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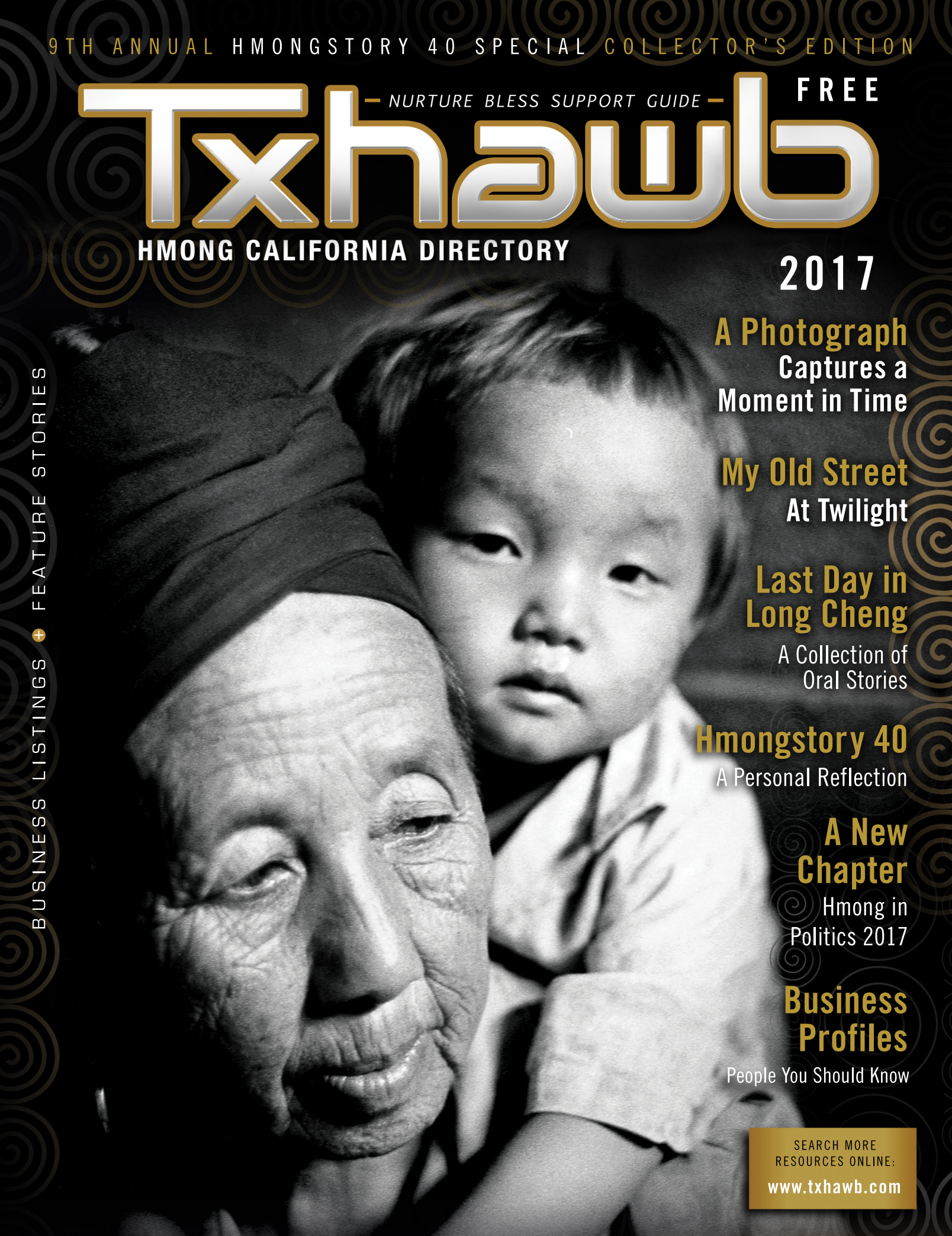
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LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHER

I wanted to first thank my family: my wife Chia; my children: Cody, Alex and Jocelyn for their patience, unconditional love, and support which gives me the strength and energy to complete each issue.

Thank you, secondly, to all the advertisers for financially supporting our publication. Readers, please look over all the advertisements and help support our advertisers when you need that type of service or goods. The advertisers make it possible for us to print and give Txhawb away for free, and the advertisers enable us to enrich our community through their meaningful, intriguing stories, and their tangible, invaluable resources.

Myself and a whole team of volunteers: individuals who passionately love the Hmong community and have dedicated the last three years of our lives to imagining, dreaming and building the amazing Hmongstory 40 Project. There are simply too many people to thank individually here, so I want to openly thank everyone who helped and volunteered to make possible the success of Hmongstory 40. It is truly a grass root movement because so many people generously contributed to making it so unbelievably magnificent. Although it would be beyond the scope of these pages to thank each one of you, I want to tell you that I know who you are, and as you read this, you must know how special your participation has been to this historic project.

After putting on two complete exhibits, one in Fresno and one in Merced, I feel properly compelled to pause to reflect on our work. *Was it worth it?*

Hmongstory 40—the exhibit came together beautifully because of the endless dedication of our team members. They devoted the best of their talents to it. But I'd like to send a very special thank you to William Cha, Meng Moua, and Thai Vang for their determination and countless hours of meticulous work, for they designed and built the heavy foundational frames and structures of the entire exhibit.

Was our exhibit, the Hmongstory 40 Project, successful? If you truly want to witness the true success of Hmongstory 40, search Facebook under "Photos of Hmongstory 40," or Google it as "Hmongstory 40 images." Search it on Youtube as well. The thousands of pictures and videos that appear will remind you of the story of our three-year journey. I encourage each one of you to take the time to reflect.

Take the time to peruse all the photos and read the comments. They are evidences of what we have achieved, of what we have accomplished together, and of how many lives we touched through our exhibit and through our sincerity towards one another, through our diligence in meeting the numerous deadlines, and, chiefly, through our perseverance during our hours of aches and pains when we had to work through many lonely nights. You'll discover in your search results how many memories and friendships we have forged along the way; how many strangers from three regions of California, separated by almost 300 miles but united by a common purpose, became a family; how many elders finally discovered a safe place to heal from their traumas of the War or the agonies of being refugees; and how they freed themselves of the burdens and weight of tragic memories of long ago.



Lar Yang
Txhawb publisher,
founder of Yang Design

Youa Za Yang
Txhawb Associate publisher
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Genuinely ask yourself this: how many young Hmong children can now look at their parents and say, "I know a little bit more about where my grandpa come from now," or "I learned about my Hmong history today"?

And the pictures we couldn't see, the pictures people took, at the Fresno and Merced exhibits–thousands of photographs of families learning about American history through the Hmong refugees' perspectives. How much history people took away in photographs or through reading the information next to the display in the exhibit. How much knowledge was shared about the Hmong diaspora.

My greatest hope is for people to always remember how our project inspired them. I hope Hmongstory 40 will continue to inspire people to volunteer to support ideas that enrich their communities. I know you can be the change you want to see in the world. You need not have to wait until you have a doctorate degree, until you become wealthy, or until you have gained vast amount of knowledge and life experiences; the moment you decided you want to commit your time and talent to support an idea you dearly believe in, you would have already profoundly begun making a difference.

I hope you would think as I once pondered on myself this question: "Had there ever been a day when a Hmong judge, Hmong doctors, shamans, business owners, community activists, Hmong politicians, professors, teachers, students, administrators, policemen, youths, and elders work together on a single project that enriches our community? With certainty, I say we all have experienced this moment during our time with the Hmongstory 40 Project. Our community needs more projects like this because such community projects would build and shape our community by honoring our history and heritage and would further pave the future for our children, based on our humanitarian ideals. Here is the definitive fact: everyone who helped with, donated to, or volunteered for, Hmongstory 40 has been changed by it.

If you truly love our community, please ask yourself the ultimate philanthropic question: What can I do to help? Once again, thank you, and enjoy this issue of Txhawb.

Lar Yang - Editor

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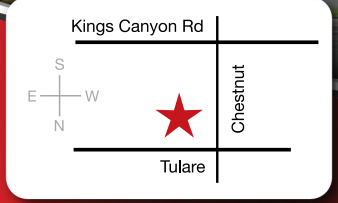


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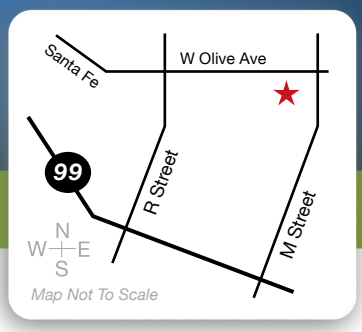
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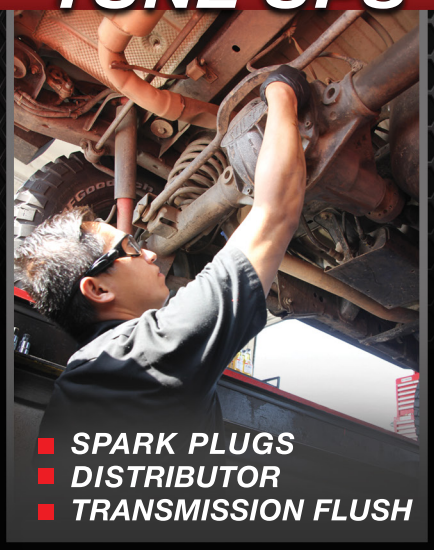
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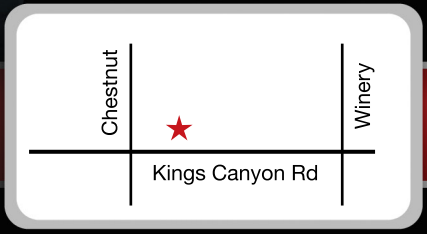
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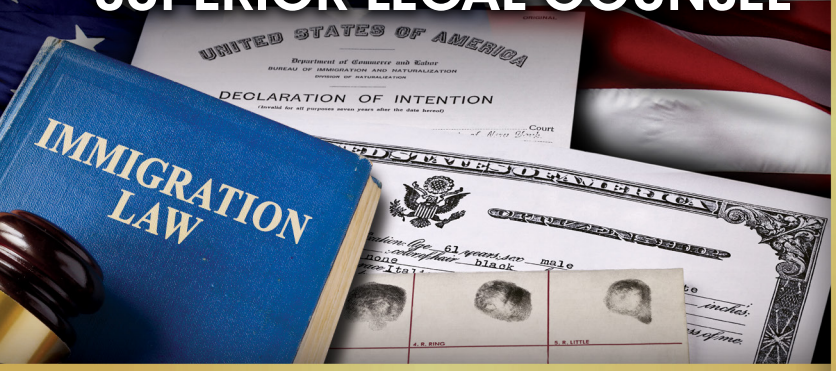
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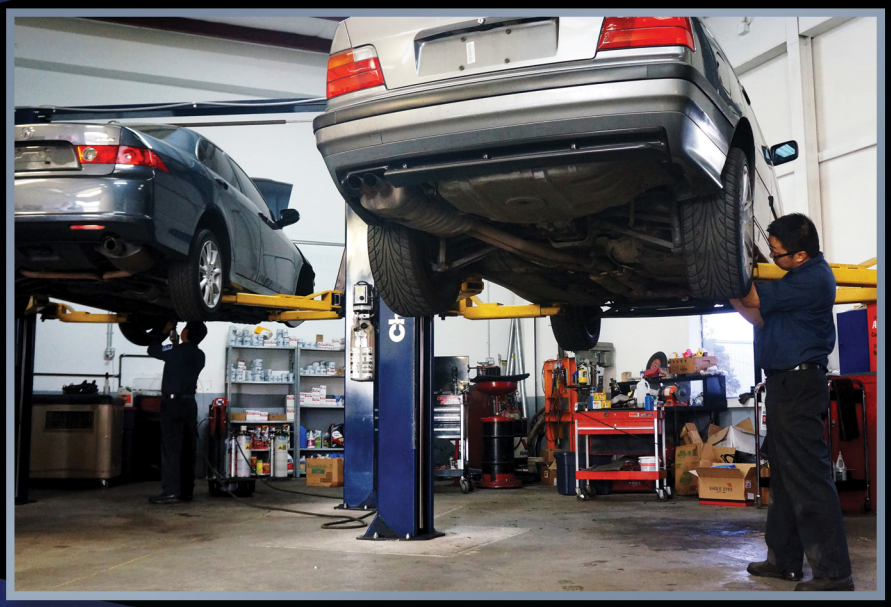
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A PHOTOGRAPH
CAPTURES A MOMENT IN TIME

Photos by Galen Beery & Shayle Miller
Written by Lar Yang

"A photograph freezes a moment in time,"

Doug Hulcher - *refugee camp photographer* once told me.

For the last three years, William Cha and I have spent countless hours, scanning and digitally repairing thousands of photographs for the Hmongstory 40 project. It is time consuming work and requires a lot patience. But in return we got such a rare and intimate glance into Hmong history. It was an astonishing experience and emotionally exhausting endeavor.

The first sets of black and white negatives we scanned were from the collection of Galen Beery, whom I have become extraordinarily close with. When one first looks at a black and white negative, it's difficult to tell how the photos will look because the negative images are reversed. But after they are scanned and transformed into vivid photographs, something very special happens.

Each time the scanner finishes scanning a negative, a new photograph would appear on the computer screen. Each photograph, an intimate, personal story frozen in time, would slowly and quietly emerge back to life.



> **Maybe history forgot about them - these unknown truths - whispers that survived through oral storytelling but absent in literary texts.**

It was as if small pieces of our Hmong history—stories of our struggles—once forgotten by time, are now re-awakened, a memory coming to light. Native American Indians once believed that a photograph trapped a person's soul. To me, the negatives are stories that had been etched into small negatives then became lost to time. Maybe history forgot about them - these unknown truths - whispers that survived through oral storytelling but absent in literary texts.

Galen Beery worked for International Volunteer Services (IVS) and spent 10 years photographing people of Laos, especially Hmong. In total, we restored over 3,000 photos. Each photograph unapologetically retells the truth about the Hmong struggles and survival in Laos around the 1960s to about the mid-1970s. The photos reveal the harshness of life that our elders had to endure. The Hmong had been refugees since they f led China, south to countries like Vietnam and Laos, the Hmong were unwanted refugees in foreign countries. Despite such unwelcoming animosity towards the Hmong at that time, the Hmong endured and scratched out a living among the harshest, highest mountain plateaus where most other ethnic people would not dare attempt to persevere against such a hard existence.

As more photos were scanned and brought back to life, the photographs started to speak in detail about the story of the Secret War. Each photo seems to speak of how the Hmong found themselves in the middle of a Communist-driven civil war, and of how we sacrificed our fathers, uncles, brothers, and sons in the name of honor and courage and freedom. Each photo speaks of how primitive slash-and-burn farmers were, illiterate and pre-literate people who, without a written language, suddenly became T-28 pilots overnight.



Hmong refugees living near military base 1970s
Photo by Galen Beery

Each photo speaks of how the Hmong were driven from their homes as the War engulfed the kingdom of a million elephants.

It speaks with an aura of sadness of how, for nearly a generation, Hmong children began to believe that rice fell from the sky because their parents lived on the constant run, never staying in one place long enough to grow and harvest a season of their own rice on the mountainous slopes. Their fathers worked not as farmers in the fields but as soldiers in a Secret War, so their family could receive rice rations from the sky, dropped down by Air America airplanes.



