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I was born, like most Hmong people, I think our birthdays are estimated. So, I was born in 1971. My parents told me I was born in the town of Na-teng. I don't know exactly where it's at but they called Hmong Mong Pheng, the people from that region. I've been to Laos many times but I haven't visited that area. But I was born in Laos. So, I have what I described to people, it's kind of like a movie you saw a long time ago where you remember bits and pieces. But if you are to tell the entire story, I can't tell the entire story. From my memories of Laos, I've traveled back many times, so I know what Laos looks like now. But if I'm really honest to myself, I was about seven or eight, almost eight before my family left Laos. So, I do remember bits and pieces; Going to the field to pick Hmong cucumbers. These are very specific images... or digging up taro roots with my mom. Those are little things I remember as a kid and then I remember running around with the pigs and chickens. But those are all I really honestly... They're like my memories. They're not things people have told me about so, to be really honest, just bits and pieces of my childhood in Laos.

In 1975, my uncle Tong was working in Long Cheng, so he came back to tell my parents and the elders that the country was falling apart and that we should leave. So, in fact we actually were preparing to leave too. But we returned to our villages after the Hin Heup shooting as you know. So, we actually tried at that time but then because of that, the elders all decided to go back to our villages. So we went back trying to bring some normal routines into our lives and lived as normal as it can be. We stayed until late '78. That was a very contentious time if you think about the larger history of the region. This I remember myself, it's not that people told me about. So, not too long before the whole village left, our village was bombed. So, in my village, my parents were at the field so all the kids, we knew that if you heard a plane, you're supposed to run and hide. So, fortunately no one was hurt. We heard the noise and everybody fled. I was home babysitting my younger sister and our baby brother who was born in 1978. As a kid, I

didn't understand all the larger politics but it was after that incident that all the elders had a meeting and decided to leave once again. But I think it was also because my uncle had arrived in Minnesota. He is Vang Tong. He works for DNR right now. He is my dad's younger brother. So, he was in Minnesota already. He had sent a message to my parents that if there was an opportunity than we should leave. So, I want to say that he asked the people who came back to Laos to take photos of us so that, I think he had to pay them some money to guide us out. So, when they returned, they took photos of us. That was my first photo ever to be taken. When we arrived in Minnesota my aunt and uncle gave it back to us. So we actually have our first photo ever, taken in 1978 in Laos and I was already like eight years old.

My father has three brothers but one died so he has two younger brothers. He was the oldest so he served in the earlier years. But towards the late 60s and early 70s he wasn't actively of course they all guarded their villages but he wasn't an active soldier because my uncle Cher Chong for serving for the family at the time. So my parents, like most Hmong people, you really became displaced quite a bit. So, they farmed and that's why I remember bits and pieces like that. They farmed, fished, you know... just like other Hmong families who could live in the villages. My father was also very involved in trade. This is one thing that I don't remember myself, how it happened but as a kid, you heard what people are doing. We lived in an area where he was able to raise pigs and chickens. So, I would remember my mother telling us kids, "oh, your dad took the pigs to Na Xu to sell." So he was involved in taking his animals to sell and he would buy us soap and clothe. It's those kinds of exchanges that he was involved with. My mother had... a lot of people who travelled, so she would set up a little shop in our house and she would sell salt to people who travelled through our village. So, in some ways, they farmed, they did multiple things to survive. They farmed, a little business bartering, and raising their own livestock when we could live by ourselves like that.

The first time I held a pencil was in Ban Vinai refugee camp. You can't imagine. It's impossible to imagine. This is what I always say to people, if you haven't seen it... if you haven't been exposed to it, then how could you, even begin to desire it. We were so remote. There were only a couple of people in our village that went to school, including my uncle. He went to school so we knew about school. My father went for a little bit. My mother never went to school. He must have a few years of schooling so he could actually read Laos a little bit but not that great. So, they understood the value of education. He actually tried to put my older sister in school with my uncle but she cried every day and she wouldn't go. So then he let her stay home. So, I think as a kid back then, you can't even imagine what is possible because what's possible in front of you is what you see only. There was no TV. Now a days, the kids in Vietnam and in Laos in the villages when I visited them, they have TVs and they can see what life is like outside. But for us, for our generation, there was no exposure.

Well I think it really depends on who we're talking about and where people live. For those of us who didn't live in Long Cheng or Sam Thong, places where people gather and you could see people going to the market, you could see exchanges; you could see Jeeps, and all kinds of technology. I think that's a different kind of lifestyle for kids then because I have interviewed a lot of people who are likely to have actually lived there. So, even though they may not have a lot of opportunities either, they could imagine things a little differently. But for kids like me and others in my village, we didn't have that kind of exposure. And one thing that I'm always

thankful every day of my life is that my brothers and sisters, my family, we were so fortunate. We have Hmong friends in this country that we have met, who saw their parents died, killed in front of them, or lost during the crossing. We are so fortunate because even though our village was bombed before we left, I never saw anyone got killed. I never had gun shots. I was never in a situation like that. So, I think that if you live in areas where you witnessed war, you witnessed that kind of tragedy, even at Long Cheng, which I interviewed people who were young and they would see the planes bring bodies back all the time. It's a different imagination and life experience for them. But for kids like me, it's still peaceful in a sense. There is a war but when you are not in the middle of it, witnessing it, then I think it's kind of a different experience. I do remember happiness. I remember playing with rocks. Those little things because we were removed. So, our experiences are just a little bit different or maybe it was because I was very young. If you talk to my brothers who are a few years older than me, I think their experiences are different. So, my parents fear. My brothers probably fear too. But as a kid, I have my mother, my father, so I didn't have that kind of fear as a kid. But I think for all people at the time, finding a way to survive was all we did, especially when you have to move from place to place. That's basically what you're trying to do and hoping to wake up to the next day and still be in one piece.

