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Interview with William Snyder

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William Snyder

Interviewer/Transcriber/Editor: Paul Hillmer

24 October, 2005

Sergeant William Snyder has served on the St. Paul Police Force since 1975. He heads up the Asian Gang Strike Force and has many years of experience dealing with Hmong gangs and relating to Hmong gang members. Sergeant Snyder was the first chairman of the board for the General John W. Vessey Leadership Academy. Dr. Hillmer [the interviewer] is Concordia University's liaison to the Academy, which may explain any apparent familiarity between the two men in this interview.

(0:00) Let's start with your name, Sir.

Bill Snyder.

(0:04) And what's your current job?

I'm with Ramsey County Sheriff's Department. I'm a sergeant.

(0:07) And could you just tell us a little bit about your background—where you grew up, where you went to high school, if you served in the military...

Sure. I grew up on the west side of St. Paul, went to Humboldt High School, graduated in 1971, and in 1971 I enlisted in the United States Navy. I went to San Diego and San Francisco for training, and then was stationed on a ship outside of Norfolk, Virginia, and was there for four years. Two years into the navy, I started testing for the St. Paul Police Department. The whole reason I went into the navy—two reasons. I mean, the Vietnam War was on and I thought it was my duty, and then in order—I wanted to be a St. Paul police officer. In order to be [an officer] in St. Paul you had to have your military obligations fulfilled, because the draft was still on, and you had to be 21. So I figured if I went in when I was 18 I'd come out when I was 22, join the St. Paul Police Department, and it worked just like that. [Both chuckle]

(1:10) Everyone should be so fortunate.

Exactly. Exactly.

(1:14) Could you talk about the first memory you have connected to learning about the presence of the Hmong in St. Paul... [recorder stopped]

I don't know the year, but I remember making a traffic stop and arresting a guy. And he didn't speak English. And I brought him downtown and I called—it wasn't David. There were only two Hmong police officers on the police department at that time, and one was David Yang and the other was Nhia Kong. And I called up Nhia and I said, 'I need you to come down and interpret for me.' And to me they were all Vietnamese. I mean, they were Vietnamese boat people. That was the big thing back then was the Vietnamese boat people. I knew nothing of the differences. And Nhia came down and he started talking to this guy and he says, 'I can't interpret.' And I said, 'What do you mean?' He said, 'He's...?' What did he say? I think he was Thai—no, he wasn't Thai, he was Cambodian. He said, 'I don't speak Cambodian.' I said, 'What do you mean? You guys all speak Vietnamese, don't you?' And that was literally my first experience with the Hmong. And from there I—I did not know the difference. In 1992 I was transferred into the juvenile unit as an investigator. There were only two places you went when you were being punished in St. Paul Police: one was the Com [Communications] Center, one was the Juvenile Unit, and I went to the Juvenile Unit

(2:46) We won't ask why you were being punished [both laugh].

I don't know why I was being punished! To be real honest with you, I have no idea why I was. But when I walked into the unit, Fletcher was the lieutenant in charge of the unit, and he said, 'You're going to be my Asian investigator.' And I said, 'I know nothing about Asians.' And he said, 'You'll learn.' And that was my start in 1992.

(3:08) Wow! So what kinds of things were you doing prior to that time? What was your experience on the force?

I was a patrol officer for twelve years. I joined the PD in '75, so for 12 years I did patrol, and I took the test to become a supervisor and passed. I was promoted to sergeant in '88, I believe it was...And then I was put in charge of the Employee Assistance Program, because I was a recovering drunk and had a lot of problems and the guy who was in charge of the unit was being transferred, so they sent me to Hazelden for training and I became a Chem Dep [Chemical Dependency] counselor. I went back to the EAP and ran that for about three years, and then was transferred into the juvenile unit.

(3:59) So here you are—you're starting almost literally with a clean slate—you said yourself you knew nothing about Asians at this time...

Right

What was the process that you went through? Who were some of the people you got to know, the resources that you employed, to start learning what you needed to know?

