

3-2-2006

Interview with J. Kou Vang

Paul Hillmer

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2 March, 2006

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Mr. J. Kou Vang in his office at JB Realty, Spruce Tree Center, St. Paul.

J. Kou Vang was born in Long Tieng, Laos in 1970. His father and his oldest sister were killed during the first retreat from Long Tieng in 1972. The surviving members of his family evacuated in 1975 and were taken first to Nam Phong, then to Ban Vinai. In 1976 his family was brought to Chicago, where they lived in the Uptown neighborhood. Vang spent most of his childhood in Appleton, Wisconsin and attended the University of Wisconsin - Madison. While working for Graber Inc., Vang was recruited by Lee Pao Xiong to work for Hmong American Partnership in St. Paul. When Xiong left, Vang began his own odyssey in the St. Paul business world. Starting with his role in fostering economic development and providing small business training through the Neighborhood Development Center, Vang next purchased a small business, sold it two years later, and then became a vice president and commercial loan officer for Western Bank, where he was in a position to help encourage the growth of a substantial number of Hmong businesses. Today he is president of JB Realty, one of the most successful real estate and property development companies in Minnesota.

(0:08) Well, let's just start with the obvious—your name, Sir...

My name [Pauses] that my parents gave me is Kou Vang. Back in 1991, when I was getting ready to get out of college and I was interviewing, I felt—I came to the conclusion that that was not the type of name that people in Wisconsin wanted to see, so—and that was also when I became a citizen, so I changed it to James Kou Vang, but I go by Kou. James is basically a—paper documents, that's it.

(0:42) And where were you born?

I was born in Laos, in Long Tieng, Laos.

And what are your parents' names?

My mom's name is **Song Xiong**, and my dad's name is **Zong Chue Vang**.

(0:56) What are your very earliest memories? When you think back to your childhood, what stands out in your mind?

It's a mixture of memories and probably fabrications from stories that your parents tell you, but my earliest vivid memory is we were getting ready to leave Long Tieng and come to Thailand, and I had a little pet pig that we needed to take care of pig before we left, and they slaughtered the little pig and we had the last meal before we left Long Tieng. That's my earliest recollection.

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(1:38) So life, in terms of your living memory, begins in Thailand?

Life in terms—yeah. Again, I don't—we got here [the US] in '76; I was six years old, so some of it could be real memory, some of it could be fabrications that I made up based on stories that my parents told me. I don't know.

(1:59) Well, regardless of whether it's made it up or whether it really happened, what do you remember about life in Thailand?

We were in the camps. We were some of the very first people in the camps. I remember flying over, I remember being in tents in Nam Phong, I remember moving to [Ban] Vinai, being there when the first couple of houses were put up, being there when they were still cutting down trees to make the camp, and stuff of that nature. We were some of the very first families. We were [in] Building One of the First Quadrant. So we were one of the first families there.

(2:36) Was your father a soldier, or what role did he play?

My father was killed in the war in '72. He was a soldier, but at the time of his death we were just leaving Long Tieng for the first time. It was the first time Long Tieng got overrun. So we were leaving, and in the midst of leaving he got separated and they shot him, along with my oldest sister.

(3:09) Did you lose any family members in the evacuation in 1975?

No, by that time we'd lost everybody that we were going to lose already. So my father and my oldest sister were the only two from the immediate family which we lost, and that was in '72. By '75, when we left Long Tieng, the second time, when all the DC-10s were pulling out, two of my brothers got on the last DC-10 to leave Long Tieng, which left my mom, myself, my sisters to go back down to Na Sue and then we crossed over via the Mekong River in Vientiane.

(3:53) Did your mother re-marry?

No. No.

So where did you first arrive in the United States when you re-settled here?

We arrived in Chicago in July of '76.

So you were six years old—

Six years old.

Were you essentially plopped immediately into a public school or—

Yeah. We arrived in July. By August we were in school—didn't know what you were doing, you kind of sat through it. We originally settled in a part of Chicago called Uptown, by Argyle, right off of Lake Shore—right off of that.

Yeah. I know right where that is.

Right now it's—the Vietnamese town right now is what it is. And the school was right around the corner on Argyle and Ashland there, and it's—didn't know anything. Juts kind of went to school because that's what people did.

(4:54) I would assume that most Americans looked at you and they just thought 'Asian.' They didn't understand about Hmong, they didn't understand probably that much about the war...

Absolutely.

What do you remember about sort of trying to fit in or make your way or adapt to this very alien culture and geography?

83 I think we were fortunate that we landed in Chicago. It's a pretty diverse city, and it's also—the area
84 we landed in was pretty culturally diverse, so there were less of those glares or looks or
85 misunderstandings or stuff or that nature. I think it was, 'Yeah, this is where all the trash gets
86 dumped anyway, so it really doesn't matter.' [Laughs] So I—it didn't really hit me until the third
87 grade when we—was it the third grade? I think the first or second grade when we moved out of
88 Chicago to a little town called Ottawa.

89 **Still in Illinois?**

90 Illinois. It's about an hour and a half west of Chicago. And the reason for that was because my
91 older brother got a job assembling tools at the Snap-On tool plant in Ottawa, so we left. And that
92 was where you started sensing that you were different, that you don't speak the language, you
93 don't—you know, you're a second-, third-grader, really. It is what it is. And kids at that age, some
94 are nice some are—kids can be cruel at that age. So...

95
96 **(6:24) So how many brothers and sisters do you have?**

97 I have three brothers and three sisters. I'm the youngest. Or they're seven of thirteen. The other
98 six passed away.

99 **Oh my...Did you travel with any other relatives, or was it just your mom and siblings?**

100 It was—at that time when we were leaving Laos, my oldest brother was married already, and so he
101 acted the part of the father, and so we traveled mostly with him. On my mom's side, my mom's
102 youngest brother, my uncle [was] high-level military, so there was some access because of that, also.

103
104 **(7:11) When you say 'access,' what do you mean?**

105 Uh...back-door ways of getting around and getting out of the country. I don't think that—if it
106 wasn't for him being at that high level, I don't think we could have gotten out in one piece.

107
108 **(7:26) Do you have any memories of coming here and having to deal with technological or**
109 **cultural or other things that were just strange to you and trying to trying to make sense of**
110 **them, and...**

111 Not really. You know, you have your TVs and stuff like that, but I think other than that, at the time
112 we were here, the technological advances weren't really there. You had your TVs, and I remember
113 we lived in—we moved to Appleton, Wisconsin in the 3rd, 4th grade, and I remember getting a color
114 TV with a remote control for the first time. And this was the year that Superman I was on TV for
115 the first time. [Interviewer laughs] I remember that, because we were watching the black and white,
116 and all of a sudden my brother came in and said, 'Hey, we got a color TV!' We put it on and
117 Superman was on and we were going, 'Oh my goodness!' You could see Superman in color with a
118 remote control! Oh my gosh! That was an interesting time. But my exposure to technology really
119 came in the 8th and 9th grade, and by that time—you know, we didn't have a computer and stuff of
120 that nature, but you had access to it at school and stuff like that.

121
122 **(8:39) So had your brother moved on to a new job? Is that why you moved to Appleton?**

123 When we were in Ottawa, at that time, my father's—our clan, the leader of our clan lived in
124 Appleton, and my mom's youngest brother lived in Kansas City. He relayed a message to my
125 father's clan and said, 'Hey, we know that her husband's passed away. It's your responsibility. Are
126 you going to take care of them or not? If you're not, I'm going to come and take them to Kansas
127 City,' because they knew that we were there by ourselves. So my uncle came down and told us
128 we've got to move on to Appleton because he didn't want to deal with the Hmong side of things,
129 [Interviewer laughs] so we moved up to Appleton, which is not the worst thing in the world, so...

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131 **(9:31) For the uninitiated, how would you explain the relationship of the individual to the**
132 **clan?**

133 You know, the way I explain it is to people is that you, you live your life, but you live your life for
134 the perception of the clan. The clan has—at that time, or in previous times the clan has incredible
135 power. The clan leaders were—and it may be in the same clan, but it's immediate family upon
136 family. Then they wielded the perception, they wielded the respect from the other clan, and you—it
137 does have that type of control. Being a family like ours, without a father, you had to [Pauses] submit
138 yourself to the clan even more, mainly because when you were going to get married, the clan had to
139 step up and represent you. Your mom couldn't do it because she, for lack of a better word, didn't
140 really have a formal place within the clan, so—

141 **Standing.**

142 Yeah. Yeah. So you had to submit yourself quite a bit more to that. Whatever we do, we say—I
143 remember growing up, my mom says, 'Whatever you do, keep in mind how it's going to get
144 perceived by your uncles, and...In today's world it's not like that anymore, because clans can't
145 control stuff anymore. I think that they're losing—well, I don't think I know they're losing their
146 influence and stuff of that nature, so you don't have that anymore. People are willing to live their
147 own lives, whereas in the past, if you didn't have a strong past other people [could] kind of say stuff
148 about you, do stuff to you that, without a clan, you really can't survive.

149
150 **(11:22) OK. Now, I neglected to ask—did you make it over to the United States because of**
151 **a sponsor, or how was it that you got to Chicago?**

152 We were one of the first couple of families that got sponsored by one of those—what do they call
153 it? VOLAG, volunteer organizations [agencies], and I think it's one of—I didn't find this out until
154 later in life when I started reading on those first waves of immigrants. That was one of a couple of
155 NGOs which was set up to find sponsors, and when they couldn't find sponsors, then the
156 organization itself did the sponsoring, and so we were sponsored by one of those organizations.

157
158 **(12:08) And did you live in an apartment?**

159 [Yes]

160 **So there were how many of you in how many rooms?**

161 We had a one-bedroom that was me, my mom, my two sisters, and my uncle. So there were five of
162 us in a one-bedroom apartment.