Hmong refugees fleeing their homes lost to war.
Photo taken in Bon Xon, Laos in 1960s

Photo by Galen Beery

In effect, living while on the run families made building temporary shelters appear like homeless vagrants fleeing with their children. Truly, a whole generation of Hmong were born as refugees on the run. Sadly, many young children died.

> **"Truly, a whole generation of Hmong were born as refugees on the run."**

The elders, whose lives were disrupted and their spirits broken and devastated by the War, would surrender to the inevitability by ingesting pea-sized chunks of opium. It is one thing to hear the whispers of these stories from our parents, but for the first time, through the experience of scanning these photographs, I got to experience the stories that are hard to find words to explain. Perhaps even by sharing with you this experience, my words fail to genuinely paint the vividness and intensity of each moment as I gazed at the newly generated images of the Hmong people on my monitor.

Besides Galen Beery, Dr. Shayle Miller, was another photographer who donated his photos to our project. We also scanned about 2,000 photos from his collection. He was a young doctor who spent some time in Thailand, treating health ailments of the Hmong and Cambodian refugees. He started buying Hmong Paj Ntaub (story cloths) and helped many refugees by taking Paj Ntaub back to the states and selling them in America. He became very close friends with his Hmong-English translator, Bryant Lee. Dr. Miller took many photos of Bryant's family.



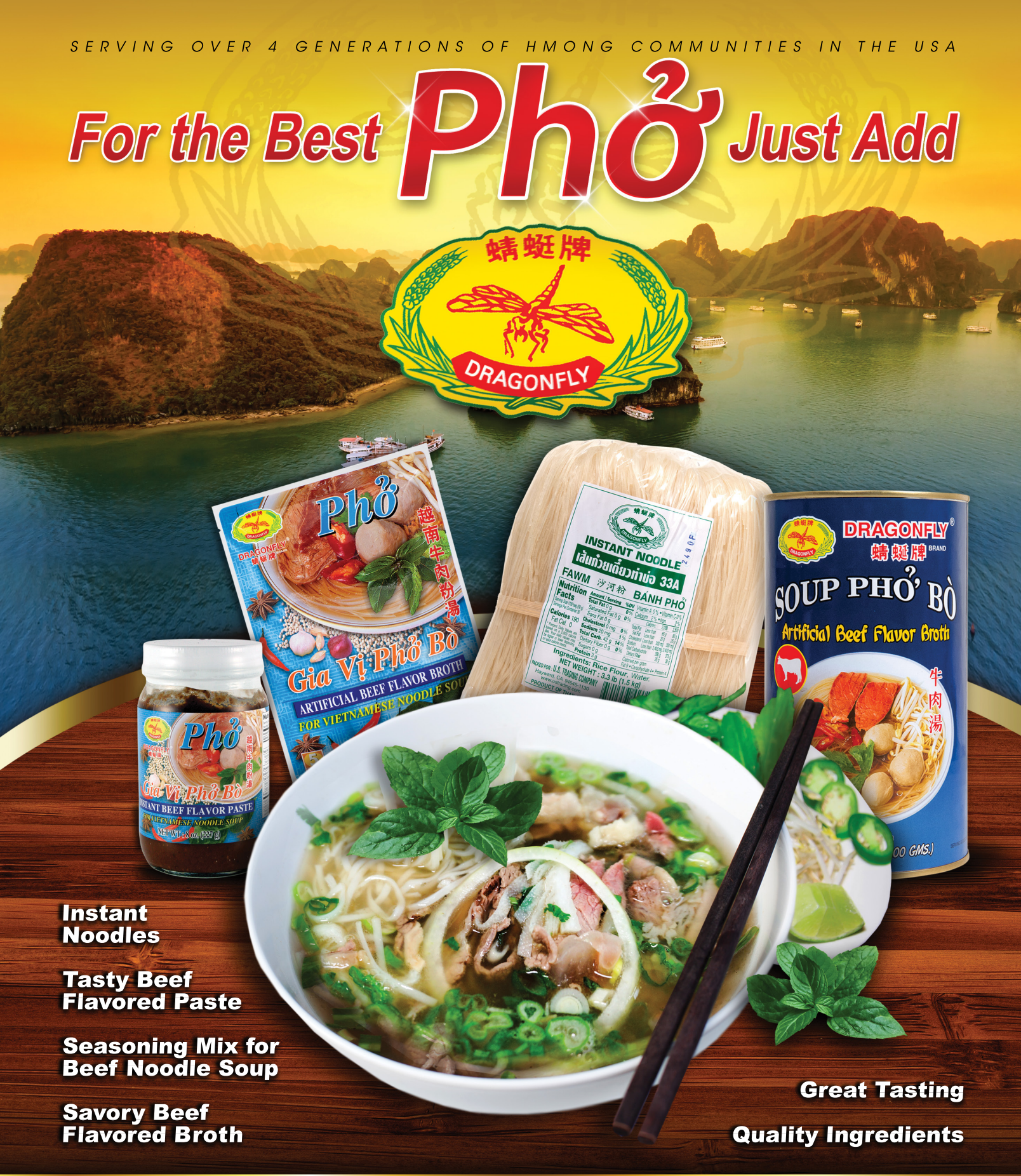
Evacuation of Samthong, Laos 1970s
Photo by Galen Beery

Dr. Miller met Bryant who was translating in the transition camp Phanatnikhom. Soon Bryant helped to organize and collected Paj Ntaub from families, friends, and neighbors in Vinai to give to Dr Miller.

In the beginning Dr. Miller would buy the Paj Ntaub and sell them to foreign workers at other camps far from Ban Vinai. Dr Miller facilitated the sales without any compensation other than to help the Hmong families. Dr. Miller brought many Paj Ntaub with him to the United States and Bryant later organized the sending of

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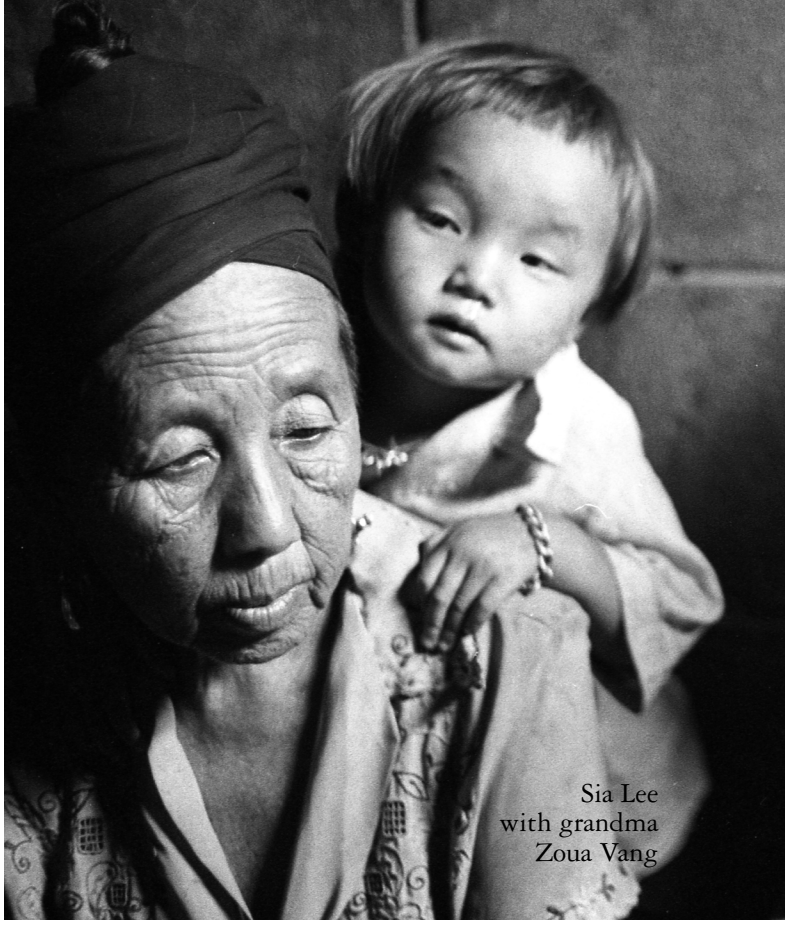
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boxes. Dr Miller would sell the Paj Ntaub at art and craft fairs. This resulted in thousands of dollars being sent back to the Hmong families in Vinai who didn't have any other means of income. This benefited many families living in Ban Vinai camp.





Sia Lee with grandma Zoua Vang

All photos by Shayle Miller

> "some are so intensely honest that they are hard to look at"

I told Dr. Miller that his photos are very compassionate and raw; some are so intensely honest that they are hard to look at. He captured the stories of the refugee camps through the eyes of a modern medical healer—a western doctor experiencing the plight of refugees, the victims of war in a third world country. He told me that he photographed what he saw because he was afraid no one would believe him without photographs as evidence.

On the cover of 2017 Txhawb is a breath-taking black and white photo of Bryant Lee's mother (Zoua Vang, the wife of Cha Long Lee) already a sixty-year-old grandmother then, photographed with her granddaughter Sia Lee. The family were living in the famous Ban Vinai Refugee camp in 1983 when this photo was taken. Bryant Lee's family had been refugees in Thailand since 1976. They first settled in Camp Nam Yao before entering Vinai in 1982. By 1986, Ban Vinai refugee camp peaked at 42,000 refugees. The photos were taken in a hot, humid concrete room where the family lived and sewed paj ntaub together. Her photo is hauntingly beautiful because it captures the beauty of all Hmong grandmothers. When you look at this photo is triggers the memory of your own grandmother. The incredible strength and wisdom written in her aged wrinkles spoke truthfully of her life and experience.



Bryant Lee's wife Chue Lee photographed with their son Pheng Lee.

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ALTERATIONS & TAILORING

I spoke to the granddaughter Sia Lee, who is in the photograph, and she talked about the fond memories of the grandmother.

"My grandma was a small woman in physical stature but a very strong woman. Grandma was strong, emotionally and mentally. She rarely got ill because she farmed daily and farming always kept her healthy. In fact, she was never sick until her passing. About 10 years ago when she was in her 90s, she got sick for a few days then passed away without much suffering. In her lifetime, my grandmother kept watch over the generations of her children and grandchildren. Every day she would cook for the family and when we had guests in our house, grandma would cook and entertain the visitors. She was a humorous woman who spoke kindly and softly and never judged you when you made a mistake."

"Grandma was the matriarch of our family. When her children had problems and wanted to break away from the family, she would be the one to fix everything and keep the family together. She was also the greatest at storytelling, preserving and passing folk tales and our history down to the younger ones. She was the anchor or the main tree that connects every one of us happily together as a whole family."

"One of the funniest facts about my grandparents lies in the line between the love and jealousy they shared with each other. My grandpa would never let my grandma go anywhere. At first, I thought it was such a guarded jealousy, but I later learned one day that it was so because he loved her so much.

Even at their old age, grandpa would still lovingly guard grandma, even during brief moments of daily outings. The inseparability between them has been evident of their timeless love for each other. However, I remember my grandmother most through her gentle acts of kindness, for she had sacrificed so much of herself for everyone in my family. She has been my inspiration and still is now my hero. In my own life, I want to be like her. I yearn more than anything to follow her example and live a meaningful life," Sia said.

I also asked Bryant about his memory of his mother.

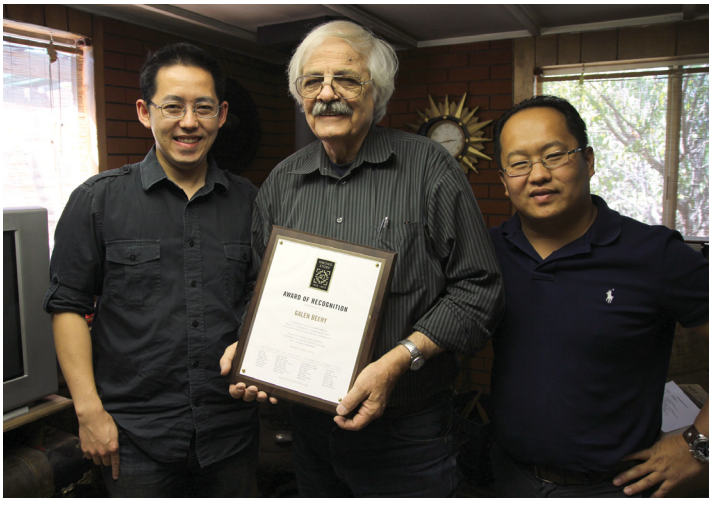
In response, he said, "My parent's generation were a very special generation of Hmong. Hard working and self-reliant, they lived with me their entire life until the moment of their passing. Without doubt, they were so strong, resilient, and resourceful people. I remember their love for all the children in our family. It is hard to find the right words to tell how much they have supported me and my brother and sisters. I know I may never be able to give my children what my parents had given to me."

Bryant continued to recount his memory of the time he spent translating with Shayle Miller, "I would always remember Shayle carrying his camera, taking many photographs, but I don't think I ever saw any of his developed photos. I didn't realize he had taken so many photos of my family. When I first saw the collection of his photos, those photos reminded me of a laborious life back in the refugee camps. There was absolutely nothing to do in the refugee camp. All my family did was sew paj ntaub. All I did was translate: I would go wherever they needed me. But these photographs also reminded me of all the places I visited by translating for the doctors who worked throughout the refugee camps. The photos Shayle Miller took gave me a sense of fulfillment, knowing that I had aided my people in my own little ways, during one of our Hmong people's most trying eras."

Photography truly does capture a moment in time. Throughout the progression of the Hmongstory 40 project, I've closely examined almost 20,000 photographs. It is a special kind of education and enrichment I didn't find in two semesters of Asian American Studies at San Jose State University or in any textbooks. This may be a repeated adage, but photos are mirrors of the truth, an undeniable evidence about our history, of why the Hmong are in America. Such is a high price the Hmong had to pay for the opportunity to make new lives in America.

I once wrote an email to thank Galen Beery for preserving such important chapters of Hmong history for our people when we didn't have the skills or ability to document our history. I promised him I would never forget what he did for our people, and I promised him I would give his gift of history back to the Hmong people, because the greatest gift one can give another person is the gift of one's own history.

If you missed the Fresno and Merced Hmongstory 40 exhibits, your last chance to experience this incredible exhibit will be during **February 11th through 25th, 2017 in Sacramento.** Please visit www.hmongstory40.org or Facebook Hmongstory 40 for the latest updates.



William Cha, Galen Beery and Lar Yang *October 2015*

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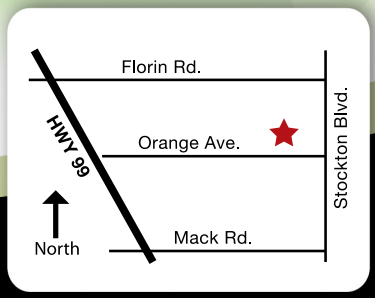


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Painting by Boon Ma Yang



MY OLD STREET AT TWILIGHT

Written by Y.J. Lee

In the twilight hours, summer nights in Fresno were much cooler: everything softened into shades of gray and, like night insects, families up and down the line of apartment buildings came out onto the street.

I wheeled out my bike, my dad gave the starting push, and I lurched down the uneven road. My cousin John squeaked around on his own bike, racing me, calling out "Watch out, Mai, I'm going to ram into you!" The neighborhood boys roamed rough with each other and smoked cigarettes - watch out for them, my father said, they are growing up to be future gang members. But I just laughed out how in the midst of their swagger, they stopped to scratch the mosquito bites on skinny brown legs.

My mother came outside and bought pan dulce from the Mexican vendor's last round and broke in it half to share. We wore no shoes, not even sandals, and by the end of the day our soles were hard and black like burnt meat. When the light posts blinked on and the moths emerged like drowsy white petals, we all went back inside our homes.

