



MAO HER

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My name is Mao Her with my husband's last name of Thao. My father is Boua Tong Her and my mother is Mee Yang. I was born in Laos in 1958, on paper. I was born in the village of Nam Ba, Xieng Khouang Province. I have 6 brothers and four sisters. Two brothers and two sisters have passed away but the rest of us are all here.

I was able to go to school back then. I was a very fortunate girl. Because Hmong parents usually don't let their daughters go to school but my uncle convinced my parents to let me. So, I was fortunate to have been able to go to school but not my older sisters. There were other girls going to school too but not very many.

I got married and then shortly after that we fled from Laos. Back then, once you have reached your teenage years, parents will make you get married. So, I was married when I was about 13 or 14 years old.

We lived in Vang Vieng just before the country fell. One day, hundreds of Communist soldiers just showed up looking and asking for people who are working for the U.S. Government. My husband was working for USAID, helping displaced refugees. My father was a tribal leader and my brothers were soldiers for General Vang Pao and the CIA. That's why we have made the decision to flee the country because it was not safe for us to stay.

We lived in Vang Vieng at that time. Due to the political chaos, the USAID office in Vientiane was closed down and the staffs were not paid. So, my husband Toua went to Vientiane to protest along with other USAID workers. I was about 15 or 16 years old, my parents and my in-laws were not there with me so I was not sure what to do. I waited for him there for two weeks. I was fortunate that Uncle Pang Cai Her, Senator Fong Hawj's father who also lived in Vang Vieng, came back from Vientiane and told me to flee to Vientiane and find Toua there. I was very young so I was not even sure how to get to Vientiane but there was a Hmong student who is going down to Vientiane. Uncle Pang Cai asked him to take me there. It was a very scary situation because there were many checkpoints where communist soldiers would come into the

bus asking for IDs and check to see if there are any Hmong in the bus. This was right after the Hin Heup incident which many Hmong were killed. I have to dress up like a Lao, speak Lao, and pretend to be a Lao so I won't get pulled off. I was scared. Many Hmong faced far worst situations but now that I think about it, I was very lucky and blessed to be able to go through that and made it to this country.

Four or five communist soldiers would come in and test to see if passengers can speak Lao. If not, they know that those are Hmong. So, some older Hmong ladies got dragged off the bus and I never knew what had happened to them. I felt so sad because it was a life and death situation and there was nothing I can do to help. If I tried to help them, I would have gotten arrested as well.

When I arrived in Vientiane, I got on a taxi and went to Pang Cai's house to see if Toua was there. When I got there, he had already left to go back to Vang Vieng to look for me. But when he knew that I was no longer there, he came back and we were able to find each other. After that, we brought our parents and in-laws to Vientiane and then we fled to Thailand. We hired a police officer to lead us. We were cramped into a hauling truck with about 20 other families and drove through the forest to avoid detection. If anything was to happen, each was to jump off the truck and run away to hide. For the children, some parents covered their mouths to prevent them from crying out loud. Others were drugged to make them fall asleep so they won't make any noise. We were fortunate that we did not have very many children because there was a point where we have to hide in the forest and we were not allowed to use any lights. We have to sneak through the jungle in total darkness to try to get to the river. We almost left behind one of my sister in-law and my mother in-law in the jungle because children were crying and when they whistled for us to get back in the truck, they didn't hear. When we got to the Mekong river we counted the people and they were missing. So we had to go back and look for them in the jungle but found them. It was frightening because there were other groups who fled and were caught or got killed by the communist soldiers. So we fled, trusting fate to get us out safe.

Each family counted their own people and we got on a couple of boats. Our family was the largest because we have both my parents and in-laws' families. So we got on the boats and ride across the river in total darkness. When we got to Thailand, it was still dark and it rain really hard. We didn't know where to go so we hide under some chicken coops. We were all stained with chicken poop that dripped from above. Everyone smelled really bad but we can't do anything because we were really afraid. We were afraid of being robbed by the Thai people as well because there were horrified stories of people being robbed and killed when they got across to Thailand. We hide until morning but were fortunate that nothing happened. We were then taken to the refugee camp.

At the refugee camp, we were counted and registered. There were other relatives who had arrived before us so we just cram into their tiny quarters and live temporary like that. I was young and in a crisis mode so I don't remember all the details but I did remember that we were very destitute and in poverty with not enough food to eat, no clothes to wear, and no proper housing to live in. All family members and relatives just squeeze together into tiny living quarters and tried to survive like that. There were many of those who suffered and died from

malaria. So, we were not just fleeing from communist but also facing hunger, sickness, and death.

We've decided that it is not safe to return to Laos and we're stuck in a refugee camp so we pretty much decided right away not to go back but to go forward to a third country to start a new life where we can have an education and a career to raise our family.

I came to this country on March 15, 1976. We came straight to Minnesota because a church in La Crescent sponsored us. So they drove from Winona, Minnesota to pick us up. So, we arrived in March and we have only seen winter in post-cards but we came during that time and it was very cold so we were fearful and not sure how we are going to start our life.

We had no idea where America is and which state we will be going to. A Minnesota church sponsored us through Catholic Charity. So, we ended up here. I thought America is a small country like Laos. But when we got here, it was such a big country and it was only us in the middle of nowhere.

We were the first and only Hmong family in La Crescent when we arrived. A Cambodian family lived in La Crosse at that time. There was a Korean lady who was married to a Caucasian man and we went to the same church. So she would take us to La Crosse to attend Adult ESL classes. At that time, I was still very young, under eighteen but I was married. So they did not allow me to attend regular school. My schooling was Adult ESL classes.