There were no resources. What you did was—I was handed cases. I had never investigated anything before. I mean, I had millions of reports I had written, but I had never been an investigator, so I walked into the unit, and they said, 'Here's the departmental policy on investigations. Read it.' And then they said, 'Tomorrow we'll start handing you cases.' And they started by handing me—I think it was 20 cases. And I never had below 40. And that was my [introduction] into law enforcement investigations. And the way I learned was, you were handed a case, you go out there and start talking to people. Now Dan Carlson was the Asian investigator prior to my coming there, and a guy by the name of Brock Ness. Dan wasn't willing to share a lot of his information, but Brock Ness and I hooked up, and Brock did teach me a great deal about it.

(5:13) Do you remember anything that he said to you that's stuck with you over the years?

No, not really. I mean, the very first couple of kids I went out and dealt with were Lao—because no one was really dealing with the Lao. And so I started to learn a little bit about the Lao and their gangs. But then Dan was the Asian investigator, and when something would happen, he'd get called, and he'd never call me. So I kind of drifted off, started doing Hispanic gangs, because nobody was doing Hispanic gangs, and I started working on the West Side where I'd grown up and met all the kids and got to know all the—boy, at that time the Latin Kings, the BFLs (Brown for Life) and all of them, and was making a ton of arrests in different shootings and stuff up there. Then Dan got transferred into a different unit and I was pulled back and [they] said, 'Now you're going to do the Asian stuff.' And then they just started throwing—when an Asian crime happened they just threw it on my desk and I got 'em all—and that's how I learned.

(6:16) Interesting.

Yeah, self-taught. [Chuckles]

(6:19) How would you describe that process? Let's say that I was replacing you—heaven forbid—but [both laugh] in a position like that, what kinds of things would you want to tell me to kind of give me a leg up and benefit from your experience?

Well, I'd say this to anybody doing investigations: you're only as good as the amount of people you know. So the more you're out there meeting people the better off, the better you're going to be at your job. And what I did was I treated the kids with respect, because gangs were built on respect. So I treated them with respect, and because of that they got to like me and began to talk to me and got to know me. 'Cause I was out there in their face every day. And that's probably where most of my knowledge [came from]. I asked them and I learned from the kids: 'What does this mean? Show me what that means. What gang is your enemy? Why are they your enemy? What are Cripps? What are Bloods? [and so on].' And they basically taught me. So that's the way to learn. You get out there and you just immerse yourself in it and learn.

(7:23) What were you learning about the Asian gangs that you were studying at that time? What were some of the groups, what were some of the reasons for the animosity between gangs, and some of the...

Well, what I learned from other people, because [this happened] prior to my being [a part of the Asian Gang Unit] is how the gangs started in Minnesota. It started out with a soccer group—they called themselves the Cobras—Cobra soccer team. And if you look at the history of gangs, all gangs have started basically the same. The Latin Kings started in—I believe it was Chicago. And they were oppressed by other gangs, and a group of guys formed together to stop the oppression and realized they then had power, and then began to oppress other people because of that power. And [it was] the same with Asian gangs. They were being oppressed, they learned that by forming together they had power, and with that they formed their own gang. And they were all members of a soccer team to begin with. So they called themselves the Cobras. Well, there were a couple of leaders of the gang—and if you look at the history of the Bloods and the Cripps—and the Asian gangs formed themselves off the West Coast gangs, the Bloods and the Cripps. They were either Bloods, which were red, or Cripps, which were blue. The Cobras were a Cripp gang. And the way it was with the Bloods and the Cripps, originally it was just the Cripps. (I'm kind of jumping around here, but it's all part of it.) The two leaders of the Cripp gang got into a huge fight, and they broke off—the one broke off, and he did everything opposite from the Cripps. Rather than be blue, he was red; rather than be—I don't know if it was left or right, but if the blues went to the left, then he went to the right. Everything was cocked to the right—everything just 180 degrees different than the Cripps. The Hmong had the Cobras, and there were a lot of California gangs, but there weren't any gangs here. The two leaders got into a fight over the one leader's brother. He got jumped for a jacket that he was wearing—back then Starter jackets were the big thing—or it was a baseball cap, actually. He got jumped for a baseball cap. It was members of the Cobra gang that jumped the brother. And he got into a huge fight with the members of the gang, so he broke off and started a new gang called the TMC (that's Tiny Man Crew). And they became a Blood gang, so that's how the rivalry started—and then everything broke off of that. So those were the two original gangs here, and then other gangs came from California. Many of the parents would—when their child was doing something or hanging in gangs, the parents would send them to a relative in another state in hopes of straightening the kid out. And what that did was just bring another gang to another state. The kid didn't get straightened out. He started a gang up here. So that's how most of our gangs came in.