163 **And the neighborhood you described as 'where they dump the trash, anyway.'**

164 Yeah, it's one of those neighborhoods that's—the slums of Chicago. I mean, it is what it is, so...

165
166 **(12:41) Did you have a sense of that as a young boy, or do you think you were really too**
167 **young to understand that?**

168 No, that image, I think I formulated that years later when I went back and I looked around and said,
169 'Well geez, this is...' But at that time, anything's better than urinating in the streets, so...

170 [Interviewer laughs] ...you know [Laughs]

171 **When you put it that way... [Laughs]**

172 You know, anything's better than where you came from, so it's all relative, I think.

173
174 **(13:04) At what point do you think your language skills began to kick in? Do you have any**
175 **specific memories of thinking, 'Oh wow! I'm starting to get it' or 'It's coming together for**
176 **me now?'**

177 You know, I don't really—there wasn't that 'aha' point, but I do remember, because throughout
178 high school—and I'm still self-conscious about the way I speak and stuff of that nature. I think I

179 have a pretty good command of the language, but I am still conscious about it. In high school I
180 took a couple of foreign language classes and stuff of that nature, and one of my German teachers
181 said to me, ‘You really do not truly’—well, ‘You’re not truly fluent in a language unless you can
182 dream in that language.’ And I remember in my junior year I finally dreamed in English. And so
183 that was my ‘aha’ of saying, I think that sub-consciously I don’t have to make that transfer from,
184 ‘Oh, this is what they said in English, this is what it means in Hmong’—make that transition to
185 Hmong and then go back to English. And that’s—you know...

186
187 **(14:16) So what was life like for you in Appleton?**

188 It was a—I think it was a normal life. I mean, I went to Catholic schools, so relatively bland. I grew
189 up just like any kid. I think when you grow up in that kind of environment, you grow up running
190 away from the environment. And when I grew up, I was fortunate to be relatively athletic, so I
191 played a lot of sports, hung out with a lots of friends—and I had a lot of white friends. And I was
192 also fortunate in that my English was pretty good, and so my white friends related to me pretty well.
193 I think they overlooked the fact that we lived in the projects, stuff of that nature. I mean, I sensed
194 some of that, but I think they kind of got over that as they got to know me. So I didn’t really hang
195 around with a lot of Hmong kids in high school. Granted, Appleton had a pretty nice Hmong
196 concentration, but I really didn’t hang around with a lot of Hmong kids. I didn’t really realize my
197 “Hmongness,” if there’s such a word, until I got to college, where I started looking around, I started
198 re-evaluating myself. And my first year was very similar to high school, where I had a lot of white
199 kids, a lot of white friends. But by my sophomore and junior year I was pretty exclusively hanging
200 out with a lot of Hmong kids. And I think a lot of that is just me being more comfortable with
201 myself.

202
203 **(15:48) Do you think that you and your siblings—well, I’m sure you did—but how would**
204 **you describe the way in which you and your siblings served as an interpreter for your mom,**
205 **and as someone who sort of helped her function as best she could in this country?**

206 Absolutely. We—my mom didn’t speak English, so [Pauses] we would translate for her at our own
207 parent-teacher conference, so... [Interviewer laughs] it gives you a lot of power, you know? You
208 can tell her what you want her to know! [Both laugh] So we would do that, we’d take her to the
209 hospital, to the clinic, and we’d translate for her there. I remember I was in sixth grade, my aunt has
210 a son that was born with fluid in his brain, and it had to get drained. And they did that when he was
211 just born, and when he was three years old, we had to go down to Milwaukee, to the Children’s
212 hospital in Milwaukee, for them to replace the shunt. I went down to translate that procedure to my
213 aunt, and I was in sixth grade! I had no idea what a shunt was, I had no idea what the heck they
214 were doing, but you kind of make do with it. And I—so, we were that link for our parents.

215
216 **(17:06) Do you have a sense of how difficult that must have been for your mother and for**
217 **people of her generation to come here and try to function here?**

218 You know, I didn’t. I didn’t at that time, but as I got older I started to think about it, and it’s my
219 own value of having—and I would think that if I was in my parents’ shoes, having my kids translate
220 for me, I think I would just—that that would be a tremendous—that would do tremendous damage
221 to my own self-esteem, that we reversed roles. I think it’s one thing if it was at this stage of life,
222 where I’m married and I have my own family and I’m assisting my parents. That’s a totally different
223 issue. But when you’re 12 years old and you’re the face of the family, I think it is a real damage to
224 the parents, and I think that’s why you have a lot of the issues you do in the community now, is
225 because kids are in defiance of their parents because they view themselves as being the key to the
226 outside world for their parents. And I think it’s tough, it’s very tough, because unless I can sit there

227 and tell—and present an image that I know more than my kids, otherwise they won't listen to me,
228 it's going to be tough.

229
230 **(18:21) Now you said that didn't really know that many other Hmong families in Appleton.**
231 **You said you went to a Catholic school.**

232 [Yes.]

233 **Was there—obviously there's a divide in a sense, because you have Hmong who have**
234 **accepted Christianity and those who have not. Did you have any sense of that in Appleton,**
235 **or was that beyond your experience at that point?**

236 You know, that wasn't really a big deal at that time. And I think a lot of it was because kids don't
237 think in those realms, because at that time it was more of, 'Are you good at this, are you part of this
238 crowd, are you part of that crowd?' I think a lot of it was more materialistic than it was
239 philosophical or belief system, and it really didn't play a role until I was getting ready to get married,
240 and then it was a big role, because I'm a Christian, born in a Christian family, raised a Christian. I'm
241 a Green Hmong, raised in a family that is very proud of Green Hmong tradition. My wife is a White
242 Hmong—it messes up things. [Interviewer laughs] My wife is a non-Christian. Really messes up
243 things.

244 **Oh boy...**

245 And it's a tough thing. I mean, it's tough, and I think it's doubly tough for somebody like me,
246 who—I've always been [Pauses] I've always been a mama's boy. I've always been somebody that
247 was always exceeding the expectations of the clan. And so when I married a non-Christian White
248 Hmong, the clan felt like I deserted them. And that's a big, big hurdle. And it took my wife and me
249 a long time to—and I consider myself a pretty liberal guy. I think it would have been easier to my
250 clan if I would have forced my wife to be a Christian, forced her to speak Green Hmong, but I
251 didn't, because my own perception of this is: when I was dating her, I knew she was a non-
252 Christian. I knew she was a White Hmong. It didn't bother me then, why [should] it bother me
253 now? And so, until this day, I don't force her to go to church. I think you can't force belief on
254 people, they chose to or they don't it's their call. At the end of the day, I hope I'm saved
255 [Chuckles]. I'm not going to force her to speak Green Hmong, because she never did when we were
256 dating. But it's gotten to a point where the last five or six years, the clan—I mean, we've been
257 married for 11 years now—it wasn't until the last five or six years that the clan started accepting that,
258 saying, 'You know, it's not bad.' [Interviewer chuckles] 'It's really not that bad, because Kou hasn't
259 changed. Kou is the same person he has [always been]. And his wife, even though she is non-
260 Christian and White Hmong, she is just as loving as a Christian Green Hmong girl. So it's tough.

261
262 **(21:33) What makes it difficult for a Green Hmong to be married to a White Hmong? I**
263 **suppose the clan loyalties get involved here somewhere...**

264 It's—no, I think a lot of it is just prejudice. It's just like Northern and Southern. You know, you
265 have a different dialect, and 'Oh, those Southerners, they're weird, they do things differently, they
266 eat crawfish and we eat trout.' It's the same crap, I mean... [Both laugh] You know, centuries of
267 stereotypes. But in the end, they're Hmong—my gosh, you know, give it up! [Laughs] They love
268 their parents the same way we do and they want respect the same way we do! What's the big deal?
269 [Laughs]

270
271 **(22:21) And I suppose in part, this is also a sign of that waning clan influence—**

272 Absolutely.

273 **—that you talked about, that you can defy the clan.**

274 Absolutely. And I think a lot of the clan's acceptance is I have defied the clan, and I'm still, for lack
275 of a better word, successful. And our marriage is successful, and we coexist, me going to church,
276 she doesn't go if she doesn't feel like it—she goes most of the time just to be with me. And our kids
277 speak English, White Hmong, and Green Hmong, depending on who they talk to. [Laughs] So
278 it's—you know, if my kids are with a White Hmong, they don't know that—they all speak White
279 Hmong. [When] my kids are with Green Hmong, they all speak Green Hmong. And people are
280 going, 'Well, gee, that's interesting.'

281 **I'll have to hire them in a few years to do some translating for me!**

282 [Laughs]

283

284 **(23:14) What do you see as the role of the Hmong Christian church in the United States? Is**
285 **there something unique about it other than providing this place for Hmong people to**
286 **gather?**

287 [Pauses] I don't [Pauses] What I see as the role of the Christian church is either to step up to the
288 plate and be the keeper of the culture, or [Pauses] just be the religious piece of it and leave the
289 culture alone. I see them going half-way, and it bothers me, and I think it bothers everybody else,
290 because Christianity in the Hmong community is what? Maybe 20, 25%. The other 75% are non-
291 Christian. For example, I'm down at the funeral home, most times, for a non-Christian funeral.
292 The very important part of the funeral is [Pauses] Sunday night, they pull out a big, long table. And
293 the brother of the deceased, the brother-in-law of the deceased, the uncles, and the leaders of—the
294 head of the town—everybody sits around there. And they go through his or her life. If it's a guy
295 [who] passed away, they come through and say, 'Well, he left a wife and four kids. Who's gonna
296 take care of 'em? Did he have any debt? Who's gonna take care of that? Did anybody owe him
297 money? You better pay up!' Chances are nobody's going to fess up to that! [Both laugh] And it
298 gives you a chance to air out things, and a lot of that is done so that the spirit can go and reincarnate
299 without the burdens of this world, OK? For the Christian funerals, you don't have that. That's fine,
300 but there are things that need to be talked about.

