I don’t remember how old I am. I just remember I was very young and the reason I say this is, as many refugees from Laos, especially from the 1970s and 1980s, there were no (birth) records that I’m aware of. My parents told me I was born in Mahosot Hospital in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. But they don’t have any records. I’ve asked them how they determined my age when we were living in the refugee camp and they told me, well there was a couple of factors. If you are older they will make you younger because they’ve heard that if you’re younger when you come to the United States you will have an opportunity to go to school and when you’re younger they made you a little bit older so you could get more rice portions. So, in my case they told me that they made me a little bit older so that we can get more rice portion for our family when we were living in the refugee camp in Thailand.

I remember bits and pieces and things that I remember were being carefree in the camp. But at the same time I remember those boundaries. There were certain places we couldn’t go. I remember when we first arrived there were not a lot of people and there were a lot of building that was being put up. And I remember one time there was an influx of people and tents were being setup. I also remember that in the refugee camp there were a lot of young children and I remember going to school or trying out for school and I was not old enough. I jokingly shared with my colleagues here that there was a certain test that they would give to young children to see if they qualify. They would ask the young children to raise their right hand and put it over their head. If you can touch your left ear than you qualify. If you can’t then you can’t go to school. And I remember I couldn’t reach my left ear and I remember crying because I really, really wanted to go to school. So, I tried to cheat and I put my hand behind my back and reach but they said I didn’t qualify. So, I took that technique and I shared with my colleagues and I said, maybe that’s what we need to do to test our young people.

It was 1976 and we arrived in Dallas, Texas. We were sponsored by the United States government and another one of our sponsors was a local church. We started in Dallas, Texas… that’s where my uncle was. There were maybe a handful of families and I think we were living
in some sort of apartments or projects at that time. I remember my parents made contact with some relatives and one day they announced that we are moving to Minnesota and I’ve never heard of Minnesota. I was told that at that time the University of Minnesota offered English as a second language. So, when my parents first arrived they were both working and they didn’t speak a word of English. My father really wanted to go back to school. So, when we heard from relatives here that there was educational opportunity here, my parents packed us up along with my uncles and moved us here.

I want to say we moved in the summer of 1978 because I remember it was after school. My parents packed us up in our little vehicle and you know, all of our belongings were in this little vehicle. Both my mom my dad… and I have two other siblings, we were all packed up in this Ford vehicle. My father love his Ford van at that time. And we drove, I remember it was a long time before we arrive in St. Paul. He wanted to get an education and also connect with the rest of the family because my father’s side of the Kong family was here. And for my father, family was very important. And I think for many of our Hmong families. I can remember being a young child and just listening to my parents talk and the tears that they shed because they missed home. And home in reference to Laos and home in reference to other family members.

I think Minnesota itself, the culture, the language, and the people are more receptive to the Hmong. I think the Hmong feel that they… again, this is just my observation living here for over thirty years… that they are more receptive to the programing, the services that they provide. If you look at the History of Minnesota we are a philanthropy community. We also have a lot of non-profit. We have a lot of churches, the council of churches. You have Lutheran Social Services. You have the Wilder Foundation. You have non-profit organizations that provide a lot of support both mentally and physically to the community as a whole. For Hmong community I think this is an opportunity for them and they feel like they’re being accepted. I don’t know, I have the sense that they feel that they are more accepted into this community.