(10:31) What do you think an outsider needs to understand? You said a gang is based on respect, it's based on—

Violence

Okay. What other kinds of things does an uninformed person like myself need to know about gangs of any kind, to say nothing of Hmong gangs?

Well, the basis of the gang is respect through violence. Basically that's what it is. These are kids who, for whatever reason—you know, there's lots of what you'd call social reasons, a lot of built-in human reasons, but for whatever reasons they're the outsiders of their particular group, and they form together or join into a gang to get that power. It's all about power. The bottom line to all of it is power. And the more violent you are, the more 'respect' you get from other gangs. And gangs will attack gangs. There's lots of gangs out there, and gangs start up all the time. But if they don't have the power or the violence to ward off attacks from other gangs, they'll quickly disband. So the more violent they are, the more respect they get, and that's—it's not respect as you and I understand respect, by earning somebody's respect. It's respect bought through fear. So a group of gangsters will walk onto a bus, and everybody will shut up and not say nothing and nobody will confront them, and they look at that as being respected. It's not respect—they're feared. So to them it's the same thing. And as long as you understand that, then you know that you're dealing with a very violent entity, and that there's always weapons around. You hear about kids—in our minds—you hear about a kid getting shot because he threw a gang sign, and you think in your mind, 'Why would somebody do that? Why would somebody—

(12:29) 'Threw a gang sign.' What do you mean by that?

Kids will, as they're walking by each other will what you call 'throw a gang sign'—put their hands up and form a gang sign. So if I'm a TMC, they'll throw the gang sign for TMC. Or if they know I'm a blood they'll throw an upside-down B, which is a 'diss' to me. Now that requires action on my part to deal with that. 'Cause he's now 'dissed' me. And that's why kids get shot. We look on it as being stupid. Who cares? It's like calling you a name. But if I don't respond to it, then my gang is looked at as being weak. So I have to respond to it. So I will now get my guys and go attack him. And now because my gang has attacked him, they have to respond or they're going to be weak, so they then get their group and come and attack me. I'll go to a shooting, and I'll have a kid lying dead and I'll ask, 'What happened?' and I'll learn that two years before this kid 'dissed' 'em, and now he's finally got his payback. So it's just grudges that don't go away

(13:36) They linger for—

Forever.

(13:39) Unbelievable. How many Hmong gangs are there in the St. Paul area—roughly?

I think if you go to Minnesota Gang Strike Force you're up into the hundreds. That's just Asian gangs. But active Asian gangs is probably 30 to 40 that are active at any one particular time.

(14:01) Do you think there's anything unique about Hmong gangs that sets them apart—other than their culture? Or do they pretty well fall right in line with gangs of other racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds?

There are some different things about Asian gangs, but they, again, follow a lot of the normal gangs. There's a progression to gangs. The Latin Kings started out as an ethnic-based gang. There's two different types: the entrepreneurial gang and an ethnic-based gang. If you look at the black gangs, the GDs, [Gang Discipline] they're an entrepreneurial gang. They're into drug dealing and they're into making money—it's all about making money. It started out as ethnic—'It's about us, and about our background,' about all that—and pride. But it evolved into money. The Latin Kings were the same way. It started out as ethnic and it evolved into money. And the Hmong gangs started out as

pure ethnic gangs. It's all about pride—it had nothing to do with anything more than just pride. And they're actually one of the more violent gangs, because it's—an entrepreneurial gang will fight, but their bottom line is money, so we don't want to draw too much attention to ourselves, we don't want to do too much, because we won't make money; where an ethnic-based gang is all about pride, so if you 'diss' me, I'm going to attack you, and I have to, to get that respect—and on and on and on. So they do tend to be a more violent gang. An example of that is, a group of GD, black gangsters, attacked a Hmong kid in school because of his gang, and that night their house was totally shot up. It was over a jacket and they just beat this kid up, and then their house was totally shot up. And they were questioning me, [asking] 'Why?' And I said, 'You messed with an Asian gang.' And they have that reputation of being very volatile and very violent.

