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Interview with MayKao Hang

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MayKao Hang

Interviewed: March 21, 2012

Interviewer, Editor: Paul Hillmer

Transcribers: Jillian Humlie, Paul Hillmer

At the time of this interview Dr. MayKao Hang was president and CEO of the Amberst H. Wilder Foundation. Born in war-torn Laos, Hang's family escaped to Thailand and eventually settled in the Twin Cities in 1976, when only a small number of Hmong families had yet arrived. Dr. Hang reviews her life story, focusing on her family's history and adjustment to life in Minnesota, her education, and memories of various issues in the Hmong community related to resettlement, including clan and gender issues, community leadership, generational conflict, and changing understandings and definitions of Hmong identity. The final portion of the interview covers her professional experiences and how her life has prepared her in many ways to be the head of one of Minnesota's most respected non-profit organizations. Dr. Hang graduated from Como Park Senior High School, earned a bachelor's degree from Brown University, an MA degree in Social Policy and Distributive Justice from the Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs, and a Doctorate in Public Administration from Hamline University, the final degree not quite completed when the interview took place.

(00:05) Let's start with the obvious state your name please.

Yes, My name is MayKao Yang Long Zhoua Hang

(00:10) And what are your parents' names?

My Dad's name is Blong Yang and my mom's name is Sua Vu Yang. Vue is her maiden clan and Yang is obviously my dad's clan

(00:22) And where were you born?

My parents were born in Xieng Khouang Province, but I was born in Sayaboury, Laos, right as the war was kind of kicking up and the CIA was involved.

(00:36) So if and when someone asks you about childhood stories of your life in Laos what kinds of things are you inclined to talk about?

I don't remember much about my childhood in Laos. So, my first actual vivid memory is of running away from Laos. I thought for years that the dream that I had of running and hearing gun shots and being afraid, it was actually just a nightmare. I had these recurring nightmares when I was a child. And finally, I think I must have been in like my late teens, early twenties then and I was talking to my mom about this recurring nightmare I never really talked to her about it before and she finally said "Oh well those, that's not really a nightmare. It actually did happen." And it turned out that my—this is years later, you know, a kind of discovery about my own history. My mom had fled with

us three girls. I think I was about three at the time. And my sister, who is a couple years older and at the time my other sister was a couple years younger—we were just kind of babies at the time. My dad was a teacher in Laos. Actually one of the few Hmong teachers. He was in a different place, he had been thrown into a reeducation camp; they called them seminars there.

Yes.

Right, the French word. So my mom and some other villagers decided to flee. And she took us and tried to get across to Thailand and had paid a cousin of hers, actually, to lead us off to safety. And we got to one of these check points. You know, roads were few and far between there, obviously. Her cousin betrayed us at the check point, so the villagers scattered, the soldiers just ran after us. We spent the night in an open field. A second night we actually wandered into a village of lepers. Hmoob Mob Nruas [Chuckles]

(2:48) Believe it or not, that's not the first time I've heard that.

Right so, these lepers, they quarantined them; they actually saved us. They sheltered us for a couple weeks. My uncle was with us at the time—this was my dad's older brother. He's since died, he never made it over. He went, found my dad and my dad came back and got us and then we tried to flee the second time. And so I think what my memories are, are really of running. And then I lived for a year in a refugee camp in Thailand. So I was about four when we came to the US.

(3:22) Okay so you don't really have pre-American memories of your own.

Yeah, more emotions, thoughts, kind of nightmares, you know, trauma from remembering just little snippets of things, remembering the trees, the noises, the guns, that kind of thing. So I don't have many but actually my most vivid memory is getting off the plane and seeing all these white people who have big noses [Interviewer laughs]. I got a Barbie, I think my older sister got a Barbie, and my youngest sister, there were only three of us kids at the time, she got a Raggedy Ann and I just remember that she hated it. So you know that was my first memory was getting this box with this Barbie inside.

(4:08) So how did your father get out of Seminar and get back to you?

They released him after a week and then they told him that he was to report back to a different place; he was going to be sent up north. North I don't know maybe the northeastern border of Laos for more training. And of course he was terrified, he had heard that basically you were just taken there basically to be killed. Having found us he then said, "Okay we're going to try to figure out how we're gonna get out of this place," because he had lost all hope for us actually having a life there. And I think at the time because there were many educated Hmong who were involved with the war, or were involved in some way. And my dad really wasn't; he kind of was one of these fellows who was an educator. You know, there weren't a lot of people back then who could actually buy an education. He was just a really, really smart poor village kid who somehow tested into the university

of Vientiane, Laos. So he was one of two individuals who tested into the university and was on free scholarship. Because at the time I think it was—per every province you could have these scholarship kids and he was one of these scholarship kids. So unlike—I've talked to other Hmong people who were around his age and they actually—either they were involved with the military or they were people of means, had money to pay for the university. My dad really didn't, and so he just felt like the war was not something to be engaged in, it wasn't his politics. So he kind of stayed away from it and didn't get really involved until the very end, because he was an educator and obviously that wasn't a good thing to be at the time.

(6:15) So I'm sorry, just to close the circle here. You were hiding in a community of lepers, your family went to where then to reunite with your father?

He came and got us.

At that place?

Yes. Because my uncle who was his older brother basically went back and tried to find him. Found him, he had been released, my dad and my uncle came back. We went back to our home village, pretended like things were fine. And then we stole away in the middle of the night. My dad actually said, because back in the old days all the teachers had uniforms, they all had to be dressed a certain way, so he actually traded his school uniform for someone else. At the time there were Hmong people who were falling on both sides of the political divide. So apparently there was some guy, this is according to my dad, who was willing to trade and not say anything for the clothes that he was wearing, so he did that. And we just stole away and we actually went back to a place where he had taught in northern Laos. Crossing through the mountains

Nong Het?

Nong Het and then down to Nam Yao which was eventually the refugee camp that we ended up in. We walked. There were a bunch of us who left kind of at the same time from the village—again, attempt number two. There were a couple uncles who were with us, things like that. So anyway, that's how we escaped the second time. My mom said that we hid, we apparently had some house up north like by the border where dad had taught. We kind of waltzed in there and pretended we were going to live there. And so the women were the ones who had made all the preparations for the village because they were less suspicious. They went and got everything ready and then, you know, stealing away at night again so that no one would see us.

(8:24) Moving ahead a little bit—we'll get back to the thread of the story, but—at what age are you hearing these details? Are you getting them in sort of as snippets as you're growing up or is there a particular time that suddenly you are curious and are asking your parents these things?

They all came in snippets over time because I think—I don't know. I never even knew my dad was

in a re-education camp until much later. I think I was in my twenties when I decided to interview my parents in an oral history project. I had gotten really curious about my own family's history, and so decided why not, you know? So I actually interviewed my parents and that's when more of the full story came out and I have to say even after the oral histories more detail came out. So some of these things came out in little snippets, like I always knew that a village of lepers saved us, [Chuckles] like from the time when I was a little girl my mom would say, "Well—" and she would talk about it matter-of-factly like we would be sitting around doing pa ntaub sewing or something and she would say "Well, there was a really great woman in the leper village that we lived in for a time" and then she'd go "I thought we were all going to die." [Interviewer laughs] But she would never associate it with the flight.

Yeah.

And so I thought, "Oh, I guess we lived in a village of lepers at some time." And so all these little snippets coming out and usually not always sad but with some triumph. Like we survived and this is kind of what happened. But the whole story didn't come out until I was in my twenties. And it was just because I asked. It wasn't because—I mean, I think they would have been fine telling me the story earlier, they just maybe didn't think I was that curious thought it was maybe because I wasn't that curious. And I also think growing up bilingual and bicultural my English surpassed my Hmong in so many ways and then when I actually learned how to speak Hmong a lot better, I could actually understand the meaning behind some of the words, because it's very disorienting when you are bicultural and bilingual. You go to the public schools and all the teachers are shushing you because you're speaking in Hmong. "Well you should speak English." Well when I grew up, when I was growing up in St. Paul in the eighties, there weren't a lot of Hmong kids. And so I was an anomaly and teachers didn't know what to do with me. I would be back in ESL and back out of ESL [Chuckles] They had no idea what to do with me. And then what they decided to do with me for a period probably of ten years was integrate, integrate, integrate. "You have to speak English." And I don't think anyone really knew what they were doing. They didn't have a lot of ESL experts at the time in the public schools, so I grew up during the time when the Hmong language and culture wasn't really fostered and so it was just like, "Well, how do I even talk to my parents? I don't even know if I have the right words to ask, the right questions to ask them."

(11:33) So where did you go to school?

I went to public schools. I grew up on the north end of St. Paul and then I went to Brown University for college. I won a full scholarship to Brown. And I came back here and studied public affairs at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs. And then—I'm in school again, I'm actually not done with school. I'm doing a doctorate program at Hamline University and I'm pretty much done with all my course work and I passed my exam and I'm working on a dissertation right now.

(12:08) You said you grew up here at a time when you didn't have a lot of Hmong classmates.

Yes.

So you were in North St. Paul and not sort of in the midst of a place where there tended to be a greater accumulation of Hmong students.

I grew up on the north end of St. Paul, so not North St. Paul, the north end of St. Paul. So Rice St. and Wheelock, and things like that. I think I started getting more Hmong classmates around sixth or seventh grade, something like that. And then by the time I was in high school there were a lot more Hmong kids that came in classes behind mine. So I graduated from Como Park Senior High in 1990.

(12:50) So you came here in what year?

1976

Oh wow! OK, I didn't put two and two together there.

Yeah, 1976.

So you were just here so early that the second big wave—

Yeah, the second wave hadn't hit yet. When my family moved to St. Paul there were ten Hmong families here. [Laughs] So my dad and my mom had—they helped shape this Hmong community, actually. My dad was one of the cofounders of Lao Community Center. He cofounded the Hmong Mutual Assistance Association, the Hmong Cultural Center, [Laughs] the Hmong Yang Vang Meng Association which is the Yang Clan Family Association. So he did a lot civically in this community. But I have really seen this community both as a kid and I think as an adult go through lots of change.

(13:40) We'll talk about that, I'm sure.

Mm-hmm.

Well let's go back to you arriving here, getting a Barbie doll and seeing all these funny looking, pale, big nosed people. How—as you remember as an adult of course childhood memories have a sort of different cast to them. But what do you remember about that early phase of trying to make sense of life in this new place?

Well I remember learning how to speak English, being terrified on the playground because I was on the monkey bars and there was this little girl next door who kept—she was standing below me and she kept saying “Let go” and I thought, “What is she talking about?” [Interviewer laughs] “What is she talking about? And they were Latino kids, her and her brother. And I can remember thinking, “I'm really scared I think I'm going to have to let go” and she kept saying, “Let go” And then I let go and there was suddenly a meaning to those words. I mean, I remember things like that. I remember the acculturation process with media, like looking at media. I think Elvis Presley died some time in there. I remember when Elvis died and my dad was like, he used to call him Alvin because he couldn't say Elvis, I remember him saying “Oh Alvin is the most handsome man I have ever seen in America and now he's dead.” [Laughter]. It would be things like that. I remember not understanding Christmas, because as a kid our sponsors who were all white—the first Christmas they brought over wooden ornaments that we had to paint and then hang on the tree. I remember my mom mumbling about “well these Mika people, they're really strange. Why would you cut wood,

do this, and then hang it on a tree? The tree is made of wood.” [Laughter] So all the holidays and no one understood what Halloween was like why would you dress up like crazy goblins and ghosts and—because spirits mean something very specific in the Hmong culture, I remember my parents going “Well, why would you do that?” You would never want to package yourself as a spirit of any kind. And it’s all evil stuff and evil spirits are bad.

