your house, some letter or paper or anything about it – they may have a couple years ago, but that's about it.

KL: When you do [9:00] I mean – when do you see the pond, somehow, when you're walking around or anything – what's your gut reaction?

SR: Well, for one, I'm like, this is nice to have water around your house, which is great, you know, water's always nice to have around the house – but then there's like – I've heard about it being contaminated. So my gut reaction is just – stay away from it. I mean, I drive by it or walk around it, but we never really go near it. I don't know if it's in the air or stuff like that. I don't even think about it. Most of the time, I don't even think about the pond at all. And I live there. So...

KL: Why do you think it's nice to have water by your house?

SR: Well I like water in general. Like – a beach, a lake. I think it's refreshing. I think, you know, it's something beautiful about nature that offers to mankind and stuff like that. So I think water's great. But then it being contaminated, it's like – whomp. [10:00]

KL: *[laughter]* Is the pond different in different seasons?

SR: I don't know.

KL: You don't know?

SR: Yeah. I was tempted to go one time to – there's a, uh, a pathway behind Job Lot – but, I don't know. I've heard rumors, stuff like, “Oh, it's so contaminated you don't even want to go there,” “The air's bad,” or whatever.

KL: What about the neighborhood where you live, the streets that you live on? How is that different from where you lived before?

SR: Before? You mean on the West End?

KL: Yeah.

SR: The West End was very, very, very urbanized, if you want to call it that. It was very hood ... um, it's very loud. It's a gang neighborhood. Cuz my house where I lived at was an actual gang household. I lived on the second floor. So the first floor was gang members. [11:00] They didn't bother us because my father drove them to work, they worked together and stuff, so they looked after me. But since they were a gang household, there's always opposing gangs, so my house got shot up all the time. Bullet holes and stuff ...

and then there's transvestite prostitutes down the street and at the other end there's like chickens running around and then across the street from that there's like a rubber factory, a plastic factory, and we can breathe in that the whole time, and the lemonade truck sold drugs, stuff like that. There's explosions and car crashes right into my porch. So that's where I was living at. So this is coming from the war in Cambodia to the refugee camps to the United States, where it's the land of opportunity and golden roads and stuff – and we came into this. We were fortunate to move into the Triangle because it was such a culture shock. Even moving schools – because I went to Classical High School – different atmosphere. And the area [12:00] – it's diverse, it's completely diverse. You know, Caucasians, blacks, Asians, Spanish, whatever – we have it in the neighborhood. I think it's a beautiful neighborhood, too. It's quiet, it's not loud, it's nice. There's a lot of trees, which I like. I love trees. And then there's this pond. *[KL laughter.]* That nobody goes near.

KL: What do you – what do you like the most about your neighborhood?

SR: I like the big streets. I like the fact that it's diverse, and not just one subcategory or minorities per se. Um – I like the fact that people can walk around. People walk around a lot, I see people exercising – old women, walking around. I know Sebastien lives in my neighborhood, he's with Community Music Works – did you guys interview him?

KL: I think so?

SR: Yeah, great guy. He runs all the time. Jogging. So, it's nice to see that. It's just refreshing compared to what I was at – where I was at [13:00] – on the West End. Refreshing in a sense.

KL: “In a sense” – what do you mean?

SR: I mean, now that you're mentioning it, every time I say “refreshing,” the pond comes into my mind and takes the word “refreshing” away. I don't know what's being done with the thing – I know Holly's sent me so many letters – not letters, emails – I haven't had a chance to do anything yet.

KL: What do you not like about your neighborhood?

SR: Contamination. To be honest, that's really it. The neighborhood is great. It's a great neighborhood to raise a family, whatever you want. There's a school there, which is great. But – you know. There's a gym right across the street from me, which is cool, and if you're into that church stuff, the Renaissance Church is right there – they make churches anywhere nowadays – I think in that vicinity there's like four churches, in a garage and stuff *[SR laughter]* – I don't do that *[KL laughter]* – I don't know, it's quiet, it's

nice, no one really bother you, there's a neighborhood cop that drives by every now and then, there's [14:00] crime watch – I don't care too much about that but, it's a just, a nice neighborhood compared to what I was at. Anything compared to what I was at is a nice neighborhood. So, this was a step up.

