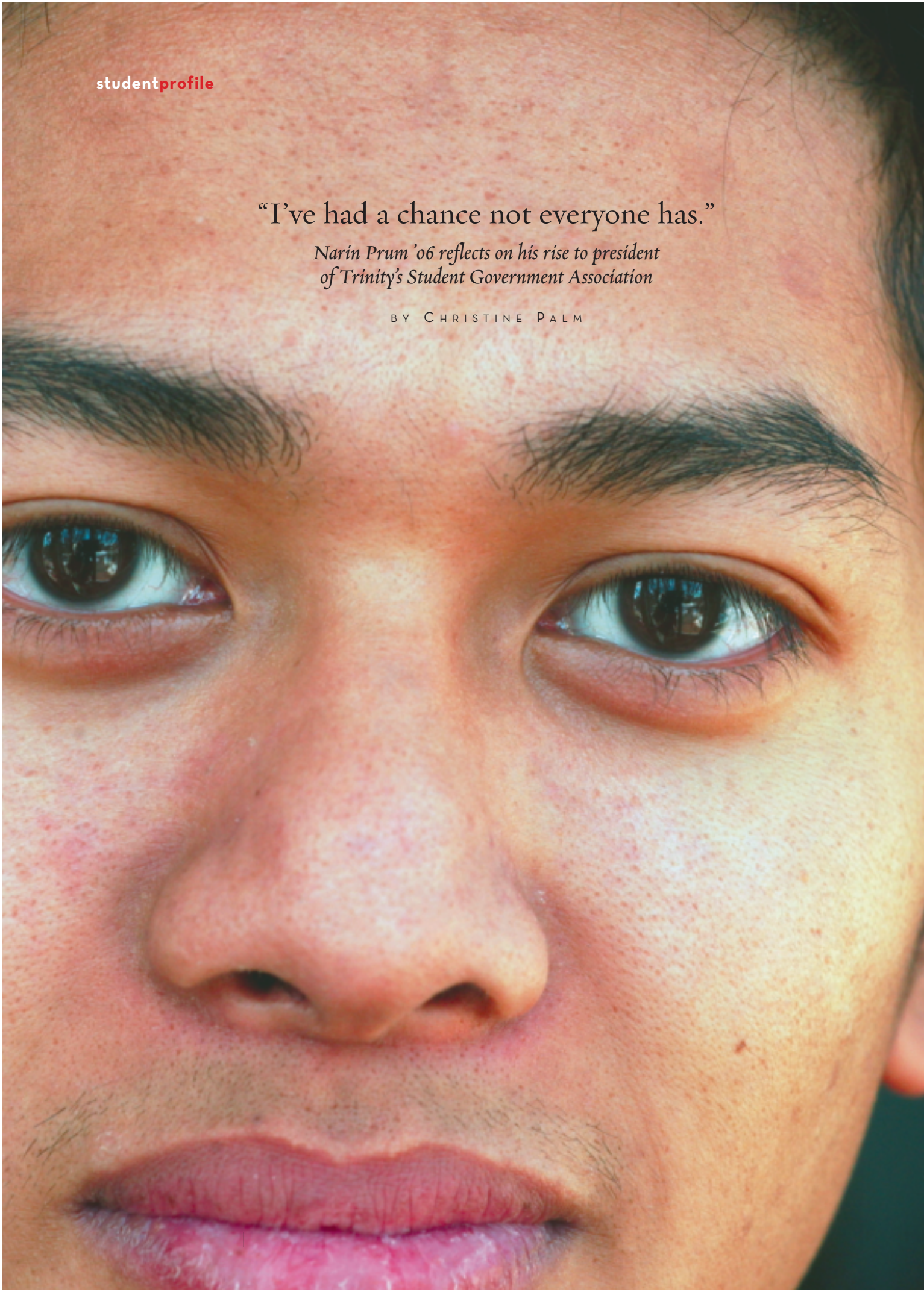


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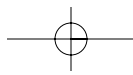
“I’ve had a chance not everyone has.”

*Narin Prum '06 reflects on his rise to president
of Trinity's Student Government Association*

BY CHRISTINE PALM



PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICK LACY



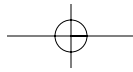


“I’m George Bush at my school,” Prum told his parents.