I was seven years old and I lived in a very poor neighborhood of Hmong families, with a few Hispanic families in the mix. I liked my street, I like running around at twilight and having fun. Also, my cousins lived across from me and I enjoyed visiting them. The apartment unit next door to them was empty, so one day when I arrived I was surprised to see, fleetingly, a boy's blonde head disappear behind the fence.

"Is he lost?" I asked my cousin John.

"No, that white kid is the new guy," said John. He was twelve years old and had a big, round nose that squatted in the middle of his face like mushroom. The tough boys in the neighborhood liked to make fun of him for it. John got into a fair number of fights, but he also knew things; he was a very smart boy. "His family moved in yesterday."

This fact rather amazed me; I knew white people only from school. There were a few in my first grade class, but most kids were Hispanic or black or Hmong. White people didn't live where I lived, didn't play where I played. The news spread fast and my friends and I were curious, but we never did see anyone come out of the front door. The following week when I went to school on Monday, the new boy was in my class. He never spoke to anybody, not even the teacher; often, he didn't go to school at all. He never came out at twilight to play.

A few weeks later a group of kids and I were playing dodgeball on the street when there was a sharp sound, like a violent clap. My cousin John cried out and jerked to a stop, clutching his shoulder, a thin trail of blood flowing down his arm. He screamed, kids everywhere started screaming. Someone hustled John back inside his house. "Someone's shooting at us," said a girl before sprinting away.



Painting by Boon Ma Yang

I ran into my house, where my mother was hysterical in the kitchen because the glass window was broken. I peeked out another window and saw something utterly bizarre: a blonde woman stood on the sidewalk, holding a rifle and laughing as she shot at the neighbors' bushes and mailboxes. There were still some kids running in the distance, and she aimed the gun at them and fired. My friends, all those lively, skinny brown children, flew out of sight like debris in the wind.

"That's a BB gun," my mother said furiously as she joined me by the window. "I found the pellet that broke our window. What is that crazy white woman doing?"

A few minutes later, patrol cars and an ambulance stopped on my street. Awful red and blue lights pummeled the bushes, trees, and sidewalks; the world turned blotchy and sick right in front of me.

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I got a raging headache and went to bed early. After that day, I stayed in for the next week until my mother begged my cousin John to come over. John told me that he was fine, and he grabbed a picture book for me to look at. I started "reading" - meaning that, since we had a poor grasp of English, I made up the story in Hmong to go with each picture. In this way, the story was a little different each time we "read," and it always grew better and funnier with each retelling. But today John closed the book before I finished. He told me that the blonde woman with the BB gun had been high on coke and drinking booze.

The coming down abruptly from my best story yet, I asked,

"What is coke?"

John looked at me like I had disappointed him somehow.

"You're too young," he said, meanly. "You're a just baby."

"No, I'm not."

"You are," he insisted. "You don't know anything. You think you can just sit here and make up stories and everything will be Ok, but it's not. Damn, how I hate this place. There are gangster wanna-bes walking everywhere, trying to beat people up. There are crazy white ladies shooting BBs at kids. There are people selling drugs and buying drugs. I hate this place. I'm going to get out of here."

"Ok," I said.

"I will," he said, scratching at the thin white bandages on his upper arm. "I'll live in a nice street where I can go outside and no one is going to shoot me. I'll live in a big house and ride my bike all day."

"Ok," I said. "Will you take me with you?"

"Sure," he said.

My parents moved me out soon afterwards, but John never did get out of that neighborhood. We lost touch, and when I was fourteen I went to John's funeral. In life, when I still knew him well, he'd been a smart and angry boy who grew into a troubled young man. He committed suicide at the age of nineteen. At his funeral, as the qeej droned mournfully, I recalled his story of how he would get away from it all-one of the last and best stories we had ever shared. I knew it was stupid and useless, but I closed my eyes and wished so very hard we could just go back to the days where we raced around on our bikes, waiting for the sun to set, lingering in the cool air, telling stories that got better and better as the moths fluttered around the light posts like white petals cast adrift.

My Old Street at Twilight

Author's Note:

My mother didn't know any English, but she still read to me. We would sit down with a picture book, I'd point at the illustrations, and she'd tell a story in Hmong to go along. The story would always change, but the warmth and closeness remained the same. John and I sometimes read this way, too. John was a braggart; honestly, he talked a lot of shit. He told really good stories.

This story in particular, I started writing this story many years ago, but didn't finish. I took a nonfiction writing workshop that inspired me to revisit this piece. While the final version is not strictly nonfiction, this is a story based on a true story - or many true stories - from my childhood. My cousin John (name changed) was a real boy; all those other boys roaming around in the background of the story, the "gangster wanna-be's" are real; and the lone, young white boy was real. Once upon a time, we all lived together in the same neighborhood...
and some of us grew up, and some of us didn't. What happened? Was there someone, something to blame for John's suicide? What story can I tell to possibly make sense of it?

I can't.

All I can say is, it is so hard to be young, poor, ill-educated, and Hmong in America - to be the children of foreign war refugees, to grow up on welfare, to eat less food because your family of ten cannot afford a full fridge, to get bad grades because your homework hard and your parents couldn't help... Some of us have overcome these obstacles admirably. I can't say I am one of these, because I am still trying to figure it out. But despite the hardships, my childhood had great moments of joy, too. I look at the young children now, the fresh-faced 3rd generation Hmong-Americans, and I know they are the same way. They believe in stories, too. And I want to tell happy stories, so they will be happy. But I also wanted to tell this story, because once upon a time John was just like them: he was funny boy who made up clever stories and made me believe.

Y.J. Lee

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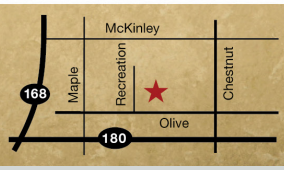






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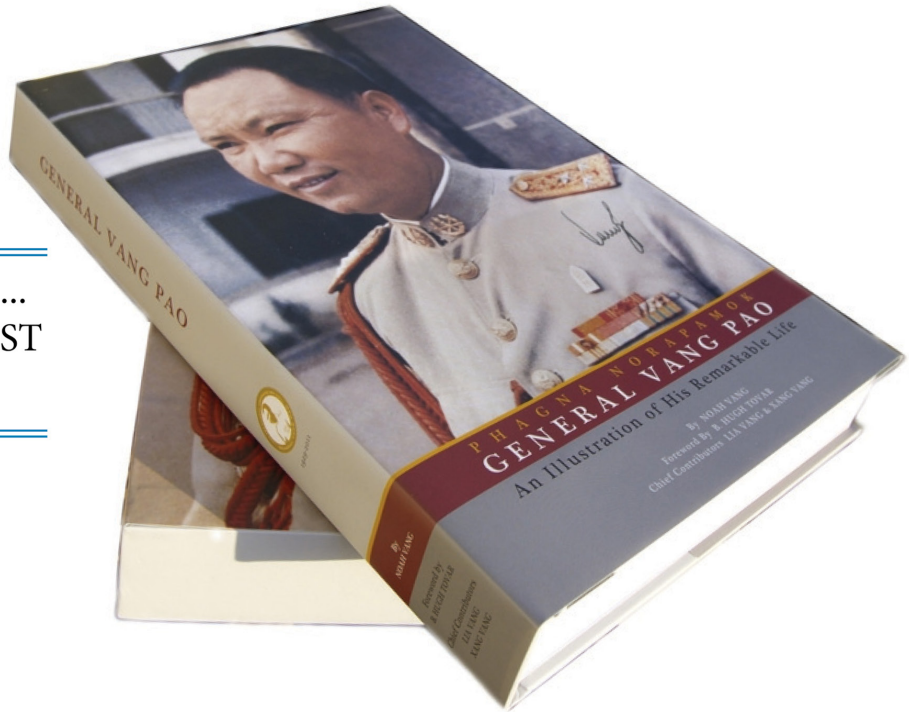


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A NEW CHAPTER

HMONG IN POLITICS 2017

All Photos on this page by Lance Lee







Photo by Toua Xiong

NOVEMBER OF 2016, THE HMONG COMMUNITY OF CALIFORNIA MADE HISTORY.

Written by Chelsey Xiong

In Sacramento County, Steve Ly would go on the win the mayoral race gaining 26,786 votes, a huge 44.6 percent over six opponents, to become the first Hmong mayor of any city in the United States.

Mai Yang Vang would win a seat on the Sacramento City Unified School District School Broad by default after the incumbent dropped out of the race. In Merced County, Lee Lor would win Merced County Supervisor race with 9,480 votes victory over incumbent Hubert Walsh's 8,038. In Fresno County, Brandon Vang would also win a seat on the Sanger School Board with 1778 votes over incumbent James D. Karles who received only 703 votes. Pao Yang lost by a small margin of 128 votes difference to incumbent Eric Payne for State Center Community College District 2. Pao's loss shows that every single vote counts.

Things were very different in 1997 when Charles Vang became the first Hmong American candidate to run for public office in the state of California. Almost twenty years later a total of seven Hmong Americans ran for public offices: Brandon Vang for Sanger Unified School Board, Lee Lor for Merced County Supervisor, Noah Lor for Mayor in the city of Merced, Mai Yang Vang for Sacramento Unified School Board, Pao Yang for State Center Community College Board of Trustee, Sou Vang for Oroville City Council, and Steve Ly for Mayor in the city of Elk Grove.

In 1997 when Charles ran for Fresno District City Council, he was a small business owner and radio producer with no experience in politics. The Hmong community in California had little political participation during this time. However, he had one inspiration that propelled his campaign. He wanted to see the Hmong community move forward: to better understand how the city, county, and state operated; how money is distributed; and to understand the importance of being a citizen and how each of us can participate.

Charles's vision included a shift from the label of immigrants and refugees to American citizens by participating in civic duties. Charles said, " I felt that by the experience of our community, somebody had to go out there and do something that would catch the mainstream community's attention. That was why I ran. I wanted to wake up everyone: that we are no longer immigrant or refugees, we are now American citizens."

His campaign manager was a young Blong Xiong, who gained experience in politics in his prior work with the Fresno County

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CHARLES VANG AND BLONG XIONG

Supervisors and community advocacy work with Fresno Center for New Americans. Even with Blong as a campaign manager their team had no mentors, little guidance, limited fund, and they must learn how politics was played. "We had no idea what the politics was about and how to run a campaign, we didn't understand the term 'district.' That was a very new experience for our community but an important experience," Blong said.

Charles remembers asking for support as a new and uncomfortable experience. Charles said, " Asking people for support, endorsement, asking for their votes, were all new for me because in my life I had not asked people for money. I had never asked them to help me or be on my side." Asking people outside of one's family for money to run for public office was not common in the Hmong community.

Charles Vang didn't succeed. He would finish in 3rd place, but he had pioneered the beginning of the Hmong community's civic engagement in the Californian political arena. Five years later in 2002, Dr. Tony Vang succeeded in his run for Fresno Unified School Board and in 2007, Blong became the first Hmong American to be elected to a city council seat in California. He won the seat for Fresno City Councilmember for District 1.

Blong was inspired by the idea that there was a need for a stronger voice, a stronger advocate, and to be at the table where the decisions were made. "If we're not engaged and not involved in those types of policy discussion with the decision makers at the table then we lose something, we lose a very influential voice," Blong said.

After eight years as Fresno City Councilman, Blong would push for a monumental run for Congress in 2012 and then again for Fresno County Supervisor in 2014. Blong's Fresno City Council seat termed out in 2013. Despite two campaigns that fell short, the vast support from the extended Hmong communities all worked together to make his two bids possible. Hmong communities throughout California and even other states like Minnesota and Wisconsin contributed money and volunteers. Since then Blong has been instrumental in supporting future candidates. Blong gave back to the Hmong community by providing mentorship to both Pao Yang and Brandon Vang during their recent 2016 campaigns.

Pao and Brandon were new faces to the political arena in Fresno County. The 2016 election was the first time in which either ran for public office.

Pao Yang has a 17-years career in education. Pao said, "I decided to ran for the Trustee seat this year to be able to have a larger impact and share my experience and knowledge with the leaders of our community." In his career, Pao worked with students in counseling: advising and coaching them and their families to understand the importance of higher education.

Brandon is a former Probation Officer. In 2009, after moving from Southern California back to the Fresno area, he took care of his children while his wife May Lee, a registered nurse provided for their family. This allowed Brandon to volunteer at their children's school and gained an understanding of the importance of decision making within the K-12 school system. Brandon said, "I wanted to have an impact in the community but at the same time I wanted to also have a say in decisions directly effecting my family, especially my own children. I am a parent. I have two kids who graduated from Sanger Unified School District and I have three kids who are still attending Sanger schools. To me, this is more than just a campaign."

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Photo by Toua Xiong

The year 2016 was also more than just a campaign for all the Hmong American candidates. For example, Mai Yang Vang, who won her seat for Sacramento Unified School Board and Lee Lor who won her seat for Merced Board of Supervisor. Mai and Lee, both young Hmong American women, are the new faces of Hmong politics in California and their victories represent a new direction that we can hope to see more of. For the first time since Charles ran in 1997, we saw two Hmong women succeeded in their race for public office.

Mai Yang Vang, the youngest of all the Hmong candidates, had prior experiences in community advocacy. She developed her political consciousness while she was a student at the University of San Francisco. Mai said, "I became politically conscious of the injustice faced by our community. I started to organize off campus (Hmong Student Inter-Collegiate Coalition) and on campus (Freedom Alliance of Culturally Empowered Students & Southeast Asian American Student Alliance) to bring awareness and take action on the racial, social and economic inequities in underserved communities."

As a daughter of Hmong refugees and the eldest of 16 children, she was like most second-generation Hmong Americans. She grew up in poverty in the rough neighborhoods of south Sacramento and was the first in her family to go to college. She said, "I thought getting an education would solve all the issues facing my family and community. At 26, I came back to Sacramento better equipped with years of education only to find my neighborhoods still suffering from the same extreme poverty and institutional barriers." She wanted to do more and running for School Board was a way to create change.

Lee Lor echoed the same sentiment that encouraged her to seek public office. "I saw that we, as a community, wanted better and we deserved better. Merced was the hardest hit during the housing bust, we had the highest crime rates and our residents were stuck in endless cycles of poverty," Lee said.

Our communities needed new energy in civic engagement. Steve Ly, Pao Yang, Brandon Vang, Mai Yang Vang, Noah Lor, Lee Lor, and Sou Vang's campaigns brought new energy; inspiring, organizing and uniting the Hmong community and the people of the extended communities that they each serve.

The increased political participation among Hmong Americans is historical because of several factors. Hmong Americans are more aware of the power of their votes and their participation. When you compare the 2016 campaigns to when Charles Vang first ran for Fresno City Council in 1997, the Hmong community has grown in both education and financial stability. We as a community had become more confident about seeking support for volunteers and financial resources. Our community has grown to better understand the importance of being civically engaged and supporting the Hmong individuals who have the courage and talent to run for public office. We can come together as a community to rally financial support for candidates. Our community collectively is more educated and informative about the political process now. We are a completely different community today.



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The Hmong children of the refugee camps who came to the United States at a young age, today who are the ones who are rising to seek political office looking to influence the next generation of Hmong Americans.

