

Ariana Yang Transcription

“Our Family’s Immigration Story”

My name is Ariana Yang, and I’m a second-generation Hmong American woman. I grew up on the East Side of St. Paul, Minnesota in the heart of the Hmong community in the Twin Cities. Although I was born in the United States, my story always begins with the journey that family undertook.

My parents grew up in the rural mountains of Xiangkhoang province in Laos. Like many Hmong families in Laos, their lives were disrupted with the turmoil of the Secret War, and when the persecution of Hmong people began by the local militia, my parents and their families were forced to flee into the eastern jungles. After living in the refugee camps in Thailand, my family was granted entry into the United States. Their first stop in the United State was New York City.

I remember my father recalling their first meal in the United States. They were all directed to a McDonald’s in the airport to order food. None of my family members knew how to speak English. Even more, although they were starving, they had no idea what a cheeseburger was. By a stroke of luck, my father overheard one of the workers in the back speaking Thai. My father was able to communicate with him, and the worker was able to prepare a meal that seemed vaguely familiar to my family. My father said that he was even able to get them rice.

It was a rough welcome to the strange land they had come to, but my father remembers that moment with a sense of warmth. I think about the story often. I think about the heavy hearts my parents carried as they left family and their old lives in Southeast Asia. I think about the fear and shock they must have felt upon arriving in America, and the uncertainty they held as they moved from city to city. But I also think about the hopes and dreams they carried as they raised their family of fifteen. I think about my mother working third shift every night so that she could send us off to school each morning. I think about my father, who encouraged us to inquisitive instead of docile. I think about how all of these experiences and stories continue to shape and frame the world that I live in. Although I was born nearly fifteen years after the war ended, I now know that the memories and dreams of my people continue to live in me. As a second-generation immigrant, it is a responsibility and an honor of mine to pass these stories along to future Hmong children in hopes that we will continue to remember.