Well in 1978, as I mentioned earlier, my parents made the decision to move to St. Paul, Minnesota. It was challenging at times. As I said earlier, it is receptive but being from a country where it’s not on the map, people don’t know… I mean, you asked people where Laos is and they have no clue where Laos is and let alone it’s in Southeast Asia. So, people don’t know about Laos and that’s challenging. And then, to also being Hmong and to identify as Hmong and say, I’m Hmong and I’m from Laos. And they say, no are you Laotian? I’m like, no I’m not Laotian, I’m Hmong and I’m from Laos. So people ask, is there a Hmong land? And you’re like, no there’s no Hmong land. Not that I’m aware of. Or they say, are you from China? I’m like, no we’re not from China. Are you Cambodian? And so, as a young child and you’re being asked and you don’t have the experience and the knowledge and the skill set to respond. I think that’s very challenging. At the same time, I think trying to balance between being Hmong and trying to fit into the Western culture, education itself was difficult. I remember eventually we wanted to get into public housing because we couldn’t afford and we were a growing family. So, in the 1980s we ended up living in the McDonough home project. And I thought we made it because we had a nice place. There’s enough room for everybody. You know, you come home and no one is shooting at you. No one is yelling at you and we had clothing. My parents would go to thrift shops and churches and they would get us clothing and I thought we got it made. But
it was challenging because when I went to school it was totally different. At home I feel secure because I have my parents, my family, and other Hmong families. I thought this is good. But when we got to school, this was what I found out in reality. When people start saying, you guys are poor. And I’m like, what do you mean we’re poor? We have clothes, we have food, and we have all the necessary things. This is what it means to achieve the American dream. And being told that, oh these kids are living in the projects. I didn’t know what the project was. I thought you know, it’s something you work on and put together. So I thought, is that something we are working on to realize the American dream? But that’s when I realized the struggle of growing up trying to be Hmong and trying to be American and not knowing that you can be successful being a Hmong American. Along the way there were a lot of barriers but there were also lots of support. I remember having an ESL teacher who was very supportive of the Hmong. Especially the Hmong students and she was very supportive and helped us and say, you can achieve that dream if you get a quality education.

Definitely, as the oldest of ten kids, there were a lot of responsibilities. My father spoke many languages but English isn’t one of them and so I became the spokesperson for the family. Lots of responsibilities. As a young child, I was responsible to make sure that our mails were looked through. If my parents have an appointment they would pull me out of school to take me to the social services or help with whatever chores that would require interpreting. At the same time, being the oldest child, I was expected to be a Hmong girl and expected to do well in school. I was expected to be model to whatever is expected to be model and that was very challenging because I didn’t know what that is. When I go to school I’m trying to learn the language and trying to fit in and then I go home and I’m expected to be a young Hmong girl. I’m supposed to cook and clean. I can’t go out with my friends and I can’t do different things. At that time, I think this was very stressful trying to live the two worlds.

I have to say, definitely. It has really helped mold me. I think anyone that have seen their parents’ struggles, and I have personally seen my parents struggled being discriminated against. Being talked down. My father is a very proud man and my mother is a wonderful woman. But for them, because of the language and cultural barriers, they were not able to do a lot of the things they wanted to. So, not being able to be self-sufficient I realized how difficult that has been for my parents. Also seeing how my parents have struggled and realizing that when you go outside your immediate family, you start seeing how other people live and how they succeed in life. That really motivated me to be better.

As a young child, I had to take on additional responsibilities that many young people today don’t have to because you had parents that didn’t speak the language. When my parents were not home, I had to take care of all my siblings. I have to cook and clean. So, at one time I felt I was a mother. At certain times I felt like I was a father because I had to take on those responsibilities. That motivated me to work harder. And then having teachers or other students saying, your English is funny, you look funny, you’re Chinese, you’re Japanese, you’re whatever and you’re not going to do well because of your language barrier, because of your culture, because of where you came from… That really motivated me. At first it saddened me but at the same time I realized that to achieve the American dream, however you refer to it, you need the language. You need to understand the culture. I need to become a culture broker. And that’s going to start with my education. That really helped me focus and helped me to channel my anger, my sadness, my disappointment, to say if other people can do it… why can’t I. And I
think a further step is, I think it saddens me but also motivated me was, there was no one else, there was no mentor. There was no other people that looked like me that was doing that kind of work. I see a lot of teachers. I see a lot of people but there’s nobody that look like me that can speak to me and talk to me that can understand where I’m coming from. And that really motivated me and I’m sure it motivated many other people in our community to do well and to work hard.