Lee Lor, Mai Yang Vang, and Brandon Vang identifies themselves to this "Zero Generation": "The Hmong who were born in Thailand, came to the United States, started grammar school and who can command a certain level of English. They are part of this generation. Now is their time to hold public office, to be the advocates and voices for their community. People who are brave enough and hungry enough to be trailblazing pioneers like Charles Vang, Blong Xiong or Steve Ly will definitely continue to inspire the next generation of civic leaders and public servants."

The Hmong has been in the United States for forty years and this is a transition for us to continue to grow and contribute to the community that we live in. Politics and leadership are part of our values and for us to be included in the decisions about what happens to our community. We need to understand and engage the political decisions that are being made. Blong said, "We realized that they do affect us all, whether we're talking about education, health care or economic development, people need to be in those seats to make the critic decisions." Participating at the decision-making table allows the larger community to see the diversity in our community and to be aware of us.

We can expect to see more and younger Hmong Americans participate in the California political arena in the years to come. From Charles's campaign in 1997 to all the candidates in 2016, the volunteering efforts of our Hmong youth and community have always been the backbone of Hmong campaigns. The youth are learning more about the political process and the elders are energized to see their children run for leadership positions that make impact on their livelihood and the future of our community. Many elders are incredibly happy that they can vote for a Hmong candidate.

The political landscape is always changing. More Hmong women will engage in politics. Mai said, "California needs vigilant leaders who will stay focus on addressing the inequities faced by underserved communities and I believe that Lee Lor and many Hmong women organizers embodies this. We're already doing the hard work on the ground to improve outcomes in the community - now we need to recruit more Hmong women at the decision-making table to shape policy."

Mai also encourage that the Hmong community not organize in silo. "We need to build diverse coalitions outside our community to create change," she adds. Also, the decision to vote must be emphasized. Every person has civic responsibilities. Brandon encouraged that the Hmong community must go out and support, "not necessarily a Hmong candidate but to support someone who



they think support their political philosophy and to be involved in the most elementary level: to register and vote." We often think about what happens when we vote but too often, we don't think about what happens if we don't vote.

Back in 1996 when Charles Vang ran for Fresno City Council, a Hmong name on a political ballot was something new. In 2016, our community has come a long way. Seeing a Hmong name on voter ballots in cities with high Hmong populations doesn't surprise the public anymore. Seeing Hmong woman on the ballots is ground breaking. Today the Hmong community is civically engaged but it is the network that we have built over the last twenty years that make progress possible. Through trial and error, failed campaigns and history breaking victories, it is the network of community support that has enabled so many to walk in the footprints of those who paved the way and unselfishly gave their knowledge to light the way. The future looks promising.

Charles said, "If you feel that you'd like to do something special or want to be in politics, want to lead an organization, go and do it. Who knows? You may win." 2016 marks the beginning of a whole new chapter for California's Hmong community.

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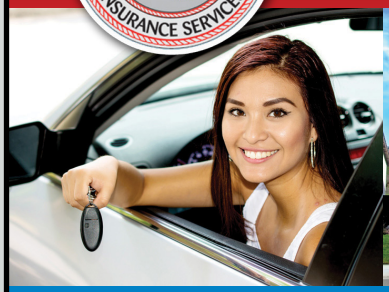

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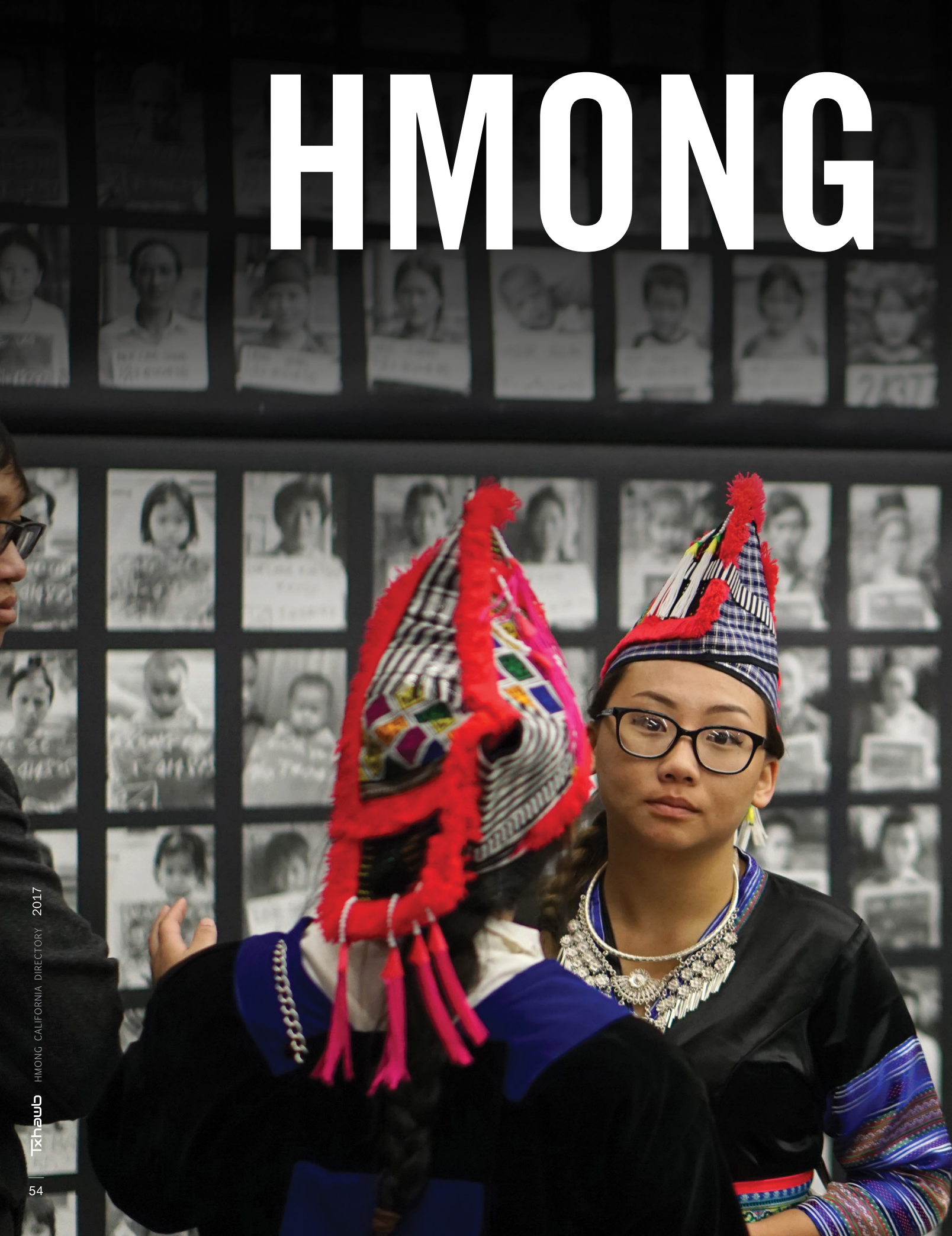
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STORY 40

A PERSONAL REFLECTION

Photos by Chuya Meng Moua *Written by* Pos L. Moua

Like any human being, you and I are Hmong and we thrive on connections and interpersonal connectivity with friends, family, and community (see, that's why Facebook is so popular). Also, as human being, when I look back on myself and the course I have taken since my birth, I long to know my identity and origin.

I have yet to understand more where my ancestors came from so that I can be definitive as to where I want to lead my life--perhaps, to live better and to benefit the world I live in, and, when the time comes, to sacrifice myself for my love as my forefathers have done. To me, self-identity is core to existence. The self undefined is a psyche stymied and uncertain; lonely and longingly sorrowful.

Uncertain of who I was, I often asked myself these essential questions: *What is Hmong? If I know a person to be Hmong, who is this Hmong man or woman or child before me? What place in this bioregion can nurture me and my family and my Hmong people? How do I belong here in this renowned society? How do I better exist here in "land of the free and the home of the brave"?*

These and many similar personal, philosophical inquiries, deep thoughts about life, have left me feeling a sense of unfulfillment in my heart. What must we as a unique people in America muster up in this life in order to build, sustain, and enlighten hearts and minds so that we are no longer weary of our doubts and uncertainties and thereby become more prosperous and stronger as a Hmong people, as Hmong-Americans, or as Americans?

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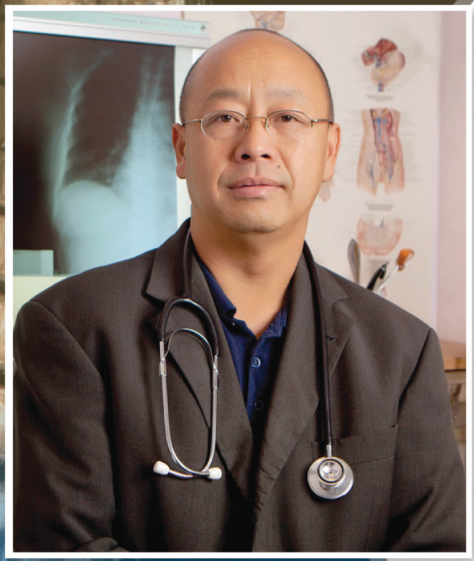
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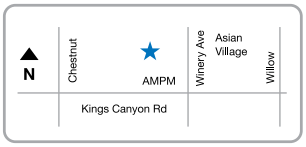
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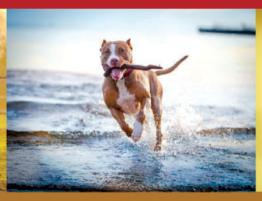
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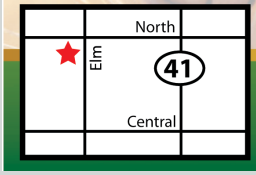
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Like you, my readers, I came to America when I was quite young, at the age of 10. I am the second eldest of seven other siblings. My family first settled in Spokane, Washington, near the Spokane Indian Reservation. As resettling refugees, my family was placed in the care of religious organizations (churches) and we didn't see many Hmong people as one would see in Fresno or Merced now, so my parents decided that we moved to Merced in 1983. It was a lonely time to adjust to life in America, more so for my parents, because they were older and had lived most of their lives in Laos. Thus, inside, I have always had an innate desire to want to know where I come from, either historically, geographically (tracing my lineage beyond China) or genetically (perhaps through *National Geographic Human Genome Project*-its result does not seem detailed enough to show me where Hmong branched from). In this personal reflection, I wish to ponder on the effects that HmongStory 40 Exhibit has had on me.

Beyond the desire to know my roots, I yearn for equality and freedom; for opportunities to improve my living in the U.S., and for an affirmation of my being--that my human contribution to this America and Earth, especially for my children and their generations to come, is meaningful. And one sure way to would for others of this America to see us in better light, for other Americans to see us for our humanness and sacrifices. To me, there is a kind value about tangible arts because it is a form of therapy for my lost and wandering soul, sometimes. To me, arts has the potential to mend the soul and to singe its troubled disparities away, enabling us to grow anew with sweetness and love of life in America.

Such arts and artifacts as seen in HmongStory 40 Exhibit during the Hmong International New Year at the Fresno Fairground, at Merced Fairground during the spring, and at Sacramento, do that.

In the Fresno Bee online article, "Hmongstory 40 Exhibit Looks Back on Refugee Displacement and California Resettlement," by Andrea Castillo, Lar Yang, the project director of this grand project, said, "I always tell people the best thing you can give some someone is their own history." I concur with him on his eloquent aphorism, for he put it pithily well.

You might ask, "How do arts and artifacts affect a Hmong man's heart when he has already lived an earlier portion of his years in that old country and the other half in America, through which he has experienced both pastoral and warring days? How must my father and Hmong elders rise up from their deep sorrows and traumas?
I have a high sense that HmongStory 40 has been a major contributing factor to the healing process of a generation who had undergone traumas in times of war.

The photographs and paintings displayed in the HmongStory 40 Exhibit carry my heart and helps me heal, emotionally. The Exhibit, organized into four visual display parts: from the Hmong life in Laos, to the Secret War, to life in the Thailand refugee camps, and then to the resettlement and life in California, gave me a visual and emotional trip of my past and helped me to resolve my deep nightmares.

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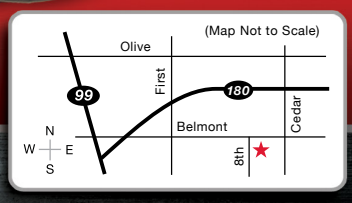
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During my first tour of the HmongStory 40 Exhibit, I saw the plaster art that depicts agonizing, half-drowning people, who were struggling to stay afloat on the makeshift rafts over that raging Mekong River, my nightmares returned and held fast onto me like tugging ghosts. Although my family and I were fortunate to cross the Mekong River by river canoes navigated by hired Thai boatmen, and we safely crossed it at night without incident, there were many horrific tales that I have heard about the many Hmong people who didn't make it across.

Those who attempted to cross the Mekong before us had only plastic balloons as floatation devices around their waists or chests. The father who could swim had to tow his young children and wife behind him. When they reached the deep and rushing Mekong current, all their tiny plastic balloons popped, and the entire family went down, "Taken asunder by the river dragon," my parents told me.

It is further told that when we Hmong first crossed it, the Buddhist monks on both sides of Thailand and Laos *were* able to give the first few drowned Hmong victims proper funeral burials, but after several months later, when there were so many cadavers washed ashore, the monks could no longer ceremoniously buried them. Many were buried in holes dug underground, similar to those of the Jew victims of the World Word II Holocaust. So you see, this Secret War, in the words of Hmong historian, Dr. Kou Yang, "pushed and pulled" us into a diaspora of our own. Although such artistic depiction appears to be frightening at first, it forces me to confront my own suppressed, emotional demons and to free myself from them.



Furthermore, the Exhibit also helps me to refresh my memories and bring to life memories of good days. Of all other artifacts, I remember that the old, rust-tainted Hmong rice **scythe** inside the transparent display glass touched my heart most: my eyes welled and pooled up by tears of sorrow and displacement and struggle. And I am sure you know how the Hmong people who were mostly farmers with scythes in their hands had been plotted out of their fields by guns and wars. That old scythe and its accompanying artifacts--the Hmong hoe and metal spearhead--faithfully return to me those memories of long ago. They are the memories of a hard farming life.

They remind me of scorching days spent tilting over hilly, damp soil; of my days spent hoeing out weeds on the steep hills of Laos, and the time when I was a six- or seven-year-old kid, of how I had to use the scythe to cut through those

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sharp blades of rice stems, or of how little food my younger sisters and brother and I got to eat each afternoon and our stomachs ached and we hungered and thirsted for days. Truly, sometimes when I eat a rare, delicious, hearty meal, and couldn't finish all of it, I am reminded of that old scythe--a forlorn reminder of burning suns and poverty, but, also quietly, of hope.

Another artifact, the old musket—that muzzle loading gun—or a similar gun my grandfather used to carry to hunt for meat and for protection--engenders a sense of nostalgia that reverberates through my soul and into the heart of these words. It's a reminiscence of the days I spent walking through the woods of the old country with my grandfather. That ancient Hmong musket: those wild jungle fowls he hunted for us to savor; the sambar he rarely downed; or the wild hogs whose thick hair we had to scald and scrape hard in order to ready it for cooking. How would I have survived had it not been for my grandfather's musket?