We have similar experience. By that time, I was eight already, I could remember a little bit more. Again, I couldn't understand the bigger things that were happening but I knew that we were leaving because I had to carry certain things. I had four brothers and my younger sister. My older sister was married already so she wasn't with us. But when we travelled, my job was to carry my baby brother. So, I carried him through the jungles all the way to the river and then when we crossed then my mother took him when we didn't have anything to carry anymore. We were stripped of everything. But throughout our journey, I carried my little brother. I still remember leeches grabbing us. But, even that journey, honestly, sometimes you're hungry, sometimes you're tired, sometimes your parents tell you not to do anything except to sit still. But again, I want to emphasize the fact that because you have your parents, as a kid, your parents are probably scared to death. But as a kid, your parents are there so, you don't fear because they're there and you're not alone. So, as a kid you suffered but it's not, I will never say it was something that wasn't bearable. You're hungry and tired but it was not like something that some of my Hmong friends went through, seeing your parents getting killed in front of you. That's something that stays with you throughout your whole life. And I see that emotionally for them. So, I was fortunate not to have witnessed something like that.

We tried leaving and then we were captured and we stayed in Vang Vieng. I had been back to Vang Vieng to visit the area that we were kept at. My parents and many of the villagers did not want to submit. Many went back to their villages and try to leave at another time but my father and mother decided that if that were to happen, we would just submit. So, we were captured and taken to Vang Vieng and kept there for about a month and then my father finally paid a driver to take us out as if we were just going to the store. We were placed at different parts along route 13 and the driver picked us up. That's why we didn't have anything when we left. The first time I smelled diesel fuel was when we were captured and taken to Vang Vieng. The second time was when we were in a boat crossing the Mekong river. I smell it so clearly, even right now I still get sick thinking about it because I get motion sickness easily. So, when we

came to the U. S., I hated the bus ride to school. Some particular moments or experiences kind of stayed with you forever. So, as a kid, those are the things that stay with me longer. Well, we were... it was October of 1979 when we finally reached Thailand. We reached Thailand and we were taken to Ban Vinai. My mother had an aunt that, their application was processed and they were leaving. So, we went to stay in their little compound that was available. We stayed there for only six months. As I told you earlier, that was the first time I ever hold a pencil. I went to school but as kids, I felt like we didn't really learn much and we were there for only six months. I don't really remember how often we went to school but I know that we went to school.

Well, Ban Vinai... I don't know if it was normal life but maybe it was normal life. It wasn't like the village where we can go to the river and do things and my brother can go hunting and bring us birds or whatever he could kill. But as kids I remember us playing "dhia yas", you know, those rubber band (jumping) that they have. So, it seemed pretty normal, as children. But I know that for elders and my parents, emotionally, you know, a lot of the tragic things, emotionally, psychologically, financially... it was really a survival thing for them. But as kids, you just hang around with friends and it's pretty normal.

So, as I told you, my uncle was already in Minnesota. So, when you get to the camp, you just applied to come. So, we only stayed in the camp for six months. I felt very fortunate that we didn't stay longer. Some people stayed very long, things happened and they don't want to come anymore. But I don't have a lot memories and I think most of my childhood memories are in America. So we came and we arrived in Minnesota in April, 1980. We arrived there in St. Paul, Minneapolis Airport. My Aunt and Uncle came to pick us up and thus our life begins in Minnesota.

I think in some ways it was very hard on my parents and other Hmong parents and elders, much much more than the children. But we have our own experiences that they could never understand. What I do want to say is that, for my parents... it was hard but because my uncle was already here... I've interviewed so many Hmong people across the country and some of them who arrived in small town America by themselves and had no one to talk to. No one even looks like them. It's a different experience. But because we came to MN and my Uncle was a co-sponsor with a church, then we at least have a family member who could help us go get rice, you know, feed us the food that we wanted to eat. So we stayed with my Uncle over the summer. And then because he was living in Circle Pines, Minnesota and the refugee group wasn't too big. So, we needed to be in St. Paul where they have English language support for the kids. So, we moved back St. Paul and got a duplex in St. Paul. So, it was hard for them but at least they had someone whom they could talk to or count on.

Well you know how every time, I don't know if you've seen that poster where people say, everything I needed to know I learned in Kindergarten? I never went to Kindergarten. Because I was older already, I was placed in third grade. For a lot of the Hmong kids, that's a huge influx. So, I went to Homecroft Elementary School in the Highland area of St. Paul. We were placed in the ESL, English Second Language, classes for additional language support.

When you think about the hardship experience you face in Laos and in the refugee camp, it's a different kind of hardship. But it's very hard for our parents to understand what we went through in school. Sometimes as Hmong refugee children, those of us who were resettled in really impoverish urban areas, sometimes if we do well and we get ourselves out of a situation like that, we tried to block out those memories. But when you really think about it, those early years in the 1980s, those kids were really mean to us. We live at 750 Marshall Ave. That was our first house. I'll give you one example. They were so mean to us and would always bully us that we have to get off the bus and came around another block just to get to our house. I can go on and on about all the incidents. We had incidents at school which kids would call us chinks this and chink that. That was reality for us. But we didn't speak much English so you either just ignore them or fight back. So, many of my Hmong peers fight back physically. Many of the boys my generation were really good kids too but after a while when they couldn't stand the bullying anymore, they became bullies themselves to tell those people at the location that we have the rights to be here too and you can't push us around like that. So, there were things like that.

What I do know for a fact is that for Hmong people of our generation, we were able to climb out of that situation is because we were poor financially but we were never poor in terms of family and love. I think that's an ingredient. My younger sister also has a Ph.D. She lives in California now. All my brothers, except the youngest who loves cars, so he went to an Auto Body School. Everybody have a four year degree. But we farmed in Minnesota. Every summer we would farm with my family. So, the ingredient is that we were not poor in family and love. The other factor is that, I have to think about this a lot, Moua, because I know that it's my family's support but I also know that it's the individual and how we are raised. From very early on, I was taught to think about my family and my community too. Because when I succeed, it's not just for me. I think that's very important too. When I do something well, it lifts my family up and it lifts the community up. So I think it's those kinds of values that is keyed. But I know that as an individually I have to get up and do my homework. Only I can make it happen. So I think it is this good blending of an individualistic identity as an American. It is very important to succeed in this country but what is different about many of our generations is that we are still very much committed to our community. So, it's those kinds of values that were instill in us that help us continue to change our situations. And because we lived in such impoverish neighborhoods, we get tired of being bullied. You get tired of people calling you names. You get tired of being in the bottom of society. You get to a point where you get sick of it and the only way to change that situation is that if you change your situation and I change my situation, then hopefully our community becomes a little better.