(16:04) Which is, of course, exactly the kind of reputation they want.

Exactly.

(16:11) Who do you work with in the Hmong community to help combat the effects of gang violence and gang membership?

There's a number of different organizations I have worked with. I worked with Lao Family to some degree, I've worked with Hmong-American Partnership to some degree, but for the most part there has not been a lot in the community to deal with—well, actually two major issues: gangs and abuse—female abuse, wife abuse, spousal abuse. There's not a lot of—it's like two problems that the Hmong community has looked at and said, 'You people take care of it; we're not going to.' So there's not a lot.

(17:18) Now you established something called the Mike Force.

Right.

(17:22) What can you tell us about that?

A group of us got together, a group of not only police officers, but citizens. Gangs are a problem. A lot of kids are getting sucked into gangs. And every year we see younger and younger kids being sucked into gangs. When I started out there were 14-, 15-, 16-year-old kids. Now they're down to 10-, 11-, 12-year-old kids. So there's just a huge drain in the Hmong community. I wanted to do something to deal with that issue. Now there's a lot of programs that deal with young kids—DARE, that kind of stuff, to keep kids out of gangs originally. But nothing dealt with kids that were already involved in gangs, and getting them out of gangs. And that's what the Mike Force was—the plan was for. We got together and we decided that we wanted to use a program or develop a program that would get kids out of and help them stay out of gangs. And we looked at what models to use and we looked at a military model. And we felt it was the best because gangs are a very structured environment. Although they're loosely structured, they're still a structure. And they teach a lot of things the military teaches, but the gangs teach it in a negative context. So we thought, 'The structure's already there. Let's use that and see if we can turn it around.' And that's how we ended up starting the program in '99.

(18:49) I assume there have to be some pretty serious challenges to weaning kids off gang influence.

There are. I mean, some of the kids don't want to leave the gang and we lost them—and we lost a number of kids. But there were other ones who responded very well to it. And there are other ones who just challenged me right up front—I mean, 'You're not going to involve us.' [But] when you've got the law enforcement behind you, it's not much of a challenge, so... Was I ever threatened? No.

Nobody's ever tried to attack me or kill me or—not that I'm aware of, anyway [both chuckle]. But I always kept a good balance—and that's the key to working with these kids is you have to keep it balanced. They all had a tremendous amount of respect for me because I had a tremendous amount of respect for them. They knew if they did something wrong I was going to arrest 'em and lock 'em up. They knew that that wouldn't make me hate 'em. I wouldn't think bad of them because they screwed up or whatever. And they knew that I'd be there if they got out to help 'em get back on track again. So I think that balance really worked out well.

(19:56) How would you describe the various components of the Mike Force program? What sorts of things did you do?

Well, what we tried to do was to put pride back into being a good kid. Because the kids looked at—they defined it two separate ways. One was 'good kids versus bad kids.' And they called themselves that: 'Oh, he's a good boy, he's a bad boy. She's a good girl, she's a bad girl.' Bad girls, bad boys were gangsters, good girls and good boys were kids who went to school kids who studied, kids who did what their parents told them to do. So we tried—and it was boring to be a good kid and fun to be a bad kid. So we tried some ways to bring them back and to put some pride into being a good kid. And we did that a number of different ways. We met—first year we met twice a week. On Tuesdays and Thursdays we'd have the Mike Force program for three hours a night. And it actually burned a lot of us out. And we did that every week; it wasn't just during the summer months, it was all year long. And then we cut it back after that. But what we did was we did a number of different things. We did education; we tried to do things that were fun, that would hook the kids into enjoying—and we used the military, and we also used the uniform their parents wore in Vietnam as a way to link the fathers with the sons. I mean, when the kid comes home wearing that Vietnam tiger stripe which Dad wore in Vietnam, they really had a connection, and we hoped that they would start talking about it. But unfortunately, the program never did really pull in the parents the way we had hoped it would.

(21:53) Who were some of the people who helped you establish the Mike Force? How did this get off the ground?