(16:04) And the school experience specifically, as you mentioned, it didn’t seem that, this early in the game, people really understood how to deal with students who were coming in with different needs, different languages, things like that.

No.

How do you remember that experience? Was it, despite some of those challenges, still a positive experience or were there some challenges?

I think it was fairly positive although I think that I was [Pauses] I had a hard time learning how to read. And that’s not unusual for a kid who’s bilingual and has already acquired a first language and all these other things, but I think I was in really low reading groups for a long time and because I couldn’t have my learning reinforced at home because my parents didn’t really speak English. it was really tough. I signed my own field trip forms—I mean, they couldn’t read them anyway, so why bother? [Laughs] So I remember doing that and when I got older I would sign my siblings’ field trip forms. I became really good at being a parent to my younger siblings, being the translator. I spent a lot of my childhood translating and interpreting for people, very badly. [Laughs] at health clinics, enrolling cousins in school. I think teachers were curious but didn’t know how to deal with kids from different cultures. They didn’t know what Hmong was; I had to explain a lot what Hmong was. But I myself didn’t know myself what being Hmong was, because I had nothing that validated my identity as a kid. So it was just like [Pauses] it was very disorienting, because schools are great socializers, they are really socializing you civically. So I learned about the constitution and I think, “Well, it doesn’t say anything about Asian people [Laughs] it says stuff about slaves or there was a certain measurement of slaves, three fifths of a person for representation, and I thought, “Well, what about Asians?” Teachers didn’t explain really what that meant, so I remember school in the early years being a very disorienting process and I would say because it’s hard to separate being an immigrant from being low income that class was a big socializer and race was a big socializer just because Hmong people tended to live in low income neighborhoods with other low income people so I grew up with a lot of low income whites. And that’s very different maybe now than how the city of St. Paul looks like. But my conceptualization of poor people in America were poor whites who lived in public housing, because that’s who was living in public housing. There was a little boy who lived next door who would like to come and take my jacks and was very disruptive. I think he must have—he looked huge but he must have been probably about thirteen or something. [Laughs] It wasn’t unusual to be called bad names in school, be told to go home, just kind of all the really racist hate oriented behaviors; I experienced all of that in school. And I think there was a lot of

segregation of different types of kids from each other, not just in the cafeteria, but just in terms of interaction with teachers and things like that

(19:37) It's sad that this isn't the sort of thing where you can take a poll, but did you have a sense that at least on some level these people thought you were Vietnamese or—?

Oh yeah, I was called Vietnamese constantly I was called Laotian constantly. People didn't know that being Hmong and being Laotian were totally different, that they had different languages and cultures, that linguistically there's not even a match. [Laughs] So I just think being mischaracterized all the time—and then—it was really funny there was actually a point where my English really surpassed my Hmong and I didn't have an accent anymore and everything, and then people thought I was Korean or Chinese or Japanese [Laughs], so there was just this mischaracterization all the time of what type of Asian you were, and not really a good understanding of [Pauses] Asia is a really big country and there are so many languages and cultures and Minnesota is very homogenous and at the time was even more so. So people just had no understanding what it meant.

(20:39) So you talked about assuming this adult role in your family, signing documents and things like that. So did your parents come to teacher conferences and if so did you translate for them, or—?

I never had any parents come to any teacher conference my entire education. I never had them come to any activities at school. I think by the time my other siblings came along they had been sort of—they were getting more active at school. But my parents, especially my dad, his conceptualization of school was still how school was back in Laos. He just felt like if there were things that the teacher really needed to talk to him about, they would really be calling him, not realizing that this was a totally different type of system and then I think by the time he finally caught on he was kind of mad. [Both laugh] He was sort of mad about it

(21:36) Mad that he missed out? Mad at American or Lao or—?

Yeah, mad because he really thought that—in Laos, the education of children is also character education and moral education and education about ethics; it was a lot more comprehensive. I think more of what you maybe see here in private religious schools, and so he was thinking that public schools did that. And then I think at some point in time he realized they weren't doing that and he would say stuff like “God damn it”—you know, in English [Laughs] [Speaks in Hmong starting 22:15] so basically it was “God damn it, I thought they were trying to teach you how to be good people and I find out they're teaching you all these things that I don't agree with.” So he just decided to take matters into his own hand and do his own thing.

(22:36) Well teachers were sort of unquestionable authority figures back in Laos.

Yes they were, they were. They were. And then he kind of realized “Oh they are not unquestionable

characters here. Wow maybe they don't have my children's best interests at heart." And I think it disheartened him, but I think it also think it made him very, very strict. He was a very strict disciplinarian. And [Pauses, laughs] his way of managing the kids was "If the teacher is on chapter two, you should be on chapter four!" So he'd like force us to study ahead.

(23:14) Did all the kids respond to that reasonably well? Were there differences between you and your siblings?

Yeah there were differences. I think some of us were more motivated than others and some of us were less able to deliver on the expectations that he had or that my parents both had. My mother had her own ways, they were a little softer but no less difficult to sort of rise to that level of expectation. But they did turn out five kids who actually graduated from college and did fine in life, so they must have known what they were doing.

(23:52) How did your parents fare as they first came here in terms of finding employment, in terms of feeling secure and being able to take care of their family and those kinds of things?

I think probably the first fifteen years were a constant struggle. And there were times when they, my parents voluntarily stayed poor for the good of the family. So my dad's first job [Chuckling]—you know, teachers in another country are really revered figures and that was kind of what he was expecting, and he had aspirations to become an educator here, and it was really, for him, the land of opportunity and that's actually why he wanted to resettle here, and he was one of the first in all these other things because he wanted a better life, and my mom wanted a better life for us. But his first job was working the graveyard shift at a bowling alley. And in the '70s or even the later '70s, they were kind of the punk rock years. Well he thought [Chuckles briefly]—and there were all these rumors in the refugee camp about America being the land of giants and America being a land where there were evil monsters and with Halloween, who knows? But when he stepped into the bowling alley he really thought he had entered the land of monsters, [Both laugh] because of all the beer drinking, smoking, punk rockers with blue and green hair. He just thought he had made the biggest mistake of his life. He did that for a while. He cleaned out ash trays and toilets; he was basically the assistant to the janitor.

And my mom, she had two babies in a row when she came to the US, finally started working, I think, when my brother was about a year and half. We were on welfare and lived in public housing; and she had found a home daycare provider for us in the neighborhood. And after a while she, my sister at the time, the one right after me, she was a preschooler and so she would half time to be in daycare to this woman's home, and she had discovered after a couple weeks or a few months and Naly kept saying "Well our little brother keeps crying, Mom," and it turned out that the daycare provider was locking my brother in the basement. [Laughs gently] Whenever he cried or needed attention, she was just leaving him down there and he would be crying and crying on his own. And occasionally my sister who was a little older, Carol, would be down there, but sometimes it was him alone, and so sometimes my mom quit work and she just said "You know I don't care what this

country is telling me to do. I don't care if I lose my welfare benefits or whatever it might be. I'm taking care of my family." And so she quit work and she kept going to school when my dad was home and could take care of us but she just basically voluntarily exited the work force, because [Pauses] When I talk to her now she still gets angry about it, "How could you do this to a child, a small child, a baby, really?!" So she feels a lot of guilt for abandoning the kids, and because she couldn't upgrade her skills as fast because we were little, we just stayed poor for another six or seven years until we grew up more, and then she went and found work. And I think by then I and May Song, who was a little older than I, could actually help take care of the younger ones a little bit longer. So I think it was touch and go and she did retraining programs. She is one of the few women that I know now, she's in her sixties, who at the time actually took the time to go to evening high school, finished high school, did a two-year vocational degree and finished that, then went on and did some other work. So then she was fine. But you know, the retraining and all of that takes a really long time, you have to invest a lot of time, especially if English isn't your primary language.

(28:03) Were there—on some level obviously, there had to be—but were there tensions in the family over some of these things that you just discussed? You mentioned school and obviously your father was upset about, the American school system. It's typical to go through these things as a family and not just make sacrifices but also, I would assume, experience some tension between various family members.

Yeah, there was tension with family members. My parents were very charitable. They had almost nothing themselves and yet they still found time to share their resources with many other Hmong. My dad especially felt an obligation to family members because he was one of the few educated ones sponsoring. Once we were able to, we kept sponsoring families from Laos because he would be like "Okay one more family we have saved from death" [Both laugh] So I actually grew up with revolving—I felt like I had grown up in a social services organization, which I kind of did. So there were periodic tensions between sharing resources and some people are more stingy than others with paying for gas and everybody would complain. And some people would complain about food—I mean, just basic needs. We were constantly giving clothes away and showing people where to go to the Goodwill you know Salvation Army and all of that. And then there was tension in my family because of most of us were girls and there were family members who felt that my parents should continue to have kids—you know, that whole thing. There was a split in my family and there were also—when you help that many people there are also misunderstandings about what you can and can't do and there was a family member who felt that the reason why one of our relatives couldn't come over was because my dad really didn't focus on the paperwork right and so there was a rift and he sent this terribly ugly letter, really kind of ostracizing my dad and yelling at him, basically telling him that he was worthless because he had a family of girls you know, there were four girls in the family and just one boy. So my dad in typical fashion in one of our photo albums [Laughs] laminated the letter and stuck it in there. [Both laugh] And then whenever we weren't doing well he'd say "See?!?! This is why you have to do well in school so you don't do this kind of stuff later on: accuse

people who know more than you of not doing enough and letting other people be the mouthpiece for you. So he just—all these different tensions and hardships, it did lead to a big rift in the Yang clan, because that uncle then became Christian and then my dad didn't agree with that and so we just stopped interacting. So there are rifts around gender and religion and treatment of different jobs, because when resources are scarce people fight. But as much fighting as there was, I think there was more helping and support of each other. My parents were the kind of people who would give the shirt off their back for a new relative to America. Even if the pot wasn't old they would say "This is a really old pot and I think you should take it. [Borh laugh]. That's how we were. So we grew up with little, and then we shared what little we had. And that was just kind of how we grew up. And it led to, I think, most of us in the family becoming very community-oriented because that's how our parents were.

(31:55) Was this idea of being a girl in a patriarchal society something that you felt on a regular basis or was this something that some guy was throwing at your dad at this particular time of stress?

No I think because as gender roles changed there was stress around my mom going to work, stress around women earning more. My dad was very supportive of us as girls and at the same time was very much a product of his own culture. So I always had to grow up with that duality of my dad thinks I can be very successful and then "Oh gee my dad's going out and talking to women," and my dad is going out and doing all these other things that really—I think is disrespectful to my mom. So I think it's—you know, people are really creatures of their environment and what they've been socialized to do, and unfortunately in the Hmong clan system, women do take a secondary role. And like in the Hmong belief system, if you act really bad and uncharitably as a man you can come back as a woman—I mean, that's the threat [Laughs] in the cosmology of the Hmong, so what does that say about women? It means you are supposed to be second class citizens and you are supposed to be deferential, and all these different things because you are less high on the social status. So while my dad believed that women should be educated and girls should go to school and all these other things, I had to live with the duality of, "Well, this is his belief system"—and it's my mom's too. I mean, she believes the same thing. And some of it's like protective and some is just, "Well, this is just how things are." I think any father would say, "Well, if you have a teenage daughter you better be as careful as possible and you want to screen every young man who comes through the door." So I think it's that, but it's magnified. It was magnified because my parents were living in a culture that wasn't their own. And they had to be extra diligent. So the way they took care of that was by being very strong disciplinarians and then also by saying, "You can be anything you want." And then what you see as role modeling is, "Oh, mom's in the kitchen all the time, she's cooking, she's not eating with the men," and there are all these other things that are going on then.

(34:17) I assume that along with "You can be anything you want," there's also "and that will make you a good wife for some husband" on some level.