Back in Laos, I've thought that I wanted to be a nurse because for Hmong girls there aren't many options. During that era, it's either being a teacher, a nurse, and or being a mother taking care of the family and farming. But the country collapse so when we got here in the States, I worked in the hospital as a translator. Later on I studied to become a nurse.

I am the founder of Hmong Healthcare Professionals Coalition. It was not a big organization but a place where we came together to share ideas on how we can help the Hmong. I started this organization because in the early days the Hmong were very afraid of doctors and fearful of taking their children to the hospital for check-ups. They were afraid of surgery. There were those who say the doctors will eat our brains and use us as experiments. That is what makes them afraid of going to the hospital. There were also issues of children having ear infections. Parents would take them to the doctor and the doctor would give them antibiotics but within a couple of days if their child doesn't get well, they thought the medication is not good so they go to the next doctor. They go to five different doctors who made five prescriptions of the same medication. The Hmong parents expect the medication to work right away. That's why there were mistrust and fear that the doctors do not care and they were not willing to heal them. So there were many problems of overdoses or not taking the medication enough as instructed. That was the first reason. Secondly, there were very few of us who translated in the hospital so we were on-call 24 hours a day and over worked but we were still unable to help all of the Hmong. There was a case which a child had meningitis and he went into surgery but he died from that so some Hmong Minnesotans were upset at me and a co-worker. They said we did not help them by allowing the doctors to perform surgery on the child and that is why he died. Therefore it is our fault. They said we are Hmong, why didn't we help Hmong. After that they met with us in a large meeting room and grilled us for four hours because they were upset that we did not help

them. We didn't know what to do because we were just translators, not doctors nor surgeons. We were just simply translating what the doctors say and what the parents say. The parents were frustrated. We, the translators were frustrated. The hospitals and doctors were frustrated because there were lots of misunderstandings and mistrusts. That is why I decided to organize and call all Hmong translators to come together once a month and help each other make proper translations so the Hmong will understand. It is also to create trust and understanding in the Hmong community by providing information on how healthcare, hospital check-ups, and procedures work in this country. We also wanted to provide information and knowledge to doctors and healthcare providers on how Hmong perceive healthcare and healings so they can better understand and help the Hmong. We provide trainings, rules of translations, and Hmong translators are required to learn proper Hmong languages to make proper translations so we can help instead of creating more problems. That is why I decided to form the Hmong Healthcare Professionals Coalition. These were the objectives then but now we have expanded our goals. Now, we have doctors, nurses, and healthcare professionals getting involved. So, every year during the July 4th Hmong festival, we have a health-fair to educate and provide healthcare information for the Hmong community. Since 2011 we have partner with healthcare providers to provide free flu shots for those who do not have any health insurance. We have retreats and monthly meeting for the Coalition members. We are also providing information and assistance to any social workers who may want to know more about Hmong and work with Hmong. I also do a monthly health talk to discuss health subjects on KFAI and we are also planning to air programs on Asian American Broadcasting. So we do radio shows, health fair, flu shots, and conferences.

I think some of the biggest issues in the Hmong community are mental health, diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, and kidney diseases. These are some of the main issues but mental health is the biggest problem. Now, we not only have to deal with instructing them how to take proper medications to help control their diabetes and heart diseases but we also have to talk about their thoughts, their state of mind, their daily living. So, mental health is a big issue right now. Ramsey County did a survey and we have found that both young and old, men and women have major health issues of mental health. Finding the right doctor or knowing how to take proper medications is not an issue anymore but now we are facing stress and depression because of the loss of jobs, losing houses, marriage issues such as separations, divorces, family breakups, and things like that. We have changed and are not the same family anymore. So those are some of the issues facing Hmong and many have lost hope, not knowing what the future may hold for them. They are concerned about who will lead the Hmong in the community, about their children's education, they are concerned that their grandchildren may not be able to speak Hmong. All of these combined with their diabetes and high blood pressures make it a health issue in the community.

I was born into a family that has always been public servants. So, whenever I am free I am involved in the community of one aspect or another and I am also involved at church. But when I find the time, I enjoy photography, fishing, and camping.

I think the best thing is that I am born to be a mom and a Hmong woman. Hmong women have a certain role that was expected of us. So through that, I am able to see things from a different window. People may tell me that because I am a woman, I can't achieve this or that. However,

all that we have been criticized, praised, or blamed actually help me grow in my thoughts and abilities in knowing how I can contribute and help improve our society and not focus on the push down and blame of a Hmong woman. So, I am glad to be born as a Hmong woman.

The worst that has happened to me was going back into Thailand in 1982 and seeing my parents but having to leave them again for the second time. But I am glad that they all were able to come to the United States. So my worst moments also became my best.

I am not sure what my proudest moment is but I am just glad that I am alive. I have not achieved that yet so perhaps I have to prove myself and keep on doing my best and achieve greater things to see what I can accomplish. But it is not too big of a deal for me. It is the small things that matter. If I am able to make a dent in somebody's life, I am happy that I have made a difference when she is in a time of darkness. Whether it be saying a word of encouragement, a word to inspire, or able to give hope to the person. So, I look at small things. I don't look at big things. Big things are hard to achieve but any of us can achieve small things. As long as I am alive, I will continue to learn and continue to do small things that change people's lives.

One, know who you are. Two, do not be selfish of your talent and abilities whether it is big or small. Open your heart and use your time to contribute to others because there are those who are wealthier but there are also those who are poorer. So, contribute because in the end you will be no more but those are the ones who will live on.

Three, is our family, especially the girls. We know that now there are education and more equal opportunities for the women here but not the women who are still living in other parts of the world. So we need to look into what we can do to help the Hmong women.

What is good about MN is that there are MN leaders who are actually taking interest in knowing - It is quite different in other states.

What is not good is that once we commute into a large population, our love and bonding with each other tends to strain and we lost that sense of community and helping each other.

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