Well originally it was Dan Thorsen's idea. He's a deputy with Ramsey County Sheriff's department. And he came to me with it because I had the Hmong gang connection. And then we started talking to other people—Charlie Opp, because he had been with the Boy Scouts, and we wanted that influence. Gosh, who else was part of that group? Rob Rowan came later. There was a group of about ten of us who originally met—Steve Young, because he was very active in the Vietnamese community, Trudell Grew, who was part of the 173rd Airborne Association. We wanted to get Vietnam Vets involved with it—and we did—as a healing process for them. But also then they had the experience to relate to the kids, and the kids could then look up to them as a mentoring type of program, and it worked out really, really well using the veterans. And, like I said, there were about ten of us, I think, who originally sat down and started the program.

(23:13) How do kids get into the program? Did you literally just let the community know about it and the kids showed up? Or do they get into trouble and they're given the Mike Force as an option instead of other more unsavory things?

Well originally seven kids showed up to the program. And those were kids, because I was out in the community all the time working cases, and a guy I worked with Zhang Kai Yang, also was out working with the kids. We got to talking to the kids and said, 'Do you want to come to this program?' In fact, three of the original kids were his sons. So that's how it started. And then as we

met kids, I'd talk to 'em and invite 'em to the program. But then word of mouth amongst the kids really spread fast. And that's how we now get our kids—it's all word of mouth amongst the kids.

(24:01) Why do you think parents aren't a stronger part of this program? It sound like something they should be supporting. It sounds like something that's pushing their kids in a healthier direction...

I don't—you know, I've got my own thoughts on the subject. I'm not 100% sure. Two things—or one thing I know for sure is that the Hmong parents are extremely busy. Most of them are working two jobs—both mom and dad are working. So they don't have the time. An they look at us as a baby-sitting service—I think was part of it. And the other part of it was a force to help their kids do good. But they didn't have the time to do it themselves. So—the second this is, I don't know if it's just a complacency or what it is in the Hmong community, but I've never had the Hmong parents—they'll come to meetings, they'll yell and they'll scream, but when it says—when you put the hammer down and say, 'Help us,' they don't. And I don't know—I can't answer that question.

(25:06) Are there any kids you can tell us—obviously without betraying confidentiality—about how they get involved in gangs or what that story is that provided you with some insight into their experiences and their challenges?

All the kids have basically told me how they got involved with gangs, and it's a pretty simple process. Most of them just grew up with other kids, and other kids were involved in gangs and some of them were friends. And some of these kids weren't involved in gangs, but kind of hung out with them, and then once you're hanging around with a gang member, other gangs see you and you're tagged, and then the pressure comes, because they're going to jump you and beat you up and you're kind of pushed into gang involvement. Other ones just got involved because of the way it made them feel, the brotherhood, and you'd ask them, 'Are you involved with a gang?' 'Well no, these are just my friends.' And that's the way a lot of them saw it is 'just their friends,' yet they were deeply involved with the gangs. Other ones got involved because they just liked going out and beating people up and getting drunk and using drugs. And every one of them dropped out of school. Being involved is easy; getting out is hard. That's where the trouble gets in is when a kid decides, 'I don't want a part of this any more.' It's very, very difficult for them to step back. We've had some great successes, but we've had a lot of failures, too.

(26:45) Are there often times when, if a kid successfully extricates himself from a gang he has to move to a different school or a different neighborhood?

There are some. Sometimes, yeah.

(26:54) But it's actually more common for kids to stay where they are, even though they've withdrawn from a gang?