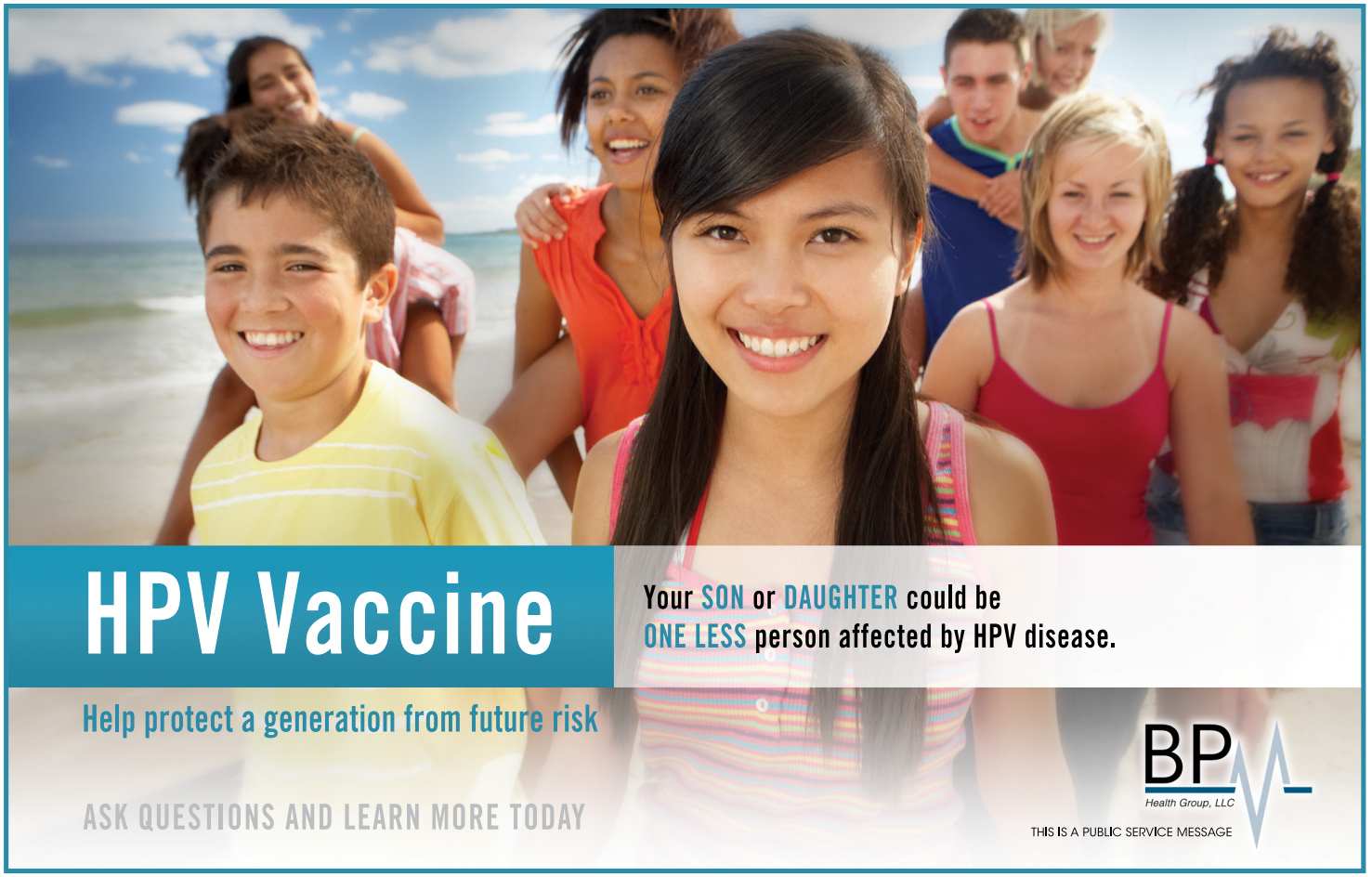
And the tiny love harp (*ncas*) placed next to its sheathing case, inside that carefully set glass; rusted and appeared untouched for decades, it reminds me of my first outing with my uncle whom I accompanied one night to his lover's house. Its melodic vibration brought out sounds of romance and intimacy and eventual bonding between him and his future bride. Now, you see, the saddest truth is that after the War, I don't know where he is now? And what of his love? Was this Hmong harp only played softly and echoing gently in the country of no one's love? Will it continue to accentuate our love for each other in the days to come?

And what of the leaders? The mural of our famed but somewhat obscured military commanders and Hmong clansmen and *kiatongs* stemmed as far back as the late 1700's. When I carefully

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perused their faces like lines on a poem, I saw their tragic sacrifice and persistence, and perhaps their dedication to a cause they believed in, then. Will their contribution to our existence as a people be remembered in our hearts and minds, or will their contribution to our past and present become faded like the sun in the distant setting horizon?

Most moving of all is the wall of the CIA frontal snap-shots of the thousands of faces of young Hmong soldiers. Their faces are the faces that endure, and their facial features, linings of their eyes, the ridge of their noses, the small mounts of their cheekbones, the squinting of their eye lids--all of their Hmongness seem to have been the same hereditary markings on the faces of my three sons. They were uncles and cousins and grandfathers and brothers so dear to me. Many photographs of these young soldiers, but their names we may never know. Of the thousands of visitors, once, a Hmong grandmother stood next to me and stared at the photos of these young soldiers' faces for a long time and her eyes welled up with remembrance, and I saw her and quietly bowed my head.

HmongStory 40 Exhibit has been one emotional affirmation for me and my family, especially for my children who have sustained deeper understanding of the Hmong people's journey. It is a project of grandeur and significance beyond words;



perhaps only with emotions and calling of memories can we give it fuller reverence to embody our past and future. In short, I have been empowered by the Exhibit's awakening artistic contents and its rivetingly emotional arts and artifacts because it reminds me of the tremendous suffering I had to endure when I was a child in Laos and during the days when I had to leave Laos and Thailand to come to America. The Exhibit is therapeutic and subtly calming to my heart and mind. In essence, it has helped me to talk about my sadness, and it has slowly but progressively enabled my elderly parents and I to engage in discourses of those sad, hard times. Ultimately, HmongStory 40 remains an inspiration to me and gives me renew strength to endure the struggles ahead as a Hmong.

LAST DAY IN LONG CHENG

A COLLECTION OF ORAL STORIES

(Introduction to "Lao Choppers" by Gayle L. Morrison)

The Secret War in Laos was directly linked to the Vietnam War. Whatever happened in Vietnam was certain to happen in Laos.

On April 30, 1975, Saigon (South Vietnam) was taken over by communist forces. The U.S. military immediately withdrew from Vietnam, evacuating thousands of Vietnamese nationals who had worked with the U.S. government during the war.

Two weeks later as the Americans also withdrew from Laos, a secret air evacuation of General Vang Pao and 2,500 Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) soldiers and families was organized by Jerry "Hog" Daniels, CIA advisor to "VP."

On May 11, the White House approved the use of U.S. airplanes for an air evacuation from Long Cheng to Thailand. On May 12, two U.S. C-46s began to fly people out as communist troops and tanks moved towards Long Cheng.

On May 13, a large U.S. C-130 joined the evacuation effort while the crowd of families and angry soldiers continued to grow. The infiltration of enemy spies and possible assassins made the situation very dangerous.

On May 14, Jerry "Hog" Daniels was the only American left in Long Cheng. It was his responsibility to safely move General Vang Pao to Thailand. The story that follows is the oral history account of what happened to some of the remaining SGU officers and pilots on that last day.

For a more complete story, read
Sky Is Falling:
An Oral History of the CIA's Evacuation of the Hmong from Laos
by Gayle L. Morrison.



Photo by Sing Ly
Noah Vang Collection

LAO CHOPPERS WEDNESDAY, MAY 14, 1975

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Maj. Xiong Yang, Wing Commander

Early on the last morning in Long Cheng the Lao choppers stand by at my building. I tell people, "Nobody touch those helicopters. They are deposited for General Vang Pao only." I station many guards around those helicopters.

I stay around my office with the chopper pilots. Two hundred to three hundred people sit down *close* to the choppers near my office. If the airplane lands, those people run to go into the airplane. If no airplane, they sit all along the building and wait for the choppers. I tell the people there's no gas for the choppers. Those *tahan* don't know that I lie about the gas. Really the gas tanks in the choppers are full, but they are reserved for the general moving out. So the people stay and stay, stay and stay, stay and stay. Many *tahan* sit there all day, waiting for the gas to come.

2d Lt. Nhia Tou Vang, T-28 Pilot

I drive my family back to Long Cheng from Nam Yin, and I go straight to find Xiong Yang at the flight ops building because he is our Wing Commander. For sure he will have a way for us to get out.

When I go talk to Xiong Yang, there are soldiers already talking to him. Those soldiers don't want the helicopters to leave with any pilots or any officers inside. Nobody can get on the helicopters because the soldiers don't believe Xiong Yang. They carry their M-16s and follow him to keep an eye on him and on the choppers.

Xiong Yang moves around in the airport, and he keeps an eye on those helicopters too. I tell him quietly that I need to fly out. He says, "Don't worry. We still have three Lao choppers that will leave." He says: "Probably I will leave around 11:00 A.M. You have to be prepared. When you see the first helicopter start the engine, then you go fast down to the training center. Wait for me down there at Soun Kang Fuek. I will come pick you up. Don't let anybody else know, only you."

Xiong Yang talks to the soldiers who carry the M-16s around the choppers. He tells them that one helicopter must fly north to Hin Tang to pick up soldiers

and after that it will return to Long Cheng. He says the other two helicopters will fly southeast to Muang Mok to pick up soldiers there also. Then the soldiers say to him that if the helicopter has to go pick up soldiers it has to go *empty*. *Nobody* in there. Xiong Yang says: "Sure! We are not escaping! We just go to get the soldiers! If you don't believe me, just look inside! Nobody is in there! We only go pick up soldiers then bring them back to protect Long Cheng." I see with my own eyes that the soldiers go and look in the helicopter. I go look in there too, and there is nobody in there. I only look in one, but I think the soldiers go and look in every chopper, not just the one that Xiong Yang shows us.

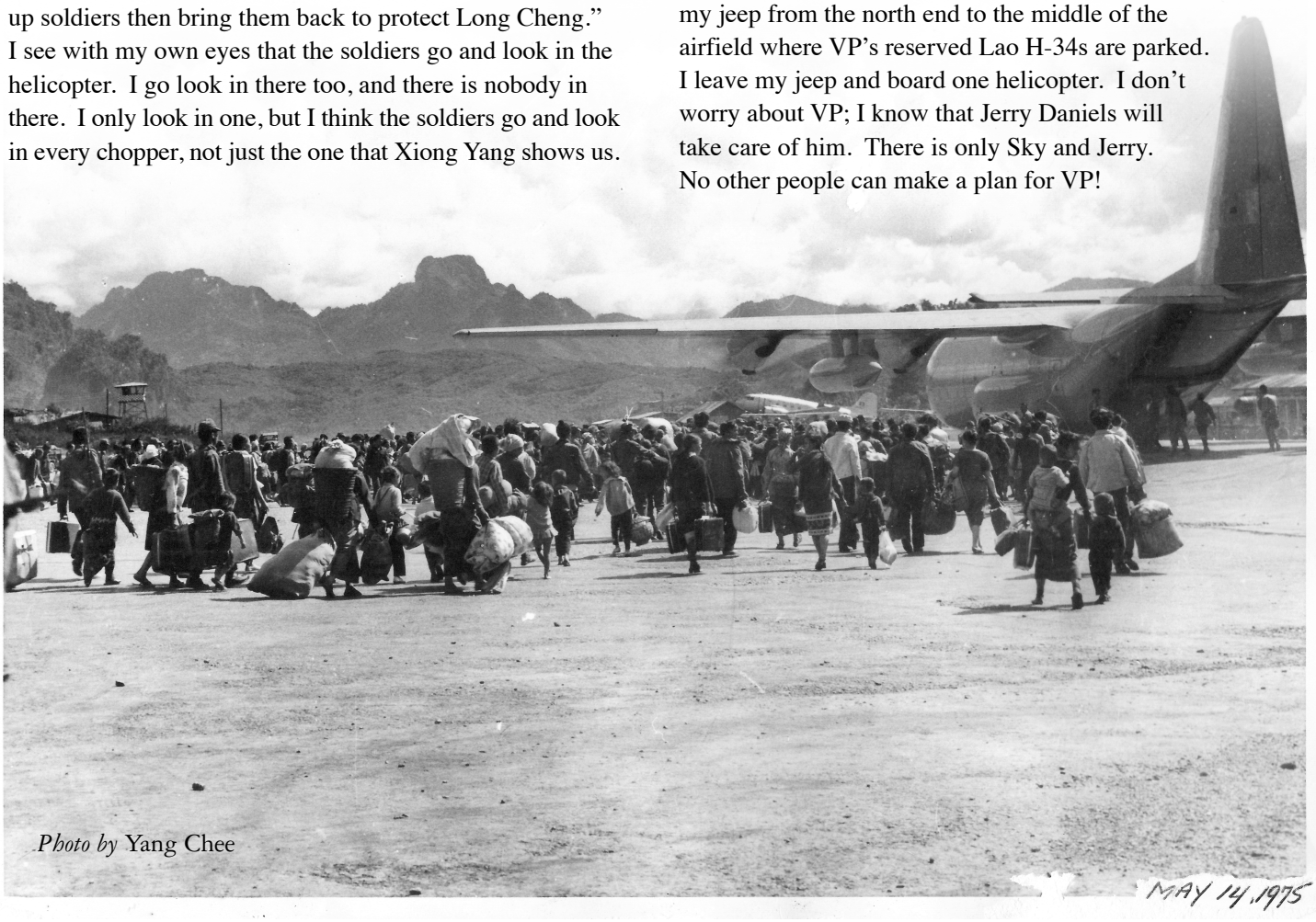


Photo by Yang Chee

Maj. Xiong Yang, *Wing Commander*

Major Vang Kao holds the gun and comes to my office with four or five soldiers and their families. Vang Kao is scared. There is no airplane landing so he wants the chopper to fly his family to Udorn, Thailand. He points the gun at me, at all the people. I say to him: "The general is still here, I am still here, everybody is still here. You hold on because I have no gas. When the gas comes, I will put it in my chopper. Then I will take you and we go." I lie to him like that. I lie to *everyone* the same!

Those choppers should be empty but one chopper has officers inside. Only the pilots and I know that. Those are the good men like Ly Tou Pao and Ly Tou Yia, the Hmong *Phouthen* [Senator] from Vientiane. Good people are inside but they are afraid.

Col. Ly Tou Pao*, Chief of Staff, MR2*

VP tells me early on the morning of the 14th that this is the last day. He tells me that at the last minute I should take the Lao helicopters and leave.

I leave the general's house and drive my jeep from the north end to the middle of the airfield where VP's reserved Lao H-34s are parked. I leave my jeep and board one helicopter. I don't worry about VP; I know that Jerry Daniels will take care of him. There is only Sky and Jerry. No other people can make a plan for VP!

I wait inside the helicopter because I already know it is reserved for my group. I wait inside for a long time. Then Colonel Moua Tou Lu comes to join me.

I am in the helicopter with Tou Lu, looking out the window, when I see Major Vang Kao walking with his gun, coming towards the helicopter. I see he is very upset and will create a problem for us. He won't kill me but I am sure that he will force me to do something. He will say, "You are the chief! You are the commander! You have to find an airplane for me!"

Vang Kao comes and looks inside the helicopter to see if anybody is in there. Lucky for me, at the tail of the helicopter there is a place big enough for two or three people to hide in where nobody can see you. Vang Kao comes to take a look inside, but he doesn't see anybody because Tou Lu and I are hiding in the back.