I think it goes beyond that. I think it’s an innate desire and want. I think it’s part of being Hmong. I grew up knowing my parents were always in the community. They’ve always serve the community. I can’t remember a time when my parents or grandparents were not serving the community. I was told growing up, and this is sometimes the conflicts and peace, my parents would talk about you can’t succeed as an individual. You succeed as a whole. Community and family comes first. You can’t be selfish. You can’t be me, myself, and I. When you enter this society and go into mainstream society, it’s very self-centered. It’s about me, myself, and I. It’s about what I can do. It’s about what I can achieve. Professionally now, people don’t asked, who are you? People asked, what do you do? Because we are identified by what we can accomplish as an individual. Growing up Hmong American, I had to balance that because it didn’t matter how intelligent and smart I am, at the end of the day, with the skill set that God has given me, what am I able to support my community with? So, it was a personal choice and also a community conscious decision.

I went to school for a business degree. I love the business sector. I wanted to do that. But I wanted to balance how I can give that to the community. And knowing that education was going to be number one, regardless of where I went, I wanted to make sure that I have the necessary skill set so that I can come back and contribute to the community. I remember I had some colleagues that told me, when I was growing up, when you pick an area of work or a focus and you are going to stay there and you’re going to retire from there. I remember sitting back there and listening… but I don’t want to do that. I want to explore and learn different things. So I did. I started in government sector. I went into the private sector. And I realized this is different. There are skill set I learned in the private sector that I think will be very beneficial to the community. So, I came back and I started working in the government sector again. And then when I had the opportunity, I ran for office. Because I knew that at that time if I don’t run, who is going to run? Honestly, I wasn’t planning to run. I was waiting for someone to run. Because I said, if someone runs I will be the best supporter. I will support, I will do whatever it takes. But I realized that if I was not willing to take the skill set that I have learned in working with the non-profit sector, the government sector, if I don’t take the skill set, the knowledge, and the competency that I’ve learned and I apply it, when will I have that opportunity? So, I took the knowledge that I have. I have been very blessed and very fortunate to have the opportunity to run successfully two times and be able to serve in a public setting. And St. Paul public school has been really good to me and I think I have made a difference in helping our general community. Have an understanding of what Hmong American is and how they can contribute to the overall society. As a community or as an individual, we can’t be successful alone. We need all of us together. So, when I went to St. Paul I didn’t go as a Hmong American. I went as Kazoua. I also went as a Hmong community. This is what I can bring to the table. So, I believe that the works we’ve done and the works that we are continuing to do is to better all of our community so that we become a more prosperous and more self-sufficient community.
Yes, I am the first. There were two other former elected official board members, Cua Lee and Neil Thao. But I was the first Board Chair and that’s quite an honor. I think when you look at the communities in St. Paul that’s not a big deal. But if you look at the Hmong community and how far we’ve come, that is a big deal. It takes someone who believes in you and having faith that you can get the job done and they give you that opportunity. Not only that they give you but you also have to earn that opportunity. Because I don’t believe that my colleagues would just say, oh Kazoua is a Hmong. Let’s give it to her. There’s a combination of, does she have the competency, does she have the skill set to do this job and do it successfully.

I believe being Hmong and having the opportunity, again I’m just going to reflect on my experiences and what I have seen, is that the Hmong are survivors. They are a survivor group. They will do whatever it takes to survive. And I realized that they are also very adaptable. What I have seen, and I remember in 2004, the Smithsonian did an article and they talked about the different refugee groups and how they have adapted and able to achieve. They identified the Hmong as a group that have been able to achieve success in a very short period of time and how they are able to integrate into the system. I think that sort of innate in our DNA, if you want to go that far, to say our families are hardworking people. And they realized that in order to survive, they have to be able to adapt. If you think about it, the reason the Hmong are able to do well here is because they have access to education and they have access to opportunity. If you give an opportunity to someone and they have the desire and the will to be successful, they will do that. I noticed that when I traveled across the United States I realized that not only in Minnesota but there are different places where our young people or families have settled and they have been able to integrate into the community, they are able to work hard and I think it’s the work hard ethic. Their education and their work. I have talked to employers that have said, the Hmong are the hardest working employees. There are a number of organizations here that hires Hmong and they have said that the reason they are so successful is because they have really good Hmong workers.