Yeah, if a kid tries hard enough, the gang will eventually—all the gangs will eventually recognized that he's stepped out of it and they'll leave him alone. It takes a while. It takes some getting beat up and it takes some other things, but eventually they will leave him alone—and I've got a number of kids: one—I can tell you his name no problem—Tou Yang. He was with me—he actually came to live with me for seven months. I got him—I got his parents to agree to move in with me and live with me and my family to get him out of the gang. Some of these kids are so deeply ingrained into it that they just can't step away from it. So I felt if I separated him from the gang for a period of time, that would help him get refocused. It actually did—it worked out very well. He ended up getting married, he ended up doing very well—actually, I shouldn't say very well. He's doing better than if he ever would have been with a gang. He's not in prison. Other kids—I've had kids who have tried

real hard. T-Dog—Tai Lor. He's in prison for shooting his brother. And he was doing very well. I got him into school—the first step is getting them back into school, 'cause all these kids are drop-outs. And he got back into school, he was doing well, but he got into an argument with his brother and pulled out a gun and shot him in the head. And now he's sitting in prison. Some of them are a success, some of them you fail. And Tai actually could have been very successful. He just made that one stupid decision. Chris Her—there's a kid who—we talked, and I was working on getting him out of the gang, he never got out of it, and he—from two blocks away he just fired a shot at a kid and hit him right in the heart—another shot he'd never duplicate again in a million years—and killed him. He's sitting in prison. Now here's this very intelligent young man who says, 'I don't know why I ever got involved in gangs. So...

(29:12) Are they ever available to speak to kids about situations like that? Are they allowed out of prison to participate in some kind of prevention program?

We tried to put a program together with Tai—Tai got really into wanting to put a message out to kids to stay out of gangs. And he got together with a number of other Hmong men in prison, and they called me up, and a few other people, and asked, 'Can we do something?' and we attempted to do it, but the project ended up failing.

(29:47) That's a shame.

Yeah, it really is, because there was a Hmong gentleman who filmed it; we went down, they talked, we had our Mike Force kids go down there, they talked, we had a panel discussion—we had good plans. But the gentleman ended up stealing the money or something—I don't know, it was just...silly. So it never happened.

(30:08) But do you have the film?

He's got it. That's where the issue came up is. He said nobody paid him for it and he wasn't going to—blah, blah, blah. Rather than looking at, 'I'm doing the right thing for the community,' it was more about him, so...And that was a project that I became a part of, but wasn't in charge of. And Chris Her wants to, desperately—and most of the kids in prison, when you go and see them and talk to them, they desperately want to do something, but there's really no vehicle for him to do it.

(30:46) Now you've said a lot of gangs are ethnically based, at least to begin with. Do you think, at their heart, it's about being a member of an ethnic group, or do you think it's about being a member of an immigrant group where, as you say, mom and dad are both working hard, they're busy and don't really have the time to closely monitor what their kids are up to? What would you see, particularly in the Hmong community, as the larger cause here?

I think it's both, because when you look at the Latin Kings, it's an immigrant group, yet it's an ethnic group, so the issue is brought on because of their immigrant status. But it becomes an ethnic issue when the gangs form. They're all Hispanic. Same with the Hmong. The issues were brought on because they were immigrants. But that happened with the Irish. It happened with almost every immigrant group. It happened with the Chinese. And the Hmong will head down the exact same path, and you'll see the Hmong gangs of today become the Tongs of tomorrow. And the kids are now into drugs. That was an issue that we waited for and now—that's actually destroying the gang structure. Methamphetamine is destroying the gang structure and just messing up the kids bad.

(32:13) So how long ago did that start to—

About two years now—meth has really raised its ugly head.

(32:21) Is there anything more to belonging to a gang than just hanging out with a group of people? Are there rituals or events in the life of a gang—

Yeah, well there's definitely more than just hanging out. Yeah, there are events. When a kid enters a gang, that's an event. There's a number of ways to get in, and one of the most frequent ways is being 'beat in.' So there's a specific period of time when he's attacked by fellow gang members to see what his mettle is, to get into a gang. If you do something wrong within a gang you're violating. And then what that means is you're going to be attacked, and you have to be beaten up for a specific period of time or whatever. If you try to get out they're going to beat you out of a gang. When a friend is attacked the gang gets together and goes after 'em. But for the most part it's just getting together and hanging out, getting high, going out and doing something. And most of the shooting incidents aren't premeditated, although some of them are. Most of them are just spur-of-the-moment. Something happened, and they just happened to run across somebody and they say, 'Hey, isn't that guy a PB?' 'Yeah, that guy's a PB. Let's get him! Who's got the gat?' And they see who's got the gun, drive around the block, come back and go get a gun, come back and shoot the guy or whatever. But then that will leave then to a premeditated shooting by the PB in retaliation [and the cycle continues]. It just keeps going and going and going. And now they're starting to turn to drugs.