301

302 **(25:27) And there's certainly nothing about any of those things that would defy or betray the**
303 **Christian faith.**

304 Absolutely. Absolutely. You know—a marriage ceremony. Only my clan can marry off my
305 daughter. We have a saying: 'The older brother can [birth] the child, the younger brother can marry
306 them off.' Somebody wants to marry my daughter, I call my clan together, we sit down, we talk: 'Is
307 it a good family? Is it worth it? Should we do it? [et cetera],' and it's a clan effort. Because if that
308 girl goes off and her marriage gets screwed up, it's [the] clan pressure that keeps that marriage
309 together. You don't have that, because now, you go to church and you say, 'Well gee, my clan—I'm
310 not going to use my clan, so I'm going to have the elders of the church come and act as my clan.
311 Well, the elders of the church are maybe from six different clans! They're not going to pressure that
312 marriage to come together if there's problems. So you have a lot of those things, and as I tell
313 ministers, I say, 'I think you guys really need to define this—that culture and religion are so
314 intertwined that if you want the intertwining of Christianity and Hmong culture together, that's fine,
315 but you have to fess up also, that when the crap hit the fan, you've got to be there to clean it up.
316 Otherwise, you shouldn't be there. And so I think that the culture is turning, and because of the
317 vacuum, or that void that is created because the clan is losing influence, something needs to step
318 into that. And is it the church? I don't know. But quite honestly, the bulk of Hmong Christians
319 belong to the Christian Missionary Alliance denomination. That's an incredibly conservative
320 denomination—very, very conservative. And I think—a couple years ago they had a celebration:
321 Fifty Years of Christianity to the Hmong people, and I had the opportunity—I get called in to these

322 sessions and I don't know why they do it. I was in the session talking to the superintendent of the
323 CMA. We sat there and we talked and talked and I said, 'Let me ask you guys a question.' They
324 said, 'Yeah.' I said, [Sighs, Pauses] 'Let's say that we have a really big church, and they're building
325 this big building and I am a major contributor. And my daughter happens to marry a non-Christian.
326 And I say to your church, I want a church wedding. In your guidelines, I cannot have a church
327 wedding. And I'm saying I want a church wedding, and you're saying I don't think so. I'm saying,
328 Well geez, this wing has my name on it. If I don't get the church wedding, this wing doesn't exist.' I
329 said, 'I think eventually there will be people like me who are going to do this, and the church and the
330 local church are going to have to decide if you are going to change principle, or are you going to lose
331 me as a member?' And I said, 'At the end of the day, I think you're going to change principle,
332 because you're probably going to lose my \$120,000 a year contribution.'

333
334 **(28:54) Now this probably isn't a fair question to ask, but I'm going to ask it anyway.**

335 Sure.

336 **Do you see that more as a process of American culture creeping into the church, or a**
337 **process of rising Hmong wealth being brought to bear on the church?**

338 I see that as a process of changing or the evolution of a religion to be more accepting. I think that
339 50 years ago—and I apologize if I offend anybody, but I think that 50 years ago some white
340 missionary dude came up to the mountains of Laos, and Christianized a bunch of Hmong people.
341 And we're all ignorant, we can't read, so they took a couple of us, took 'em down to the capital city,
342 taught them how to read, and sent 'em back up there. And we interpreted Christianity to the narrow
343 view of those couple of white missionaries which came up there. And the Hmong people believed.
344 We didn't question, because it was the word of God. Fifty years later, you have a thinking group of
345 Hmong Christians who—there's no doubt in my mind that they believe in God, but they question
346 their faith and the practices of that faith. 'Cause if you look at it, Christianity is a religion of
347 forgiveness, submissiveness, and compromises. But wherever Christianity has gone, bloodshed and
348 genocide has followed. And it's kind of funny that the dude that's preaching is the guy that's on top,
349 and everybody else is on the bottom. And I think that as you get a community that is awakening,
350 you're going to get that question. The faith itself is a good faith. The belief itself is a good belief.
351 [Pauses] How those beliefs and how that faith gets translated into action is not the best thing in the
352 world. [Laughs] I mean, it leaves a lot to be desired!

353
354 **(30:06) Well, and I suppose it doesn't help that you see this sort of breakdown of Hmong**
355 **community at the same time that you see this questioning of the Christian faith—**

356 Absolutely.

357 **—so that you don't have the community to sit around and discuss what should be**
358 **happening.**

359 Correct. Because even now, if you go to any Hmong church, what you see is you see a lot of young
360 kids, [and] a lot of elders. You don't see the middle generation. And the reason is the middle
361 generation, which is my generation, we question that faith. We are also—what you're also seeing is
362 splintering of the churches. You have a lot of smaller churches—20, 30, 40 families. And I think a
363 lot of that results from the fact that I sit here and I go to church, and the pastor is talking about 'us'
364 and 'them'—the believers and the non-believers—and if you don't believe you're going to hell, if
365 you believe, you're going to heaven. And I said, 'You know, the world is not black and white. It
366 just isn't. [Laughs] To me, Christianity is man's way of justifying or understanding the unknown.
367 How do you explain that? I don't know.

368 **That's OK.**

369 [Laughs]

370

371 **(32:21) Do you think there are elements of the Bible that are emphasized in Hmong**
372 **churches that may be different if you go down the street and walk into a Baptist church or a**
373 **Lutheran church?**

374 Absolutely. Absolutely. I think we have a much more narrow interpretation of the Bible, and I
375 think we are much less tolerant of what the Bible teaches. I find myself more spiritually fulfilled
376 going to a non-Hmong church than I do going to a Hmong church. And maybe that's our
377 American culture of "buffet-style" religion! I don't know. [Chuckles] But on the flip side, I do see
378 that the Hmong churches are a lot more conservative.

379

380 **(33:04) Well, it's tough, because if you want to use the whole Bible, it becomes a much**
381 **more difficult process to say, 'I'm going to teach this to you, and you're going to believe it**
382 **and you're not going to question it.'**

383 [Laughs] Right. Right. Absolutely.

384

385 **(33:19) So where'd you go to college?**

386 I went to the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

387 **And how would you describe that experience? You've already said that you experienced an**
388 **awakening of sorts there.**

389 It was a good experience. I loved the University. I think I found myself. I think I was—I found, I
390 got comfortable with myself, I got comfortable with what I stood for, and who I am, and stuff of
391 that nature.

392 **What do you think made you uncomfortable before that time?**

393 I think a lot of it is growing up in Appleton, seeing that I was hanging out with all of the—for lack
394 of a better word, all the jocks, because I played a lot of sports. And you see—the only
395 representation of the Hmong kids were the ones that were kind of awkward, they didn't really speak
396 good English, and they were always sitting by themselves eating [Pauses] egg rolls. And I think
397 going there, going down to Madison, it's a much more diverse community, you see what's going on,
398 you see people proud of their heritage. One of the most profound things, I was sitting—in my
399 freshman year, I was sitting there in the library, and a couple of Chinese guys came in, and they
400 talked very loud, but they were very—in my mind they were very proud of their language and they
401 were talking really loud, people were looking around, but they didn't really care, they were just
402 talking away, you know? [Interviewer laughs] And I thought, 'Well gee, how come I'm not proud of
403 my language?' That's what I mean, that sort of forced me to come back and re-evaluate myself and
404 say, 'You're not really white. You don't even know who you are, so you should really look at these
405 things a little more differently.'

406

407 **(34:56) Were you already familiar at this point or did you have the opportunity in college to**
408 **study in more detail the Hmong involvement in the war in Southeast Asia and that whole**
409 **process because of which the Hmong were forced to leave Laos?**

410 I was not, at that point, but when I was there, there were eight Hmong students at Madison, and we
411 put together a conference where Dr. Yang Dao came down, and a bunch of other Hmong people
412 came down, and that was my first exposure to what they were doing in St. Paul here—the Hmong's
413 advancement of St. Paul. And that got me interested. I started reading, I started reading *The Ravens*
414 and stuff of that nature, trying to get a good understanding, and it's—it's also a time of awakening,
415 because I was Hmong, yet I didn't know a lot of the stuff that was happening, and you didn't know
416 the reasons that you were here, and what your parents told you was different from what the books
417 really said, and—

418

419 **(36:02) How so?**

420 Well, I think a lot of it is what your parents tell you is from their perspective, and their interpretation
421 of geopolitical events. It really had nothing to do with their interpretation of geopolitical events.
422 They were seeing it from [the perspective of] a farmer up on the mountainside of Laos, and it
423 broadens your understanding of the whole area.

424

425 **(36:30) Would you say that thinking about those things made you, in any way, reconsider**
426 **the loss of your father and other members of your family in a broader context, maybe in a**
427 **more personal way?**

428 I don't recall that. I do recall at that time that I ran across an article that said during the Vietnam
429 War we lost 300,000 people, which was 30-some per cent of the Hmong population [in Laos] at that
430 time, and that a generation of men were lost during that ten-year period. And I started thinking
431 back going, 'Well, gee, that's right, because I've got all these aunts that have no husbands, and they
432 would have been right at that time.' And I never really realized that until after I read that article...
433 So I started thinking back, going, 'Yeah, I don't have a dad—gee, my other aunt don't have a
434 husband...Gee, I've got all these aunts that have no husbands.' And so you start thinking, 'Well gee,
435 that must have been during the war, and it fits.' And so you start asking them, and they say, 'Yeah,
436 he passed away here.' 'He passed away there.' 'He got shot here.' And that had a profound impact
437 on me—that we lost—granted, the Americans lost a lot of lives, and the Vietnamese lost a lot of
438 lives, but it was a war in which we got drawn in. We weren't the instigator, but we got drawn into it,
439 and we lost 30% of our population, and yet nobody knew about it. I mean, how could a people lose
440 30% of their population, and nobody acknowledged it?