The vast majority of Hmong in large groups only migrated to Northern Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand in the mid-1800s to the late 1800s. That's the period where you have a large group of Hmong people migrating. We are one of the newest groups in that region. Surely there could have been other Hmong people who had participated in trade or people who were ambitious pioneers who may have traveled before that time. But as far as what we have evidence for, it's only in the mid-1800s that Hmong started to migrate into Southeast Asia.

If we think about nation states the way we know a nation as a sovereign state, with a self-governing, then of course there is no Hmong nation state. But as an ethnic group, it really depends on how one looks at it. But in terms of geography then there is no Hmong country. We exist as an ethnic minority all over the world.

By the 60s and 70s, Hmong lives have been changed tremendously, especially with the war years. Many people suffered during the war. But I think that amidst all of that war and suffering, many people continued to live normal lives. They still tried their best to farm, tried their best to have their little shop, and tried their best to go to the market. People went to school. Many students went to Vientiane. They became exposed to other way of life outside of the villages. So, in my opinion, there was no such thing as “the way Hmong life was.” Even at different moments in Hmong history, there’s always been kind of a class division too. It’s not the kind of class division that we know of now a day but there’s always been disparity. There were families who were productive and there were those that were not. So, Hmong life was pretty diverse too. Some people may be farmers but my father at one point had a lot of cows. And we’ve often joked that one of the reasons he didn’t want to leave was because he didn’t want to leave the cows.

That’s pretty safe to say that people supported themselves. They found ways to support themselves. They weren’t dependent upon others. Sometimes they did and they help each other. This year someone may have less rice and they would go to ask others to help out. But it is fair to say that Hmong people are pretty proud people who wanted to take care of themselves and their family. They don’t want to be dependent on other and if they can, they help each other. I can’t say that about now a day but back then, people helped each other more.

It’s a secret war because we were a part of these covert operations all over the world. So, in some ways it was a secret because the Americans weren’t supposed to be there. It’s a secret because Laos was supposed to be a neutral country. And it was a secret because everybody denied they were there. Everybody means, all foreigners, denied they were there even though we all know they were there. So those are the reasons why it’s a secret. It’s that people, politicians, and military officials just literally lied that they weren’t there. It’s not a secret war. In hind-sight, we knew it and it’s clear. So, it’s only a secret because thousands and thousands of American soldiers did not go into Laos. It’s a secret only because it was a proxy war. It was part of the larger proxy war during the cold war. So, if you look at it from that way, it’s a secret war because we said it’s a secret war.

We were really just a part of this whole effort by the U.S. to involve all kinds of people that they could involve on behalf of their war effort in Southeast Asia. What was very different about Hmong was that it wasn’t something that impacted just a few people. It wasn’t something that impacted just the soldiers or those that worked directly with the Americans. It impacted a whole group of people. It took away the lives of thousands and thousands of people. When a bomb, whether it be a Russian bomb or an American bomb it did not discriminate. It killed everybody who happened to be in its way. Along the Laos and Vietnamese border was so heavily bombed. So, many of our people died. That’s the difference. Being uninvolved was not an option. Hmong and many other ethnic groups were torn apart by all these decisions that were not made by us. You think of all the hundreds of Hmong villages on the mountains of Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia... Do you think anybody really wanted to fight democracy or communism as political ideologies? I think not. People lived in the area so they didn’t have a choice. If you were uninvolved, then you were suspects by both. You could choose not to get involve but you will be pulled into it.

I think it did have a certain impact engaging with North Vietnamese forces and Lao communist forces. But in terms of the goal of stopping the movement of supplies from North Vietnam to the South, Hmong and American, despite all the bombing, people continued to get through. More and more came through despite all of those efforts. So, I think it had some impact but I tried to think more broadly about it. So, we can't say that it was only because of the Hmong efforts that the North Vietnamese didn't infiltrate, which they did. They did. There were just thousands who went through to the South. So, it helped at certain times during the war. It held them back but obviously, as we know, at the end of the war, they weren't able to hold them back completely.

Many honest Hmong people did not know. Not even high ranking officers that I have interviewed. I have interviewed common infantry soldiers to military officers and when they are very honest with themselves, many people have said they didn't know the bigger purpose of the war. Sometimes I wondered if our military leaders understood the larger scope of the war. But we have our own reasons to fight too because it impacted our families. Now people know. Now people can go back and say they know certain things but if they are really honest, they would tell you they really have no idea. We saw the Americans and we just thought they were coming to help us. That's a common response I get from honest people.

There's a couple of ways to look at that. In terms of motivation, many soldiers became soldiers because they didn't have any options too. Some were conscripted. Some villages have to come up with enough people to become soldiers. But there were many people who joined themselves too. Many became soldiers because they thought they could improve their life condition too because soldiers have salary. Even though it was very little, it was something. So, I think the motivation comes from both wanting to help their people but then also opportunities to do something with their lives too. One of the reasons people kept fighting to the very end is because I am not sure if they understood they were fighting a losing war at the time. I think one of the most frustrating aspect of the American war in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia was that they were limited about what they could do. Despite all the technologies and weapons, they weren't able to accomplish the task that they had set out to do because of the political issues. Whether or not there was a contract between Vang Pao and Bill Lair, that's not important to me. What is important to me is that they had a meeting. There was a purpose why Bill Lair came to meet with Vang Pao. That's a fact. I think that's a historical fact that we all can agree. An interaction occurred and whether there was any promise of anything or not, things did happen. Supplies, weapons, and military advisors did come to military region 2. So, whether there was a promise or not, I don't want to debate about that. What I'm saying is that they had a meeting and things transpired. Supplies kept coming and it changed Hmong way of life upside down. That's reality. That's the live experience. That's what our elders experienced. So, to me, maybe there was never a promise of anything.