(34:01) So if the Hmong gangs follow the pattern of the gangs who have been in to meth for a while now, what do you see as the next step or the next problem?

Well, meth is such a hideous drug that one or two things will happen. The kids will either totally get out of using meth, or it will totally destroy the gang structures, and we won't have a gang problem. Because the meth is just eating the kids up, and they're really not staying structured in the gangs like they used to. It's all about getting meth. It's such an addictive drug that it's just, "get the meth! Get the meth! Get the meth!" So they're going out and committing crimes. It's kind of like the heroin problem was back in our youth. So it could be positive on one side in that it destroys the gang structures, but it's destroying a whole generation of kids along with it. And then with that is coming a lot of drug dealers. Now they're not necessarily staying structured within the gang as much, either. And I base that on different conversations I've had with kids I know who are deep into gangs, and they've just told me that the gangs are just gone, that's it's all about getting high, getting high, getting high.

(35:24) So the power now is based on who can provide the drugs and who gets to make the money as a result of that.

Right.

(35:29) So there is already at this point drug dealing within Hmong gangs, or are they still basically getting their supply from sources outside the gang?

Both. It's starting to—gangsters are starting to become dealers and ripping other people off and buying—you see it going across racial and ethnic lines now. The Hmong—it used to be guns. Hmong with guns were—that was a big thing. Hmong, guns, Hmong, guns, Hmong, guns. Well now they're starting to deal some of their guns for meth and Hispanic gangs have some meth, and they're working with Hispanic people, and just crossing all the lines that were never crossed before. So I have no idea what it's going to be like.

(36:14) Wow. [Pause] Are there any Hmong gangs that are divided along the same lines as their parents—pro Vang Pao versus anti-Vang Pao—or is that just so far beyond their experience because that's their parents' generation and—

That's their parents' generation. I haven't seen that with the gangs. The gangs are more interested in—'Let's get high or let's go find some girls. Rapes are a big thing. Getting girls—getting young Hmong girls and taking runaway girls and raping them. They don't consider it raping—they're just having sex. But you have a 16-year-old boy and a 13-year-old girl, it's rape. But they just see it as having sex.

(36:53) This is an odd experience I had earlier this year. Maybe there's nothing you'd like to add, but I'll share it with you and we'll see. I went to the Hmong New Year last year. I was walking around in the midst of what seemed like an ocean of people (although I was told by my students that numbers were actually down last year)—

They were down last year.

But just minding my own business walking past this display, and boys are taunting one another, and all of a sudden it goes from taunting to a full-out fist fight, guys are pulling out socks filled with coins and swinging them around, trying to hit each other. And this is all happening in the midst of this crowded festival, and the security guards come in and beak it up. No Hmong adult intervention—it's almost like it didn't even happen.

That happens every year.

So that's just a normal part of the Hmong New Year festival at this point.

Unfortunately, yes. The gangs all know to show up there, because all the other gangs are going to be there, and they go walk around. Same thing with the soccer tournament. They walk around looking for each other. And what you saw was one gang running across another gang, and the gang signs started going, and all of a sudden, BOOM—it explodes into a fight. That has happened where that has exploded, shots fired, people get shot. We had five people shot at a soccer tournament one year. Then the next year the fence went up around it, the metal detectors, all of that. Prior to that there never was [such security measures]. Same thing with the Hmong New Year. Now you're wanded when you come in. Why do you suppose that is? [Chuckles] Because of previous experience. That's a very common thing. It's unfortunate. And the parents are afraid—which is why there's no parental involvement.

(38:44) Which stands in stark contrast to the absolute authority of the Hmong parents in the traditional Hmong household of only a generation ago. Now there seems to be so much disconnection between the kids and the parents and the parents have little or no authority over the children at all.

And a lot of that is because the parents don't know English and American ways, and the kids know it extremely well, so the kids become the power point within the family. And parents then become afraid. Hmong mothers are terrified of their children—of gang kids. And they don't want to do anything, for fear of their child, so they call us and say, 'You take over.' Well, we can't. They don't know what to do. Many parents have been arrested for doing what they did in Laos to their children here, which is a crime, and the kids know that. So it's a generation in flux. But, you know, all of this will change. As this generation grows up, and as these kids who grew up in the United States become parents, those issues will disappear and resolve themselves.