Right, right. Yeah. “You’ll be a good wife.” The messages I got growing up was “Your primary responsibility is you to be a good wife and mother.” Now that was counter to the messages my own parents gave to me which was, “Your primary responsibility is to become educated”. And then “we want you to marry a nice Hmong man, and then have kids.” [Both laugh.] Which ironically I pretty much followed, because I completed my education before I actually did get married. But they had these very—both of them had this very strong value around education. I mean, its like “Education is your priority. You will not have any other priority other than education; you will not have friends before you can get an education. You will not have—” I mean, the only thing that maybe trumped that was, “You will support your sisters [Both laugh] in their education!” Those were all the messages, but it was very counter to what the rest of the community was saying to me, so when I went other places, even when I was about sixteen or seventeen, it would be, “Well, you are such a lovely young woman. Boy, why you aren’t married yet?”

Of course, yeah.

All my friends started marrying each other starting at around age thirteen or fourteen. By the time I graduated from high school all my friends were pretty much married with the exception of one person. I out of my graduating class at Como Park Senior High was the only person—young woman—who graduated from college unmarried. Everybody else was married. So it was a lonely experience to have that level of pressure culturally and to really defy it, to say, “Well, but I am going to become educated, I am going to go to school.”

(36:16) Were you confident enough in that vision that you didn’t spend too much time second-guessing yourself and sort of wondering why you weren’t getting married?

No I wasn’t confident, because I wasn’t receiving any support, or very little support for what I was doing, so—I tell this story all the time of why social change needs to happen in our Hmong community to support education for all. I was part of this really interesting focus group one time that the Federal TRIO programs were doing around first-generation college students in the Hmong community, and I was one of the few women who was in the group. And I realized in reflection at that meeting, in that focus group that I as a student—I had already graduated from my master’s degree then—that as a Hmong girl, the only support that I had gotten from my clan—and it wasn’t even a clan member, it was someone from my mother’s clan giving me cash to spend—was twenty dollars. Twenty dollars was given to me to spend freely from an aunt of mine who lived on welfare and had been orphaned at a young age. She wasn’t educated herself, but for some reason she sent me this crisp twenty dollar bill, and I cried in the mail room. [Laughing, but moved still.] It was amazing. Because Hmong boys don’t have to experience that level of lack of support. And I actually remember crying one time when I came home from college. . .

It moves you even now.

I know I know.

That’s how significant it is.

I was crying ‘cause I said “Mom, I’m such a good student and there are all these Hmong boys who

are getting money from their clan members to buy books and all these other things. What about me? Why isn't any one supporting me?" and she said "Well honey it's because you're a girl and you're going to marry and benefit some other clan." [Laughs] But she said, "But I don't think that you should be sad about it" and I said, "Well why not? Why can't I be sad about it, or even outraged?" She said, "Because honey, all these Hmong boys who are getting all this money from their relatives, when they grow up and when they finish, they can never claim that they did it on their own"

(38:46) [Chuckles] There is an interesting insight from your mother.

And—I mean, she was trying to make me feel better. And she said, "Honey, you're not going to owe anybody anything. You can become whatever you want you can do anything you want. You're not going to be obligated to all these clan members or relatives. So you remember every single person who is helping you now, because you're going to become somebody someday, and not many people are going to be able to claim that they did anything to help you"

Not legitimately, anyway.

And you know—not legitimately, anyway. [Interviewer laughs.] And she was right. She was right. Because—I think that the concept of moral debt and obligation crosses so many generations and really for me, because there was no expectation, or very little, and then very little assistance. I really don't owe a lot, necessarily, to other people. And that's OK.

Absolutely.

Yeah, it's OK. But it was a freeing moment. But I think that those gender dynamics are really strong. I've talked to a Hmong boy who's graduated from college and says the same things that I do. I remember that every time I give money to clan members that I have to give equally to Hmong girls and women who are in school, because they are struggling so much.

(40:02) And this was a theme that came across even with my Hmong students, who are women, all the time.

Yeah.

"Why is this happening, and why—?" I even had a young woman when I spoke at the HND [Hmong National Development] conference last year say "Oh yes we have a name for it: Hmong prince syndrome". [Dr. Hang laughs] I had never heard that before.

I have never heard that, but [Laughs]

So yeah, clearly it's a big deal.

It's a big deal to the extent that it doesn't create a return. It doesn't create value in terms of women giving back to the community at some future date. It also doesn't improve the community, because you know that everybody has to have an education in order to be economically self-sufficient and do well and break that generation—break that cycle of poverty and all these different things we know.

(40:57) And of course my grandparents probably didn't think all that differently at that time either. Those same patriarchal ideas, I think, have existed in most cultures at one time or another.

Yeah. Yeah, I mean, what does that say about us as a country that we think we are progressive and there have been more Muslim countries that have had women as prime ministers than we have had presidents in our nation's history? So I don't think you have to look so far beyond the Hmong community to see those gender differences and those dynamics, still so persistent.

(41:30) This probably wasn't the case since your father was an educator; it's sort of an odd question anyway, but it seems, with some people I've spoken to, that the very thing parents want for their children, which is an education and success and college and a profession, can also be the very things that can alienate them from their children,

Right.

that it creates more distance between parent and child. Did that happen at all with you in some way?

It did, I think, for my mother because she had never really received a formal education; the education she did have wasn't about living in the world of ideas. There is a very dramatic split when you become educated, because you move beyond kind of survival—"I work so that I can earn an income" to "I need to be self-actualized in my work." It's a very different type of activity—not that it's always so clear, but when you're not as educated or when you're basically in survival mode, you can't afford the luxury of living in the world of ideas. And the minute you do that, it creates a class difference that's pretty substantial in terms of connecting a divide and sharing knowledge. So it's like you can't talk to your mom, I couldn't talk to my mom, even today, in terms of living in the world of ideas. It has to be about the here and now and the present. And I think that it took me a long time to realize that that was the schism that had been created by me going to school, and I am much more able to understand the world that she lives in than she is to understand mine, because she's never lived in my world. How could she? She never had those opportunities, and so it's dependent on me to actually figure out how to bridge that difference, because I have lived in that other world too. I mean, I have lived in both worlds. So when you cross classes, you cross that idea divide, it becomes very difficult to communicate with people who haven't been there. And I see this divide and this schism happen all the time for the college educated Hmong and those who aren't educated or people who are older and younger. It's not that what makes us happy is so different, but we can't express those things that we care about in a way that is actually understandable across language, across cultures, or across classes. I mean, it's a significant difference.

(44:24) What do you think this generation of Hmong young people doesn't appreciate about what your generation did when you came here and you were—I mean, it's still the case for many Hmong kids today so I'm not trying to create an artificial distinction, but it seems to me at least on some level that the so-called step and a half generation, who really did serve

as a bridge between both their parents and this culture they found themselves in, probably took on their shoulders some things that perhaps the second generation can't appreciate.

Yeah, like students now in their twenties probably can't appreciate any more, because their parents are my age cause they got married so young. [Both laugh] Yeah, well it's true. I think when you are a part of a bridge generation like mine, you can see cultural problems from multiple angles. There's that additional flexibility to actually have some tolerance and patience for things that can't change as quickly. What I see with a lot younger people, or people who are ten years younger than I am, because they don't remember the refugee experience, not even like I do, because I—.(I think you can define those periods of years however you want to; I would no longer consider myself to be a refugee, obviously)—But being that close to the refugee experience was a gift and a curse in a lot of ways. It was a gift because it allowed me the opportunity to see things from multiple angles, and it was a curse because it was such a burden and still is, [Brief laugh] even though I am much better able to deal with it now. I mean, the trauma alone is a burden. I think for younger people, younger adults there is a lack of awareness or understanding or appreciation for that refugee experience, for the cultural elements that have needed to change in order to really adapt to this country, in order to be successful. No acculturation happens without some sacrifice. And I think because Hmong kids these days are largely divorced from how rich and vibrant and wonderful Hmong culture is, they actually don't really have a great appreciation for it, about who they are as human beings and as cultural beings. Cultural identity is a powerful force in shaping your self-esteem, who you are and how you think of yourself, whether or not you feel anchored in any type of reality of why and how you experience certain things. So because I think the Hmong are racially different than the dominant culture, at least the dominant culture now (although you could make some arguments St. Paul and certain places that they're pretty dominant). I think what I see is that because there's a lack of appreciation or even tolerance or understanding for learning because our educational institutions by and large don't teach these kids about who they are and how rich the culture is that it's disappearing and that part of the American story is going to probably be lost if we don't document and do things. And that's partially why I agreed to do this oral history interview, because I think the Hmong are a proud people and it's a two thousand year-old culture and history, and there's a lot there. And so like what I see teenagers wanting to be is Korean now, which I think is really funny. [Interviewer laughs] There's this whole fascination with Korean pop culture, because we do youth leadership work here at the Wilder Foundation and everybody's obsessed with Korean culture. And so whenever I talk to young people, especially if they're in high school, I talk about Hmong culture and how cool it is to be Hmong and what it is like to be Hmong and why being Hmong is cooler than being Korean. [Laughs]

Sure, if you are Hmong, anyway, yeah.

Right, if you're Hmong and you are a Hmong kid. So I think there is this desire to sprout into a different type of tree, even though you're a Hmong seed and you're not going to. So there's that lack of understanding.

(48:43) What's your take on the use of hip-hop culture with a lot of the Hmong youth?

Would you see that as a way to express one's Hmong identity, but just through this avenue of expression, or—?

Yeah, through a different vehicle. Culturally the Hmong have always been an oral tradition. Oral traditions are the most robust, I think, in our culture, so it's not unusual that that would be translated into hip hop, kind of that whole rap culture, whatever it might be, spoken word poetry. If you look at the history of the Hmong it's not unusual that the arts community is completely vibrant. The Hmong have expressed themselves through art for generations, so there are new mediums new vehicles for doing that, yeah.

(49:41) So as you mentioned, your family came here quite early. You're bringing relatives over, the Hmong community is growing. How connected did you feel to that community? Were you more concerned about your educational accomplishments in your own family or did you see yourself becoming sort of a part of this community in a way that helped you sort of cement your identity in this new place?

Yeah, I think if there were an order to how I was socialized to group, it was education, then community. So my dad didn't have an older son, so I think I was his older son [Both laugh] So I went with him to community meetings and I was at meetings at Lao Family. So I think that [Pauses] that I've always felt connected to the Hmong community, and the community has certainly grown and changed a lot. I remember the first Hmong sports festival, I remember the first Hmong New Year. And I remember—my family was a part of co-creating all of that, so I feel an investment in the community, and I think [Pauses, Chuckles] I think I do represent the new St. Paul in a lot of ways, because this is my community. I mean, I grew up in it, I live in it. It was cross cultural to me. And I feel connected to the Hmong community, I feel connected to the St. Paul community. There were a lot of people who were here in this community when I was growing up who weren't Hmong, and I feel connected to those individuals. So I feel like I really have been very well woven into the fabric of this community. And I haven't felt the disconnect. I mean, I don't feel disconnected from the Hmong community. I don't feel disconnected from the African American community, I don't feel disconnected to the white community.. Probably why I'm at Wilder, because these different types of communities were the communities that were a part of my upbringing here. But cultural identity for me was really centered around being a Hmong person. In fact I don't go around saying I'm Asian, I don't know what Asian is outside of being Hmong, really. I think I was grouped into that group when I went out east for college, and then there were way more East Asians than Southeast Asians and I thought "Who are these people [Both laugh] Third generation Chinese American from California. OK!" Now that would be a very different experience because I have nothing in common with those folks other than my racial identity and maybe some cultural elements around Confucius and Buddhism, who knows how long ago, many generations ago.