To contribute to what you’re saying, yes I believe that the success and still some struggles that we have is that we are still trying to achieve that American dream. We will work hard and we will continue to do that. Every day we have our share of struggle. Have we achieve the American dream? Have we achieve success for everybody? No. But I think that there is a majority of us that are working hard to help our families to get there. And it’s through education and making sure that opportunity is available to our community and to anyone that wants to move forward.

I honestly, wholeheartedly believe that Minnesota is a better place today because of Hmong American. I honestly believe they not only contribute to the culture, the language, and the economy. The Federal Reserve Bank did a study, I want to say in 2004 or 2005, and they said the home ownership was overwhelmingly Hmong American. So, we contribute financially in the buying power. As we start more education, we have more money. We have more resources. We can purchase more. We contribute more. So, economy, we contribute to. We contribute to the language and the culture. Think about the Hmong soccer tournament. Think about our new year. Think about the events and weekend parties that we have and how much we contribute to this community. Think of all the young people that have contributed their wealth and their education… their knowledge to the community. And today, we are in this building right now.
This is a charter school. It’s a charter school found by Hmong American. We employed 150 staff. The majority of them are Hmong. We have close to a thousand students. But over 90 percent are Hmong student. This is our contribution. We pay taxes. We contribute, we give. And I believe that Minnesota and any other State is better when we allow other people to contribute. So, I believe that Minnesota has a rich culture today because of the contribution of the Hmong.

Minnesota is a ground where many opportunities can flourish. Personally, my family, we owned two businesses here. I’ve worked for State government. I’ve worked in the private sector. I ran for public office. I don’t know if I can have the same opportunity to be an entrepreneur or to do all these stuff anywhere else and Minnesota has given me that opportunity or has created that opportunity where I can contribute to. I believe that with the same opportunity that I have been given, I believe that other Hmong Americans are taking that challenge and that opportunity. I remember in the early 90s or even in the 80s where everybody was central in St. Paul. Today, if you asked, they’re all over. I mean, we have families and friends... because of education, because of wealth and prosperity they’re buying big homes. They’re purchasing lands. They’re farming. You’re not limited. In the early 80s we would say, become teachers or social workers. Today, I want to say almost every day, I mean I’m still finding careers that I did not know existed or did not know that we have professionals in. With that said, I believe that we will continue to expand and do and contribute more into this community. So, in regards to running for office, since the 90s we have had the success of Hmong American running for office and being successful at it. In the beginning we would have just one candidate. Recently, we would have multiple candidates. And now you’re not looking at them saying they’re Hmong Americans. You’re saying, who is the best candidate? And I think when we get there is when we realized we have achieved or we have arrived. Businesses, small little mom and pop shops. Now we have very successful businesses from grocery stores to Hmong Village. Amazing. People travel from all over the world to come and see. We take a lot of things for granted but when you start traveling and start seeing how other Hmong communities are still struggling, you’ll see how far the Hmong in the United States have come. We have been able to achieve a lot.