The plan was just for the military officers. Some of the pilots and military officer's families were already taken to Thailand before the evacuation. So, there was never a plan to take all the Hmong out. Or take as many as they could out. In fact, so many people who were involved in that evacuation, they tried not to take any people. They tried to get away and take only certain people. But the public knows when things were happening and it is a survival moment. Even Vang Pao waited as late as he could too. As a young person who wasn't there at that moment,

none of us could ever understand what was going on in the minds of the military leaders and the Americans who worked with them at that time. None of us could understand what they struggled with. All I'm saying is that there was never a coordinated plan that says we need to get as many Hmong people out as possible. In fact, I won't name names but there were wives of deceived prominent Hmong pilots who told me that they were told not to leave. Wouldn't let them leave. But they didn't listen and just fought their way through into the plane. Yes, it was more obligations of the individuals who got to know Hmong who worked with them. But you can never say the U.S. government had a coordinated effort to get these Hmong people out.

Hmong was never a part of any refugee resettlement program. The 1975 Indochina Migration and Assistance Act that congress passed was only for people fleeing Cambodia and Vietnam. It would be another year that Laos, including Hmong and other ethnic refugee groups, would be added to that federal legislation.

The fact is that there was never a coordinated refugee program for Hmong people. But because we were part of this larger group of refugees from the Vietnam war, who were displaced in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and all over. When they become displaced, then it becomes a different game where the United Nations have an obligation to categorize people to see if they are legally refugees. So, I think it's much more complex than just the U.S. having a program. We became a part of the international humanitarian effort where it's now Americans helping Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong, and others. But it's really because of the American involvement. That story was sort of erased. What's popularized is that Americans are now participating in a humanitarian effort to help people who are seeking refuge. So, it's like Americans are helping these refugees who are fleeing their communist countries. So, the story is now told differently, instead of Americans helping these people who had to flee because Americans had been bombing and fighting and paying or forcing these people to fight for them for years. The story is completely different.

So, the program is very much a larger program of U.S. refugee resettlement. It's not a special program for Hmong. We were just part of these more than a million refugees from Vietnam. Once you are in a refugee camp you will have to apply for resettlement. You can't apply for resettlement in a country that does not accept applications. So we know that with all the characterizations of what Hmong people are, what Americans and the world know about us at the time was that we are a primitive ethnic group, we don't read and write, so very few countries actually offer refugee resettlement to Hmong people. So, it's not that Hmong people did not want to be in many other places. It was because they didn't offer any resettlement opportunities. So, most Hmong people came to the United States largely because of the relationship during the war too. But in many ways, it wasn't a special program for Hmong. Most Hmong also have relatives among the first group who came to the United States. So, like all other immigrants, it's called "chain migration", when you have relatives in one particular place like my family, then you follow through sponsorship.

This is the question that people debate all the time. I thought that I had clarified it in Hmong in Minnesota but people still continue to say this, after. The very first Hmong family to come to Minnesota is Her Dang or Dang Her and his family. They came in December 1975. But Her

Dang was not part of the refugee resettlement program. The first legislation was only for Cambodia and Vietnam. So they were not part of that, but the priority category for those who worked directly with the Americans, the USAID workers and pilots, etc. Her Dang worked for USAID. His family came as part of that pro-opportunity for Hmong people and others who worked with Americans. So he and his wife came to Minnesota in December of 1975. And then when the refugee resettlement program was opened to Hmong then Leng Vang or Leng Wong now, who is also an uncle of mine, his family came in February of 1976. So when you talk about which Hmong family was the first to be resettled as refugee then of course it would be Leng Wong. But if you talk about the first Hmong family to come to Minnesota then it's Her Dang. You can't dispute fact. Most people don't dig deep enough and they don't understand the distinction. But if you really talk about just migration history then Her Dang's family came to Minnesota first and his son Bill was the first child to be born in Minnesota.

Like all other refugees, the earlier families cannot leave the refugee camp, the earlier group; they called it "the first wave." They can't leave the camp until they have a sponsor, an American sponsor. It could be an individual, it could be a church, a group of people helping to sponsor a family or it could be a whole town. They can't leave until they have a sponsor in the United States who will be responsible for helping them to resettle, to find housing for them, to help them find a job, to take their kids to school, to help take them to health screening. You have to have a sponsor in order for that first group to come. The U.S. did not think that the refugee resettlement would continue as long as it did and that's a fact too. Most people thought it will be, like refugee situation are supposed to be crisis and once the crisis is over, it's done. Either things get better in that old country and people go back or once you're done resettling then people stop coming. But that was not what happened to Hmong. So in 1975, 1976, 1977 in Minnesota, there's still people who are involved in refugee resettlement who still live in Minnesota, I'm sure you'll talk to some of them but, they started to create refugee task force to help resettle. So by 1979 and 1980, it wasn't stopping. The resettlement wasn't stopping. You continued to have each month, I've looked at files at the immigration history center, I have these table of each month how many are arriving. I mean there are hundreds of people arriving per month in Minnesota. So what happened was that by 1979 and 1980 when a lot of people were coming, you will see that 1980 was a very important year because of the refugee situation. At the federal level, the Refugee Act of 1980 was passed which meant that, before the Act was passed people would be processed at camps abroad and then they will come to the U.S. But after the Refugee Act of 1980, they had policies and procedures where people are supposed to have orientation. So, you will see the change. People that came before 1980 or even 1980 were a little bit different because the federal law was passed but it wasn't implemented until like a year later. The people who came before 1980, they didn't have to spend time at Phanat Nikhom for 6 months. So it was after that, sometimes people don't understand why things happened but it was because of the Refugee Act said people needed orientation and preparation before they could come. They went to English classes, whatever's available or orientation. So the Refugee Act, what happened was, before 1980, every year there wasn't a ceiling, a number that was set for how many refugee could come to this country. So there's a point in time where there's hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asian refugees coming to the United States. But after the federal Refugee Act of 1980, then they would set a ceiling like each year Congress decides how many refugee the United States will accept. So since 1980 to 1981, it's been always like seventy or eighty thousand. So it's not unlimited like it was during the last 5 years of the 70s. So that's basically how Hmong people