(52:28) So what do you remember about the establishment of these Hmong institutions and how they served to—well, to serve, but also to bring together the Hmong community that was growing here in the Twin Cities?

Well, I think my memories of this are that there was a lot of conflict between public entities and the Hmong community, that public organizations in particular that had to serve all people, didn't understand what this new cultural group was and didn't understand how to work with them. I remember people not understanding, "Well why is animal sacrifice happening in public housing?" [Both laugh] That was kind of a big deal. And then I remember things around city ordinances that weren't being enforced—I mean, I remember in the early years—and this is what community organizations would help educate other Hmong people about: "You know there is a public entity that regulates when hunting happens. You can't shoot robins!" [Both laugh] And then everybody would start talking about "Robins—you mean the ones with the orange belly? You can't eat those?" [Both laugh] I mean, those were the kind of conflicts that happened early on in this community. Or seeing a live pig outside of McDonough homes is really bad, you know, really bad, [Both laugh] even if it is for a spiritual ceremony, like that's really bad. Public housing really doesn't like that," and then brokering, "Well Why?" And then the whole issue of early marriage, statutory rape for people who over eighteen marrying individuals who are under the age of sixteen. Well, in the Hmong culture that's not statutory rape, that's a marriage. And when a young man who is eighteen is marrying someone who is fifteen, they're really promising to love this person forever and those marriages do last, and so [Pauses] Just the conflicts with the court system and all of that, I mean, there was a fair amount of conflict, I think, in the Eighties around all of that, and the Hmong organizations helped bridge some of those conversations. My dad talks about showing up in court one day saying "You know this is wrong. Here is what our culture is and this really isn't a bad thing happening. This is what's happening here." So I think there was a really important functional role in terms of educating the Hmong people about public institutions and educating them the public systems here about how to be more culturally competent and not interfering with things that were happening that were not bad, just a part of regular cultural practices.

(55:23) What about the practice of bride kidnapping? Where did that fit in the spectrum of things? I would assume on some level there was some level of uneasiness about the practice in the United States but also a sense that yes, this is a cultural practice.

Yeah it was a cultural practice. And I remember when some of that was happening and the press was releasing stuff. I think Lao Family might have stepped into some of those. But it's not really kidnapping in the sense of white western culture of kidnapping and absconding with a teenager. In the Hmong language it's actually a totally different word, so kidnapping is nyiag getting a bride is zij, which is a cultural form of taking someone to be your wife, and sometimes is put on as a big show for people. So the in-laws don't feel bad that you are actually taking this young woman to be married. [Interviewer laughs] Now some cases really were kidnapping and not right, but most of it was zij which is taking this woman to be my wife. And you know, sometimes it was putting on a show. But I don't think that public entities understood that. And I think that practice has largely disappeared because people kind of don't see the need for it anymore. And then the other is—you know it's just not culturally accepted in this country to do that. So you see a little—you see the clan

elders come to the bride's home to actually ask for that young woman's hand in marriage and things like that.

(57:01) Well, you mentioned that one of your relatives adopted Christianity. Obviously that happens in many cases, and in others obviously traditional practices are maintained. When you add the mix of that, living in a culture where as you say, things aren't understood and sometimes even as a result of education people might say "Well we don't really quite practice it the same anymore," how are you finding your sense of cultural identity where at least in those aspects of your family is concerned? How did those—

Change?

Yeah.

Well my dad, I think in the refugee camp, actually thought about Christianity. He and my mom have crossed that Christian divide a couple times. [Both chuckle] So I think my dad was thinking about becoming Christian in the refugee camp. But then when we were sponsored into the US we had a group of churches, across denominations, actually, formed a little coalition and sponsored our family into the US. And then there was a guy who was a pastor who lived on our block in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, who taught my dad how to drive and do all these other things. And because the churches had sponsored us, I think there was maybe even some feeling of obligation or whatever. So we were promptly baptized and we became Christian. So I was Christian, I think, from the age of five or so until I was about twelve. And then my grandfather had been resettled into the US and said, "No you can't do this," and then we became animist again. So half my childhood was growing up Lutheran [both laugh] and the other half was being animist. And then when I got married my husband actually was sponsored by a Lutheran church in Michigan of all places, Richfield Michigan, and so we had to decide as a family whether I would convert or he would. And he wasn't going to, and frankly as a woman I can't be animist on my own. It requires that there is some patriarchal relationship to brothers and other things. So I converted so now I'm Lutheran and have been for like the past ten years or so.

Welcome to the club.

Right. [Interviewer laughs] So I'm Missouri Synod Lutheran, the conservative branch of the Lutheran church. My husband's president of the congregation at the Bethlehem Lutheran Church in St. Paul. I have never looked back. And I have—this is the thing about, as I said, being a part of that bridge generation is having grown up in both religions, understanding the merits of both, I think I have maybe a religious flexibility that maybe even my husband doesn't even have, because his family became Christian back in Laos. Their clan has been Christian for a very long time. But I think what causes a schism in the clan, within a clan, is actually when someone decides to become Christian. And then the relatives, the clan members don't follow along, so what you see is clans that are split up within families—*ib cuab kwv tij* is what Hmong people call it—into different sects of "We're Christian you're not we can't associate with you anymore." So it's painful, it's very painful. And there are elders who tell stories about becoming Christian and then having all their relatives turn

their backs on them, and having built their own new clan and family and it's awful. I know examples like that too. And because my father didn't want to make that choice once my grandpa came, because he was the patriarch of the family, he just said, "OK, we'll go back to not being Christian again, because it's easier." And frankly for a period of ten years or so we couldn't be animist! [Laughs] There were no other people to be animist with, there were no shamans. I mean, how would you do it? You couldn't do it. You couldn't call the soul home, you couldn't do it. So it was a problem.

(1:01:23) It seems like some of the people I have spoken to who are Hmong Christians but who certainly are open not just to having relationships with but even attending shamanistic practices—

Mm-hmm

They would say that some of the most intolerant people regarding that kind of ecumenical spirit would be Hmong pastors,

Uh-huh.

that of all the people who are intolerant about Hmong Christians trying to hang on to some sense of their cultural practice or identity, pastors are the ones who are just, "Nope you have to cut all the ties," it's got to be "all in," as it were.

Yea, I think that's really interesting, and I have seen that among some Hmong pastors. You know, some are more tolerant. I think it kind of depends on which church you go to and all these other things. But because animism and ancestral worship is woven into so many aspects of Hmong culture, I don't know how you can actually just say "Now you're not anymore," and it's like, "Well, I'm not going to become some lutefisk eating person and all these other things." So like my husband and I, even as—being Missouri Synod Lutheran, we'll go to blessing ceremonies and we'll participate. We're not doing them, but even if you think about evangelism, it's like, "How can you do that if you're not willing to associate with people who are different from you and you are so intolerant? So because I do belong to a very conservative branch of the Lutheran church, I think there is more intolerance, probably, in terms of thinking a specific way about other people who are different. And every now and then I threaten Lue saying that we have to—at least if we stay Lutheran—go to some more progressive—

ELCA or—

Yeah, you know, and it's what he knows and it's what he believes in, so I think I'm the one who is the compromiser and that's OK. Just because we are that way and belong to that sect or whatever it might be, doesn't mean that there isn't the possibility for change or even—they're still working on me, I think— [Laughs] you know. . .

(1:03:43) Well, I think for many women it's hard to belong to a church that doesn't allow women to be ordained.

Well, yeah, to be ordained or even to have a leadership role within the church.

And that can vary between churches, even the within the Missouri synod.

Right, right. But when they sat down to ask if my husband would be on the board of Lay Ministry and they sat down with Lue and I and they asked Lue to do it and my support and I said, “He’s fine; I don’t need to take leadership at church, too, I’ve got enough going on in the community.

[Interviewer laughs] But it is odd, because I am a feminist; I do believe in the fact that women should be able to be ordained and do certain things.

(1:04:25) So I’m going to switch themes a little bit. As you think—I don’t know where this would start. This might be as a teenager or even a little later. As you think about how your family and your clan and members of the community regarded the Hmong back in Laos—not even the ones from the refugee camps in Thailand, but the Hmong in Laos—what do you remember about discussions, ideas, whether there were sort of different political strands within the community about what to do with this situation and how to best help those people or to try not do anything because to try to do something might involve a collaboration with the communist government. Any different sort of strands of ideas about that that you recall?

Yeah I think [Long pause] I think there were different roles for men and women related to that. I think the women’s roles quite frankly were to house and feed people if there were big meetings around. How do we help the cause? How do we get more people out of Laos? How do we help our own people here? The movement with General Vang Pao, with really organized structure, I think my family was always on the loose fringe. It’s sort of—my dad didn’t want to alienate those folks but he really wasn’t all fully in. But that’s how he was about the war, too. He didn’t believe in the war. He was sad about it but he didn’t want to actively participate in it. So he always walked this sort of fine political line. So he’d attend meeting but he never took an active role. He tried to stay away from some of it because he didn’t believe that was the path to prosperity, either here in the US or even back in Laos. I think he was more fixated on how do I become an important person here? How do I contribute here? How do I really work hard to feed my family and do things I need to do here? And I think for him it was confronting the realities of what we were dealing with here was already so bad he just had no energy for thinking about back there. I mean, not ‘til much later and prosperity had been gained somewhat, moved up and out of poverty, bought a house, doing all these other things. So I remember attendance at meetings. He was always deferential towards the General, because my grandfather and General Vang Pao grew up together in the same village. General Vang Pao’s oldest sister was my grandpa’s step-mom. So his [my father’s] half-siblings, all his half-siblings, were General Vang Pao’s nieces and nephews. And my grandfather’s own mother died when he was quite young, so General Vang Pao’s sister was his mom. So my dad just kind of felt like “There’s a meeting; I just feel like I just have to go.” But my Grandpa always told us stories about General Vang Pao when he was young and what he used to do and what antics he would get into, because they were about the same age and they were more like brothers than they were uncle and nephew. So I think because the cause was being rallied by the General and many other people, my dad would

show up. But I don't think that he really ever believed in doing anything over there. Because I think that when he left [Laos] he really did psychologically leave. I just think that if he ever did want to return, it would be as something else. I mean not with a military cause or anything like that.

(1:08:19) But would it be fair to say just as someone who's looking from the outside someone like me just asking someone who was at least a part of the community that there were different groups who took this cause more or less seriously than others.

Yes.

Some thought, "We're contributing money and we know one day we're going to go back and others who were maybe more ambivalent and others thought of it more as a joke.

Yeah, I don't think that—I think there were different sects, I mean different sub groups and I think our family kind of fell into the "We're ambivalent about this; we want to see where it goes."

Don't want to be rude for certain.

Right, but not for us probably. We've got to focus on where we are now and where we need to go. But a lot of deference towards those who actually did want to do something, because that was OK for them; it wasn't necessarily OK for us.

(1:09:17) Did those divisions ever cause problems within the Hmong organizations that were designed to serve the community, that you had people who were so divided over what the ultimate strategy should be concerning what was going on in Laos that they didn't like working together and they had a difficult time—?

Oh yeah, there were notorious factions of people who, even if they didn't like each other—it's not like they disrespected each other or anything, but they would just avoid each other. {Both laugh} They just wouldn't talk about stuff. They just wouldn't talk about their politics they'd just be side-stepping around it. And I think in particular if you were a Hmong man you were probably confronted a lot more often with having to make choices about "Do you support this or don't you support this?" And I tend to think because of the Hmong clan structure there are different factions that fall along clan lines. If you're a Vang, "Why aren't you supporting General Vang Pao?" I think it would be really hard to be a Vang and not supporting Vang Pao. So I think it was maybe just easier to be in the Yang clan because you just didn't have to. And I don't even know if General Vang Pao's wives, because women—General Vang Pao's wives—he married a lot of wives and really unified the community that way, because he could claim relationships from all these different clans and I can't remember if he actually had a Yang wife.

