Legacies of War Celebrates 15 Years of Success, Honors Outgoing Executive Director Channapha Khamvongsa and Welcomes New E.D. Sera Koulabdara

PRESS RELEASE

September 10, 2019 — At its 15th Anniversary Gala this evening, Legacies of War will join with 200 supporters, partners and friends to celebrate 15 years of success in raising awareness of the 80 million Vietnam War-era unexploded bombs in Laos, helping to secure historic funding to accelerate the removal of unexploded bombs and support survivors, and advancing a constructive bilateral relationship between the United States and Laos. Legacies achieved these milestones by building community and developing leadership of the Latioan diaspora in the United States, many of whom will attend tonight’s celebration, which will be held at the Carnegie Institution for Science in Washington, D.C.

The gala will honor Founding Executive Director Channapha Khamvongsa, who has propelled the organization’s success since 2004, and welcome incoming Executive Director Sera Koulabdara. The landmark event will also recognize key champions and partners, including Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont, Lao PDR Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith, The Mines Advisory Group (MAG), Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs Stanley L. Brown, and members of the Laotian American Advocacy Organization of California.

Under Khamvongsa’s leadership, Legacies has advocated for increased U.S. support to clear unexploded bombs in Laos and help survivors, and funding has multiplied more than 20 fold - from $1.3 million in 2004 to $30 million in 2018, saving lives and creating hope for the future. But the work is far from finished. Less than 1% of the bombs have been cleared and at least 12,000 survivors and their families still need help.

To continue carrying on Khamvongsa’s leadership, Legacies of War is thrilled to welcome Ms. Sera Koulabdara as the incoming Executive Director, effective October 28, 2019. Koulabdara was selected by the Legacies Board of
Directors after a thorough search process earlier this year that was supported by an advisory committee of friends and supporters of Legacies.

“Over the last fifteen years, telling the story of war, refuge and the resiliency of the Laotian people has been the greatest responsibility and honor of my life,” said Khamvongsa. “I have full faith and confidence in Sera Koulabdara’s vision as our new Executive Director, supported by our dedicated Board of Directors.”

“My father shared painful memories of the devastating effect the Secret War had on him, our family, and the people he loved, and as a child in Laos, I remember having to walk certain paths to avoid the unexploded bombs,” said Koulabdara. “As the next Executive Director, it will be an honor and a privilege to help light new legacies for the future of Laos and the greater community who cares about our mission.”

Koulabdara brings a strong record of executive management and fundraising experience, as well as international consulting background, to Legacies. She has helped build and manage diverse organizations, including the United Way, Make-A-Wish Foundation and the Crohn’s & Colitis Foundation. She joined the Legacies of War Board of Directors in 2017, where she held several leadership positions, including fundraising chair and vice-chair. She graduated with a BA in International Business, Marketing and Spanish from Ohio State University.

“Channapha has been central to the success of Legacies of War, and we’re grateful that she will remain engaged as a Board member,” said Alexandra Hiniker, Chair of the Board of Legacies of War. “We welcome Sera’s leadership moving forward as we build on all that Legacies has achieved over the past 15 years.”

During the 15th Anniversary Gala, guests will renew their collective commitment to ending the legacy of war in Laos and inspire a new generation to work for a safer future. Attendees will include Members of Congress, former U.S. Ambassadors to Laos, and representatives from the U.S. Department of State and USAID, the United Nations, the private sector, demining operators, survivor assistance providers, the Laotian diaspora, and longtime supporters of Legacies of War.

With support from key champions and the leadership of Koulabdara, Legacies will continue working to fulfill our vision of a future of healing and hope in Laos when there are zero deaths and injuries from unexploded bombs, when all survivors receive the support that they need, and when people can farm and build on their land in safety and peace.

"Legacies of War has educated countless Americans, including Members of Congress, about the dangers of millions of Vietnam-era U.S. cluster munitions in Laos, which continue to kill and maim innocent people. We know how to deal with this deadly legacy; it is a matter of resources and political will. I am confident that Congress will continue to provide the funding to remove cluster munitions and support the victims, so the people of Laos can live and work in safety," said Senator Patrick Leahy, Vice Chairman of the Appropriations Committee and Gala Honoree.

“On the occasion of the 15th Anniversary of Legacies of War, I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to the organization for the essential role it has played in helping to raise awareness about the unexploded ordnance problem in Lao PDR aimed at securing most needed funding to clear the land and
help unexploded ordnance victims. I firmly hope that with concerted effort and assistance from the international community, every person in Lao PDR will one day live free from fear of losing a life, limb, or loved one to an unexploded bomb,” said H.E. Mr. Saleumxay Kommasith, Foreign Minister of the Lao PDR.

“The United States remains committed to clearing unexploded ordnance from Laos and Southeast Asia as we address the legacies of long-ended conflicts. Without the dedication and support of organizations like Legacies of War, this endeavor would not be possible,” said Stanley L. Brown, Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs.

“Legacies of War’s leadership and support has inspired us to raise our voice and advocate for the inclusion of Laotian history and culture in California schools,” said Pida Kongphouthone, Laotian American Advocacy Coalition of California.

“We are grateful to Legacies of War for their tireless efforts, as an ally and close partner of MAG America, in freeing Laos and its people from the impact of explosive remnants of war,” said Jamie Franklin, MAG America Executive Director.

“One more death or maiming in Laos from these munitions is one too many. I look forward to the day when all the provinces of Laos are free from these tragic reminders of war long since past . . . I want to recognize the excellent work of Legacies of War in combating the threat that unexploded ordnance (UXO) poses to the people of Laos,” said Representative Jackie Speier (D-CA 14th District), Co-Chair of the Congressional UXO Caucus.

“At Legacies of War, they dare to dream of a brighter future, bringing us closer to the goal of ridding Laos of these bombs and enabling the country to heal and move forward,” said Representative Joaquin Castro (D-TX 20th District).

“I am proud to stand with all of you in your efforts to clear UXO from Laos, and countries around the world,” said Representative Tom Emmer (R-MN 6th District).

“...I am honored to support this crucial work . . . Legacies of War has not only worked to raise awareness about this issue at the highest of levels of government, but it has fought for vital and continued funding to save lives and promote healing,” said Representative Grace Meng (D-NY 6th District).

"Legacies of War has played a crucial role in educating the Laotian American and broader communities about the U.S. secret war and its tragic aftermath. We look forward to working together to uplift the stories and experiences of Laotian Americans," said Kulap Vilaysack, Founder, Laos Angeles, Transition Advisory Committee.

“Another world became possible for Laos because of Legacies’ tireless advocacy and commitment to its people. Congratulations to Channapha Khamvongs and the Legacies family for building a historic movement within the Laotian diasporic community. I look forward to working with their board and new executive director,” said Chanida Phaengdara Potter, Executive Director & Community Architect, SEAD and Transition Advisory Committee.