That sounds hopeful.

Track 2

(0:04) You were instrumental in forming what is now the General John W. Vessey, Jr. Leadership Academy [a charter school based on a Junior ROTC model].

Right.

And part of that story revolves around the Mike Force and around your concern about Hmong gangs and other gangs as well. What does the uninitiated person need to know about the formation of the school, your role in creating it, and also the hopes that you have for its potential influence?

The school was an outgrowth of the Mike Force program. The Mike Force program was limited in its success. And it could still be extremely successful if certain things happen. One was financing. It was just never able to be financed at a level—it needed a full-time person running the program, and it never had that. As the program was going on, one of the things that I saw immediately was that gangs + kids = drop-outs from school—in all cases, drop-outs from school. And once I got them back into school their lives began to turn back around again—in most cases. So I saw the importance of education. But what I also saw was—with our current education system, they weren't dealing with the gang issues at school. They were basically ignoring them. So I saw kids who were going to school, getting hooked up in gangs and then disappearing from school and having no consequences for it. So I knew that if there was a way to hook the education piece in and get a kid in there and provide discipline and structure, you could solve two problems with one solution. By educating a kid and also bringing him out of the gangs and back into a structured, disciplined environment—I saw that as very lacking in our public schools today. So I looked around and saw a military school and thought, 'Wow, what a perfect fix for the kids.' Now it's not for everybody, but to help kids get out of gangs, it'd be perfect. And I started the process. I went to the Mike Force board and said let's do this, and they all said 'You're nuts,' and we started the process, and eventually after years of fighting it became the school. And my goal was to develop a school that was specifically geared towards gang kids, and helping turn their lives around. Now it hasn't quite met that goal, because you have to open it up to everybody, and there's a lot of kids who want to go to military school. And the problems that arise when you bring in a bunch of kids who are in gangs into a school environment, are much more complicated than any of us thought was going to be. But I think the potential's still there to really have a dynamite school out there [From 2004-2006 the Vessey Academy was held in the Phalen Recreational Center in St. Paul].

(3:05) Who came up with the idea of approaching General Vessey?

That came from—I think it was Frank Lopez—no, Steve Young. That was his idea. Steve knew the General, and he knew him because—I don't know if you know Steve's history. Steve's father was the ambassador to Vietnam. Steve grew up in Vietnam during the Vietnam War, and he speaks fluent Vietnamese. Well his father knew General Vessey very well, and Steve knows the General very well. So when we started looking to name the school we started looking at Medal of Honor winners. And I think it was Steve who brought up, 'Well what about General Vessey? Do you know his history?' And I had no idea who General Vessey was. I'd never even heard his name before. And then I started doing a little research and [concluded] 'Yes, this is perfect. Here's a guy that started at ground zero and went all the way to the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Plus he's a Minnesotan, so it was a perfect fit.

And he made it to the top despite being a relatively short man, like most Hmong.

Right. And then I got to meet him and asked him, and he graciously said yes, which just vtotally shocked me. Well, it was like coming school here [to Concordia University]. When I came to Concordia to ask them to be our sponsor, that was our last leg. If they said no, we were done. And I talked to Dr. Holst [University President Robert Holst] and sat down, and I don't know what

happened—well, I do know what happened that day, but he turned and he said yes, and it just seemed like everything was ordained and meant to happen. It couldn't have happened any better.

(4:45) Now I know the first year of the school's operation you were there practically every day.

Yes.

What were you doing?

Just seeing how it was going, talking to the kids—and that's the way I worked cases. I was out there every day, talking to the kids, learning, knowing what's going on—and I felt it was important to do that to get the school up and off the ground and do that work. But you have to remember, that was a three-and-a-half-year struggle to get that school open. And there were a lot of hardships in that process. So to have that happen and to have that open up was the culmination of a lot of things and a lot of work, and some people had gotten beat up over it, some people had done very well. We had made enemies on certain sides and made friends on other sides, so...It was an interesting point in my life.