It’s been a long, strange journey for Narin Prum. From a refugee camp in Thailand to an apartment in the Bronx to a residence hall on the Long Walk, Prum has adjusted and readjusted, and each time, raised the bar higher. Prum was born of Cambodian parents who, fleeing the clutches of the dictator Pol Pot, emigrated to New York with their young family when Narin was only three months old.

Twenty-one years later, when Prum was elected head of Trinity’s Student Government Association, his parents didn’t fully understand the honor. So great was their psychic and physical deprivation under Pol Pot’s regime, the very idea of—and the language for—representative government had been completely erased from their memories.

Fortunately, Prum is a persuasive and clear communicator.



“Of course, they were glad for me and proud,” he recalls. “But I had to work hard at describing the scope of the responsibility of being president of the student government. They simply were used to a system where there is no voice mediating between the common people and the person at the very top—in their case, a terrible oppressor. For them, my success was, pretty much, incomprehensible. So, I finally told them: ‘I’m George Bush at my school!’” Prum, who is decidedly liberal-minded, chuckles at the irony.

“I like to see things on a large scale.”

Prum may be a perfect example of how, sometimes, the American dream manifests as something enduring. His features are distinctly Cambodian, but when he speaks, it’s with a heavy Bronx inflection that is disarming.

remain on the lowest rung of the economic ladder among Asians—that they can do it, too. They can go from urban poverty to something wonderful, as I have. If I didn’t do that, I wouldn’t be fulfilling my role in life—I’d just be taking advantage of my opportunities and being selfish.”

Prum chose Trinity over other schools because it’s “relatively small, and located in a city, so there’s a chance for me to really do something.” As head of the Student Government Association, Prum has worked for “more unity—of race, class, gender, and sexuality.” He always sports a lapel button encouraging tolerance that reads, “Don’t commit it; don’t permit it” and served as president of Trinity’s Men Of Color Alliance from 2002 to 2004.

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While he greatly respects his parents, both of whom are farmers but now work in factories, he aspires for something more. And he loves hip-hop music, which he enjoys alongside aspects of Theravada Buddhism, which his people brought with them from the Cambodian countryside.

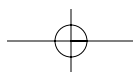
But there’s one important area in which Prum differs from many of his accomplished peers: he does not aspire to, as he puts it, “big money in a big house in the suburbs.” Rather, he plans to take his considerable smarts and energy and bring them back to the poorest part of the New York. He was recently accepted into the Teach for America program and plans, upon graduation, to return to the Bronx to teach.

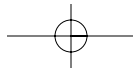
“I try to see things on a large scale and I recognize I’ve had a chance not everyone has,” he says. “But I need to try to show many of these young Cambodian kids—who

A personal history of reaching out

Prum, who graduated in the top three percent of New York’s prestigious private All Hallows High School and completed course work in sociology and government at Georgetown University in 2001, volunteers with many local community organizations, including Hartford’s Caring Families Coalition, the Create Change Coalition (where he helped battle alcohol and tobacco ads aimed at inner-city youth), the Trinity Center for Neighborhoods, and Khmer Health Advocates, a West Hartford-based group that provides health services and counseling for Cambodians.

His community advocacy work here is only the latest in a personal history of reaching out. As a young person in the Bronx, Prum worked with the Youth Leadership Project, tutored Cambodian and Vietnamese elementary school students, and served as interpreter for Cambodian community members trying to deal with





public service agencies. He also coordinated a report about Asians on welfare in New York and co-produced a documentary about Asians on welfare. But Prum isn't all business and social progress.

"Another thing I've worked for is more opportunities for students to hang out and have fun," he says. "We've put on talent shows, dances, car tournaments, touch football games, and hip-hop shows." In a manner unassuming and non-judgmental, Prum tries to make sure these events are substance-free.

Does he feel burdened (or worse, self-righteous) about his dedication to justice?

"Naw, I'm a lot like everybody else," he says. "I like to play video games and hang out, too. For me, it's about the future. I just see myself as more useful than sitting at a desk, making a lot of money, and not knowing what to spend it on."

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Nancy Birch Wagner
Dean of International
Programs and
Graduate Studies