441 **That is a pretty stunning—**

442 Yeah. And you lose a generation of men. And it's—it's incredible.

443

444 **(38:11) Did college affect you in any other ways that you think of as significant now?**

445 Besides the personal realization that you need to get back into your community—I think that that
446 was the most profound piece of it.

447 **OK. What did you graduate with?**

448 I have a degree in finance, econ, and accounting.

449

450 **(38:49) And did you already have a sense before you graduated about what you wanted to**
451 **do with that degree, or were you open to possibilities at that point?**

452 I've always known that I was going to be involved in business somehow. It's always been a [guiding]
453 force of my life. I think a lot of it is because—a need to make money. Because when you're poor,
454 you need to make money, [Interviewer chuckles] so a lot of it was right around there. And in high
455 school I was in all the business clubs, I was in all of the business associations, in all of the
456 competitions, so I always knew that I was going to be in finance and accounting somewhere.

457

458 **(39:33) Did you initially stay in the Wisconsin area, did you come to St. Paul right away,**
459 **or...?**

460 I graduated, worked for a year as a controller for a company called Graber Products. I—Lee Pao
461 [Xiong] and I are very good friends. We were in the same youth group together. He was at Hmong
462 United Methodist Church up here, we went to Appleton United Methodist Church up in Appleton.
463 And we ran across each other. He was a couple years older than me, but we ran across each other at
464 youth camps. And I was working for Graber. He called me right after he got hired as executive
465 director for Hmong American Partnership, and said, 'Hey! Why don't you come up here?' I said,

466 'For what?' He said, 'Just come up and see me.' I said, 'Sure.' So I went up, I saw him, we talked
467 and caught up and as I was leaving, 'Say, why don't you come work for me?' I said, 'Yeah, right,
468 whatever, man.' [Interviewer laughs] So we talked, going back and forth, and I said, 'Well, let me
469 think about it.' So I went home, I didn't think about it. So he called me again. He said, 'Did you
470 think anymore about it?' I said, 'No, not really.' He said, 'Well why don't you?' I said, 'You can't
471 afford me.' He said, 'Well how much are you making?' So I told him, and he said, 'Yeah, you're
472 right. I can't afford you.' [Both laugh] I said, 'So it is what it is.' And he said, 'Well, let me ask you
473 a question.' He says, 'Do you want to spend the rest of your life making bicycle racks or do you
474 want to take that education and do something to help your people the way you always talk about—
475 and the way you and I always talked about when we were sitting at those camp fires?' And I thought
476 about it. I said, 'Yeah, you are right.' So I left my job, came up here and worked for a third of what
477 I was making, [Interviewer laughs] but I think it was a good thing; it was a blessing in disguise,
478 because it allowed me to see the community. And a couple of years ago, I was over at that
479 symposium at Concordia [University in St. Paul], and I said to people, I said, 'This is the epic center
480 of the Hmong community in the United States. And I truly believe that. Anything that is good will
481 come out of here. Anything that is bad will come out of here, because this is the epic center of the
482 Hmong community.

483

484 **(41:47) So take me back, if you don't mind, to one of those campfire sessions. What kinds**
485 **of things did you and Lee Pao talk about wanting to accomplish?**

486 Just things like—you talk about the old leadership, how they did things, and if you were ever in their
487 position, you would never be corrupt, you would never do those kinds of things. Those—the types
488 of decisions they made were wrong, the issues facing the community, how do you deal with teenage
489 pregnancy, how do you deal with the drug issues, how do you deal with Hmong men having
490 multiple wives—you know, a lot of those, in my mind, questions about the universe that will be
491 asked from the beginning of time 'til the end of time, and will probably never be answered, because
492 it's too complex for everybody, so...

493

494 **(42:36) And yet you can't help spending night after night talking about it.**

495 Yeah. Yeah, but they're interesting points of discussion.

496

497 **(42:44) So you come here, you're working for slave wages, or something close to that—**

498 Yup.

499 **What are you doing? What was your job description, and what were you trying to**
500 **accomplish?**

501 At Hmong American Partnership, I was the director of finance when I came up here. And I really
502 wasn't trying to accomplish anything. I was just—you know I just thought it would be cool. So I
503 came up, and we worked, and I was there for about a year, and Lee Pao decided he was going to
504 leave and go to the Council on Asian and Pacific Minnesotans. And my only motivation for coming
505 up here was him, so when he left, I had no reason to stay. So then I left and went to work with
506 Mike Tamali, who started an organization called Neighborhood Development Center, which is an
507 offshoot from Western Bank, doing economic development, small business training, and stuff of
508 that nature—which I thought was kind of fun.

509

510 **(43:38) You've already said that you think this is the epicenter of the Hmong community**
511 **nationally. What impression did—I assume more St. Paul than Minneapolis, but even so,**
512 **what impression did the Twin Cities make on you when you first decided to come, and then**
513 **actually did come and live here?**

514 Well, it was the same thing. We thought that—I thought that anything good will come out of here,
515 and anything bad will come out of here, and if you're going to make yourself into somebody, then
516 you need to do it here, because this is where the best and the brightest are. If you're going to
517 compete, you compete here. There's no use in being—and I tell my kids this all the time—there's
518 no use in being the smartest of the stupid people. [Interviewer laughs] That doesn't make any sense,
519 OK? If you're the smartest one in your class, but everyone in your class is below median average, it
520 doesn't make any sense. You can't be the smartest of the stupid people, you've got to be the
521 smartest of the smart people. And before I came up here, that was the intention I had, was I want
522 to go and—because in Hmong we have a saying that after you sharpen your knife, you need to go
523 try it out. Well, I've sharpened my knife. I've gone to college, I have three degrees, I graduated in
524 three years—quite honestly I thought my shit didn't stink and I walked on water, [Interviewer
525 laughs] and so I needed to come and test out my blade, you know? [Laughs]
526

527 **(45:03) It must have been stimulating in a way, though, to come here, to see Frogtown—**
528 Absolutely.

529 **—to just see the number of Hmong businesses and Hmong churches and Hmong homes.**
530 Absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, I get this all the time. I have cousins who come up here once a
531 year, so they come and they go, '[Gasps] My God, look at the advancement you guys made!' And
532 you don't see it because you're in the grind all the time. When I first came up here, Hennepin
533 County was in the midst of reforming welfare legislation. The STRIDE program [the employment
534 and training arm of the AFDC program] was in effect. And the STRIDE program was viewed
535 (which later turned into the MFIP program), which was viewed as the Hmong organizations' way of
536 creating work for themselves—Lao Family and Hmong American Partnership—and that because
537 these two organizations didn't have anything to do, they went and lobbied the County to change
538 welfare laws so they had stuff to do [spoken with no small amount of sarcasm]. [Interviewer laughs]
539 That was my first thing when I got up here, was we had to deal with that, and I had bullets sent to
540 me and saying, 'Hey, would you please go kill yourself so that we don't have to do it for you?' And
541 we had picketing and stuff of that nature and on the one hand I was scared shitless, but on the other
542 hand it was so exhilarating I was like, [Interviewer laughs] 'Man, people are sending me bullets! This
543 is'—I still have a collection of them. I have like four of them at home. I was like, 'This is
544 incredible!' But—I mean, it's the epic center! You can ask Lee Pao, I mean, it's just hilarious! I
545 mean, we would get calls that said, 'You better watch out when you go home tonight, because you
546 won't make it home.'
547

548 **(46:48) Why were you seen as the cause for this problem?**

549 Because I was the second-in-command at Hmong American Partnership, and it was Lee Pao and I
550 that were the face of the organization.

551 **But why Hmong American Partnership? Why not the conservative federal government?**

552 Because the people felt that the organizations were the ones that went and lobbied to change the
553 rules or the welfare laws so that we had work to do, so we can put people to work and we could
554 force them to go through the process, and so that we created work for ourselves. And most of the
555 time it was either Lee Pao or me defending what we were doing. And so we were seen as the two
556 guys that were...
557

558 **(47:29) That's a lot of power that you allegedly had.**

559 I know. [Interviewer laughs] Isn't that funny? [Laughs] Yeah, I mean, there were times when I
560 would get home and the phone would ring, and people would say, 'We know you're home. We'd
561 like to (***)

562 **So do I. [Both laugh]**

563 You know—but that’s just Hmong people. And at that time there were a lot of other things going
564 on. Hmong National Development was getting kicked off the ground, and that was seen as the rival
565 to Lao Family, because that was started by Yang Dao—it was seen as the rival to Lao Family. And it
566 was called HAND—Hmong American National Development, and that had a bad connotation, so it
567 got changed to Hmong National—HND. And so it was just—I think the community itself was
568 struggling to find its place.

569
570 **(48:22) What do you, who I’m sure doesn’t have nearly as much invested in this as someone**
571 **of your parents’ age—what do you see as the key for an outsider like me to understanding**
572 **the conflict in the community between the pro-Yang Dao and the pro-Vang Pao people?**

573 [Pauses] I think that for you to truly appreciate those relationships, you have to understand the
574 politics of poverty. Because Yang Dao approaches politics from a different plane, from the position
575 of an educated individual—one who’s never been through the trenches with his people, but one
576 who felt that through his education he deserves that position, and that he should be listened to
577 because of his education. The General approaches politics from the basis of the people. He has
578 been through the trenches, he has stood beside these men as he watched them fall, he has buried
579 these men, he has taken care of their families, and at the end of the day, the people know that when
580 the going gets tough, the General’s going to be there for them. And so you see all of these
581 controversies and all of this aggression and all of these conflicts going on, but at the end of the day,
582 the General has earned the respect of the people, and Yang Dao wants that type of respect. It
583 doesn’t happen. You have a highly educated individual who thinks that by picking up that degree
584 the heavens opened up and the knowledge of time [the ages?] got bestowed on him, which doesn’t
585 happen, and you have a guy that knows he’s not highly educated, but he’s been through the
586 trenches, and I think it’s politics of poverty. I think that’s what it is.