I was recently in Laos and I was talking to some business community members that are Hmong and they have said to me, only Hmong American, especially Hmong Minnesotans are able to do this. I took a group of eighth graders and teachers and we went back. We were visiting villages and we were learning from our culture and our language. They (villagers) were so excited and they have tears. They said, we will never have that opportunity here. We’re so limited. But you are able to do today. Not only that but you are a woman. You are a Hmong woman and you are leading a group of students. They’re not college students but they are eighth graders and they are learning about language and culture from a Hmong school. This is amazing. Things like this help us realize that we are working towards the American dream. And that we need to continue to work hard. We need to be proud of ourselves and take more time to celebrate our success. I think as a human being we have a tendency to focus on the negatives and all the parts that we are lacking. But I think as a society and a community we need to take it upon ourselves to say how far we have come and how much we have accomplish during that time. It’s difficult at many times because you still see that many of our families are still struggling education wise, broken homes, barriers, discrimination... that still happens. I’m not saying that doesn’t happen. It’s still
happening more today than ever. But at the same time, we’ve also accomplished more today than we’ve ever accomplished before. And we need to balance that out to say, yes we still have to work on making sure that our children are getting quality education. That our children are graduating from high school and they’re going to school, getting good jobs, and that they’re becoming productive citizens. Many of us, we worked hard and we have not worked for our own self but we have worked for our own community. I’m not doing this to say, here is Kazoua’s glory, or here is Moua’s glory, or here’s other people’s glory. I’m doing this because I feel like this is my contribution to my community. And I see my community as my immediate family. My Hmong American. But today I’m saying, the community that we live in, we are not isolated. It’s not, here is Hmong. They live by themselves. We are a better community today because we’ve learned to live with others. And the difference is, we’ve learned to accept and assimilate. We’ve learned to accept. And we need to learn to focus on the good of the people. The good of our community. How do we take that and stop this discrimination… of this, you’re taking my job… you’re taking my home, or you’re taking things from me. But to say, how can we work together so that we can be a more accepting society. A society that loves and cares for the whole. And this is the foundation that the Hmong has that I don’t think the mainstream really understands it. If anything at all, this is what I would leave for the mainstream community is that we need to come back to the heart of the community. We can’t survive in isolation. We need to live and work together as a community. Once we understand that, being Hmong American is good. Having African American neighborhood is fabulous. Working with White co-workers, how do we share our differences? How do we appreciate all the success that we have? So, yes we need to celebrate our success. But we need to also continue to work hard so that we don’t lose who we are.

I’m very optimistic. I believe… I mean, in the back of my mind I do have fears. I have fears that we will be so focus that we lose our identity. But at the same time I am also very hopeful. Because I see schools and I see curriculums that are focusing on the language and culture. When we have Hmong Culture Center. We have Hmong American Partnership. We have charter school. We have Hmong curriculum in the public schools. We have social studies that focus on the Hmong contribution. That makes me hopeful. Hopeful that as long as we don’t forget who we are and where we came from, it’s good to be successful. It’s good to be forward thinking, to look at what the future will hold. I think there is going to be much success. But along the way, I think there will be a lot of struggles. And I think just trying to find what’s going to work. I think as long as we have that balance of understanding who we are, being a Hmong American, and our grandparents and parents of what they have done to support us, to offer us this opportunity. Let us not forget that. Because once we forget that, that’s when we don’t know where our future lies.

My father shared this with me and I’ve shared this many times. When I was younger, he sat me down along with my siblings and he said, if you don’t know who you are today you won’t know who you are tomorrow. And what he’s trying to say is, if you don’t know where you came from and what your history is then you can’t stand in front and say this is who I am and this is what I want to be. For me, that resonated to me as an adult. Now that I think back, because of what he said, I’ve made a conscious effort to go back and learn my language. To learn how to speak Hmong again. I spoke Hmong when I was younger. I got older and I didn’t think it was important. And I think many of our communities are losing that.
In the 80s and 90s we talked about melting pot. We all become a big blah. But later on the analogy is, we’re like a salad bowl. We have to retain who we are and contribute and say, all the things that we are, are good things and it’s not bad. It’s all good. But how do we contribute? How do we make it better? So, moving forward I feel optimistic. There are still barriers in front of us. But if there are people that are willing and believe that the community as a whole want success for our community and are willing to work towards that success through education. Making sure that our children are still getting quality education. That they are graduating. Making sure that there are opportunities for them. That if they’re going to work or going back to college they’ll be able to build financial success. So they can have their own business or work for someone. So that they can provide support for their family. Ultimately I think everyone wants that. They want to be able to have that sense of pride in themselves that, I have accomplished. And you don’t have to be a political leader, a movie star to be successful. Your success starts with, what do I want to accomplish? And did I accomplish that?

