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WEST COUNTY TIMES

From Laos to Richmond, local man honored by White House for environmental activism

By Robert Rogers
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RICHMOND -- When Lipo Chanthanasak was honored last month at the White House for his environmental justice work, he felt he wasn't alone.

"I didn't take the award as just for me," Chanthanasak said through an interpreter. "It was for all low-income communities fighting together. I received the honor for all people in Richmond."

The 73-year-old Laotian emigre only speaks Khmu, a tribal dialect from his native Northern Laos, but his words have stirred people in Richmond since 1991. He has been a forceful critic of Chevron's local refinery and of fossil fuel consumption generally and is a leading member of The Asian Pacific Environmental Network's (APEN) local chapter.

For his efforts, Chanthanasak was



Lipo Chanthanasak, 73, third from left clockwise, a native of Khmu ethnic group of Northern Laos, is honored during a blessing ceremony called Baci by the Asian Pacific Environmental Network community at Nevin Community Center in Richmond, Calif., on Wednesday, May 22, 2013. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)

one of 12 recipients of the Champions of Change Award, given to people each week by The White House Council on Environmental Quality for their work raising awareness about climate change and advocating for renewable energy development. While at the White House, he also took part in a panel discussion with other award recipients.

Chanthanasak was honored again Thursday night with a ceremony at the Nevin Community Center.

"Community members like Lipo are leading the way to healthy, safe and prosperous communities for all of us," Roger Kim, executive director of APEN, said in a prepared statement.

Chanthanasak's small stature and soft-spoken, native tongue -- he came to the United States in

his 50s with little formal education and never learned English -- belies a lifetime of fervent idealism and moral righteousness.

He grew up in Phoualn, a tiny village of about 200 people in Northern Laos. During the Vietnam War, he fought with a guerrilla unit alongside American troops and the CIA. When Laos fell to the communists in 1975, Chanthanasak fled to Thailand.

He returned to Laotian jungles in 1977 to join the resistance movement. In 1985, Chanthanasak returned to Thailand and landed in a refugee camp, he said.

Finally allowed into the United States in 1991, Chanthanasak faced a new reality that bore echoes of the old.

"My community faced chemical pollution, and I saw that those who suffer most are the low-income people," Chanthanasak said. "But here they stand up and demand change. The injustice creates the resistance."

For years, Chanthanasak has marched at rallies and spoken at City Council meetings, always with the aid of an interpreter. His dogged but largely unsung work was finally recognized in Washington, D.C., which he hopes will only intensify the spotlight on communities that suffer on the front lines of what he calls "fossil fuel dependency."

APEN has been among Chevron's staunchest critics, relentlessly



Lipo Chanthanasak, 73, a native of Khmu ethnic group of Northern Laos, is honored during the Asian Pacific Environmental Network special ceremony at Nevin Community Center in Richmond, Calif., on Wednesday, May 22, 2013. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)

prodding the energy giant to reduce emissions and convert more of its operations from fossil fuel refining to renewable energy production. Chanthanasak has been a key link between the group and the city's sizable Laotian community.

"Richmond is a community that can help lead the world toward renewable energy that doesn't harm health and the environment," he said. "We are proving that we can produce local clean energy good for the economy and the environment, and we can continue to push our governments in that direction."

Contact Robert Rogers at 510-262-2726 or orrogers@bayareanewsgroup.com and follow [Twitter.com/roberthrogers](https://twitter.com/roberthrogers)