587

588 **(50:17) Is this going to matter at all to your children’s generation?**

589 No. No. I think my generation is the last generation [for which] this conflict will be of any
590 importance. Even my generation, the importance is not from understanding the conflict, but the
591 importance is from understanding what came out of the conflict, as well as appreciating what came
592 out of the conflict. I tell people this all the time: I say, ‘You can say anything you want about the
593 General. You can like him or dislike him. You can do whatever you want to do, but at the end of
594 the day you have to respect him. I think you just have to. There’s no way around it.

595

596 **(51:01) It doesn’t seem to me that there’s anyone who’s going to come close to replacing**
597 **him when he dies, either.**

598 No, and I don’t think we need one, because I think that difficult times and great times will invent
599 great leaders. The times of—his time is over. And I’m not saying that in a bad way, I’m just saying
600 there is no need for it, because the times have changed. I think [at] the next outcry, there will be a
601 new leader, fashioned in that mold, to address the issues of that time, will come together at that
602 time, and I don’t [know of] anybody else who thinks they can be the next general. I don’t think they
603 should even try to be there, because the atmosphere and the situation may not call for it.

604

605 **(51:46) Yeah. Oh yeah. The Hmong people don’t need another military leader.**

606 Absolutely.

607

608 **(51:53) So—I’m sorry, the subsidiary, the offshoot of Western Bank was called—?**

609 Neighborhood Development Center.

610 **OK. And how long did you work there?**

611 For about three years.

612 **And what did you get out of that experience?**

613 [Pauses] I understood how... [Pauses] I understood how the white man went around trying to,
614 [Chuckling] trying to create a need to service the poor people.

615 **Create a need...? A need for whom?**

616 For them.

617 **Oh, so almost like what you were being accused of [back at Hmong American Partnership].**

618 Yeah.

619 **Here we are, the noble white people, bestowing these wonderful things. You have to give us
620 money and power and influence and...**

621 Right. I think a lot of it is—I call it white liberal guilt, is what it is. ‘I’ve been so successful at
622 making money off your money, that I think it’s time that I need to do something, because otherwise
623 I can’t live with myself.’ And I think that that’s what it was. And I found—I learned how that was,
624 I learned how to package things together so you could sell it to people of like intelligence, and stuff
625 of that nature. I learned how importance networks are, I learned how important schmoozing is, and
626 [Chuckles] stuff of that nature. And I also developed a lot of contacts at that time. I was able to sit
627 at the same table with CEOs and leaders of organizations that matter, that set policies in—policies
628 of the poor in this area. So...

629

630 **(53:33) And where’d you go next?**

631 I decided that it was time for me to go try out my entrepreneurial skills, so I went off and bought a
632 little company called Cherta International Trading. [Interviewer asks to hear the name again.] And
633 we imported food products out of Thailand, and we brought in vegetables. I did that for about two
634 years, and then I sold that to a company called International Foods out of New Jersey. Then I
635 didn’t really have anything else to do, so I kind of sat around, and Bill Sand, who owns Western
636 Bank, called me up one day and said, ‘Let’s go have lunch.’ So I went to have lunch, and he said,
637 ‘What are you doing?’ I said, ‘Really nothing.’ He said, ‘Why don’t you come back and work for
638 me?’ And I said, ‘Doing what?’ And he said, ‘Well, we figured out that our Hmong deposits have
639 gone from being 35% of total deposits down to fifteen, and we’d like to figure out a way to bring
640 that back up.’ So I said, ‘Well yeah, OK.’ So he says, ‘What do you want to do?’ And I said, ‘Well, I
641 want to be a commercial lender.’ He said, [matter-of-factly] ‘OK.’ That was at noon, and by three
642 o’clock I was hired as a vice president at a Western Bank, as a commercial lender—the first Hmong
643 commercial lender in the country—for a conventional bank. Did that for a couple of years, [Pauses]
644 went from a zero portfolio to about a \$30,000,000 portfolio, managed the investment department,
645 which had about \$70,000,000 under management for a year.

646

647 **(55:05) I assume some significant percentage of that was loans to Hmong businesses.**

648 I considered it my obligation to pull every single Hmong that wanted to start a business out of
649 poverty, so yeah. The Hmong loan, in terms of the sheer number of loans, was probably 60% of my
650 portfolio. In terms of dollar value they were probably 20%

651

652 **(55:29) So were there specific initiatives that you could create that would help you do that?**

653 I was very fortunate that Bill Sands trusted me. And so at the end of the day, as I’d tell Bill, you
654 could—I could analyze numbers with the best of them. At the end of the day, the last question a
655 lender asks himself is, ‘What does your gut say?’ And this is in—maybe in lending it shouldn’t be
656 done this way, but this is the way that I do it. I can analyze all the numbers, I can find every single
657 reason in the world to make that loan, I could find just as many reasons to not do that loan. But at

658 the end of the day I sit there, I go, ‘Do I trust that the people can make this happen, and am I
659 willing to collect if it goes to hell?’ And if my answer is ‘yes’ and ‘yes,’ I make the loan. And Bill and
660 the leadership at the bank were real supportive of that—real supportive. They didn’t question me,
661 which was a great thing. [They] allowed me to do—I would say that probably 90% of the businesses
662 up and down the Avenue [University Avenue], and in St. Paul and Minneapolis, I had a hand in. I
663 walk into any store and I get stuff for free all day long. [Interviewer laughs] ‘Hey, Kou! Have a
664 drink!’ I walk into four stores and I walk out with a bag of stuff, and people are just amazed. I walk
665 into restaurants. I eat—they won’t let me pay. And it’s just amazing. I mean, I have a lot of friends
666 that I’ve been very blessed. I mean, a couple years back, Administrator **Baretto**, which is the SBA
667 [Small Business Administration] administrator, came to town. And we had a breakfast session with
668 him. And we’re talking about how to get more loans into the communities of color, and
669 everybody’s coming up with their ideas. We’re sitting in here with all bank CEOs coming up with
670 their ideas, blah, blah—and I just started listening, at the end I said, ‘You know, what? I think those
671 are all great ideas, but I think you guys are missing the point. They said, ‘What do you mean?’ I
672 said, ‘Here. The SBA has all of these quotas that they want to meet. They have all of these non-
673 discrimination policies that banks can’t do. Well here’s the thing: you have—every single gate
674 keeper is white. Every single gate keeper is white. I’m the only Asian lender that has any lending
675 authority whatsoever in the Twin Cities here. You can have all those systems set up, but here’s the
676 gate, OK? I can’t even get past the gate keeper to participate in the game. I’m not even good
677 enough for you to discriminate against.

678 **That’s a pretty ironic way of putting it!**

679 Yeah. That’s the problem! You have all of these anti-discrimination policies, [voice rising] but if I
680 can’t get past a lender to get into the game, you can’t even discriminate against me! I mean, that’s
681 how bad it is, that I can’t even get discriminated by you, OK? [Laughs] I said, ‘What you need isn’t
682 programs—you’ve got enough programs, you got all these programs up the wazoo, what you need is
683 lenders who are culturally sensitive that understand business models in certain ethnic communities.
684 Without that, the white lender from Minnetonka is going to walk into my little Asian grocery store
685 and gonna say, ‘You know what? I don’t know if this is gonna work, ‘cause I don’t understand who
686 the heck is going to buy kung fu ketchup.’ [Interviewer laughs] It doesn’t make sense, you know? I
687 know they’re not going to do it, even if it’s a \$30,000 loan, they’re still not going to do it, because
688 they’re still going, ‘What am I going to do with 18 cases of kung fu ketchup?’ It doesn’t work!

689

690 **(59:01) There really is kung fu ketchup?**

691 The rooster sauce.

692 **OK! [Laughs]**

693 [Laughing] And so it doesn’t make any sense, right? [Laughs] And you need that! That’s why
694 California works, Texas works, New York works, because they have lenders that understand how
695 Asians do business, how Muslims do business, how Hispanics do business, and they can get through
696 the cultural barrier and say, [Pounding fist on desk] ‘It works,’ As I say to people, when I was
697 lending, I have this ‘35 Rule,’ and I know that I shouldn’t discriminate based on age, but I have this
698 ‘35 Rule.’ If you’re over 35, chances are you have an Eastern credit culture; if you’re under 35,
699 chances are you have a Western credit culture. The Eastern credit culture is, ‘We don’t really value
700 paying on time. We’ll never walk away from a debt, but you know, this month, ah, I have some
701 other needs. I’m spending the money elsewhere. [Laughs] OK, I’ll catch up next month.’ So timely
702 payment is not that big of a deal to us, but we will never walk away from debt. We repay all of our
703 debt. Western credit culture, you make those monthly payments, because you value timely
704 payments. But you will also file bankruptcy on me. And if I can make a guess at where you are with
705 this, I’ll give you leeway.

706 **Interesting.**

707 But you don't know that unless you're me, unless you're part of the community. Western Bank has
708 \$350 million in assets, and I walk up and down University Avenue, and I do business on a
709 handshake. You tell me you're going to pay me next week? Not a problem. Next week, I don't
710 know how you do it, but there's cash on my desk. And if you don't pay me, I'll call your uncle, and
711 he's going to say, 'Pay Kou!' [Interviewer laughs] You pay. It is what it is.

712

713 **(1:00:57) So how did JB Realty get started?**

714 JB Realty was owned by Judy Mueller, and started by Judy and Robert Van Hoef back in '75. They
715 were clients of mine, Judy is a real good friend of mine. I was working at Western Bank, and Judy
716 was getting ready to retire. She said to me, 'Why don't you come and work for me?' I said, 'Ahh, I
717 don't think so. As a job, I have a good job. I don't need this.' And she said, 'Well, what are looking
718 for, for you to come work for me?' At that time it was just Judy and Lynn. I said, 'Well, I want
719 ownership.' And the rest, as they say, is history. So I joined them, I bought out Judy six months
720 after I joined them. There was three of us in the office when I joined them, there's 18 of us now, so
721 we've grown a little bit in the last three years.