I believe so and I don’t think it’s only charter school but the public school. When they start realizing that our families want their culture and their language be a part of who they are and they are offering programs such as what’s happening at Jackson or the first Hmong magnet school at Phalen. These efforts are going to help our Hmong community remember. Not only Hmong American but the overall community to understand who the Hmong Americans are. I think those are going to be important pieces.

A non-profit organization I started called, Hmong Education and Resources Today which host the annual Hmong Resource Fair. Here is an opportunity that we continue to educate and provide resources to the Hmong. But also provide resources to non-Hmong. So, it’s a two way communication. We need to continue to learn about who we are but at the same time we also need to know and be able to work and adapt and live within the community that we are with. So, I honestly believe that education in any shape and form is going to help our community become stronger.

I believe wholeheartedly that the reason the Hmong Americans in the United States are successful is because they have access to education and I wholeheartedly support that. Because I had the opportunity to travel to Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Jordan in the Middle East and I have seen firsthand barriers that are put up because the community, the government, and the society… they know that when a small group of people have access to education, they start thinking for themselves. They start making decisions for themselves. They start wanting things that are better for themselves. And I see that the reason the Hmong in the United States have been successful is because they have, in the last 34 years to not fight a war. They’re not running for their lives. They are settled and they have an opportunity to send their children or go to adult school themselves and get a quality education. We talked about quality education all the time. But I realized that education, be it formal or informal, does open doors. It does open opportunities and that is the reason why I honestly believe today there are professionals and families and communities in different areas outside of just St. Paul. Because they have seen that there are opportunities. That there are resources. That there are education they are boundless. There is no limit. So, families can have access to things that they would never have if they were living back in Laos, Vietnam, China, wherever they are. They are not able to do that.
A quick story I want to share with you. There was an uncle that was visiting from France and he was a formal leader and a very prominent man back in Laos. He came and we sat down and we talked and he said, you young people are so fortunate but I realized that it’s not only the young people. I realized that any Hmong that has arrived in the United States have been given opportunities that none of us have. And he said, the barriers that they have encountered in France, and again this is his own personal story. He said, my children worked hard. They made the grades. They are at the top among the students and the top of the class but when they graduate they don’t get the same opportunities that you do. Here, you can compete. Here, equal employment opportunity is really equal employment opportunity. Over there, we don’t talk about it. They ask your nationality. Are you full blood? Whatever the culture and the language and when you’re not… even though my son was born in France, because of the color of his skin and because he was Hmong France, he did not get the opportunity. That story really resonated and really hit hard for me because I forget how much opportunities and how much resources, how much access we have here that other people in other countries do not have.

Oh my goodness, there are so much things I want to do. I always asked myself, what do I want to do when I grow up? And I’m still looking for opportunities because I honestly believe that at the end of the day, as long as I’m at a place where I’m serving my community. I’ve made a conscious decision to come back to my community and serve. And I’m happy to be where I am today. And I will continue to look for opportunities to serve, to better serve, to best serve the Hmong community and also mainstream. Because I believe that I am a bridge builder. I’m a change agent. And the only way I can do that is, I have to be out and about and be sharing my story. At the same time, being able to hear other people’s stories so that I can take those stories and continue to share. And to break down the discrimination. To break down those barriers that people, through fear, put up against each other. I’m going to continue to be a champion of that and continue to break those barriers down. Am I going to do it overnight? No. But I believe that myself, along with other people in the community who are willing to help, we can do this. And it’s going to take a while. It may be brick by brick but we can do it if we wholeheartedly support and we know that what we’re doing is for the good of our community.

I am definitely proud to be a Hmong American and a Minnesotan. Everywhere I go Minnesota has given me so much opportunities here. As a child growing up I moved away for a little while but I realized that Minnesota is home because it has offer not only for me but for my family and for my community opportunities I would not have anywhere else. And for that, I will always be forever grateful to Minnesota.

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