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Col. Moua Tou Lu, Military Advisor

Ly Tou Pao and I are already in the helicopter when Vang Kao comes with his gun. We see from his actions that he will not allow the Hmong leaders to leave the country. But he doesn't know if any Hmong leaders are in the helicopters or not, so Ly Tou Pao and I hide because we are scared.

Maj. Xiong Yang, Wing Commander

I tell Vang Kao to wait for the gas, and I drive across the airstrip to one small parking area close to General Vang Pao's house. One Porter with one American pilot is there with Jerry. The airplane's engine is running. Jerry stands at the airplane. I tell Jerry: "Jerry, there's too much danger! Vang Kao wants me to take the chopper across to Thailand but I say I have no gas. He and his soldiers want to kill me! What can I do?"

Jerry and I talk and at that time the C-130 flies overhead again. I tell Jerry: "Now the C-130 flies over my head to come land. You call on the radio to tell the pilot to park close to my office. When Vang Kao's people run to the C-130, I will have time to get into my chopper. Can you do that?" Jerry says yes.

Jerry calls the C-130 and at the same time we see General Vang Pao's jeep driving up the mountain, going up the road, higher, higher. I watch by my eye and I say, "Oh! The general's car goes!" *Everybody* thinks the general stays in his house, but Jerry and I see the car go around the high mountain.

When a little American chopper flies out from that mountain, Jerry tells me, "The general is gone." Now I know this really is the last minute. Jerry says, "Xiong, get ready. I go too. You take care of yourself." Jerry drives off, the *kab tsawb* [Porter] flies out very fast, and I *run* back to my office.

The C-130 lands and taxis back to my building to park. People are moving toward the 130. Vang Kao and his family are moving too. So many people run and many, many thousand people run towards the C-130, but Vang Kao is afraid that not all of his family goes in. I see the firearms, the soldiers' guns are all around. Vang Kao points the gun at the other families and says: "Don't come closer! Let my family go first! No one dare to cross me! Whoever comes, I kill!" Then Vang Kao shoots the gun. Not at the ground, but into the sky—*pa-pa-pa-pa-pa-pa-pa*. "You come, you die! You come, you die! You let my people go inside!" Vang Kao does like that. Still the people are not afraid and they keep coming, moving, moving. Vang Kao shoots, shoots, shoots into the sky. That is the *final* time and all the guns are in the hands.

Col. Ly Tou Pao, Chief of Staff, MR2

It is about 20 minutes from the time Vang Kao fires his gun until the time when Xiong Yang comes to the helicopter. When Xiong Yang comes with the Lao pilots, he tells me that VP just left in the little American helicopter. I think VP doesn't trust the crowd of people at the airport so he has to fly out from somewhere else. Everything is chaos and you don't know who is the good guy and who is the bad guy even in your own group.

Maj. Xiong Yang, Wing Commander

With a hand signal I tell the Lao pilots to start the choppers very fast. I run to get into the chopper where Tou Pao hides. That chopper has a Lao pilot and I am the co-pilot. In one of the other choppers is another Lao pilot with Hmong co-pilot Vang Kha. The Lao pilots will fly the choppers, but I already talked to Vang Kha before. I said: "If the Lao go the wrong way, you must fly the chopper and follow me. You know how; I know how."

The C-130 still loads. The choppers are very noisy but the C-130 is noisy too. One chopper is still empty because I think General Vang Pao will go in there, but now the general is gone so we don't wait any longer. I tell the Lao pilots, "Take off! Take off!" The choppers fly up very, very fast! Up, up, up to 7,000 feet so Vang Kao cannot shoot us.

2d Lt. Nhia Tou Vang, T-28 Pilot

When the first chopper starts the engine, I do like Xiong Yang told me. I leave his office quickly in my brother's jeep and drive to the training camp at Soun Kang Fuek. Soun Kang Fuek is at the southeast end of the airport, below the hospital up on the hill.

By the time we are close to the hospital, almost to Soun Kang Fuek, I see the first Lao chopper starts to fly northwest like it is going to Hin Tang. As it passes the big cliff at the head of the runway, the other two choppers take off. They take off just before the soldiers see that the first chopper goes around that cliff mountain, turns and comes back.

When I see the second and third choppers take off, I am nervous and very scared! Oh, I don't know what will happen. I am confident that Xiong Yang will have somebody pick me up; he will not leave me behind. But there are soldiers all around and I am scared that when the choppers turn and go a different way, the soldiers will shoot and the chopper cannot land.



Photo by D. Gamelin Collection

I have to take this picture!" Maybe if it is only one helicopter I won't take the picture, but *three--C'est bien!* I want to take that picture because it is the last time that VP sees Long Cheng.

Maj. Xiong Yang, *Wing Commander*

From Long Cheng we head to Phou Khao Quoi. I let the Lao pilot fly for about ten minutes. At Phou Khao Quoi I am afraid that maybe the Lao pilot will take the chopper too close to Vientiane so I say, "You let me fly."

By the time the first chopper is on its way back, the second chopper that Xiong Yang flies in joins with the first one, and the third chopper comes to Soun Kang Fuek to pick up me and my family. The helicopter has not even touched the ground yet when we get in. That chopper is empty and we jump in real quick. Real quick! Then the Lao pilot tries to take off. He picks up the helicopter about eight to ten feet, but the engine stalls and we drop down to the ground! When the chopper hits the ground it scares me to *death!* If the chopper breaks down when it drops, the soldiers might come kill us. Oh! Scares me to *death!* I know that Lao pilot is scared too. I'm 100 percent sure that pilot is *scared,* like when we are in a combat situation, because I am a pilot and I know how we fly.

Then the pilot tries again. He lifts off correctly and our chopper flies up right behind the other two Lao choppers. All three choppers fly in formation to Nam Phong, Thailand.

Blong Moua, *Lycee Vientiane Student/Photographer*

My family does not try to get on any of the airplanes that land on that last morning. We see the crowd step on each other. We see that and we say: "'Oh, we don't have the courage to take the risk." Then I see one small white American helicopter suddenly take off. I see that and I say, "Oh! VP goes!" When VP takes off, suddenly there are three Lao army helicopters that follow the American helicopter. I don't know where they came from. Maybe they are waiting for VP's helicopter to take off so they can escort him. I see three army helicopters flying together. I say, "Eh! I have my camera and I am up in the cockpit and the passengers can look up under the pilots' seats. When I fly, Tou Pao can see that my legs sit at the pilot's controls and that the Lao pilot just relaxes.

I fly very low, only 400 to 500 feet off the ground. When we fly, nobody smiles because the chopper is old and it goes so slow.

Col. Ly Tou Pao, Chief of Staff, MR2

When I leave Long Cheng I don't feel anything except that for myself, I survived. That's it. I survived leaving Long Cheng, so forget about it. But I don't have much money with me. I have some in my pocket but it will last for only a short period of time. Not enough for a lifetime. After that, how will the future be? Where will the future be? What is next?

For now, the only thing I know for sure is that Xiong Yang will make certain that the Lao pilot does not take us to Vientiane.

Maj. Xiong Yang, Wing Commander

The choppers fly very low and very slow, and finally we cross the Mekong River to Thailand. Then I say to the Lao pilot, "Okay, now you fly again."

When we land at Nam Phong everybody smiles. Then Tou Pao says, "Xiong, why do you fly so low? We are afraid!" I say, "If I fly high and danger comes, I will have to circle down and find a place to land. It takes too long.



They will have time to shoot us. If I fly low, just above the trees, then if I see something is wrong we will have a short time to land. Everyone jumps out and runs for cover. I save your life like that!" Tou Pao laughs and says, "Oh! That is your idea? We don't know that and we are afraid when you go so low!"

After Vang Kao comes to Nam Phong, I go to General Vang Pao's house and Vang Kao goes there too. The general is so mad at Vang Kao. He says, "Why did you point the gun to Xiong?" Vang Kao laughs and says, "Oh, general, if I don't do like that my family will be lost. I do like that but I will not kill Xiong Yang. I do it to scare him only." Oh, terrible!

We stay in Nam Phong one or two nights. Then the Lao pilots meet with the general. General says to the Lao pilots: "Friends, you help me to bring my people here. Now everything is okay. I love you so much but I cannot stay with the communists. The Hmong pilots cannot go back to Vientiane but you are Lao pilots. Your families are still in Vientiane. Please take the choppers and go back. I used the choppers to bring my people here, but I don't steal from the Lao government. In the future if we come back to see each other again I will be the same as your dad and mom. I will love you your whole life. I won't forget that you helped me." That makes the Lao pilots very happy. They say okay, they say bye-bye, they start up the choppers and fly back to Vientiane.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For 40 years, Gayle L. Morrison has worked with the Hmong community in refugee services, education, business, and as an oral historian. Her first book, *Sky Is Falling,* documents the harrowing evacuation of U.S.- supported Hmong from Laos in May 1975. Her second book, *Hog's Exit*, captures the life, mysterious death, and traditional Hmong funeral held for Jerry "Hog" Daniels, General Vang Pao's CIA officer in Laos. Gayle is currently involved in research for her next book on the Hmong Chao Fa.

Gayle has traveled to Hmong refugee camps in Thailand and tribal villages in Laos. Her BA is in Sociology with an MA in Psychology.

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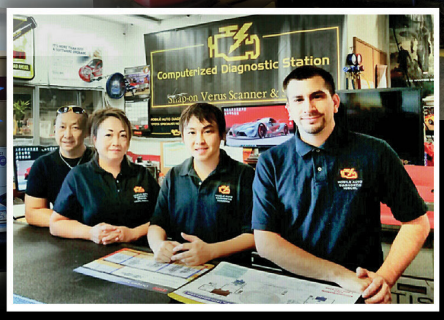
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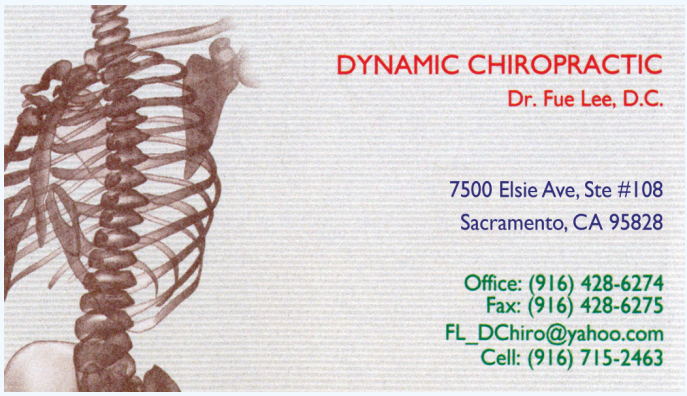
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Santa Ana, CA 92706
(714) 541-4533

National Hmong American Farmers
6366 N. Figarden Drive Ste 101A
Fresno, CA 93722
(559) 313-3339

New American Media
209 9th Street Ste 200
San Francisco, CA 94103
(415) 503-4170

Pan Valley Institute
3649 W Beachwood Ave Ste 102
Fresno, CA 93711
(559) 222-7678

Sacramento Asian Pacific Chamber of Commerce
2331 Alhambra Blvd
Sacramento, CA 95817
(916) 446-7883

Southeast Asian Assistance Center
Yang Xiong
5625 24th Street
Sacramento, CA 95822
(916) 421-1036

Southeast Asian Community Center
Philip TuongDuy Nguyen
875 O'Farrell Street
San Francisco, CA 94109
(415) 885-2743

Stone Soup Fresno
1345 E. Bulldog Lane Ste 4
Fresno, CA 93710
(559) 224-7613

United Hmong Foundation
Steve Her
4568 East Pine Avenue
Fresno, CA 93703
(559) 252-5566

CALIFORNIA

Central Pacific Coast Hmong Alliance Church
1000 West Ocean Ave
Lompoc, CA 93436
(805) 737-5577

College Church of Christ
1284 E. Bullard Ave
Fresno, CA 93710
(559) 439-6530

CHURCHES

Fresno Salvation Church of God
4626 East Dakota Ave
Fresno, CA 93726
(559) 430-9813

Emmanuel Hmong Baptist Church
1147 West 6th St
Merced, CA 95340
(209) 722-7995

Eureka Hmong Baptist Mission
Chong Na Chang
1357 McFarlan
Eureka, CA 95501
(707) 267-5443

First Hmong Evan. Church
5314 Ardelle Ave
Stockton, CA 95215
(209) 547-1921

First Hmong Alliance Church
Santa Ana, CA 92799
(951) 294-0674

Hmong Alliance Church
Banning CA 92220
(951) 849-9608

Hmong Alliance Church
Cypress, CA 90630
(714) 995-4375

Hmong Alliance Church
Chico, CA 95927
(530) 826-3495

Hmong Alliance Church
Merced, CA 95341
(209) 384-7167

Hmong Alliance Church
Oroville, CA 95965
(530) 532-1979

Hmong Alliance Church of Fresno
8234 E. Belmont Ave
Fresno, CA 93727
(559) 252-5823

Hmong Alliance Church of Modesto
Modesto, CA 95358
(209) 204-0976

Hmong Alliance Fellowship
Moreno Valley, CA 92552
(951)333-7995

Hmong Baptist Church of Fresno
4141 N. Fresno St
Fresno, CA 93726
(559) 225-5809

Hmong C&MA Church of Stockton
4040 Clark Drive
Stockton, CA 95215
(209) 937-9874

Hmong Catholic Community
1526 N. Fresno St
Fresno, CA 93706
(559) 488-7438

Hmong Community Church
5015 East Olive Ave
Fresno, CA 93727
(559) 251-3140

Hmong Comm. Alliance Church
3563 E. Madison Ave
Fresno, CA 93702
(559) 498-3966

Hmong Community Church Mennonite
5015 E. Olive Ave
Fresno, CA 93727
(559) 264-2851

Hmong Fresno Community Church
819 Tulare St
Fresno, CA 93706
(559) 226-0146

Hmong Fresno Community Church
3721 E. Olive Ave
Fresno, CA 93702
(559) 417-4982

Hmong Grace Lutheran Church
4863 E. Tulare St
Fresno, CA 93727
(559) 434-8369

Hmong Methodist Church
1343 E. Barstow Ave
Fresno, CA 93710
(559) 251-4107

Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses Sacramento
3409 52nd Ave
Sacramento, CA 95823-1026
(916) 704-4691

Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses Fresno
275 N Helm Ave
Fresno, CA 93727-3113
(559) 681-7073

Messiah Alliance Church
Fresno, CA 93747
(559) 277-8091

New Hope Christian Church
3901 E. Clinton Ave
Fresno, CA 93703
(559) 324-8707

Sac Hmong All Church
Dr. Christopher Thao
9131 Locust St
Elk Grove, CA 95624
(916) 685-6921

Stockton Hmong Baptist Church
7525 Oakmont Dr
Stockton, CA 95207
(209) 472-9122

The Crossing Community Church
3620 N. Millbrook Ave
Fresno, CA 93726
(559) 367-8079

Trinity Christian Headquarters
Rev. Konghtxoujh Mitt Moua
1028 P Street
Sanger, CA 93657
(559) 876-9075
www.tch12.org

Trinity Hmong Baptist Mission
2510 Jordan Ct
Stockton, CA 95205
(209) 464-5077

United Church Liberty Evangelical
4557 E. Tulare St
Fresno, CA 93702
(559) 456-0532

Yuba Sutter Hmong Alliance Church
Yuba City, CA 95992
(530) 755-3529

MICHIGAN

Detroit Hmong Alliance Church
11488 Jackson Ave
Warren, MI 48089
(586) 756-1916

First Hmong Baptist Church
8140 Konczal
Center Line, MI 48015
(810) 757-7471

Hmong American Baptist Church
27550 Groveland
Roseville, MI 48066
(586) 855-7670

Lansing Hmong Alliance
525 Samantha St
Lansing, MI 48910
(616) 794-4340 / (517) 394-3123