722 **I guess!**

723 Just a little bit.

724

725 **(1:01:53) [Interviewer asks Vang if he missed any important details before jumping into a**
726 **discussion of JB Realty.]**

727 Nope. That's it. From Western Bank I came here and never looked back. I'm having more fun
728 now than I've had in a long time.

729

730 **(1:02:04) What makes this such an enjoyable job for you?**

731 I get to do a little bit of everything that I love to do. I am a social creature, as you can probably tell.
732 I understand numbers, so I get to do a little bit of finance work. I like to see things get built, so I
733 get to do a little bit of construction, a little bit of design, which meets just, just enough of my
734 creativity juice, which I don't have that much of—just enough. And I'd like—I'm a student of
735 politics, and I get to deal with political officials on a little, on a small scale. I never want to be any of
736 them, but I get to deal with them, I get to sit at their table every once in a while. So I get to touch
737 finance, construction, design, and politics. I get to touch everything that I love to do. And I get to
738 deal with people. I [Pauses] my clients here are—there's a good chunk of them that are Hmong.
739 And that's just by default.

740

741 **(1:03:13) I would assume there's an aspect of this that's like what you did at the bank, which**
742 **is you get to open doors of opportunity, you get to say 'yes' to people who hear 'no' a lot,**
743 **Absolutely.**

744 **You get to really—in a way, I would guess this is how you see it: you get to serve your**
745 **people,**

746 **Absolutely.**

747 **...you get to follow that calling that you felt a long time ago.**

748 You know, we have—the Hmong community has been very fortunate in this community. I get a lot
749 of people who ask me, 'Why Minnesota? It's so cold! You guys are from tropical countries. Why
750 Minnesota?' And I said to them, I said, 'Well, the weather is cold, but the people are warm.' And
751 they say, 'What do you mean?' I say, 'Well, all you Scandinavian, Norwegian, German people, you
752 guys are kind of weird, just like us.' [Interviewer laughs] 'You don't really understand why we do
753 what we do, you don't know why we do what we do, you don't really care to do what we do, but as

754 long as we do it in our back yard and don't mess with you, you're good.' [Interviewer laughs] And
755 the same thing with us. We don't know why you people do that. We're like, 'Gee, that's just a weird
756 way of doing things. But hey, man, they're white! They do it that way, it's OK!' As long as you
757 don't do it in our back yard, we're good! And I think it's that 'Minnesota nice' tolerance where,
758 'You know, you're my neighbor, you're good, I see you every once in a while, we wave at each
759 other—I'll probably never invite you into my house, you'll probably never invite me into your
760 house. We'll meet in the yard somewhere and exchange egg rolls and beer every once in a while, but
761 as long as you do what you do in your yard and don't do it in mine, and I do what I do in mine and
762 don't do it in yours, we're good! [Laughs] I think a lot of it is that. And the Hmong community's
763 been blessed with having success in this marketplace, and they've been—it's a prosperous
764 community, and we're getting to the point where we want to have a stake in this community, where
765 we want to build long-term assets in this community. And what we at JB here have been able to do
766 is to be the person that brings that together. You want to build a building on University on land
767 that you own, you go down to the city, they're going to say, 'Gee, you need drawings.' 'Oh.' 'Go
768 find an architect.' You find an architect, they go, 'Yeah, we could draw it for you, but I don't know
769 if you could do that there. You may need a use permit.' You go back to the city, the city says,
770 'Yeah, here's a use permit application, but you need community approval.' Who's the community?
771 Well, some neighborhood organization. You go there, they go, 'What are you doing? That doesn't
772 make sense.' OK, when you get through that, they go, 'Well, you need to find the money.' Well
773 who's going to build it? Oh, a general contractor. You go find a contractor. 'Well gee, we can build
774 it, but your plan's not done.' It becomes a huge hassle. And what we've been able to do is bring all
775 of that in house. You tell us what you want, we will talk to the city, bring the architects together, put
776 the contractors together, get you financed, build it for you, [and] give you the keys when we're done.
777 And we've been very fortunate that people trust us enough to let us do that for them. We've
778 done—in the last 18 months, we've done over \$12 million worth of development, over 100,000
779 square feet of space. Very fortunate.

780
781 **(1:06:46) What was it in your previous experiences—obviously Western Bank was a big**
782 **piece of that—but what was it that got you to the point where you could not only buy out**
783 **this business after six months, but enjoy that trust and that influence in the community?**
784 People say to me, [Pauses] 'Boy, you've been really successful in six months.' No, I've laid the
785 groundwork for the trust from the community for 12 years. The biggest piece of it was at Western
786 Bank when I did a lot of construction lending, and I had a very intimate relationship with a lot of
787 borrowers. My first gig out of the chute when I got here was a borrower that I [lent] \$400,000 to
788 right before I left the bank. And he was going to build a new building. He called me up after I left
789 and said, 'Well, now you're in real estate, why don't you build me my building?' I said, 'Oh, I don't
790 know anything about construction!' [Both laugh] He says, 'Really?' I say, 'Yeah, I don't have
791 anything to do with construction.' He said, 'But you [lend] money for people to build buildings.' I
792 said, 'Yeah, I know.' He says, 'So you build me one.' [Sounding unsure:] 'I don't know!' And he's
793 like, 'Well, you know what? Maybe you don't know anything about construction, but I know you, I
794 trust you, you're a detail person, and I don't think you're going to screw me, so you know, why don't
795 you build me a building?' [Sounding naïve and a little scared:] "OK!" I was—'OK, no problem!'
796 So I went down and talked to the city, got the architect, got the contractor, built him the building,
797 gave him the keys. Three days later four more calls came in.

798
799 **(1:08:18) So here's someone who's paying you to get the expertise you need—**
800 **Right.**
801 **—to go out and—**

802 Yeah.

803 **—like you say, provide opportunities to other people.**

804 Yeah. The first building I built was \$425,000. I had no business building a \$425,000 building! The
805 second building I built—four and a half million. I had no business building a four and a half million
806 dollar building! [Interviewer laughs] But it got done.

807 **Wow. Wow!**

808 I built the largest Hmong church in the world—I think: the Hmong American Alliance Church up
809 in Maplewood. They went to the city four times and they could not get the conditional use permit.
810 It took me six months through Maplewood City Council to get the conditional use permit.

811

812 **(1:09:05) And that, too, you think, largely because of what you had picked up at Western**
813 **Bank and building those networks...**

814 Building those networks, knowing the politicians, understanding where they stand, framing a
815 position in a way where you don't offend people and you don't threaten people, but in a way that
816 logically makes sense. So I think that that's where a lot of my gift is, is the ability to survey the
817 landscape and frame an issue in ways where you can get people behind you and you're not
818 threatening people. We have a lot of people saying, 'Gee, we have nothing against your people, but
819 that church is just so big!' Well, three blocks down the way the Living Word is three times the size,
820 OK? Wwwwwhat happened there? [Laughs] 'Well gee, that stretch of parking lot is so long! How do
821 you make sure that there will be no drag racing on that parking lot?' I don't know, how does Target
822 make sure there's no drag racing on the Target parking lot? I don't know! What do you think we
823 should do? 'Well, I don't know. Maybe you should put up speed bumps.' OK! We'll put up speed
824 bumps! [Laughs]

825 **Happy to help out!**

826 A lot of it is positioning, and that's why I love inner city development, because it's all positioning.
827 When I built Hoa Bien, [Interviewer asks for the name again] Hoa Bien restaurant down on
828 University and Lexington, the neighborhood group said, 'We want two-story, housing on top,
829 density development. I sat down with the neighborhood group, and after numerous meetings, I
830 finally figured out how to craft my approach. And so I sat down with them, I said, 'I agree with you.
831 Two, three stories, density housing, everything you want. I think that's a great idea. But here's the
832 thing: she's got no money. All she has is enough to build this. But if you deny this project you're
833 not just denying a construction project, you're denying a woman a chance to live out the American
834 dream. Seventeen years ago she got off the boat in California, somehow made her way to
835 Minnesota, worked her fingers to the bone, saved every single penny she's got, slowly and
836 methodically accumulated this land for the last 17 years, to build her dream restaurant, and you're
837 going to deny an old Asian lady her dream of building a restaurant? Do you not like Asian food?
838 Everybody likes egg rolls and fried rice, right?

839

840 **(1:11:49) See, I'm going there today to eat lunch just based on that! That's where I'm going!**

841 [Laughing] In the end, they backed off, and we got the project built. But I think a lot of it is just
842 putting it in a way where everybody can relate to it. And this I learned from Steve Wellington.

843

844 **(1:12:06) And who is Steve Wellington?**

845 Steve Wellington owns Wellington Management—a very good friend of mine. A very, very smart
846 guy. And I craft my arts after him. [Laughs]

847

848 **(1:12:20) What do you think the Hmong community here in the St. Paul area has given you,**
849 **in terms of picking up the ability to serve the community, but also providing you with**

850 **connections and wisdom, and anything else that you see as a part of what has enhanced**
851 **your ability to, in turn, serve them?**

852 I [would] not [be] who I am if it wasn't for the Hmong community.

853

854 [Phone rings, Mr. Vang needs to answer it, recorder turned off. New track begins.]