came to this country. I mean if they, people who applied to France, went to France, Canada and Australia took some Hmong. But they were; most of immigration history, Canada and Australia were sort of follow the United States policy. So if you look at the immigration policy, it's very much like that. But, what Hmong people are saying about why the U.S., I can see how people could misunderstand that the U.S. created a program for us because of our work with the United States. Canada and Australia accepted some Hmong, but they are very selective. They are very selective. This is how we've described it. They wanted the cream of the crop. They wanted the people who had education. They wanted the people who could go and support themselves right away. Who would not become dependent on the system? But for the United States, it's slightly different situation. Many Hmong were resettled and then now with family reunification, their family members would be allowed to resettle. So in some ways, it can be seen as though it was special case. In many ways, it was special because it was very hard for people to come to this country. Some people in other countries, without this refugee situation you and I know there will not be any of us here. And some people wait for lottery; wait a life time to come to this country. And they have to demonstrate that they have enough resources, financial resources not to become dependent where most of Hmong people who come to this country had nothing. Now, you have these new legislations that people could come to this country if they have a million dollar to invest here. So it was special in a way because many Hmong just have to demonstrate that they have some affiliation. So maybe it was very special in that way.

I don't want to minimize the important roles that all these good hearted Americans played. I think Americans are very different in their own ways. I think about, and I know so many of them had, they do it because they care. So it's not, some people have had very bad sponsored refugee experiences. That's a fact too. But most of the sponsors they do it because you know they feel like it's God's calling and they are helping people who need help. And they don't know these people at all. They don't even know they are Hmong cause they were called Lao or Meo. So they don't even know but they still decided to help us. Many churches came together to sponsor.

People often ask why there are so many Hmong people in Minnesota. Why did they choose to come to Minnesota? Your answer to them should be, Hmong people did choose to come to Minnesota. It's Minnesotan who brought us here. It is the church because we can't come without a sponsor. So once people come here and eventually, then Hmong people could sponsor our own family. Then that's what happened. That's how the community grew a lot in Minnesota. But I cannot, yeah you can't minimize the amount of support that the church played and all the resettlement agencies like the International Institute of Minnesota, Catholic Charity, Church World Service, Lutheran Social Services, all of these institutions that had helped other refugees before Hmong and Southeast Asians. They were doing that before Hmong people came. So, Hmong people were just one of the refugee groups at the time that they helped. And now, you know, they are helping Karen refugees from Burma, from Bhutan. So, they continue to play those roles. But if you question about resources when people first come to this country, the financial situation had changed a great deal. The first group of people got a lot more time. They got 3 years of resources to go to school to help themselves. But by the time my family came, it was reduced to 18 months of refugee cash assistance. But apart from these federal supports, I think at the local level, Minnesota is very active and politically engaged in its own ways. There were interfaith groups. There were government and non-profit relationship, coalitions that were

built to help refugees. Again, not just for Hmong. Hmong weren't the only refugees. But because many Hmong settled in Minnesota so it almost became more like for Hmong. But it was not just for Hmong. But there were quite a bit, there's state resources. Refugee resettlement is a federal responsibility but often what happened is that the state and county, they became the one who would really have to help refugees. So county resources, foundations, places like the St. Paul Foundation, McKnight Foundation, Minneapolis Foundation these philanthropic groups also helped to provide funding for youth programs, for English classes, you name it. It's all of these different kinds of resources at the local level that made Hmong people begin to feel that Minnesota was a good place for them; was a supportive place for them. So the reasons why people stay is not so much just because you know, they like the weather but because there were actually a lot of resources to help Hmong. There were jobs. The school system in Minnesota, especially St. Paul/Minneapolis, they've done an exceptional job. There's other issue with them too, but when I think about the larger picture, let me tell you for example, in county government, in state and city government, local government, they have Hmong people working within those institutions and the health department, you name it. There are resources within those to help people and that's why I think they stayed. So the resources, I think were a combination of individuals from the sponsors who opens their house and who gets their friends to donate clothes to help us, to churches coming together, to these resettlement agencies, to city government, foundations, and to state agencies who often created like a whole new refugee program at the department of human services, specially to help with refugee resettlement.

The earlier families, you would know them. Many of them come and in fact they had jobs. Like the early groups, like the first wave of people who worked for Americans. When they came they were not on welfare. They had jobs. Many times some of them come and 2-3 days later after they landed in Minnesota, there was already a job waiting for them. And that's why they were able to come. So some of them told me that they weren't even over jetlag yet and they had to go work. Either cutting tree, or whatever, cleaning, manufacturing job, whatever job, they had a job. But it's really after a few years, you began to have people like my family and the many, the vast majority of the Hmong people whose parents may have had little or no education. They may have been soldiers or they may not have been but in one way or another they have relatives here or they were endangered after the end of the war and they fled. So you began to have the people who may not have the skills to go to work. And that's when you began to see a lot of Hmong became dependent on public assistance. So public assistance became a primary way that Hmong people survived. Like my family, there were 6 children plus my parent there were 8 of us. So, my father was part of the Hmong farming training program in Winona, Minnesota. So we lived on the farm for a year and we farmed over the summer and we would sell at the St. Paul and Minneapolis farmers markets. So, those are ways to supplement our income. But most people at my parent's age, they became dependent on welfare. Then it was really our generation, the children who hated being on welfare. So we tried our best to do well on school so we don't have to be on welfare because nobody likes to be on welfare. Maybe some people do but many Hmong people were very ashamed to be on welfare.

I think culture shock is just expected. I think even the first wave, even the people who had been exposed a little bit to Americans because they had worked with them in Long Cheng, or even if they've gone to Thailand, if they were Hmong pilots and they've been exposed to Thailand and going to Vientiane and they've met other kinds of people. Even they tell me about culture shock.

But I think especially the groups like my parent's generation who didn't have that experience. It was really hard for them. Think about food, simple things like that. The types of food they have access to. And then you think about religion, you think about access to other family and friends, very limited. My father never ate a hamburger. He died in 2005. He never had a hamburger because he could never eat a hamburger. So the culture shock doesn't end, it kind of stays with them. The earlier years definitely; having to attend English classes as adult and learning like little kids. I think it's really hard for them. But I know that most Hmong elders, at least in my life experiences, they want to do well. And no matter how hard it is, they suffer so much that the hardship in Minnesota is not compliable. That's what most tells me. Even though I was a child and went through the same experience as a kid, it's a different experience. But as adult, the hardest part that I heard elders say is feeling they're children, feeling like you're stupid, feeling like you're deaf because people are speaking all around you but you don't understand what they're saying. And needing to ask people for help when you traditionally have not had to ask people for help. I think that's the biggest shock for a lot of Hmong parents.