Salvation Hmong Baptist Mission
64 West Columbia Ave
Pontiac, MI 48340
(586) 899-2295

Tri-City Hmong Alliance Church
Bay City, MI 48706
(989) 891-0445

MINNESOTA

Good New Hmong Baptist Church
1280 Regis Ln NE
Minneapolis, MN 55432
(763) 574-2548

Hmong Alliance Church
11505 Ilex St NW
Minneapolis, MN 55448
(763) 757-2616

Hmong Alliance Church
11535 Ilex St NW
Minneapolis, MN 55448
(763) 754-7882

Hmong American Alliance
2515 Maplewood Dr
Saint Paul, MN 55109
(651) 765-2443

Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses St. Paul
1329 Maryland Ave E
St. Paul, MN 55106-2811
(651) 301-0476

St. Paul Hmong Alliance Church
1770 McMenemy St
Saint Paul, MN 55117
(651) 774-7955

WISCONSIN

Hmong Alliance Church
3131 N. Meade St
Appleton, WI 54911
(920) 832-1210

Hmong Alliance Church
2604 W. Orchard St
Milwaukee, WI 53204
(414) 643-5272

Hmong All. Church of CMA
303 N. Oneida St
Appleton, WI 54911
(920) 832-1310

Hmong Alliance Church of Stevens Point Inc.
301 Dearborn Ave
Stevens Point, WI 54481
(715) 346-0080

Hmong Christian Community United Methodist Church
3001 W. Mitchell St
Milwaukee, WI 53215
(414) 645-4844

Hmong Christian Ref. Church
1556 N. 16th ST
Sheboygan, WI 53081
(920) 458-1710

Hmong Comm. All. Church
2916 S 11th St
Sheboygan, WI 53081
(920) 458-2444

Hmong First Baptist Church
HoyuSayaovang
6693 North 99th Street
Milwaukee, WI 53224
(414) 358-2610

EDUCATION

United Hmong Comm. Center
401 9th St
Green Bay, WI 54304
(920) 432-8900

Wisconsin United Coalition of Mutual Assistance Associations
ViluckKue
2108 Kohler Memorial Drive
Sheboygan, WI 53081
(920) 458-6614

NON-PROFIT LISTING

HMONG NEW YEAR ORGANIZATIONS

Butte Co. Hmong Association, Inc.
P.O. Box 8646
Chico, CA 95927
(530) 990-2582

Hmong American Association, Inc.
1621 2nd St
Olivehurst, CA 95961
(530) 415-8616

Hmong International New Year, Inc.
1558 North 9th Street
Fresno, CA 93703
(559) 487-1012
info@hmongnewyear.us

Lao Family Community of Fresno, Inc.
1558 North 9th Street
Fresno, CA 93703
(559) 453-9775

Lao Family Community Empowerment Inc.
1075 Dixieanne Ave
Sacramento, CA 95815
(916) 921-8247
Fax: (916) 921-9784

Lao Family Community Empowerment Inc.
8338 N West Lane #101
Stockton, CA 95210
(209) 466-0721
Fax: (209) 466-6567

Lao Family Community of Minnesota, Inc.
July 4th Tournament & New Year
320 University Ave
St. Paul, MN 55103
T: (651) 221-0069
C: (651) 216-5790

Lao Hmong Family Association of San Diego
2757 Ulric St
San Diego, CA 92111

Lao Veterans of America Institute
Veterans Memorial Services
4903 E Kings Canyon Rd Ste 201
Fresno, CA 93727
(559) 252-3561

Merced Lao Family Community, Inc
1748 Miles Court Ste B
Merced, CA 95148
(209) 384-7384

Oroville Hmong New Year (Laos Veteran)
1252 12th St
Oroville, CA 95965

Sacramento Hmong New Year, Inc.
P.O. Box 232118
Sacramento, CA 95823
(916) 821-2448

Association Advancement of Hmong Women in Minnesota
Ly Vang
1518 E. Lake Street, Suite 209
Minneapolis, MN 55407-1750
(612) 724-3066

Center for Hmong Arts & Talent
Kathy Mouachupao
995 University Avenue, Suite 220
St. Paul, MN 55104
(651) 603-6971

East Side Hmong Association
Fong Cha
328 Avenue Northeast
Carnation, WA 98014
(425) 333-4393

Eau Claire Hmong MAA
423 Wisconsin St
Eau Claire, WI 54703
(715) 832-8420

Freedom, Inc.
Kabzuaj Vaj
601 Bayview
Madison, WI 53715
(608) 661-4098

Hmong American Center
Thao Phia Xaykao
1032 W. Pioneer Parkway Ste 100
Arlington, TX 76013

Hmong American Community Association, Inc.
1421 N. Broadway Ste 116
Monomonie, WI 54751
(715) 232-9350

Hmong American Mutual Assistance Association
1718 Washington Avenue North
Minneapolis, MN 55411
(612) 374-2694

Hmong American Association of South Carolina
Harry Moua
507 Foster Grove Rd
Chesnee, SC 29323

Hmong American Association of Portage County
Mai Khou Yang
101 Division Street, N. Ste E
Stevens Point, WI 54481
(715) 341-3703
hmong_am_assoc@sbcglobal.net

Hmong American Partnership (Main Branch)
1075 Arcade St
St. Paul, MN 55106
(651) 495-9160

Hmong American Partnership Fox Valley
2198 S. Memorial Dr
Appleton, WI 54915
(920) 739-3192

Hmong American Partnership Minneapolis
1121 Glenwood Avenue, North
Minneapolis, MN 55405
(612) 377-6482

Hmong American Partnership St. Paul
430 Dale Street
St. Paul, MN 55103
(651) 291-1811

Hmong American Women's Assn.
Christa Xiong
2414 West Vliet Street
Milwaukee, WI 53205
(414) 342-0858

Hmong/American Friendship Association, Inc.
Lo Neng Kiatoukaysy
3824 West Vliet Street
Milwaukee, WI 53208
(414) 344-6575

Hmong Association of Green Bay, Inc.
200 S. Ashland Ave
Green Bay, WI 54303
(920) 437-4550

Hmong Association of Wood County, Inc.
Xou Khang
1430 2nd Street N.
Wisconsin Rapids, WI 54494
(715) 424-4981

Hmong Community of Metro-Detroit, Inc.
P.O. Box 3810
Centerline, MI 48015
(586) 945-0868

Hmong Cultural Center
995 University Ave Ste 214
Saint Paul, MN 55104
(651) 917-9937

Hmong Educational Advancement, Inc.
2414 W. Vliet Street
Milwaukee, WI 53205
Ge Xiong
(414) 931-8834

Hmong-Lao American Association, Inc.
Za Teng Thao
316 Court Street
Oshkosh, WI 54901-5032
(920) 235-5133

Hmong-Lao Assistance Association, Inc.
Catherine Hodges
124 Logan Drive
Mount Gilead, NC 27306
(910) 439-9533

Hmong Minnesota Pacific Assn.
925 Payne Ave Ste B
St. Paul, MN 55101
(651) 778-8937

Hmong Mutual Assistance Association of Sheboygan, Inc.
Chasong Yang
2304 Superior Ave
Sheboygan, WI 53081
(920) 458-0808
hmaas@powercom.net

Hmong National Development
1628 16th St NW
Washington, DC 20009
(202) 588-1661

Hmong National Organization, Inc.
501 Dale St North Ste 106
St. Paul, MN 55103
(651) 290-2343

Hmong United Association of Rhode Island
340 Lockwood Street
Providence, RI 02907
(401) 455-0847

IRCO - Asian Family Center
Lee Po Cha
4424 NE Glisan Street
Portland, OR 97213
(503) 235-9396

La Crosse Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association, Inc.
Dennis Tucker
2615 George Street
La Crosse, WI 54603
(608) 781-5744

Lao-Hmong American Coalition
Yang Chee
7051 Beacon Way
Westminster, CO 80030
(303) 429-8724

Lao Family Community of Minnesota – Minneapolis
320 W. University Ave
Saint Paul, MN 55103
(651) 221-0069

Lao Family Community of Minnesota – St. Paul
1433 E. Franklin Ave
Minneapolis, MN 55404
(612) 870-1719

Lao Family of Milwaukee
2331 W. Vieau Pl
Milwaukee, WI 53204
(414) 385-3380

Lauj Youth Society
Sonja Mee Lor
995 University Avenue, Suite 213
St. Paul, MN 55104
(651) 644-2446

Southeast Asian Community Council
Cha Lee
555 Girard Terrace North
Minneapolis, MN 55405
(612) 342-1530

Southeast Asian Resource Center
1628 16th St. NW 3rd Floor
Washington, DC 20009
(202) 667-4690

United Hmong Association, Inc.
P.O. Box 9683
Hickory, NC 28603-9683
(828) 465-6288

United Hmong Comm. Center
401 9th St
Green Bay, WI 54304
(920) 432-8900



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Kongmong Moua

txhawb profile

Kongmong Moua always knew he wanted to work in sports or medicine. While being treated for a common cold at the university health center, Kongmong was introduced to what a physician assistant does. "I was fascinated that a physician assistant can treat patients such as a medicine doctor but under the supervision of a medical doctor," Kongmong recalls. He then volunteered at the university health center to learn more about medicine and has not looked back since.

Kongmong, as a refugee of the Secret War in Laos, immigrated to the United State at the age of two in 1976. He went on to graduate high school from Clovis High and went to Pepperdine University where he obtained a Bachelor of Science in Sports Medicine. He completed the Physician Assistant program at Charles R. Drew University and has been practicing medicine for 15 years. He is currently a physician assistant in family medicine for Greater Fresno Health Organizing at the North Marks Medical Clinic.

Aside from his work at the clinic, he also participates in the community to teach people about health care. He worked as a community speaker for Gilead, which promoted the education of chronic hepatitis, a major cause of primary liver cancer worldwide. A study in Journal of Community Health in 2010 reported that approximately 1 out of 6 Hmong are infected in the San Joaquin Valley. "I feel it is very important for our Hmong people to get screened and treated," said Kongmong. He also volunteers for California Disaster Healthcare as he highly value giving back to the community. "We can all give back whether be our time or money," said Kongmong. He sees that a collective group of people can do amazing work for the community. "There are some in our community that are doing an outstanding job such as the people involved with Hmongstory 40 Project. We need more of those types of individuals or leaders to step up in our community," Kongmong emphasized.

Kongmong defines success as: "the ability to make a difference in people's life and still get paid for it." He sites the saying, "When you do something you love, you never work a day in your life." Despite all his success, Kongmong considers himself as an average joe. "but I have passion about medicine and helping others." He continues to learn by attending conferences, lectures, and reading medical journals.

When not working, Kongmong enjoys traveling and eating good food. He considers himself a foodie and extremely fond of street food. He also enjoys suba diving and traveling to exotic places.

writer
Chelsey Xiong

photography
Xiong VFX

Kongmong Moua
North Marks
Medical Clinic

4011 N Marks Ave
Fresno, CA 93722

559.860.4925



txhawb profile

Pos L. Moua

writer
Burlee Vang

photography
Xiong VFX

Reflecting on his early days as a refugee child in Spokane, Washington, poet Pos L. Moua reveals that his greatest struggle was "learning a new language." Years later, his chapbook *Where The Torches Are Burning* (Swan Scythe Press, 2002) would be hailed as the first published volume of poems written in English by a Hmong American.

Pos teaches English at Merced High School and Merced College. He holds an M.A. in English/Creative Writing from UC Davis, where he studied under the guidance of renowned poets Gary Snyder, Alan Williamson, and Sandra McPherson. Asked why he chose to study writing, he explains, "Because I wanted to write about my people, whom I have so much love for. Their hardship must be recorded, and I wanted to channel my energy to do that through poetry." On the surface, his poems explore feelings of exile and loss, common themes within the Hmong narrative - but what differentiates Pos's work from other Hmong writers is his lyrical celebration of the human spirit and its existential search for meaning and love. If a poem is meditating on loneliness, it is quietly proclaiming desire. If it is lamenting a death, it is really celebrating a rebirth. His poems are ethereal and glow with unbound hope. "English is difficult for me," Pos confesses, "but I find that it is also sweet and intricate, soft and sincere, as the Hmong language has been." Pos draws much of his inspiration from leisure time spent fishing or hiking in the mountains and along the sandy coastal shores. Lately, he has been writing in both Hmong and English.

As a longtime member of HAWC (the Hmong American Writers' Circle), Pos co-edited the groundbreaking book ***How Do I Begin?*** *A Hmong American Literary Anthology.* He also founded SAVE (Southeast Asian Vision for Education), a non-profit organization that services Southeast Asian high school students. To date, its members and community contributors have provided over $120,000 to students. SAVE also served as the fiscal agent for Hmongstory 40 exhibit in Merced, and has continued to function as a philanthropic entity for the community.

These days Pos Moua finds himself spending more time with his loved ones. "I often think of the good health that enables all of us to live and enjoy our daily lives. To me, family and friends are the cornerstone of existence; I'll never tire of living for them, and with them." And of his art, Pos eloquently adds, "Writing is a noble, universal calling for a few of us. I found eternity in it. It is an art that endures. One hundred years from now the words remain...while the poet may have ridden the microdust across the sky."



Nomtsia Xiong

txhawb profile

A child of war and exile, Nomtsia Xiong found his calling early in life.

"I was born in Laos, fled to Thailand in 1976 when I was 6 years old and lived in the refugee camp for 6 years before resettling in Stockton, California in 1982. My first experience with school in the United States started in middle school," said Nomtsia. "Growing up in America is not much different from the refugee camp because we still didn't have enough to eat and struggled to pay for our necessities."

As a result of those experiences, Nomtsia knew that he wanted to spend his life helping people: those who lack safe drinking water, food, medicine, opportunity and/or education; those who suffer separation from family members and marginalize; those who struggle with social, emotional, mental disorders and racism.

In 8th grade, as a refugee, he remembers being "taunted, beaten, and bullied for being different". This shaped his hunger and drive for knowledge about civil rights, justice, and equality. "I had an appetite to dive deeper into the analysis of why these conditions exist and achieve better understanding" This led to the study of History, Criminal Justice, and Sociology in order to understand how social systems work and how to change them. "I wanted to see change so I have been working endlessly for the last 25 years to improving our schools and local government systems," he said.

To achieve these goals, Nomtsia decided to go into the non-profit field where he learned community organizing and public policy. Though it is a career of hard work and little pay, it gave him the chance to help empower and transform people. "I believe in the power of people; each of us has the potential and power to make change," he said. "In our line of work, we are in the business of developing people to do extraordinary things. We go beyond teaching you how to fish, we want to make sure the river is not polluted so you can still fish for years to come."

Nomtsia is an avid fisherman himself. "I love river trout fishing and can do it all day long," he exclaimed. He is a family man who loves to spend time with his family fishing, camping, hiking, and traveling. He is a man of faith who is active in his church and has served in many capacities over the years. But most of all, he is a man who is passionate and committed to his community.

Nomtsia currently serves on many important board/committees: Merced City School District - Bond Oversight Committee and English Language Advisory Council (ELAC), Merced County - Municipal Advisory Council (Beackwood/Franklin) appointed by the Merced County Board Supervisor, The California Endowment - Building Healthy Communities Initiative as Steering Committee Member, UC Merced Community Health Advisory Group, and Merced Union High School - Superintendent's Community Advisory Council.