855

856 (0:00) [I am] who I am because of the Hmong community. They've given me every opportunity in
857 the world, they've trusted me when they had no reason to trust me, [Laughs] they give me chances
858 to do things I have no business doing. Whatever I do, I always default back to my base. Many
859 people, I think, in my position, try to go outside of the community. Many people, many Hmong
860 businessmen, pride themselves on the fact that they don't serve the Hmong community, or that they
861 are so good that they can serve the white community. My thing is, you know what? There are
862 Fortune 500 white companies that want to tap into the Hmong market. Chances are it ain't that
863 bad! [Both laugh] So why not service your own community? Whatever I do, that's always been my
864 base. When I was doing the wholesaling, it was Asian wholesaling—back to my Hmong base.
865 When I was lending, my first couple of loans were Hmong loans—back to my base. I cut my teeth
866 on Hmong loans. Commercial real estate here, back to my base; construction, back to my base;
867 financing, back to my base; development, back to my base. From there, you have the experience
868 and the history to then tap into the non-Hmong base. That's just me. This community, for all its
869 good and bad, probably provides me with the most opportunity I ever got. I could never do this if I
870 was in Appleton, Wisconsin or Chicago, Illinois or anywhere else. The Hmong community in this
871 area, just because of the sheer number of us in the area, has basically, for lack of a better word,
872 force-fed tolerance into the greater community. Every once in a while I go down to Green Bay, I go
873 down to Appleton to visit friends, and it just drives me nuts, the way people looks at you, the way
874 people treat you, and stuff of that nature. I feel that, in this community, again, even if they don't
875 understand you, they're discreet about it, and they allow you to exist. And I think a lot of that has to
876 do with the grass roots, the non-profits, the education, the Hmong events—good or bad: the
877 homicide and the suicides and the Senator and the House of Representatives and the advisors and
878 the polygamy and the college graduates and the top—every year there must be three or four Hmong
879 valedictorians in the school district. So you have your good and your bad and it all comes together,
880 and it provides you with that opportunity.

881

882 **(2:56) Were you able to celebrate New Year in places like Ottawa, Illinois or Appleton?**

883 No. Appleton you can. There's New Year every year in Appleton. But here it's more of an event.
884 It's a function, it's an event. I did not realize how big the Hmong New year is to the River Center
885 until I sat on the River Center board. It's one of the top five events annually at the River Center.
886 But the thing is, the River Center staff doesn't give 'em that much respect. It wasn't until I sat on
887 the board that I said, 'You know, this is ridiculous. You guys shouldn't do this.' I said to the River
888 Center guys, 'We play a thousand hockey games a year. You can't move one hockey game so we're
889 not fighting for parking?' I mean, how ridiculous is that? 'There's a thousand hockey games! Move
890 it to a different day!' Last year they moved it back; the year before they actually didn't put hockey
891 on that day. Last year they moved it back. I wasn't on the board anymore, so they moved it back,
892 'because it's a tradition.' And I say to folks, 'Yeah, it may be a tradition, but the hockey tradition is a
893 lot shorter than the Hmong New Year tradition.' So now you got 30,000 Hmong and 18,000 white
894 dudes trying to find parking in a two-mile area. How ridiculous is that? And I think some of that is
895 just a lack of respect—in my mind it's a lack of respect. When you've got a thousand hockey games,
896 and I've got one thing going on, is it going to kill you? Lord knows I've got enough tickets to
897 hockey games. [Both laugh]

898

899 **(4:44) So in dealing with your clientele who are not Hmong, do you think there is still**
900 **sometimes a cultural or a racial barrier to overcome?**

901 Not anymore. I think my experience speaks for itself now. But in the first couple of deals,
902 absolutely. But now I feel that I am on even ground with a lot of stuff that I go after. But at first it
903 was. But I think right now I'm on even ground. Then again, I have a company of 18 people. My
904 wife and I are the only two Hmong people in the company. I don't know what that says about us,
905 anyway, [Pauses] but it is flattering that so many good people are willing to come and work with me,
906 which is a good thing.

907 **I was treated royally by both of the staff I met.**

908 Good.

909

910 **(5:36) As you think of where you stand now, and you look at the generation that's coming**
911 **up, including you own kids, and you've already expressed that there are some significant**
912 **problems, as there are in any community in this country, are there specific concerns that**
913 **you have or specific initiatives that you either have seen or would like to see that might**
914 **address some of the problems that you've alluded to?**

915 I think we will lose our community as our kids come up. I think they are more for themselves, they
916 are more mobile, they're more educated, and they're able to weave in and out of Hmong and non-
917 Hmong communities a lot more easily. And because of that ability and mobility, I think you lose the
918 community cohesiveness. I think that the clan will lose more and more of its power base, and I
919 think that the gap between the haves and the have-nots in the Hmong community is going to get
920 quite a bit wider. I am sad to see kids that grew up in this country, were born in this country, grew
921 up in this country, and are stuck in dead-end positions or dead-end jobs or no jobs at all. They
922 don't know enough Hmong to rely on the support system of the clan, however small that may be.
923 They don't know enough English to survive in their own. And it's a shame, 'cause all they know is
924 street slang, and it doesn't work—not in the real world. It may work if you're flipping burgers, but
925 not in the real world. And I feel bad about that. As prosperous and as much advancement as the
926 community has had, you drive up and down University Avenue, you can see the difference. There's
927 a huge difference. And I think that gap needs to come together. And I don't know how that—but
928 you know, those things are left for much brighter people than me.

929

930 **(7:37) Well, and I guess that's the positive and the negative of seeing your children**
931 **assimilate, at least on some level, into American culture. Like you say, they have greater**
932 **opportunity, they have greater flexibility in how they interface with the culture,**

933 Absolutely.

934 **...but they're losing something.**

935 Absolutely. And you see that now. At Hmong funerals you see that if [the deceased] is not truly
936 related to that family, people don't come anymore. And you see a lot of that stuff. You see how
937 people are changing, and you see how people are ignoring the clan's influence. Those are [Pauses]
938 those are not good trends in my mind, because you have to fear something, or you have to fear
939 retaliation of something, and if the only fear we have is of the law, and not a moral fear of who we
940 are and what we stand for, it's tough, because you don't have that relationship anymore.

941

942 **(8:43) What do you hope for your own children? What do you hope that they will hang on**
943 **to—or at least try to hang on to about their heritage and their identity, and what are you,**
944 **perhaps, happy to see them let go of?**

945 I am happy—‘cause I have three girls, and I am happy that they will have opportunities that they
946 would never have had if we were back in Laos. They will have the opportunity to be independent,
947 which they would never have if they were back in Laos. What I hope that they don’t lose is that
948 sense of family—that family goes beyond mom, dad, and siblings. The family is extended, and that
949 they will cherish that and they will take that into consideration when they do things. My hope, and
950 my aspiration is for my kids to start a little bit better than where I started, and hopefully by that they
951 don’t get complacent and not lose out. In the Hmong community we have a saying that, ‘Do not
952 look down on the orphans, because one day God is going to turn the end of the spoon for them.’
953 As you know, the spoon has the end where you hold it. What that means is, if you look down on
954 orphans, one day they’re going to become adults. And one day God is going to allow them to hold
955 that end of the spoon and feed themselves, and maybe feed you. So I hope that a lot of those senses
956 of community [aren’t] lost.

957
958 **(10:28) If you could sit down with a group of young Hmong students and allow them to**
959 **benefit from your experience and provide to them what you would think of as good**
960 **suggestions or secrets of your success, however you might want to package it, what would**
961 **you hope to share with them?**

962 I get asked that a lot by a lot of people. [Interviewer laughs.]

963 **I’m sure.**

964 And people ask me, ‘What is the secret to your success?’ And what I say to them is, ‘The secret of
965 my success is, I beat the sun every single day. I beat the sun every single day. I get up before the sun
966 comes out and I go to bed after the sun goes to bed. If you can’t beat the sun every single day, you
967 will not be successful.’ It may have—there may be a little bit of education, stuff of that nature, and
968 people say to me, ‘You’re successful because of your education.’ I say, ‘Well, that is a base. That is a
969 very big base.’ But you know, you could graduate from Harvard or Yale, but if you don’t beat the
970 sun every day you will never be successful. If you’re not motivated, if you can’t do stuff right, you
971 will never be successful. The other thing that I’d like the younger kids to realize is that [Pauses]
972 there are perceptions and stories and propaganda out there that tears down a lot of the elders, a lot
973 of the leaders or the old leaders of the community. And I think these kids need to be more tolerant.
974 They need to fully understand why things are done, and let history show you what type of leader the
975 General is, or his people, or what type of leader Yang Dao is, and don’t be so quick to judge. You
976 should—instead of judging your parents and saying, ‘You guys are idiots because you are so loyal to
977 one person,’ maybe understand why they’re so loyal. Maybe what you don’t realize is that your
978 father is so loyal because the General drug his butt out of some trenches somewhere 30 years ago
979 and saved his life. That’s why he’s so loyal. Or maybe Yang Dao stood up for him in some
980 parliamentary session. That’s why he’s so loyal. You should realize that, instead of saying, ‘You
981 know what? You guys are idiots. You were raised in some backwater part of Laos, and that stuff
982 makes no difference. We are now educated. We hold bachelor’s from the University of Minnesota
983 and we know more.’ Because there is more to history than what is written. I mean, you guys know
984 this. History is written from the viewpoint of the victor. It’s never the dude that lost. And we lost!
985 [Laughs]

986
987 **(13:35) But there’s a lot that’s being written about the Hmong these days, so that’s a good**
988 **thing.**

989 Yeah, you know, you get a lot of people, who [Pauses] how we view education today is how they
990 viewed political appointments thirty years ago. The doctors and the lawyers, they think they know
991 everything and that they should be revered upon like the generals and the colonels of the old days.
992 Maybe, maybe not, I don’t know. Eileen Her and I are very good friends, we were not always good