KL: What are the people like in your neighborhood?

SR: Um, there's a two houses down there was an older couple, who complained about my music sometimes, because we'd have barbeques, I like barbeques, and we'd just play music and then he'd come down and complain about the music every now and then – he moved. Or I think he passed away. The neighborhood is nice. Down the street there's Dominicans and Spanish people, they're nice people as well. Down the other end as well there's an African right – oh, Cambodians, Africans as well. I don't know, it's a very integrated neighborhood. Nobody fights or fusses with each other. There's no, like, pointing of fingers. There's no – uh, I don't know. It's just so different [15:00] from where I used to be at.

KL: Do you know your neighbors?

SR: Some, not all. I know people on Algonquin and some people on Alvin and Adelaide. I don't know every single neighbor, though. It's nice to be there, but a lot of them also keep to themselves, as well. You know. It's weird about Providence sometimes. Providence in general. A lot of them don't really say hi. Neighbors aren't really friendly sometimes. But I walk around every now and then. I'll say hi every now and then. I will have initiate the "hi" to get, maybe, a wave back. *[KL laughter.]* But then maybe, during the summertime, I have a lot of tattoos, so I may be stereotyped into a category, especially because of where I came from. So ... hopefully they wave. My neighbor before, that was right next to me, we always had conversations with each other, before he passed away.

KL: What did you talk about?

SR: Anything. He spoke about the neighborhood. But he never mentioned the pond. Never mentioned the pond. He mentioned, oh this guy down here is very nice, or this guy ... he's one of [16:00] those neighbors who actually walks or who sees you walking by he'll greet you ... that's a neighbor. I mean, so, but he never mentioned the pond. I don't know if he even knew about it.

KL: Really.

SR: Yeah. I had to check the back of his house. Because they moved now. Because he – him and his wife passed away the same night.

KL: Oh, wow.

SR: It's a conspiracy.

KL: What do you mean?

SR: Weird. Should I say this on video – I mean, on audio?

KL: Uh – I mean, it's going into some archives, but chances are low that people are going to access it, so...

SR: Well here's the thing, right, so – the son that was living there, he came home, the mother was really sick – stuff like that, in hospital at some times. The father I think is a war veteran, he has a prosthetic leg. So he always takes care of his wife, stuff like that, they were on a lot of medication. They were sleeping [17:00] during the day. At 11:00, twelve, two, three o'clock, the son came home. I didn't think nothing of it, went off to work. Around 11, 11:30, I came home, hear yelling in the streets – it was raining, and I find there's ambulances and stuff – and they both passed the same night.

KL: What! Something's fishy going on.

SR: Yeah. So. I keep that there. I don't know what happened. I don't know anything about it. All I know's they were great neighbors. So. That was it.

KL: What, um...

SR: It's an older neighborhood, too. There's a lot of old folks there. In my street, this street, the street after, there's a lot of older folks.

KL: This is maybe a weird question, that you might not be able to answer, but what does your neighborhood smell like?

SR: Huh. Sometimes – you know, I love the smell of food [18:00], so when someone's cooking I think it's great, that you smell food. I don't really smell like – it doesn't smell. Like my old neighborhood, you could smell the rubber factory, plastic – sometimes you could smell food, too, I love smelling food, someone's culture, so whatever they're cooking, I like that – and here in [unintelligible] it's even better. But there's no bad smells. There's no trash smells. There's no contaminated smells. There's no fermented smells. Sometimes you can just smell fresh air. As weird as that sounds, being next to that pond and whatever contamination that is. Sometimes it's just refreshing, to breathe in that air – I mean, it's not as great as New Hampshire air – but it doesn't smell, which is a good thing.

KL: What sorts of food can you smell around your neighborhood? [19:00]

SR: Well since there's so many cultures in there, Asian food, Cambodian food, which I know very well, Spanish food, which I love – oh, Popeye's is right there. I love Popeye's but I'm on this cleansing thing

right now where I'm dieting; I'm trying this new lifestyle, eating healthier. So Popeye's is a killer. I love the smell of Popeye's. There's a dry cleaners, so you smell fresh dry cleaning a lot, it's right around the corner. And that's basically it, so...it's actually a nice neighborhood.