I think that suffering is how you view it. You could use that struggle as something that you internalize and feel sorry for yourself about why you can't understand what anybody says or you could turn that around and say yes, this is my situation, this is the struggle I've gone through but this my situation now. What can I do to change myself so that I can make this a better situation? I absolutely agree that adversity, struggle, the suffering, that Hmong experience of migration and suffering and displacement made a lot of us stronger. Because we always say don't tell me about that, you don't know what I've been through. If that's all the struggles you're telling me about right now, especially young people. That's nothing compare to even my joyous, in some ways, migration experiences. There're still a lot of sufferings that we experience now a days, each generation is different. You never judge people. Even like people in my generation, we all very diverse too. Bu I do think that major events like migration, war define who you are as individual and how you thrive after experiencing tragedy like that. And I think a lot of Hmong parents; some suffer a lot, mentally, emotionally. Sometimes we've overcome that. But many come here and they say wow I am not hearing gun shots anymore. My father in-law was a soldier. He lives in North Minneapolis. He lives in Bloomington and other places before but he likes North Minneapolis. There were nights that you hear gun shots and I am like this is so scary and he's like that's nothing compared to what I had gone through. He's a machinist. He's doing well for himself.

Kathleen Vallenga, the sponsor of Leng Wong, she told me, I talked about it a little bit in the book but when I interviewed her and she told and she told people too, that she was in the hospital watching TV, she saw on the news people were fleeing she was feeling a little bit dependent because she was in the hospital. She decided she would sponsor a family. But she had no idea. She thought it would be a Vietnamese family that she was sponsoring. But when the family came, it was a family from Laos. She didn't know anything and eventually she learned that the Hmong are different from the Lao. So it's over time that sponsors and resettlement workers, government officials, most Americans, in fact, maybe all Americans who worked with Hmong in Laos, they didn't know much about Hmong either because most Americans go for their tour, they're not supposed to really do much more than do their work and then they return home. So most don't learn how to speak Hmong or any other languages unless there're other kind of personnel who had to interact with people. But most don't know anything, at least honest people

who I've interviewed. Who had played really prominent role, their job isn't to learn about any local group. I think people are not completely ignorant. Sometimes people just have inaccurate information or people have stereotypes that are passed on from group to group.

I think that Hmong people have done very well in Minnesota. I personally think Minnesota has been very good to the Hmong despite some challenges. But I think that when refugees come, the federal government did a good job of bringing refugees to local places. But in those early years no one had any education about who these people are so you're kind of thrown in and people were just supposed to learn things themselves. So I think that that contribute to challenges Hmong faced. But I also think that it is precisely because sometimes as Hmong, we have a lot of cultural values that conflict with American society too. For example, there's been so many situations where there were state codes that you can only, if you have a two bedroom home, you can only have 4 people or whatever, just a few people. A Hmong family is 8 or 9 people so if they need a house for 8 or 9 people they will need a six bedrooms home which they can't afford at the time. So, there're those kinds of issues. But, the growing vegetables, there's all kinds of things that we do that are different from what is acceptable in this society. But I think this society is also not very acceptable, it's not very open to practices that are not what is usual for them. There're a lot of people who are very advert about not wanting Hmong people in their neighborhoods, not wanting Hmong people in their apartments building. But parallel to that it's like pitting the poor people against each other. In the early years, there were certain apartment buildings that once they've learned about Hmong, they will only rent to Hmong people. You know why? They will start discriminate against American Indians or African Americans because they say the refugees are afraid so they pay their rent. So, is that good or not so good? Is that being supportive of Hmong or is it just because they don't complain about the toilet that didn't flush for 4 days in a roll? I am not trying to be critical. What I am saying is that in every society there is always different ways of looking at things. But the overall picture is this, that Minnesota has been a positive environment, welcoming environment for Hmong people. What I do want to say though that Minnesota is very different in a way than places like Wisconsin. Wisconsin, Hmong people live all over the state. You can find Hmong all over the big town. In Minnesota, there's a few here and there. Students go to Morris, Duluth, and other places. But in terms of a concentration of Hmong, a bigger Hmong population, Hmong people in Minnesota just heavily concentrated in the Twin Cities metropolitan areas. Some people had moved to other rural areas but they can't survive for a number of reasons.

Like any other immigrant groups, this is how I look at it. I don't think it's just that the Hmong who had done a good job of adjusting. But I think it's the fact that Minnesota had also been changed by Hmong presence. And I like to think that the Twin Cities or St. Paul for example is a better place now because of Hmong people. Because Hmong came and they didn't just adjust, they didn't just change to become whatever that society is. They brought in a lot of what is good in their culture too and they had impacted changes in that community. So I think Hmong people, there's still many who refuse to do anything differently and that's ok. We're all human beings. We all have our right to decide how we want to live our life as long as we're not harming anybody else. But I think that generally overall if you look at our community where we came from, I think in 4 decades, I think Hmong people had done a tremendous job adjusting to Minnesota life and U.S. life in general. In terms of impact, Hmong people had again impact Minnesota society, especially in the Twin Cities metropolitan area in so many ways. You know

the number of children per American family has continued to go down and Hmong family has continued to remain higher. Some school districts, some teachers only has job because there's so many Hmong children, not just Minnesota, Wisconsin, and other places. When you really look at the broader picture, there are businesses, political engagement, all kinds of contributions were made. And largely, again I think about the school district, some Americans have jobs, we're all working, we're paying social security, we're paying all kinds of taxes.