993 friends. [Laughs] When Eileen graduated from law school, she was the vice chair of HAP when I
994 got hired. And she went off on a tangent on a couple of things—and again, I was out of college, I
995 thought my shit didn't stink, so we got into—Eileen and PanYing and I got into some argument and
996 I said to him, I said, 'Hey, just because you walked up on stage, got your law degrees, doesn't mean
997 that the heavens opened up and the knowledge of time got bestowed upon you two. So get off the
998 high horse, get back down in the community, and figure out what the hell's going on before you
999 guys start talking about this crap.' [Both laugh] In the end all three of us made up, and we're good
1000 friends, but I think a lot of it is that, that a lot of these kids, they look down on their own people.
1001 They think that serving the Hmong is below them. They think that now that they got all of these
1002 acronyms behind their name that what they say should matter, and stuff of that nature, and quite
1003 honestly, if you've ever been through the trenches with me, it doesn't work that way. You know, I
1004 think people should really realize that, because it's tough. I mean, I did the funeral home project at
1005 the request of the General. We started last January, and we've been running for about six months,
1006 and it got in the paper about all of this (***) shit, and a lot of people say to me, 'Well gee, why didn't
1007 you ask the general to see if he's got money before you did this, so they could buy it. I'm like, 'Yeah,
1008 right.' Your mom and dad say to you, 'Hey, you know what? Now that you are educated, you've
1009 got a good job, would you buy a car and I'll make the monthly payments? Because you've got good
1010 credit and I don't. Are you going to say to your mom and dad, 'Yo, mom and dad, you got the
1011 monthly payment lined up somewhere? They'd say, 'Come on!' [Laughs] Give me a break, OK?
1012 The General says, 'I think you're in a position to do this to help me out. Would you be willing to?'
1013 I'm honored. I'm honored. I'm honored for you to even think that I would have the ability to help
1014 you out. Am I going to question you? Hey, if I can't do it, I'll be the first person to say I can't do it.
1015 But if I can make it happen, I'll make it happen. And I think a lot of it is that, is that you lose that
1016 sense of respect and obligation and position in the community. I think you have to have that.

1017
1018 (16:53) [Interviewer explains that part of his interest in the Hmong is that his own grandparents
1019 were immigrants and he has seen the loss of his own culture through the two succeeding
1020 generations]

1021 Do you eat sauerkraut?

1022 **Very rarely!**

1023 Wiener schnitzel?

1024 **Not really.**

1025 Then you're not [German anymore]! Just kidding! [Laughs]

1026 **But that's just it! Now it's a little different for me, because I'm white. So the Hmong have
1027 that additional difference—the fact that 'we will never be white,'**

1028 Absolutely.

1029 **But even so—I don't know if you were at Gary Yia Lee's talk [at Concordia University in
1030 December 2005], but the question that seemed to come up over and over and over
1031 again...was, 'What is it going to mean to be Hmong two generations from now? How do I
1032 know what that really means? Will it mean anything, other than my name, and some vague
1033 knowledge I have of how my great-grandfather fought in the war or whatever that may be?
1034 Do you ever consider that—?**

1035 Yeah, yeah. What does it mean to be Hmong now? Is it the same as it was what it meant to be
1036 Hmong when we were leaving China? I think that that definition hasn't been defined yet. [Paused]
1037 We have found through research that there are artifacts that tie us together, but our culture today is
1038 not the same as it was a hundred years ago.

1039

1040 **(18:49) But you've been pretty successful as a people at remaining separate.**

1041 I think a lot of that is by design. And I think that we've lost that. I don't think—I think we're going
1042 to be more like everybody else than we've ever been. I think we will lose more in the next 50 years
1043 than we've lost in the last 500 years. But then again, are we? Because a couple years back I was
1044 watching this PBS special about the people of the Yalu River. And as they went down the Yalu
1045 River, I saw bits and pieces of things that we do. I thought, 'Well, wait a minute. We do that. We
1046 don't do all that other stuff, but we do that piece. Oh yeah, we do that piece, too!' So what really
1047 does it mean? It's an ever-changing evolution, and I think it's gonna—we're gonna do some stuff
1048 here that we picked up and it may have—I mean, for example, when we tie the rope [the string
1049 around someone's wrist], that's not us, that's Laotian. That's not us. We don't do that, Hmong
1050 people don't do that. We never do that. We do it now, because it's a Laotian thing. Marrying in a
1051 church? That's a white thing. We don't do that! [Chuckles] The Christmas tree? That's a white
1052 thing! So I think that you're gonna do that, but I think eventually it comes down to is the last name,
1053 in my mind, which is changing now anyway—I think it comes down to that last name. And I think
1054 it comes down to that whole sense of family thing. I could be totally wrong, but I think as long as
1055 we can keep the extended family, then I think we have our Hmongness—and the importance of that
1056 extended family. It may not wield decision-making influences—
1057 [Phone rings]
1058 —but the importance of that, then we have...

1059
1060 [He answers the phone. Recorder turned off, new track begins.]

1061
1062 (0:04) But that's—I think that as long as we can keep the family together—and I think we lose more
1063 and more of that as we become more and more Christian. Because you lose more of the culture,
1064 and you become more homogenous with the mainstream Christianity. I, again, like I said, I'm a
1065 lifelong Christian—been a Christian all my life. I find myself, today, gravitating more and more
1066 toward the traditional religion. And I think a lot of that is—and I tell my wife, I say 'When the *qeej*
1067 plays and the drum beats, it stirs the soul. And I find myself—I find myself going there. And I
1068 don't know why. I find myself listening to the death songs a lot more. I find myself understanding
1069 what they mean, because that particular tradition or that particular event ties the beginning of
1070 Hmong to today. If you listen to those death songs, they tie the beginning of Hmong to today. And
1071 I think as long as we have some of that element in play—even marriage ceremonies don't tie that,
1072 but that death ceremony ties all that together. And as long as we have some of those elements I
1073 think we will always be Hmong. It ain't the black hair anymore, it ain't eating mustard soup. It's
1074 that—I think it's that piece of it. I mean, I never really listened to Hmong traditional instruments,
1075 and songs and stuff of that nature in all my life, but the last couple years, I find that when I hear it, it
1076 stirs the soul. It makes you say, 'That's what I've been missing. That's what I want to know.'

1077
1078 **(1:56) I don't know if that's—I'm just totally guessing here, but I find myself as I get older**
1079 **listening to the music of my parents' generation.**

1080 Yes! Yes.

1081 **So I don't know if it's more of that [type of phenomenon] or if it is of a spiritual nature as**
1082 **well.**

1083 I think it's us searching for that comfort zone. You know, my father-in-law passed away last year,
1084 last November, and that was my first exposure to a non-Christian funeral, because he was a non-
1085 Christian, and he lived with me. And he didn't have any sons, so I had to stand up and be his son.
1086 And I actually sat through the whole three days. And [Pauses] things made sense. It had a
1087 beginning and an end. I put that on top of the Christian funerals, and maybe I'm wrong, but it

1088 doesn't have a beginning or an end. It has an event, but there's no reason why we're doing it this
1089 way, and there's no reason to tie it together.

1090
1091 **(2:56) Well, I think in a way, just my idea, the Christian funeral of today is not the Christian**
1092 **funeral of three or four generations ago—**

1093 Right, right.

1094 **—where you would put the body out on the porch or lay it out on the family table and**
1095 **people would come and it would be a long event. So what the Hmong are losing, on some**
1096 **level, I think is what the Western Christians have already lost, which is that sense of**
1097 **connection and community and taking time...**

1098 Yeah. Because in the non-Christian funerals, there's a reason why you do it that way, and it's done
1099 because of this, and this is where this person goes. And it's—I have conversations with ministers on
1100 this, and I say, 'Are the non-Christians really sending their loved ones to hell?' They say, 'Yeah, they
1101 are.' I say, 'I don't think so.' They say, 'What do you mean?' I say, 'Because, hell in a Christian
1102 sense is where it's hot, constantly hot, and you're burning in hell. And the Hmong sense is the land
1103 of darkness and cold. That's totally different from each other, OK? How can you go to hell if
1104 you're going to darkness and cold? It doesn't make any sense.' And I said, 'In Hmong, when we say
1105 *Ntxwng Yug*' (That's the king of the spirits of the dead) 'and the Christian word, it's the devil,' And I
1106 say to a lot of ministers, 'How do we know that the devil is really *Ntxwng Yug*?' They say, 'Well, he is.'
1107 I say, 'I don't know. How do you know that?' Some white missionary dude came up to the hillsides
1108 of Laos again and said, 'Who is the worst spirit dude you guys got?' And we said, '*Ntxwng Yug*,' and
1109 they go, 'That's the devil.' All of a sudden the dude becomes the devil! [Voice rises] He may not be
1110 the devil! I don't know! I mean, it's a translation gig! [Laughs] And so when you look at these
1111 things and you say, 'Is it really—did one supplant the other because there was no other translation,
1112 or did it not?' Even Christianity itself is a hodge-podge of religion. Did Christ ever exist? I don't
1113 know! But if you look at paganism from Ireland to England to Germany to Latvia, they all have
1114 pieces of Christianity, and it has to kind of come together, because why is it that there's the Trinity
1115 in Christianity and [in] the Hmong traditional religion there's a trinity also? You have a spirit that
1116 goes and reincarnates, OK? You have a spirit that goes to the land of the ancestors and stays, and
1117 you have a spirit that roams the earth constantly, which means that the living has to constantly feed
1118 the spirit that roams the earth. [Extended, high-pitched:] Well, how did the Hmong religion get the
1119 Trinity and you guys got the Trinity, too? Somewhere along the line some dude talked and kind of
1120 brought it together. I don't know! [Both laugh] The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! Well,
1121 we've got three, too! How rich is that? Our three are kind of weird, your three is kind of weird, too.
1122 All of a sudden, you go, OK, is it really the same thing? So is it really wrong, is it really not wrong?
1123 I don't know! But [Pauses] it stirs the soul. It makes you yearn for what you don't know—and
1124 maybe it's nothing else but the desire to know. It could just be that, also.

1125
1126 **(6:47) Or to connect...**

1127 Yeah, or to connect, absolutely.

1128

1129 [Interview concludes, Interview thanks Mr. Vang.]

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