KL: What do the houses look like?

SR: There's one-family houses, which is nice, there's two-family houses, there's three-family houses. Nothing there is run-down, on my street anyway. I know on the other street, Crescent – not Crescent, Algonquin, where the Triangle is – there's a couple houses where one is boarded up because a fire happened and there's another one [20:00] that maybe that – not that it's dingy, but it's not upkept. But the majority of the neighborhood is very nice-looking. It's very pretty, in the fall, and in the spring, when the flowers are starting to bloom and the trees are coming in. It's a beautiful site to see. I was going to say something...

KL: Maybe it will come back to you.

SR: Oh, across the street is an empty parking lot because when Stop & Shop was there, there was a Stop & Shop gas station, which I thought was great, because I could get gas, it was convenient, I could go food shopping, [unintelligible] whatever. But Holly was telling me it's because Stop & Shop shut down. Funding or whatever it was. But I think it's because of the pond. And I'm glad they shut it down because I buy fresh produce and she has this theory maybe there's an underlying story – but now the building's empty [21:00] what I don't like about it is that people go there and drive all the time, you know what I mean. I hear motorcycles, people running their motorcycles – which I love – but then late at night one time it was twelve, midnight, and people are drifting. [*Imitates noise of drifting.*] All those little racers are going in there and drifting, all those little Honda Civics and whatever it is, I'm just like, "Aww. Can I just call the cops, yo?" Cuz I live right across the street and I hear that in the middle of the night and I'm like, "Goddammit." It's the only thing I hate. It's the only thing I hate.

KL: That's really funny. What do you wish you knew about the pond?

SR: I wish I knew about the pond. I wish I knew it was there in the first place. I wish I knew – I wish there was this thing that sends out to everyone in the neighborhood, "Hey, this is where the pond is at right now, this is where we're working on it," some kind of notification that there is work towards it. I'm sure people in there know about it but a lot of them don't know about what's going on with the pond. [22:00] And if there was some kind of letter or notification every month or so, or every trimester, that says, "Hey,

this is what work is being done, and if you want to help out,” – I know I’ve seen maybe one or two letters before – “If you want to help out, you can come,” or “Here’s the progress of the pond, here’s the level of toxicity right now and here’s what we’re doing to help clear that and this is what the city is doing,” but we don’t receive anything like that. I think maybe once or twice. But I might be being – I might be lying. I wish there was something like that that tells us about the pond. I mean, I wanna take my daughter out there to the pond, go out and do something. I know – is Holly doing some kind of arts thing there.

KL: Yeah, yeah.

SR: It’s safe?

KL: Yeah. I mean, nobody goes into the pond but –

SR: You mean the water?

KL: Right. Um...it’s safe to be around it. There’s a baseball field and a park.

SR: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I’ve seen the baseball field. So ... I wanna know stuff about that. A letter. Somebody write me a letter. [23:00]

KL: What – um – what do you wish you could do with your daughter at the pond?

SR: Just to be able to go there. I don’t even know where it is in the vicinity. I’ve never walked there. I know she told me where the baseball field is at; they’re doing something there as well. I mean, I’d like to go to the Job Lot and walk on that path. There’s a nice path, I think. I mean, that’s what they tell me. So, just, like, to be able to – I brought her to the high school – we go ride our bikes – so I brought her to the high school and we go by the fence, and sometimes, I’m like, *[goofy voice]* “Don’t touch the fence,” because what we see from the high school is very ugly. We got the high grass, and the dry, kinda, little bit of water, and a big tube. So, that’s not pretty to look at. You know what I should do? Take a picture of it and send it to you guys. Show you what it looks like.

KL: Yeah, that’d be great. Um – that’s all the questions I have. Is there anything else you think I should know?

SR: Huh. Besides the letter [24:00] ... I don’t think so. I think I said everything I wanted to say. Um ... I don’t know. That’s pretty much it. The protesting stopped. That’s pretty much done. I don’t know of anything else good there.

KL: OK. Well thank you so much for your time. I appreciate it.

SR: Thank you. That was cool.