It's not as if we didn't have problem before migration. I think people like to imagine a time and a place where there were no problem in the villages. But I often like to remind people that in every society there are always issues. We talk about youth problems now, but I think even the village context people have issues. But in the very specific Minnesota context, like in other parts of the country I think it's across the board. If you want to begin to name, I think elders had a really hard time at first. When I say elders, I'm talking about grandparents who came to this country and they couldn't go to work so many become very isolated. I think that's a fact. But many are resources to their children like our generation. They helped us with our children. We had free child care. But now, I'm never going to babysit for my children. They're not going to get free child care from me because I will still be working. But I get free child care from my husband's grandmother and my mom helped me out too. But I think elders are very isolated and youth issues have been problematic and I think they continue to be. Now we have Hmong youth who are doing lots of wonderful things. But then we also have a generation that is not very motivated because they haven't suffered the way we had. And I'm not saying they have to suffer to be motivated. But what I'm saying is that the ideal of bettering oneself so that you can make a contribution to the larger community. Maybe not lost but maybe it's not as prevalent, not as evident in our younger population nowadays. Some issues, so let's maybe name a few like common issues that I think the twin cities or Minnesota population, I think we begin to see a huge increase in divorces maybe starting in the late 90s to early 2000. There had always been divorces, but in terms of higher number, maybe increase in divorce so more dysfunctional family. Now we have many children who don't have either parent. The responsibility, the kind of love and, I don't think it's because they don't love their children. What I'm saying is that the kind of family that I feel we had as children when our parents were with us. It's a very different dynamic now. And we also have young people who don't want to have anything to do with Hmong. We have many kids, like my sons, they don't speak Hmong. They know they're Hmong. But that's because they are born Hmong and we're Hmong. But they don't really know much more than that. I think divorce, crime, loss of Hmong businesses, but I don't know how successful everybody is. I think we're all victims of the recession and what is financially happening in the larger society too. Homelessness, I think it never used to be a problem but now it's becoming a problem. Drugs, it's such a huge issue, not just for young people but older people too. So I think parallel to all these successes that we have, in school we still have a lot of challenges. Where Hmong kids who were born in this country, why are they still in ESL or ELL, that's what they called it now. So that's a problem to me.

We have a lot of choices now and we have a lot of ways to live our lives the way we feel comfortable. I know there are certain clans and sub-clans especially after the passing of Vang Pao, many people are gathering to find a Hmong new leader. I think that it's been difficult for a generation of Hmong leaders who have been the leaders of clans or leaders of Hmong non-profit organizations who had been very important in helping refugees resettled. It's not that I think

they are not relevant anymore, but what I'm just saying that leadership means very different things now, I think. Sometimes people don't often seek support from their leaders that in some ways expected them to. For example, divorce or marital issues have been something that we can't escape. Many times a lot of young people don't seek support from elders anymore. Sometimes when elder's hear, they've already been divorced. And I think the leadership is, again it's not that I don't think it's relevant but what I'm saying is that sometimes that leadership of elder man making decisions for their family or extended family is becoming very difficult and largely because I think that many young people feel, this is what I hear especially cause there hundreds of Hmong students here too (UW-Milwaukee); I hear students talked about elders or that leadership system doesn't understand them. You can't use rules of living that works in a village context in a context like this. So I'm not saying they are not relevant. What I'm saying is that, leadership, there're a lot of choices now. And people are not as dependent and because we have become very individualistic in this society. Many times we don't live with our family anymore. So, you don't have that kind of structure that in the early year people went to relatives, they moved toward their relatives. I remember in the early years, when you have someone's child graduated from high school people all come and they have big party. I'm the person first from my little sub-clan, the Vang from our village to get a Ph.D. So it's very important, but now we have a few more. High school graduation, college graduation used to be very important, well it still is but because there're so many more people with degrees now, it's not viewed the same. And elders don't have that kind of I think impact over people's lives as they had in the past. And I don't think it's because we don't respect them. I do think that we do value our elders still. But it's just that we live in a different society so sometimes things don't work for us.

The very first business was a grocery store because when the Hmong came to Minnesota, there was a Korean store on Snelling Ave. So, they would go buy rice there all the time. And I remember going there with my family. Then eventually they started a store, I think on Selby. So, the grocery store was the number one business. And unfortunately with so many immigrant groups, if you see one person do it, then everybody else starts a grocery store. Then no one really succeeded because there are so many grocery stores. As far as I can remember the grocery was first. Farming was more of, there's couple farming projects that I talked about in my book with an attempt to help Hmong people to become farmers. But eventually they all came and just worked on farmers market. Now there are bigger businesses, farming businesses, greenhouses, all of that is available now, but in the early days it was mostly to go and served as day labors for American farmers. So, many people did that, the grocery store, and then eventually the services. Services like insurance and things that people need. So, you began to have service businesses like that. And then the other big Hmong businesses was the non-profit organizations because in the better financial time, foundations have a lot of money. State and local governments have money to give out to organizations to serve youth, to serve elders, and to serve all kinds of populations. Then you have so many Hmong non-profit organizations open up. But eventually with the financial decline, people didn't get grants anymore so a lot of people just close their doors. Also because there's an audience, a clientele, if you have a store or a business that services just your community, you have to be where your community is, so hard work and I think some luck, good customer services, and good public relation. There're some Hmong stores that I go into and they don't even greet you, as if I'm bothering them. I'm going to give you money to buy things for your store. Why can't you just say hello welcome to my store? I joke about that all the time. Some people failed because customers come and they don't feel welcome in your

store. But I think some succeed because, I haven't done research on why some people succeed, but I do think that people succeed because they have a lot of network too. Let's say grocery store for example, they have good network, they have good customer service, and they also have a lot of family and friends in the community. Their clans or their relations might be all there. And also because they're out and about, they don't just sit at the store. When people have things they go help them. So hard work and just kind of being strategic, strategically located, but then on the flip side many people fail because, if only serve their community, there's only so much to go around. So that's what I think many people failed because of that. And I think the trend of people doing network marketing type of businesses, you name it. They start one and then they keep growing but no one really makes money. Then people start businesses like chiropractic businesses, they start all kinds of other service type of businesses. But when you have more and more just serving the same population, I think one of the challenges for Hmong businesses is to serve the general public. I see so many young people, especially those who grew up in other parts of the country, they may not really want to be with Hmong people but once they finished their work or their degree they can't really succeed in the larger society. They all moved to Minnesota and start their businesses here. And then if all your population is Hmong, there's only so much to go around. Some of them did, like the farming project. They had a whole program at the Hennepin Technical School to train them about operation and things like that. So there is that, I think there're some businesses like grocery stores, people just pull resources, the typical immigrant story of people pulling their resources to start a business and once they succeeded, they help another person to start or they borrow money from relatives, so typically people didn't take on loan very much, business loans. They pull their resources mostly.