I'm not sure. I met two of them at his Tso Plig ceremony last year.

My grandfather and my dad always used to say that we were the really poor side of the Yang family, so we never had any prominence or wealth of any kind. My grandfather, because he was orphaned and didn't have his real mom and his dad died at a relatively young age was pretty much on his own and didn't have a lot of clan support. So our side of the Yang family has no prominence whatsoever. I mean no claim to fame, nothing, other than the fact of General Vang growing up in the same

village. No ambitions—[Laughs]

That's not all bad, either.

No, no. No like—nothing worth tooting about, really

No fights to get into over—

No fights to get into, and [Pauses] I mean nothing to live up to. [Laughs] My dad was really the first person in the Yang family to become educated. And I think now—and ironically and this is so funny, our Yang family is not known for being prolific with sons. We're actually known for being pretty prolific with daughters, so all the girls do great. So there's this whole belief in where people are buried, the ancestors are buried, and how they are buried with where mountains are pointing and all this other stuff

Oh, yes, geomancy and all that.

Yeah, the geomancy stuff. When my dad went back to Laos finally and looked at where my great grandfather was buried, he said that the way his grave was tipped was all towards the girls and women in the Yang clan [Interviewer laughs.] He said—

It's his fault!

He said that all the power and prestige was going to go to the women in the family, who would keep marrying out of the family. I just laughed, I guess that's how it is sometimes, dad.

(1:13:01) Well, I want to get to your getting into college in a moment, but since we're sort of in this area, I want to stick with what seems to be to the present day a big issue, particularly when I talk with Hmong women. And that is this persistent sense that Hmong men, at least of a certain age, still feel entitled to go back to Laos and Thailand and get a girlfriend or get involved in all these matters that really do undermine their relationships if not destroy their relationships with their wives.

Yeah.

How do you see that—and realize I'm not asking you to be an expert on the topic, but just as an observer, do you see this as a generational issue that's sort slowly working its way out, or do you think that attitude to some degree is still permeating into a younger generation of Hmong men?

I think there's definitely a generational thing going on there, and then I think it is permeating to younger men as well. And I think part of it is it's a permissive culture. I mean, the culture actually allows that. There's more stigma that's starting to be gained around that, but there aren't really social sanctions that people can make related to that, and so I think until there is more of that, it will continue to happen. And frankly it's sort of your classic imperialistic exploitation of people who have wealth with people who have less wealth of the same kind, and then the ability to do it without a lot of consequences. So I think it's a problem, I think it creeps into people who are younger; I've seen people who are my age. I'm in my late thirties; I see people who are doing it in their late thirties. And I think until Hmong men recognize that it's a problem for them—the good ones, that is, the ones who see it as a real social problem—and start uninviting these people from public events

and putting them in leadership roles, it probably won't change, because I don't think that women—women can object, and women are getting very organized in the Hmong community. They are. They're just a lot more organized. I see them being way more organized than the men are at this point about social issues.

[Laughs] Oh, yes.

And it's scaring me, 'cause I keep thinking, "Where are all the good Hmong guys? When are they going to step up and really say "No, this wrong and it's not good and it's destroying our families" and all these other things. But yeah, I think that whole transcontinental wealth transfer, traveling, all of that. We see it here at Wilder as a lot of depressed women whose husbands have abandoned them and then they're dealing with basic needs and the consequences of those decisions. And I think what—I see rejection of—I call it rejection of modernity in the American world: women who are becoming more educated, refusing to marry Hmong men, who they're afraid will carry out this behavior, and then Hmong men who are older, basically, telling younger Hmong men to marry women who are much younger so that they can kind of control them; and the rejection of marriages with educated women, because you don't want someone that you can't control. I mean, it's like this Catch Twenty-two. And then there are couples like my husband and I who are both educated, who just look in horror at all of this stuff happening, and go "Holy Cow, where do we start stopping some this?" and are just deeply concerned for our kids, our families, living with it within our clans and seeing it happen, so we just make the choice to not support any of those types of marriages. We don't give money, we don't attend clan events that may have, we don't support people in leadership positions who are like that. It's just—we vote with our money, our presence, our time, our attention, and we just dedicate time, attention, and resources to organizations and people who are making a difference, and then we express ourselves when we disagree and that's all we can really do, in terms of taking personal actions.

But that's a lot.

Well, and I think you still see couples who don't agree with this kind of thing but will still show up and support a clan leader who has multiple wives or someone who is really acting poorly, and so I think until people who are my age who are the bridge generation who know more and have seen the struggles that the community has gone through and can understand multiple sets of belief systems to say, "No, we've had it, this is enough," and to also hold the elders accountable, because what we see now is young Hmong men who are in their twenties being very disenfranchised, who are trying to make something of themselves, who are disenchanted with the Hmong culture because they think that is what the Hmong culture is all this other stuff going on, and they've lost the respect for the elders who should have it, but are using it to their own ends. They're just not satisfied. You know, it's like the whole community is going through some type of intergenerational trauma [Laughs] related to "I've worked so hard for thirty years and now I'm going to go have fun." Having fun is marrying someone who is like seventeen and doing an international marriage or having two sets of wives? It's a little crazy.

[Interviewer pauses recorder to tell Dr. Hang a story.]

(1:19:17) Gender is a really powerful force in the Hmong community. And I think one of the things that is greatly misunderstood, even from people who know me or they want to pass judgment or whatever, because I've been really on the forefront of creating women's organizations in the Hmong community and really lifting women up to say "No, it's okay, you can become educated; [Laughs] you can leave an abusive husband." I mean, all these things I have been saying for fifteen years. I like to tell people that the only difference between me now and me fifteen years ago when I was doing this work in human services is I'm so much cooler now because I'm president of the Wilder Foundation. [Interviewer laughs] And back then I was just a twenty-something without kids who kept talking about social justice issues and gender equity and domestic abuse and getting hate letters from people in the community, that the empowerment in terms of becoming educated and gaining social and economic status is not about the disempowerment of men, but it's about the lifting up of the whole community. And until we recognize that as a community, as a society, not just for Hmong women but for all women, that we'll never be better. And so it's like even if you look at mainstream America, the predictor of how far a child goes in education is the level of education of the mother, it's the only variable that's been shown over and over in studies as a predictor of how children do, how well they do, and nothing else. And so I just keep thinking we have it wrong and we need to really think this through. But I think there is this thing about how about a loss of social status in addition to having feelings of privilege, about being entitled to something, that is working against being successful. Because they just don't have to work as hard to still be acknowledged and be respected, and so [Pauses] I see it with my own son. I mean Lue and I we are raising him, we think, the same, but that doesn't mean that people are treating him the same. You know, they are still treating him differently.

(1:21:46) So how do you encourage these kinds of changes while still making it clear to members of your community who may be on the fence that you're not trying to destroy or disrespect Hmong culture, you're just trying to, as you've already said, help the entire community take the next step by empowering everyone?

Well, I used to think that the way to do this would be to actually talk to the people that disagree with me, but now I've decided that we actually need to work with the people who are wanting to work with us, Hmong or not Hmong. I mean, I used to just think "Well if we just work in the Hmong community and do this"—and the levers for change have to be shaped somewhat, if you are truly going to make it, by outsiders, and by people who are just a little off the edge. I feel like that's what I've been all my life; I've just been a little bit more than what people expected. [Both laugh] And that's OK. I used to think it was because I was odd and thought very differently from others, but now I recognize that it's because I've just never truly been satisfied with what people tell me the reality is. And I think it's a requirement of leadership to stand up for what you believe in and then to have the courage to actually create a vision where others can feel like they belong and there are so many people in the Hmong community who feel like they don't belong. And because there are so many people who feel like they don't belong right now in the Hmong community, it can actually be

a force for change, so [Pauses] about, oh, fourteen years ago, I was in my twenties and I was actually working here at the Wilder Foundation, and I had been hired to create a violence prevention initiative in Ramsey County for the Hmong community. So here I am, young community organizer, don't know what the heck I'm doing, just graduated from the Humphrey Institute. I get this job, I've just returned from working in the refugee camp, by the way, because of some lobbying effort that I was involved in for the Hmong who were in the Napho repatriation center. I get back here and then I end up with this community organizing job and spent a year talking to a thousand people about "What do you think creates violence in the Hmong community? What do you think causes our—? Gender and sexism rose up, obviously, and I decided to have a retreat for Hmong women out at Wilder Forest. About thirty of us got together and we had this planning session, and I got use all the neat things I learned at Humphrey about strategic planning and all that, and there was a small group of us who wanted to meet—keep meeting to just keep talking about this, because we really hadn't had these conversations and so there were only two women and I who kept meeting. Bo Thao— [Laughs] Bo Thao and I kept meeting. She's now the national—she's now the bridge director for Asian and Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy; she's working on this large gender and equity campaign. We decide we're going to do something about this gender inequity and we create this team called the Hmong Women's Action Team, which—the purpose was to prevent violence by decreasing sexism in the Hmong community. Fast forward nine years later, we're still doing projects and then we decide to hold another big retreat. So we did, and what we found was that by in large even the women's roles inside of their nuclear families had changed but outside, in the larger community their roles had not changed; they were still feeling they weren't appreciated, and young Hmong women in college were crying, talking about not having role models, and we thought "Wow, here we are, almost nine years later and nothing has changed systemically. We've got to get more organized." So they asked me to be a chair of this process and I became the chair of a newly-incorporated organization called Hnub Tshiab, Hmong Women Achieving Together. So I was the first chair, a chair of the actual organization. We incorporated the organization, we started getting very organized around leadership development, around research, around the creation of a space to have family dialogues to talk about gender and sexism issues, all with a platform of saying "All are welcome." We're a women-focused organization; the mission is to be a catalyst to improve the lives of Hmong women doing culture, social, and institutional change. Great mission, but all are welcome, because we need everybody here to actually create the change that we want to see in the world. By the way we welcome everybody. If you're white, you're black, if you're a man or a woman, who cares? [Laughs] As long as you believe in the mission, we're fine. And, you know, it is actually starting to make a difference. We've now [Pauses] After this year we'll have had thirty nine young Hmong women going through the Hmong Women's Leadership Institute. We've created documents that cross a span nine or ten years. We're sharing our lessons with other people, we're holding family dialogues. It's a tiny organization, [but a] huge volunteer force. But it's really from working with people who are feeling like they are outsiders: college-educated women, Hmong women, women who are married to men who are not Hmong, women who have been divorced, women who are

widows, women who are feeling disenfranchised, sons of fathers who have not supported them because they've gone back to Laos and have married other women. And literally, it's like three quarters of the Hmong community. I think we're really on to something here! [Both laugh.] So it's a social change organization that's focused on people who don't really feel like they have a place and it turns out that that place is everyone's place. How profound is that? I mean, it's wonderful, and it's great, because the forces of change are on the Hmong community, and if we don't create a vision for what that change will look like. We're going to be changing in ways that we don't really like.

(1:28:18) I was talking to Diana Rankin about something else and she told about Hnub Tshiab, gave me a pamphlet and everything. It's very exciting.

Right, because Diana was like "I'll sort of pseudo-volunteer and write grants for you!" and we were like, "OK, that's fine." [Laughs] We'll pay you two thousand dollars for a year's worth of grant writing." She was like, "Yeah, sure, [Laughs] that's fine with us." Yea, she is something, she's great.

(1:28:44) So let's get back to your life story a little bit. What were the forces, do you think, that got you to the point where you were getting in school to learn a language and figure things out to the point where you were saying, "I'm good at this, I have a sense of what I want to do with my life, I have a sense of where I might want to go to college"—that sort of process in your life.

