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## Interview with Yaw Yang

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**What is your full name? What are your parents' names?**

My name is Yaw Yang. My mother's name is Chi Xiong and my father's name is Nhia Chong Yang. We lived in Laos. I had three sisters and two brothers. All of my siblings passed away during [the war] except for my oldest sister. When we lived in Laos, we had a good life. We had our own land, fields, farms, animals and horses. Since the war in Laos, our country Laos has exploded. We then had no choice but to escape from Communism and find survival. If the war did not cause our country to explode, we would still be there today. We would still have our own properties such as fields, land, animals, farms, and horses. In our farm we had cattle, bulls, chickens, pigs, hogs and ducks. We had a life with freedom. Again, because we lost our country, we landed in America. We were like aliens from another planet. We had to adapt to a new world. I will always remember having our own freedom of land. Land was very important to my family and the Hmong people. Our land that we had was worth about \$400,000. When the war came, we thought about our land and what we had. We had our large amount of rice patty fields, land, farms, and a lot of animals. We could not take them with us, of course. We sacrificed everything we had for survival. Again, in America we were like aliens. We suffered a lot of pain coming to America, and also the thought of knowing that none of my family members nor I could speak, read, write, or understand the language and culture we were exposed to. For the last twelve years, I personally suffered the painful feeling of loss — the lost feeling of belonging and the lost feeling of not knowing much about America. Just like an infant, starting to know how to talk, eat, ask for food and water. I, along with many Hmong people, started to learn the ways of living in America. I started to see how people used the language to communicate with each other. When I came to America I had three sons and two daughters. During that time, I was just starting to learn how to get food and drink for my family. It was a huge change for me. In Laos, we had ownership of our property. As I adapted to America, I missed Laos. America is where freedom is, but I don't feel free at all. In Laos, we had control of our properties, such as land, fields, animals and farms. It was not difficult to own property in Laos. However, in America everything was difficult to own: a house to live in, a car to drive in — basically everything. I had to make changes in order to live in America. I learned how to use the stove, refrigerator, bathroom toilet and shower, and also how to turn water on and off. I told myself over and over again to slowly adapt to the new world because that would be the only way to understand the culture. Although my life isn't the same anymore, I knew that learning the culture was the only way to live life in America. All I could do was raise my five children to the best of my ability and hope they will become successful people. By thinking of good outcomes for my children, and knowing I raised them in

America, the promised land of freedom, I hope they will become intelligent people. By having these hopes for the best, it helps me to not miss Laos. However, I know Laos is a memory that will never escape my heart. If I keep thinking about my life in Laos, comparing it to America, and missing my ownership and control of my properties, it hurts me more each day. As days go by, I look at my children and my life and think about and think about how I survived to come to America, I don't get sad as much as I used to. A few thoughts that helped me be happy in America are about survival. I wonder what would have happened to me if I didn't make it to America. Such thoughts help me realize how lucky some people are to be in America.

**When and where were you born in Laos?**

I was born in a city in Laos called Long Hang. In Laos, we didn't have a calendar or documentation of where and when I was born. However, I do know that I am 72 years old right now.

**How long did you stay in that city before you moved, and why?**

I got married, and during the second year of my marriage my family and I left to Thai-Sa. Thai-Sa was a smaller city in Laos. My family and I lived there for three years. During the fourth year, we moved to Muang Cha. We moved from city to city because of farming and land issues. We lived in Muang Cha for ten years. After that, we moved to Xieng Khouang, Laos. When we moved there, the war broke out and Laos broke up. When the war broke out in Laos, we were frightened. We didn't know what to do or where to go. General Vang Pao and other leaders of cities in Laos decided to go to America. It was very frightening. Half of my heart didn't want to go at all, yet the other half told me to go in order to survive.

**When you came to America, were you scared? Why?**

Yes, I was very scared. I didn't know if I would even make it to America. My first fear was of surviving in Thailand. My family and I stayed in Thailand for one year and then came to America. When I arrived in America, I can still remember how people looked at us and how I didn't know what they were saying. Again, my heart was telling me that this is a new world and that I must learn a new way of life. When I came to America, I didn't have anything with me, except a few shirts and pants. I had left my life in Laos and started a new one in America.

**When you came to America, did your relatives sponsor you, or did a church?**

A church sponsored my family and me to come to America. At times, I look back at Laos and I wonder to myself about what could have been. It makes me sad. I feel I was very lucky. I arrived in Madison, Wisconsin where I met a few relatives and also where I met my sponsors.

**When you came to America, did you work or go to school?**

When I came to America, I didn't work or go to school because I didn't know the language. I let my daughters-in-law and sons go to school. I watched their children so they could have an American life like everyone else. The only type of job I did have was at home, sewing

pants for a company for only one month. The government helped me to live life for awhile until my children could get an education and a job. There were not many jobs in Madison, so we moved to Minnesota. In Minnesota my children and daughters-in-law found good jobs.

**What are some favorite things you liked to do in Laos?**

My parents raised my three sisters and me to garden. I loved to work in the garden. I found it amazing how plants grow just like lives and people. Back when I lived in Laos, my source of income came from gardening and food. I always ran my own business selling food and vegetables.

**Since you arrived in America, what are some changes that you have seen?**

In America I saw what the American life is like. The food was different to the people here than in Laos. The way of living life was bigger and better. The education system for men and women was equal. These are just a few changes I have seen from Laos to America. The very first thing was weather. I didn't like the winter because it was too cold!

**When you came to America, what did you miss about Laos?**

Oh, I missed the lifestyle.. In Laos, I had my own land, fields of rice patties, animals and farm. My family and I owned 4 large acres of land, and 16 cows. I had three towers of rice that had just been done making. I had left my life behind in Laos.

**If you had a chance to go back to Laos, would you go back? Why?**

I would go back because it is my home.

**Now that you live in America, what are some of your desires in life?**

In America, some of my desires in life were to work and to get an education. I wanted that so much. Unfortunately, I am too old, but I have my sons to help me with my desires. All of my sons have gotten their education and are able to help me.

**As of right now, what are you doing for a living?**

Right now I just stay home and watch my grandchildren. In the summer I have a garden and where I grow vegetables. When I first arrived here, I decided not to work or go to school. I wanted to give them a chance for education and a way to earn money. I wanted to watch their children so they could make more money than if I tried to work.

**Do you like to eat American food?**

I don't like American food very much. However, I like the vegetables and fruits they have. It is very fresh. I like the chicken and beef they have. I like to buy their products to make my own Hmong food.

**When did you get married?**

I got married the year Japan went back to their country. The year France was burning Laos. I don't remember the exact year.

**When you were still young, did you go to the New Year? Was it fun?**

In Laos it was so much more fun than in America. The people and the warmth of the family were wonderful.

**As you live in America, what do you think about the young men and women these days? What about young marriages?**

I have seen that the government gives too much freedom. I feel freedom has, to some degree, caused young people to get married at a very young age.

**When the war broke out, where did you go? Did you live in refugee camps?**

I went back to live in Muang Cha with my family.

**Since living in America, have you seen any friends or relatives from Laos?**

Honestly, I do see my old friends, but not any close friends or family members and relatives. Many of my relatives still live in Thailand. I send money to them for food and clothing.

**Did you go to school in Laos?**

No, I just stayed home and worked in the garden. I also started to sell vegetables for money

**Would you like to say anything to the younger Hmong people in America?**

I just want to say to the younger people to see and value what they have in America. I want them to see that freedom in America is good, but there are rules. Rules apply to everyone. We as immigrants or aliens from another country, we need to love ourselves and not take freedom for granted.