Nomtsia shares, "My success in life is about what I can give and not what I can receive." He strongly encourages those who have succeeded to remember to give back to the community. "It doesn't have to be in the form of money only, but also in the form of time and community service. Participate in civic engagement, and/or serve on community or local government boards or committees that will help improve the lives of all Hmong families."

"At the end of the day, if you do nothing, you produce nothing" said Nomtsia.

writer
Soul Vang

photography
Xiong VFX

Merced
Organizing
Project

www.MOPmerced.org



txhawb profile

Dr Tru Chang

Like many other Hmong refugees, Tru Chang remembers having a rough start when his family first arrived in San Diego in the early 1980s. "We often walked a few miles just to buy groceries. We would push the shopping cart home, empty our grocery bags and then walk all the way back to the store to return the cart." As a second grader, he and his sister were the only Hmong kids at his elementary school. Speaking no English and unable to communicate with anyone, he would sit in class and wonder what his teacher was trying to say to him.

writer
Pachia Vang

photography
Xiong VFX

After three years of struggling as new immigrants in San Diego, his family decided to move to Merced. Despite the move, however, challenges and complications continued. For example, when Tru was first introduced to the chiropractic field, it was because he had gotten a back injury from playing volleyball. "I called all the chiropractic doctors in the phone book, but no one was willing to help me because I was on Medi-Cal and couldn't afford their service." For years he was unable to correct his injuries and struggled with the pain. It was not until he found a blind chiropractor who was willing to treat his back injuries at no cost.

Tru Chang, D.C.
Chiropractic Inc
700 W Olive Ste #G
Merced, CA 95348

209.722.9089

This chiropractor, Dr. John Jensen, was someone that Tru re-visited when his back started to flare up again while he was in college. Studying Biology at the University of Pacific in Stockton and pursuing a career in pharmacy, Dr. Jensen pointed out the obvious need for more chiropractors in the Hmong community and suggested that Tru consider pursuing a career as a chiropractor. After months of consideration, Tru decided to make the career switch so that he could help others who suffered from the same kind of challenges he did.

Today, Dr. Chang runs a successful chiropractic practice and gives back to the community by serving on many non-profit boards. To name a few, Dr. Chang served two terms as the President of the ***Southeast Asian-American Professionals Association*** (SEA-APA) and is the current Vice-Chair of ***Southeast Asian Vision for Education*** (SAVE). An organization that he helped found 14 years ago. To date, SEA-APA and SAVE have awarded over $150,000 in scholarships to Southeast Asian high school seniors throughout Merced and Stanislaus Counties. He believes that it is important for organizations and individuals to be engaged in community activities.

"I believe the basic foundation has been laid out for our community but I also see that there is still so much more work to be done for a prosperous and thriving Hmong community." As much as we value our past, Dr. Chang also feels the Hmong people should progressively change to become a positive part of building a better future.



Poge Her D.D.S.

txhawb profile

In 1983, at the age of 6, Dr. Her and his family left the refugee camps in Thailand and resettled in the United States. Little did he know, coming to the United States would bring him opportunities and successes in many aspects of his life that he had never dreamed of. Dr. Her is the third oldest of ten children and started school in the first grade after his family resettled to the United States. In a new environment and unfamiliar culture, he struggled to learn how to read and write English.

Higher education was a far fetch goal for Dr. Her in high school. It was the point in his life when his grades mattered and would determine his future, but he lost focus. With guidance and support from his older brother, he regained focus, improved his grades and went on to pursue a higher education. Dr. Her received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Mathematics from the University of the Pacific in 1999 and continued his education to receive his Doctorate of Dental Surgery degree from the University of California, San Francisco in 2005. His journey to gain acceptance into dental school was not an easy task. After numerous rejection letters and many disappointments, he finally found success. UC San Francisco accepted Dr. Her into their dental program, opening the doorway for him to start changing lives through dentistry.

As a kid, Dr. Her was always afraid to go to the dentist. "Many people, young or old, have this perception that going to the dentist is painful. I wanted to change that perception. I wanted to create a place where patients could feel like they were going to visit a friend, a brother, a son, or a relative." He wanted to create an atmosphere where it "feels like home." This ideal was the motivation for Dr. Her to open his very own dental practice in 2005 after he completed dental school. He felt that if he can change people's perception of dentistry, then he can start helping them live healthier lives through it. Teaching the importance of dental health to the community has always been a primary goal of Dr. Her. "That's what I do; I sit down with my patients and I teach! And, I continue to teach until they get it. I believe that when people truly understand their problems, they will make the necessary changes to correct them."

Dr. Her talks about his success as a business owner and a health care provider. He feels that success is not much about making the money, but about making a difference in people's lives. "Some people believe success is quantified as the amount of money they make over their lifetime. I've always believed that a person's success is measured by the number of lives he's able to touch and change over his lifetime. In my line of work, success is when I can educate patients to fully understand their diseases and accept the recommended treatments. I feel privileged and honored to be able have that opportunity to affect change through what I do."

Throughout his 11 years of practice, his practice U Smile Family Dentistry has continued to give back to the community in various ways: promoting dental health at local elementary schools and colleges, mentoring and providing internship opportunities for aspiring dental students, providing free dental hygiene products, providing free screenings to children, opening up the clinic to help people who do not have health insurance, and providing monetary sponsorships to various colleges and community programs. "The community is what makes U Smile Family Dentistry strong, and giving back is the least we can do to show them that we appreciate all the support we have received throughout the years."

writer
Pachia Vang

photography
Kong Vue

Poge Her DDS
Pobzeb Hawj

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4433 Florin Road
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CA 95823

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txhawb profile

Kou Lor, ESQ

photography
Kong Vue

Kou Lor, ESQ.

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Like so many Hmong families displaced by the Secret War, Kou Lor and his family spent several years in a Thai refugee camp awaiting acceptance for passage to the United States. Kou's earliest memories are of him playing with his siblings and other children in a squalid and overcrowded camp. In 1988, when Kou was seven years old, his family settled in Fresno, California. Kou remembers when he first went to school, his teachers put him in a back corner of the classroom with other non-English speaking students. While the English-speaking students received instruction, Kou and his non-English speaking peers were neglected. Undeterred by an education system that ignored non-English speaking students, Kou was determined to learn English. He made a conscious effort to learn English by relentlessly watching TV and studying the dictionary. Overcoming the odds, Kou graduated from Fresno High School as a valedictorian in 1999, and earned acceptance to UC Berkeley.

Kou graduated from UC Berkeley in May 2003, and began law school at UC Davis School of Law the following semester. While in law school, Kou worked as a law clerk for Safeco Insurance and interned at the Sacramento County District Attorney's Office. After graduation, Kou accepted an in-house attorney position with Safeco. There, he defended Safeco's insureds in cases involving motor vehicle accidents, premises liability, and homeowners' liability. He also defended breach of contract and bad faith claims against the company and its subsidiaries. Kou later joined the legal team at Liberty Mutual Insurance after it purchased Safeco.

In 2011, Kou accepted a position with Lewis Brisbois Bisgaard and Smith, LLP, a prominent national law firm and one of California's largest firms. At Lewis Brisbois, Kou defended businesses and individuals in cases involving catastrophic injuries, traumatic brain injuries, wrongful death, premises liability, and products liability.

For Kou, progress in his career was driven by passion for the law and advocacy as well as a competitive predisposition. But, progress did not come without sacrifice. Working for competitive firms required long work hours, traveling, and, oftentimes, time away from family. So, when Kou and his wife had their first child in 2013, his decision to establish his own law practice was a natural one.

Kou opened his law practice in 2014. Kou's primary practice areas include personal injury and wrongful death, insurance litigation, and employment law. Drawing on almost 10 years of insurance defense experience, Kou has been able to use his inside knowledge of the insurance industry to effectively prosecute cases on behalf of his clients. He has obtained favorable results for his clients, including a recent $1.5 million settlement against Chico State University and its tree maintenance company, stemming from the death of a student who was struck by a falling tree branch. Kou also successfully represented a young professional student who was accused of cheating on his licensing exam and was barred from ever retaking the exam. After review of the evidence and testimony presented at the administrative hearing, the court ruled in favor of Kou's client. Helping people is the most rewarding part of Kou's job, an experience which was lacking during his time as a defense attorney representing the interests of large insurance companies and corporations. That is how Kou knows that he made the right choice to open his own practice. Kou's wife, Nou Lee, is also an attorney in the law firm and assists in handling the caseload.



Russell Vang

txhawb profile

Growing up without parents, Russell Vang always knew that it would take a lot of hard work to be successful in life. “Sometimes I think the reason why my parents died was so I can learn how to be strong and rely on myself. I am responsible for my life and my destiny.” These words have held true to Russell since he was a young boy. Despite becoming an orphan at the age of five, he persevered and was able to complete two years of school in Laos and three years of school in Thailand. Russell would start sixth grade upon arriving in the United States, go on to graduate from high school and earn his associates degree from San Joaquin Delta College in Stockton, California.

Russell was shaped by the people and situations that he encountered in his life. When his cousin died and left behind a wife and eight young children, Russell stepped up to marry her and ensure that their family would remain intact under his love and care. He was only two years out of high school at the time and this huge change forced him to work full-time to keep his new family afloat. After having an additional five children together with his wife he realized that they could no longer live month to month on public cash assistance. So he borrowed $4,000 from his brother-in-law to match his savings and started a janitorial business.

Although his janitorial business was successful and generated a good income, he knew he wouldn’t be able to keep up with it for long because of the hard labor it required. This motivated him to further his education and become a life insurance agent. By attending classes at night after his day job, Russell was able to earn his associates degree and pass the California state life insurance exam. As a life insurance agent he realized there was a need for insurance access and education within the Hmong community. This prompted him to get his property and casualty broker license branching his career into auto and home insurance. With the help of his step-daughter, Keren Vang, they were able to start Russell Vang Insurance, Inc in 1997.

“My business philosophy is to ensure everyone can win. I believe in being honest in business. We are professionals and our clients depend on and trust us to deliver quality products and services; especially our Hmong clients, who have limited knowledge about insurance. That is why they come to us. I protect them by educating them so they know the benefits of having proper insurance.” His commitment to the Hmong community is what helped expand his agency over the years to three different locations throughout the Central Valley in Sacramento, Stockton, and Fresno.

It is this drive and dedication to help others, especially his family, which has motivated him to continue working hard. “I enjoy insurance very much. When I wake up in the morning my business gives me purpose and also makes money. Money is not everything, but money makes our lives easier. I may have all the money in the world but if my marriage and family are falling apart, then there is no success. As long as I know my children are happy, have their own families, a home and are doing well, I can be happy and live in peace and harmony. It is then that I know I am a successful person.”

After 19 years of operating as an agency, Russell Vang Insurance, Inc became a corporation in June 2016. With this change Russell turned over the business to his step-daughter Keren Vang who has been with him since the beginning.

writer
Pachia Vang

photography
Kong Vue

Russell Vang

Russell Vang
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txhawb profile

Tha Cha

Tha Cha's advice for young people is that they should "pursue what they are passionate about and commit to it." It is advice that he has followed in his own life. Discovering his aptitude and interest in the automotive industry in high school, he went on to pursue an education, training, and mastery as an auto mechanic. Tha first became interested in automobiles during his junior year because of his hobby for the modified import cars scene. He started taking automotive classes. The defining moment for him came in his senior year. "I did my first successful complete engine swap on my 1989 Honda Accord Coupe on my own, in my parent's home garage. Later that year, I drove the same vehicle out of state and back without any problems."

writer
Soul Vang

photography
Xiong VFX

Tha Cha

California House of Auto

1124 Kansas Ave
Modesto, CA 95351

209.575.5028

After graduating high school, Tha attended Sequoia Institute in Fremont, California to continue his automotive training. In 2002 he obtained his smog license. Throughout the years, while working in the automotive industry, he obtained all the required ASE certificates and eventually became a certified ASE Master Technician. He has been in the automotive industry for 17 years. It has not been an easy road. After losing his job in an automobile shop in the bay area, he decided to start on his own. He would post online ads for his repair services. He would drive to customers' homes to repair their vehicles. "There were days when I started at 8:00 AM and wouldn't get back home until after 11:00 PM."

Through perseverance, commitment, sacrifice and hard work, Tha was able to open his own shop with the help and teamwork of his brothers. "My brothers worked along with me to build our shop; we built this business together as a family. Each of us focused on a different part of the business." After all these years, he is the successful owner of California House of Auto in Modesto, California. Their business also reflects their pride for being Hmong as well. The abbreviated business name "CHA" captures their Hmong surname.

Tha believes that success is "enjoying what you are doing, being very good at it, passionate about it, and at the same time being able to provide for your family. Money is secondary, as it's possible a person can make a lot of money doing something that is completely empty to them."

The success of the business has allowed him to spend more time with his family, especially bicycle riding with his son. It has also enabled him to give back to the community by sponsoring causes like the Stanislaus Asian American Community Resource's Annual Youth Leadership Conference in Modesto, local youth sport teams, Tuolumne River Trust recycling/clean up, and Tuolumne River runs and the Hmongstory 40 project. He believes that "giving back to the community you are a part of, will create stronger and better communities for everyone. As a second generation Hmong American and a business owner, Tha believes that for a better future, we must all reach beyond the Hmong community. Hmong-owned businesses must build bridges and make connections outside of their our community. To be successful, they must earn business "from the larger community in order to strengthen our own community."

DAVID LEE VUE

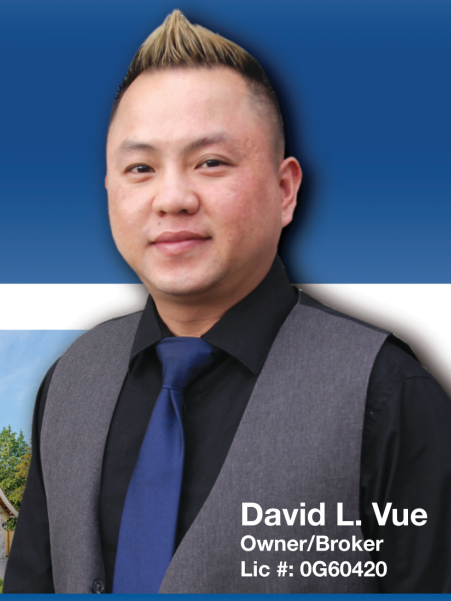
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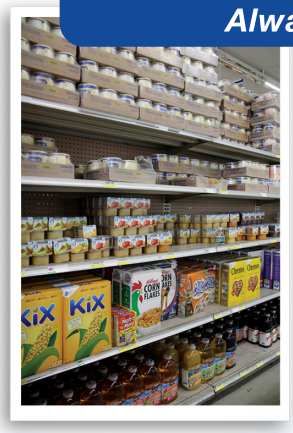


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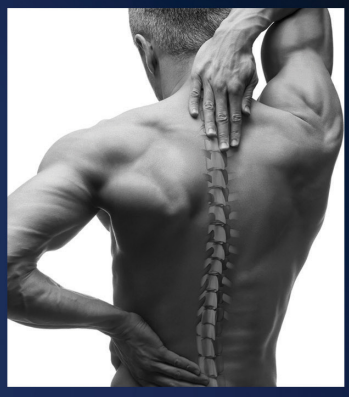
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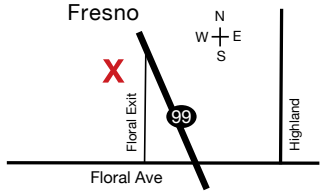
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