Yeah, certainly there were caring adults outside of my own family, because it wasn't enough only to have my parents. There were wonderful teachers I had who believed in me and didn't give up on me when I was struggling in terms of learning how to read. And it's funny because I remember all their names. I remember every adult who, whether a stranger or not, said a kind word about what I could accomplish. It's amazing how powerful adult words are in terms of talking to a teenager who is either not from your own culture or is just someone who is needing support during a time of need. I almost gave up applying to Brown University because I had a counselor at the time who was preparing me at Como Park Senior High for disappointment.

Oh boy.

Because I had applied to Harvard, Brown, Dartmouth, Carlton, and the University of Minnesota at Morris. And I graduated second in my class. So here I was, a straight A student with a wonderful GPA, my junior year in high school I was an exchange student to Germany and lived in Berlin for a year, so I speak German on top of being Missouri Synod Lutheran, which is really funny.

[Interviewer laughs] I and the pastor are the only two people who actually can speak Hmong, English, and German. So at Christmas services we're the only two people who can probably sing all three songs. And here I was, a very well-intended person in my life preparing me for disappointment to not get into any of these great schools. Well, and I was moping around and I kept thinking "Well, should I apply or not? It's a lot of money" and I didn't know Brown was an Ivy League school. I just knew it was a really good school because I looked it up in the Barron's Book of Colleges and it had a ninety nine percent retention rate, and I figured, "OK, that's a school I want to go to." And

there was this woman who was teaching at a completely different school—I think she was in Highland Park and her name was Helena Ylonen, and she must have been an advisor to one of the math teams or debate things. I would occasionally see her. I was chatting with her one day and I mentioned that I was thinking of applying to Brown, and she said, “Well, my son went there.” And I said, “Yeah, I don’t know if I should apply because my counselor says that I’m not going to get in. She stops me in the hallway she looks at me and she goes, “You need to apply!” I don’t know what that woman’s talking about, because I think you can get in. And you know, it was just enough of a push to actually make me apply. Otherwise I probably wouldn’t have, ‘cause I was feeling so low, ‘cause I thought, “Well, who am I to apply to these really good schools? Maybe I really don’t have what it takes.” And I hadn’t scored very well on my standardized exams—you know, kids who speak multiple languages typically don’t. But anyway I made it.

(1:32:17) So what was it like going there? You talked a bit about being connected to East Asian as opposed to Southeast Asian kids.

Right. Well, it was hard. I showed up with no computer. [Pauses] I was competing with people who had gone to prep schools all their lives or really, really good public schools. I mean Como Park gave me a great education. I was completely outclassed with study habits. I think by the time I figured out that maybe I was pretty smart I was like a senior in high school. [Both laugh] And then when I got to Brown I thought, “Holy Cow am I doing here?” Every other person I met was a national merit scholar; every other person I met was like a valedictorian. They were very accomplished young people who had worked at newspapers, had done all these amazing things and I thought, “I just don’t belong here.”

(1:33:22) Probably often with very well connected parents.

Very well connected parents. The prime minister of Guam’s nephew lives across the hall from me. Some guy down the hall from me [Pauses] I don’t know. . . was the lead doctor at some wealthy, prestigious Beverly Hills hospital. I just felt like I had stepped into a really, really difficult space. And I didn’t have the resources to really go to college in the same way that a middle class kid even would. I mean, I went to college with a typewriter that had some word processing function [Laughs], and I still needed carbon paper to duplicate my papers. It was just horrible! So I had to be way more organized with how I wrote my papers, I had to [Pauses] I mean, I don’t even know how I survived my first year. I did OK, but I just don’t know how I did it, because I had to be so organized, because I couldn’t buy as much paper to type through multiple drafts, I had no printer I couldn’t make corrections—I used correction fluid. By the time I turned in a paper I probably spent twenty more hours than anyone else did, because I just didn’t have the resources. And then there were the little things like I felt like I really couldn’t afford to be on the meal plan, even though I was on a full scholarship, it was a full tuition scholarship. So I didn’t have room and board, I had to pay for my own books. Luckily I had gotten a scholarship for the first year to pay for books, so I wasn’t so stressed out about that. I finally figured out that I could go to the Financial Aid office and ask for

more money to actually buy books and stuff, so I did that my second year. But I had never had anybody in my family who'd finished college, so I had no idea what to do. And I had no idea how to use the adults at Brown to help me. I mean, I had a resident counselor, I had a women's peer counselor, Brown was really into retention so they had all these counselors, and my biggest fear was "Is this going to be a really dumb question if I ask them about this?" [Interviewer chuckles] Because I was so used to being independent and self-reliant and not showing anybody how stressed out I was, I just simply didn't even know how to ask for help. So I finally figured out, I think it was my sophomore year that there were computer clusters, and I could actually go use the computer cluster. Well, the only problem was, I had to actually use the computer cluster when it wasn't busy with people who were in programming classes. So then I had to wait outside the door and wait until they were done, and then kind of figure out—well, then eventually I figured out, "Well hey, if I become a computer consultant and I work for the IS department, I can have access to a computer all the time," so I became a computer consultant. I signed myself up, because I kind of got tired of waiting for this revolving door to work on papers when the timing was right, and [Pauses] People who have means have no idea how hard it is to get through college when you don't have the resources, and here I was waiting outside of computer clusters and [thinking] "Oh, maybe I can get a good two hours in to write my paper for biology, whereas all the wealthy kids had computers. I mean, they weren't stressed about it. They were fine. So then I became a computer consultant for a couple of years, I learned all about networking, I learned how to program things, I learned how to have free access to the computer and I signed myself up for the quietest computer cluster at Brown University [Interviewer laughs] so I could finish all my papers. And it worked out just fine. So I worked two jobs to get myself through college, to get room and board, books, and all these different things.

(1:37:27) Did your parents have any qualms about seeing you go so far away for college?

My parents didn't have qualms because by then I had actually been to Germany and back.

Oh, of course!

But my relatives had a lot of qualms and there were a lot of people who told my parents that allowing a daughter to go that far away to college would be would be a great shame to the clan and the community. [Audible gasp from interviewer, Dr. Hang chuckles] I actually had—now he wasn't really a close relative, but I actually had a distant uncle who had come—I think it was a going away party I had for one of my events, and said to everybody that I shouldn't be going because I was a girl, and that—

Germany was okay but Brown wasn't?

Well you know it was more—longer and it was farther, and psychologically it was a lot of years. So I just think there was a great misunderstanding. And people really were afraid that I would come home pregnant and that I would marry some white person, and that I wasn't going to be Hmong anymore, and there was way too much freedom for me as a Hmong woman being that far away from my parents, that I would be ill disciplined and that I would just bring great shame to everybody. So there was that opposition. My parents were very supportive. I think they really lacked

a full understanding of what it meant for me to be in college that far away, and that I needed way more resources than they had given me, and that I was suffering a lot but I just never said a word. I mean there were holidays that I stayed at Brown and I didn't come home, and if I did come home I would try to work part-time jobs to get the plane ticket to come home. And I got off the meal plan my second year 'cause I figured I could cook, and I had no transportation so I walked every week to the grocery store over a mile with my little back pack. [Laughs]

Can you fit a week's worth of groceries in a backpack?

Cooking my own meals—No, you can't! I found out that you really couldn't. [Laughs] You really couldn't. If you had grains you could, but otherwise, you couldn't.

That's a heavy backpack.

It's a heavy back pack and I had to walk down a hill. I had to walk down College Hill, back up College Hill. My senior year I did actually have a friend who had a car, so occasionally she'd be nice to me. I finally figured out that if I saved enough money to buy a bike I could bike to the grocery store instead of—But biking up a hill is really bad, really bad, so [Pause] yeah.

(1:40:01) There were a group of Ivy League Hmong students at a conference in San Francisco last year. And one of them was a young woman, I think from the Twin Cities (maybe I'm wrong), who went to Brown. And she convinced her parents that Brown was the only school that accepted her, so she had to go there rather than some place closer, which I thought was somewhat ironic.

Yeah, I didn't tell my parents which colleges I was applying to until I was actually at the interview phase. And when I went to Germany, 'cause I knew that that was way too far and I was already a finalist, a semi-finalist when I kind of told my dad about it, and then it was only because I needed him to drive me to the interview. [Interviewer laughs] So it was actually a big deal when I won that scholarship to go study overseas, because it was just unheard of to let a sixteen-year-old Hmong girl go that far, and I think I might have been the first, —the first in the Hmong community. But my dad was really great about it, and he gave me all kinds of tips like “If you stick a pocket knife in your sock no one will see,” and [both laugh] “Here's how to give a handshake: hold your keys between your knuckles.” He was just your classic dad worrying about stuff like that, but he did let me go.

(1:41:21) So there were certain things that you told your parents pretty much only on a need-to-know basis.

Yeah, right, like “I need you to take me now because I'm a semi-finalist [Interviewer laughs] for a national program with the Congress.”

Was it more about—again there's too long to remember exactly—was it more about thinking you might fail and so you just didn't want to tell them you tried?

No, no I was much less afraid of failure than afraid of them—of actually winning and them not letting me go. I mean, it wasn't that I was cocky I didn't know that I would get to go; there was a lot of insecurity related to that. But it was more the fear of “I'm going to be disappointed because if I

do this and I get it, I'm not going to get to go," because I'd heard so many stories about people—you know, girls not being able to do the things they should do and all the messages I was getting from outside my family was "You shouldn't be doing any of this." And so I felt really guilty and bad every time I did something. And it's funny because [Pause] I have met a few young people now who remind me of myself when I was a lot younger. Because even with kids who are teenagers or in high school or whatever, you can tell how spectacular they are and how wonderful they're going to be. But I never felt any of that. I just thought I was—and it's just part of the insecurity of youth but also the messages you get, because if you are really so different and so spectacular, sometimes people kind of don't appreciate it because you're just so different you just kind of [Pauses] and I always got the feedback that I was a snob, which I wasn't; I was just quiet. Because the minute I opened my mouth I would say something that people didn't expect me to say and then everybody—I just always felt like everybody would shut down because I had said something with some—Now as I think about it as an adult, it was probably because I said something with a lot of insight that maybe they didn't expect from a fourteen-year-old or something. But back then I just thought it was, "Oh, I am just awful. People don't want to talk to me! [Laughs]

(1:43:43) Kao Kalia Yang is a good friend of mine, and she said people used to say "There goes the snob from the projects"

Yeah, right, right because I was so quiet people actually thought I didn't really talk that much. And I think people actually thought that I wasn't that smart until all the grades would come out, and then I'd get As. People just had no idea.

Oh it's the quiet ones. [Laughs]

Yeah, right. Because I realize now that it was probably because someone would ask me a question they wouldn't expect the answer I was giving them. And I would give them a really different answer and then it would be like "Well, wait a second, where'd that come from?" And frankly I didn't—and I'm fairly impatient, so I probably didn't have the patience then to explain to them what exactly I meant. So I think it was the fear of, "Wow, if I do this and it's really great, am I going to be weird again? Are people going to laugh at me, and if I go to Germany—I mean, what Hmong kid speaks German? I mean, really." By the time I went to Germany I had already had four years of German. But I really didn't say much in German class especially in seventh and eighth grade. I heard later that the teacher that I'd had in seventh and eighth grade said, "Well, why was she picked? She never said anything in class." [Interviewer laughs] You know, killing with kindness. So anyway. . .

(1:45:12) So were you, when you graduated from Brown, were you already sort of moving on to the Humphrey Institute or was there a period in between where you were sort of deciding what you wanted to do next?

Well I had an opportunity at Brown to do an Odyssey Fellowship, which was studying and doing research overseas with a professor from Brown, studying the HIV AIDS crisis there. So I did an independent study and then [Pauses]

Where did you go?

