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Chakra Sou, center, dances with Tiffeny Vuthy, among the audience attending the 15th anniversary celebration Tuesday of the Park Village Apartments in the community center.

Celebration of a milestone

Cambodian refugees mark 15 years of life at Park Village

By Jennifer Torres
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STOCKTON - At the end of the flower-tossing dance, girls with clinking bangles around their wrists and ankles slipped into a line and danced off the stage and into the middle of the community center at the Park Village Apartments, which was crowded with their neighbors, friends and relatives who had gathered to celebrate the community's 15th anniversary.

Many of Park Village's residents came as refugees fleeing the Khmer Rouge forces that killed nearly 2million people - more than 20 percent of Cambodia's population, and most of its artists and dancers.

Fifteen years ago, those residents, along with a nonprofit housing agency, bought Park Village, then desperately run-down, and worked to recover its potential as a community

center. Tuesday afternoon, they celebrated the milestone with dances and traditions similarly reclaimed from a difficult, violent past.

Kunthea Tuy was 9 when her father was captured by Khmer Rouge fighters. She never saw him again.

At Park Village on Tuesday, she straightened girls' skirts before they performed the flower dance and helped them pin red flowers behind their ears.

"They're so excited," she said.

 According to U.S. Census Bureau figures, more than 10,000 Cambodian people live in San Joaquin County, about 1,000 of them in Park Village.

Those who lived in the Alvarado Avenue complex in 1980s faced overcrowding and flooding.

"There was no place for the kids to play," director Sovanna Koeurt said.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development eventually assumed control of the complex after its previous owner defaulted on government loans.

Then in 1993, a low-income housing organization and a group of tenants, working together as the Asian Pacific Self-development and Residential Association, bought Park Village from HUD for \$1.

 The complex was renovated, and social service programs were developed. The association continues to offer tutoring, nutrition programs for children and seniors, dance and culture lessons, and other services.

Tuesday's anniversary began with a prayer.

Nim Ros lit five candles. "This is part of our tradition," he said.

The candles typically are part of new year celebrations, he said. Families light them to welcome each year's guardian angel.

They flickered throughout Tuesday's ceremony.

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