Well, I think we've come further than anyone thought we would. There were Non-Hmong people who thought we would not survive in the United States. They thought we will just go extinct. But when you don't compare us to 5th generation Chinese or 3rd generation Japanese, or an Asian Indian who immigrated here as a professional, when you don't compare us to other Asians of these backgrounds and just compare Hmong people from 1975 to 2015, then we have made progress that no one had ever expected us to make. That, I can say with confidence. I think we have and we will continue to have success stories. I'm so proud when I go to conferences at different places and different parts of the country and even other parts of the world and I meet young Hmong people who are at Harvard and doing all kinds of different great things. We have a whole new group of scholars who were born here. They are doing very well academically and very competitive. So we will continue to make progress. But I will say that along with that progress, there will be a plateau because now we have lots of people with higher education degrees, they are going into different work sectors, working for General Motors, West Points; you name it. The pioneer always seems to make a bigger impact. Because when you can still count how many Hmong professors there are then it's really phenomenal but when there are so many and you can't count how many anymore, then you have reach a point where it's now common and it's the norm. But because these pioneers were so instrumental in putting Hmong in the Twin Cities on the map, when people think about Hmong, they think about Minnesota and the Twin Cities. Other people at other places may disagree but I think the Twin Cities is a special place for Hmong.

It's not that the Hmong in the refugee camps chose to come to Minnesota but it was because of Minnesotans who invited them to come to Minnesota. Bbecause in the refugee camp, you can't

come to Minnesota or any other place unless you have a sponsor. So, the people who first arrived in Minnesota have sponsors, churches, and other people who were willing to open up their homes, find jobs, and support these refugees. After that, once people started to settle here, then they have family members who followed them.

The future looks very bright for Hmong Minnesotans, largely because of the concentration. I know for a fact that when you have a critical mass of people in a particular place then you can have all kinds of power. You have the power to make changes at the neighborhood level. You have power to make changes at the school level, district level. And you have the power to really determine in many ways all kinds of movements. For example, housing, certain neighborhoods, every two or three house you go is a Hmong house, at the East side of St. Paul, for example. So, I do think that Minnesota, because of its particular place, sort of inviting Hmong to be active in all kinds of different space. But the early refugees were invited to be in task force. They were invited to be in city, county, and state committees for all kinds of different issues; having different programs at state agencies that are very specific to Hmong. I think it's that kind of investment in the Minnesota community that has enable Hmong people to thrive in the way that they had. So, I think that in the future I do see a lot of potential largely because people are so concentrated. If people start dispersing all over, and move to the suburbs or other rural areas of Minnesota then I think that is going to change the dynamic a little bit. But I do think that in the future, as our second and third generation who no longer need interpreters for them, as our elder generations passed away, we are going to see a Hmong community that is not going to be as collaborative. We have already seen that there are a lot of people with a lot of ideas on how to exist in that community. So, I do see that people will continue to make progress but I do see a lot of challenges, especially if people want to run for office. In the last election, there were many people running. I think four or five Hmong candidates. It is great that people are running but I think now people will have to really distinguish themselves by a number of different areas. So, it's not going to be as easy to run for office. I think if people are going to be hired for different positions at the state, county, or whatever level, they are going to have to be very professionally qualified and competitive like other people in the mainstream community. So, maybe Hmongness is still going to be important but other factors are going to come into play a lot more.

Well, I don't know if it's about adaptation or us but I think it's because, in many ways, the community doesn't have a choice. Change is going to happen. For many women and the Hmong women who made history from Minnesota, they made history in these different positions because the larger society accepts them. When you think about Mee Moua, Mai Kao Hang, Eileen, and other people, it's not just because they are Hmong. It's because they are highly educated and can succeed in the mainstream. They are not a Hmong politician but they are a politician who happens to be Hmong. So, I think our community accepts and are very supportive of women in positions of power. But I do want to say that I've been in different panels and sessions where we talked about genders and whether the community now treats men and women equally. It depends. I think we have come a long way in terms of accepting women in leadership positions but most of those leadership positions have been women who hold mainstream leadership positions. Not so much in the Hmong community, like in the clan leadership. It's still the same. Nothing has change. So, the progress that Hmong women have made had been in mainstream society.

I think there are a few key reasons why Hmong have been politically successful. There are others who have won political positions in other parts of the country too, like Eau Claire and Fresno, but Minnesota is a politically engage community anyways. So, for the early successes, such as Choua Lee, I think their success is situational. A situational leader because there were so many Hmong people in the school district and you have so many Hmong kids and parents. The school board was typically, the vast majority are European descent. So, people like Choua won because she was a pioneer. She was an educator and ran. And it's also because she is Hmong. And people like Mee Moua. She won because she is also a very sharp lady. She is very smart and knowledgeable. So it's not the Hmong community who put her in office. It's really the general public who put her in office. But if take away all the Hmong people and you live at a place by yourself, I think it will be a very different dynamic. But the reason Hmong are successful in the Twin Cities is because they live in a very condense environment, meaning that they are concentrated, that there is a critical mass of Hmong people living throughout the twin cities. So, that matters. And I think it's because the larger Minnesota community is pretty open too. They are open to people who they think will represent their communities well at the different levels of government. So, they are equally qualified and not just a token. You know, how can you say that Mee Moua was a token for the Senate? She was smarter than most of them. And everybody else is equally qualified. So, it's not like many places where they just need a minority to represent. But I think it's going to be more challenging in the future because now Hmong people are becoming more politically savvy too. You are not voting for someone just because they are Hmong. But you vote for them because you agree with some of their policies. So, I think just the ethnic identity itself will become a little more problematic. So, people will have to appeal to their voters in a different way. The early pioneers like Choua, Mee, and Cy, their Hmongness was very important and there was such a large Hmong population. But I'm not saying that it was the Hmong who put them in office. The Hmong vote was important but it wasn't the only vote. In fact, there was a majority of Non-Hmong who voted.

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