I was in Chiang Mai Thailand, and I lived in a Hmong village for two months—with Senator Mee Moua, actually [Laughs] because she was in Texas then. And we were research assistants to Dr. Symonds. But I had convinced myself that I wanted to be an anthropologist, so applied to a couple of PhD programs in anthropology. And then I applied to some public policy schools. And I never completed my applications to the anthropology schools. I think it was sort of my way of saying, “Gee I really don’t think I want to be an anthropologist.” But there were expectations that I somehow had created for myself or maybe Dr. Symonds had created for me. I didn’t want to disappoint her, and so I applied and then I really didn’t finish my application process, and then I thought, “Huh, I guess this is me telling myself I really don’t want to be an anthropologist. So I got accepted to a number of public policy schools and I chose to come back here to the Humphrey School because [Pauses] it was a financial decision. They gave me the best financial aid package and they weren’t going to have me attain a ridiculous GPA like another school wanted me to; they wanted me to retain a 3.8 GPA to stay on a scholarship that was half that size. I mean I know I’m good, but I don’t know if I’m that good. What if I go and I can’t maintain this really ridiculous GPA? So I came here to the Humphrey School; I had a wonderful experience. I graduated from the Humphrey almost a semester early. I was twenty three when I finished. And the reason why was because I had an opportunity to work with a group of progressive-minded Hmong people to do some advocate work in Ban Napho Repatriation Center. So I ended up finishing up my masters paper early, defending, leaving and being overseas and Washington D.C. and doing some work with a joint volunteer agency, the International Rescue Committee, and some other things.

(1:48:09) Anthropology, public policy. Were those sort of two different interests at the same time? Did one—?

Yeah, they kind of were. I always knew [Pauses] I had no idea what public policy was.

OK. [Laughs]

I just thought it sounded cool. And then I was reading the descriptions of what types of things students did when they were done and I thought, “Well, you know, I care a lot about public issues. I think this is what I want to do. I wasn’t sure, but I had always has this—at Brown I was very active on campus because I cared about women’s issues, and so I became a women’s peer counselor, lived in a freshman dorm, became one of those people I couldn’t ask for help from earlier on, knew exactly what some of the freshman were thinking. And then then my senior year I actually ended up coordinating the program and worked with some deans on doing that. So I became a women’s peer counseling coordinator. So I ended up being a team of four people running all of the peer counseling for women at Brown University. And I really enjoyed that, and I enjoyed the social justice peace of that. I enjoyed supporting people, and I thought, “You know, I don’t think I want to be a social worker, but I think I want to do something more socially oriented. I think it was just kind of like a parallel passion. And then I thought, “Well, I don’t know if I’m ready to commit to another six or seven years of school, but I think I’m ready to commit to another couple years of school. I

wasn't really seeing anyone so seriously; I thought this is the time to do it. So that's what led me to the Humphrey School.

(1:49:53) Well, before we go on to the Humphrey School let's talk about your two months in Chiang Mai in this Hmong village. What was that experience like?

Well I had really never been back to Southeast Asia, and it was shocking to me to go back. I mean, shocking as in when I saw what was there I started remembering things about my own experience.

What was the name of the village by the way?

I can't tell you.

OK. OK. I've been to villages around Chiang Mai, so I was just wondering—

It was a village in the highlands and it's been written about, so the identity of the village has to be protected. But it was a village in the highlands. You could only walk up there—well, partly take a truck up there. But when the research first started you could only get there by walking with a load. So [Pauses] I remembered the trees, I remembered the food, I remembered the noises. I mean, it was just really an interesting experience. The minute I got off the plane I thought “Wow, this is what home was like,” so that was fun. And then when I got to the village, that was really eerie for me, because I suddenly realized I kind of knew what a Hmong village was all about! [Laughs] Because I'd only had these images in my brain from stories my parents had told and then the minute I got to the village I was like, “Oh my gosh, I know exactly what this is about; I know where things are located, I know where doors are,” because Hmong houses are set up a certain way, and I realized I knew all of that. And it was also an interesting experience because I did not speak Hmong very well, and I was forced to speak Hmong over and over and over and over again. And luckily it was a White Hmong village, which is my dialect. So I spoke Hmong constantly for two months and my Hmong got really, really good, because I just was constantly interacting with elders and I had to ask questions about what people thought of blood and how they were conceptualizing diseases and I had to explain heating and cooling systems in America over and over and over again. [Interviewer laughs] because these were Hmong who had been very sheltered from the Western world. And it's quite different now, but back then there were very few Hmong Americans who had actually returned to Thailand or even Laos, and so they were so curious about the Hmong in America and how they had lived and how they survived and I told them about snow and they were just amazed at snow and they said “You would die because it was so cold. How do you do this?” Yeah, really, explaining heating and cooling systems over and over, explaining airplanes, I mean, things that we take for granted here, so I had to use a lot of vocabulary, and that was really good. I think I also got a really, really wonderful view of what life in Laos in a Hmong village that was untouched by the rest of the world would be like. Because there really was nothing there. I mean, it was just very rustic: life as my parents knew it, even [Pauses] I mean, half of my mom's growing up time, war was already starting. It was really interesting to be there.

(1:53:33) So there was at least a small sense, I assume, that if there hadn't been a war this could be me?

Yeah. Oh yeah. Or every now and then I say, "I met myself in a Hmong village and how I would have been." And you know, it was sort of like a Twilight Zone experience, one of those things that you go, "Wow, this really could be me." And how different I am from all these other women and yet how similar I am in so many ways. So my professor was funny, 'cause she would come up to me day after day, you know, like every couple of weeks and she'd go "MayKao you're looking more Hmong" [Interviewer laughs] "You're becoming more of a Hmong woman!" And it was true. It was true, because I was just getting darker and I was getting skinnier, the way you eat is very different. It was just very different.

(1:54:20) So does that give you any sense of reflecting on what it means to be culturally Hmong? I would assume that you don't think of yourself as any less Hmong as someone who lived in that village that you visited.

No I don't, and the wonderful thing about having made a study of at least some anthropology in my life is that culture is what we make it. It's basically your shared understanding and meaning of what that culture is, and so while the culture is changing a lot, there is also new shared meaning about what being Hmong is, and so there's always the jeopardy or risk of people not thinking that you're Hmong enough to be doing some of the things that you're doing, and I've heard that certainly over the years: "Well MayKao, you're just not Hmong enough to know this stuff".

(1:55:12) [Laughs] Whatever that means.

Right. Whatever that means. And I think that people typically use it as an excuse to dismiss how the culture is changing, and how it needs to change in order to survive and adapt and be renewed again. Because the meaning-making that we make in the world is how we choose to interpret it at that point in time. And actually that's been the wonderful thing about the history of human beings is that we've done and redone that for so many generations, and that for the next three, four hundred years that's going to continue to happen. And it should be OK, but I think the dismissive words that people use: "You're not Hmong enough," or "You're not a guy, you're not a man" I heard one one time 'cause I was the executive director of the Hmong Cultural Center at one point when I was in my twenties. I was on the board and then I stepped off to help them with fundraising and actually running the organization. I think I was like twenty two or twenty three. And what I heard back from the 18 Clan Council was "Well she's a young Hmong woman, and Hmong women cannot be the keepers of culture" so this has to be something that is temporary. [Laughter]

OK.

And here in the meantime I'm being a representative of the Hmong Cultural Center, I'm running out—my whole tenure there I was paid a full eight hundred dollars for the year's worth of the work, [Interviewer chuckles] paying for the salaries of the teachers, cleaning toilets, taking care of the ninety-some students while I was at the Humphrey School. So I think people usually use those types of things to legitimize their perspective and to create less legitimacy for a new perspective. And it

took me a long time to realize that and I think when I did realize that that was what it was about, it freed me from feeling small and not believing in the work that needs to get done.

(1:57:18) So you were at Ban Napho, you said?

Yes.

Was that part of your Humphrey Institute time?

Well I graduated from Humphrey, I finished Humphrey and then I left, but I finished early.

Oh, that's right. . .

I didn't walk. I basically completed all my requirements, defended, and left, and then never graduated—I mean never formally. I got my certificate in the mail.

Didn't put the funny suit on.

Didn't put the funny suit on, had no recognition, walking, anything like that. [Pauses] And I was OK with that, 'cause I knew that this was a once-in-a-life time opportunity to actually apply my public policy skills maybe in a different way. So my job was—well, my first job was to fly to New York with Kaying Yang and talk to the IRC about this small advocacy project that we wanted to be engaged in, to go overseas to provide cultural orientation for the refugees who had been at the repatriation center for so many years. Refugees International was supportive, doing some work. In fact, I don't know that Lionel Rosenblatt remembers me, but I think I might actually get to sit with him at this upcoming Hmong International Conference.

Oh, he's not coming.

Oh he's not coming? OK, well then I won't get to see him again.

That's unfortunate.

Yea

I will tell him. We correspond a bit.

Oh, yeah. I don't know that he ever remembers me. I did this small project with Kaying, he came to Thailand, visited, we chatted, had dinner with him. He probably has no clue what I've become. But it might be fun for you to tell him.

I'm sure he'd be thrilled. I actually got to meet Kaying Yang when I was in Vientiane.

Yes, Kaying Yang is in Vientiane now. So Kaying and I did this little project and then we organized a Hmong American delegation, went to Napho, they left me there; I did cultural orientation for about two thousand five hundred refugees.

(1:59:14) What's that mean?

What, cultural orientation? Teaching people—by the time Ban Napho re-opened for processing, there were no funds left to orient people.

What to expect in America.

What to expect in America, what a plane was going to be like, what appropriate clothes they should be wearing, how the food would like, nothing. So I oriented people until I was hoarse. I actually lost my voice because I did so much orientation. [Interviewer chuckles] We did them in groups, but I

had to come up with all the resources, I had to mobilize resources with little to nothing. So I worked with the International Organization for Migration as a volunteer, 'cause they're the ones that do international refugee transport across the world. They helped me, the IRC helped me, I was placed with the IOM by the good graces of whoever was there. I got permission to go into the camp from the Ministry of the Interior, mobilize training equipment, got shoes for Hmong refugee kids, interviewed about six hundred-some families who had no refugee status, wrote policy briefs to the US State Department, got reprocessing opened up, and have several small children named after me. [Both laugh] That's what I heard, anyway.

Wonderful.

Yeah. So you know, it was for me just a labor of love, and thinking, "Well, there aren't a lot of people in the world who could probably do what I'm doing. I speak Hmong fairly well, I have no strings attached to me, no kids, no family that I need to be here for; yeah, I can graduate early from the Humphrey and do this crazy project. [Both laugh]

(2:01:08) How did you get hooked up with this?

Kaying gave me a call and said "Hey the US—" I think she was at SEARAC at the time. She said "Hey, there are five thousand Hmong refugees who are sitting at a repatriation center, and the state's going to open the camp up for reprocessing, but there are lots of women and kids there, and they haven't seen people from the outside world. Would you help me?" And I said "Well I don't have any money, but I can charge my ticket to New York if you want me to come with you." [Both laugh]

(2:01:42) What year was this?

This was 1996. So two young women—Pao Her [Paul Herr] was someone who was just, I think he's in the US State Department, the federal one. But you know he just would connect stuff, so he and this guy from St. Paul William Yang, Boua Fu Yang, who has now since passed—he was a man in his late fifties. We decided we were going to do a male/female team. So Kaying never went over there. But May Zong Vue (she works for the Wisconsin Office of Refugee Resettlement) and I, and Boua Fu, and Pao, we all went. And they were there for a week and a half and then I was there for two months, because they all had jobs and families and I didn't. And they must have thought that I spoke Hmong well enough to actually do my job over there, and so I did, and when I came home Fong Heu from here actually came to replace me there, and he did the cultural orientation for the rest of the Hmong refugees in the camp.

Fong whose father is a pastor who lives in the south and whose brother is Fue—

Yes.

and ran for the state legislature?

Right, the guy who does videography and some other things. And so we tag teamed and then there was another guy who went after him, because we were all trying to tag team, because we all had [Pauses] My only pressure was I was engaged and I was supposed to come back here and get married and my fiancé was getting a little impatient with me [Interviewer laughs] so I got married a like three

weeks after I came home.

Wow.

Yeah. He'd been waiting; we had been engaged for six months and I said like "Well, you know, Lue I do love you but I kind of need to go to Thailand now and do this—"

I'm thinking he understood the importance of what you were doing.

Yeah, he's still a little bitter, [Interviewer guffaws], but now that we've been married for fifteen years, he's OK with it now.

(2:03:43) So who knew those two months in Chiang Mai were going to come in so handy?

Don't know what life is going to bring you, because then when I was working at Ramsey County a number of years ago, I was—a county manager re-deployed me and asked me to lead the assessment team in the Wat Tham Krabok effort with the mayor of St. Paul. Then I was in charge of—was county director of adult services by then, managing all the county-based social services for people with mental health, CD [chemical dependency], seniors, people with disabilities in Ramsey County. I took a very local job, because I had started having kids then, and I thought that's where I'd stay, and lo and behold, I end up on this international delegation and ended up being in Wat Tham Krabok for two weeks doing mental health assessments, school assessments. So that report that was broadly used? That was a report that I coordinated out of Ramsey County.

(2:04:39) So you, Mo Chang, Jim Anderson, the fellow from Catholic Charities. . .

Jim Bordon from the International Institute, yeah, right. So there was a small team that was left—**Tom Kosel.**

Tom Kosel, yeah. So there was a small team that was left behind and did all the data collection. I had received strict orders from my evaluation manager at Ramsey County that these are the things I needed to do, so brought back all the data, helped write the report along with people in the planning office. I must have given that presentation over 60 times to organizations in St. Paul, foundations, government entities, all that. And I can't take credit for the transformations that occurred after that, but it was really valuable, and I think helped change our approach in St. Paul and in Ramsey County to how we work with refugees when there's a big influx.

(2:05:43) How well do you think the Hmong community that was more established in the Twin Cities welcomed or dealt with this newer influx of Hmong people who came in 2005?

I think there was tremendous love and support for them. I think that people really reached out and did a lot of things that would make them more comfortable. I think it was hard for the new refugees, and they said this to me in the camp: that looking at me was like looking at a vision of what they could have been if their parents had actually left. And so it was a painful experience for many of them to see all these well-educated Hmong there doing all of these things, and I think particularly for the Hmong women who were around my age. They were just [Pauses] I mean, they were

inspired, but they were so sad, because [Pauses] they had no opportunities. I mean, they just saw what they could have become. And for many of the people who went to Wat Tham Krabok, it's because they couldn't stand the repatriation center; they couldn't stand to be in this holding cell, for all purposes, forever. And what kind of life is that?

(2:06:58) What do you think kept people, at least the people you spoke to, what do you think kept people there for so long?

I talked to so many people at Napho, and then I talked to a lot of people at Wat Tham Krabok and interviewed a lot of people, and it was because the elders and their wives refused to come. And then they would die, because they were old, and they didn't want to change, and then all these young people would be stuck there. That's pretty much it. And then, I think for some, it was the hope that Laos would be won, that something would happen and they would go back. And then I think the third category were people with no status or couldn't establish status. One of the saddest stories I ever encountered was the story of an orphan boy. He was eight or nine, he lost his parents, he somehow made it to Thailand on his own with strangers. When he was interviewed, he said, "I don't know where my parents are." "Well, you can't go; you're a kid." His uncles couldn't claim him, 'cause he wasn't theirs. One time, he said, one of his relatives tried to pass him off as one of their kids who had died, 'cause that was fairly common. And when they asked him, because he was a truthful and honest boy—I think by then he was maybe 10 or 11—"Is this your dad?" "No, that's my uncle." [Dr. Hang laughs, interviewer groans] I mean, this young man, by the time I met him he was like in his early 30s, he had married, he had a couple of kids, and he fled to Wat Tham Krabok. He couldn't stand it anymore. He'd been living in refugee camps for 30 years, and by then he had a family. He just said, "Am I going to be here for another 30 years like this?" Is this any life? And he said no, so he fled. But there were certainly lots of stories of orphans, widows who couldn't establish—I mean, if you couldn't establish a relationship with some guy who'd been in war, your husband who'd since died, you were just—I mean, who were you in the world, really? You were a person without status.

[Hillmer checks to see if Dr. Hang has any other meetings coming up. They have about 10 minutes of time left.]

(2:09:32) What was your career path between doing that and coming to Wilder?

So I graduated from Humphrey—the whole time I was at Humphrey I worked. I was at the Hmong Cultural Center, I worked as a research assistant and there was a stint there in between finishing at Brown and going to the Humphrey where I was employed at Catholic Charities as a volunteer coordinator. I tried to keep that up, but it was too much. So I quit. When I graduated, I started here at the Wilder Foundation—actually I went to Napho, I came back. [Pauses] OK, this when the world is a really small place. There was a job opening. A friend of mine, I think at the Humphrey,

said “This would be perfect for you. Can I send in your résumé?” She sent in my résumé, I came back, I had an interview, interviewed numerous times for this community organizer position at Wilder, and they just wouldn’t make a decision, and I started applying for other things. Well, finally they decided maybe I was the right person, but on the interview panel was a guy whose wife was best friends with the woman who had sheltered me in Bangkok. So I ended up working here, I did this community organizing, helped found Hnub Tsiab, you know, back then, volunteer organization. mobilized about a thousand people a year doing stuff, created a couple of programs: the first sexual assault program for Hmong women and girls with Sexual offense Services and the Women’s Association of Hmong and Lao; created a domestic abuse program for Hmong kids and families, and was pretty actively working in the community, and then in the course of that, managed the Community Violence Response Team to the murders of the six children at McDonough Homes and the woman who also tried to kill herself but didn’t succeed. [Khoua Her, 1998] And there weren’t a lot of Hmong people who had clinical experience then or who could do this. Since I was at Wilder and I was part of the CVRT Team, I couldn’t participate because I was actually in labor with my son. This was when this was all happening. [I] connected the community, go stuff going, talked to the press, managed all this stuff. Afterwards [I] ended up meeting with the executive director of the St. Paul Public Housing Agency, talking about this family and the fact that there had been 17 calls for service there from the police, with no significant social welfare intervention, even though there were social workers on site at McDonough Homes and all public housing, and I thought at the time, gave him a really hard time. I didn’t think that he would want to recruit me to work there, but that’s actually what ended up happening later. So in the meantime this position—we had transitioned the program that was here at Wilder to Ramsey County and I made a job change, went to be the director of the Resident Services Department at the St. Paul Public Housing Agency. So I ran all the low-income housing affordable units in St. Paul and the community centers. I have a passion for affordable housing because that’s—I think it does stabilize families. I worked there for a number of years, kept having babies; I have four children. Pregnant or nursing for ten years. I was at home on maternity leave with my third child when there was a job opportunity that came to my house, which is fairly unusual for public systems. The new director of human services was trying to reach out in different communities of color to hire a director. He actually had two director positions open. I read through the requirements, and I thought, “You know, I don’t know anybody who’s qualified to do this. You’ve got to have so many numbers of years of experience at an executive level, blah blah blah, and then I kind of thought about it and I said, “Well, if you actually count all of my experiences, grad school plus, I think I could qualify.” So I applied and ended up at Ramsey County for five years being the director of adult services, running 11 of the services in Ramsey County for people who are 18 and over, plus kids with disabilities. And then ended up here at the Wilder Foundation because of some of my joint work with—some of it with Wilder, but a lot just in the community. Because I had worked at Wilder before Tom Kingston knew of me. He was the president then, a force in the community, had been here for 20 years. He and I had gone on this delegation to Thailand together to Wat Tham Krabok. It had changed his life and understanding of

refugee issues, and he somehow convinced me to apply for a director-level position here at the Wilder Foundation and by then I thought, “You know, I’d really like to work more with kids and families and less just with single adults. So I applied and they kept calling me back and I ended up here and two years into my job here, Tom decided to retire on me [Both laugh]

(2:15:03) How dare he!

And after he made the announcement I remember what I said to him as we left the leadership team meeting. I said, “Tom, I’m not ready for you to retire!” [Laughs] I’ve only been here two years and there was a lot of change happening at Wilder and we were going through a lot of difficult things in human services and one thing led to another and I [Pauses] I ended up applying for this position because I asked myself what it was that I wanted to foster in the community, and what could I contribute differently that maybe some other candidate couldn’t contribute. And I always ask myself this whenever I take a job: what is the unique value that I can contribute? Why am I a person who could contribute any more or less than anybody else in the community? And I had convinced myself at that point that I had something different to offer, perhaps, than maybe a different type of leader, because I’ve seen the Wilder Foundation from many angles. I’ve been a recipient of services, I’ve participated—there’s a program here called the Shannon Leadership Institute for Reflective—it’s a reflective leadership institute. I had participated in that six-some years ago even before I came to Wilder. I’ve funded the Wilder Foundation as a county director, giving contracts to Wilder. I’d seen Wilder as a collaborative partner from my public housing days, because of their co-locations with senior services, and I thought, “You know, there probably aren’t a lot of people in this community who really appreciate the Wilder Foundation and all it does, and the many perspectives and ways that Wilder has touched this community. And outside of that, I think I am what St. Paul is becoming. And Wilder has always been about responding to community needs, and having a really broad mission to provide relief, but also to promote the social welfare of people who live in the East Metropolitan area. Well, that where I’ve had my career. So then I applied. Now I didn’t know I would be the next president. It was a fairly scary thing. But I have to say I’m glad that I did, and I think one of the most difficult and challenging things for me has been as a Hmong person who is bicultural, bilingual, having to meet the same tests and criteria as those who are only English-speaking or those who only understand one culture. I don’t view anything from a monocultural lens, and it’s hard for me when I see people only doing that. And then there was that full day and a half of testing that I had to do [Both chuckle] around values, around altruism, around personality, around intellect—intelligence exams, logical reasoning, numerical reasoning—

Wow.

I thought it was a lot to ask someone from my type of background. And you know, at a certain point (and this is really funny) after I took the exam I was very upset actually, and I almost withdrew from the process. In fact, the search firm had to talk me down, because I was just like, “You know, I can’t work for an organization that violates my values around how we make people go through these things in order to actually say ‘there’s competency here.’” And I actually ended up having lunch with a very wise Native American person who’s been around the community for a long time, and I said,

“This is what I’m upset about, and this is what I’m unhappy about. What do you think?” And he goes, “Well, no one said that becoming the next president of the Wilder Foundation would be easy. [Both laugh] There’s a reason why a lot of people of color don’t make it into these top-level positions. And I think that you might be OK.” And he said, “You’ve already done all of the testing, right?” And I said yes. And he said, “OK. Well, what have you got to lose? It’s already in.” And I said, “Yeah, you’re right.” And he was right. He was right. But I just stuck in there. But I think there was a point—and you always ask yourself this whenever you’re taking a risk on something is, “Is it worth that compromise that I personally or professionally have to make in order to fit into what this organization truly needs?” And you know, this organization truly does need someone who can overcome some of those personal and professional obstacles to actually make a point, and that’s what in the end it’s about hopefully championing the mission in different ways that maybe perhaps someone who looks very different or has a very different background would do it. So anyway, here I am. That’s the journey, that’s the career path.