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Interview with J. Kou Vang

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

Still in Illinois?

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

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

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

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

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

(7:11) When you say ‘access,’ what do you mean?

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

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

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

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

When we were in Ottawa, at that time, my father’s—our clan, the leader of our clan lived in Appleton, and my mom’s youngest brother lived in Kansas City. He relayed a message to my father’s clan and said, ‘Hey, we know that her husband’s passed away. It’s your responsibility. Are you going to take care of them or not? If you’re not, I’m going to come and take them to Kansas City,’ because they knew that we were there by ourselves. So my uncle came down and told us we’ve got to move on to Appleton because he didn’t want to deal with the Hmong side of things,

[Interviewer laughs] so we moved up to Appleton, which is not the worst thing in the world, so…
For the uninitiated, how would you explain the relationship of the individual to the clan?

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

Standing.

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

OK. Now, I neglected to ask—did you make it over to the United States because of a sponsor, or how was it that you got to Chicago?

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

And did you live in an apartment?

[Yes]

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

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

And the neighborhood you described as ‘where they dump the trash, anyway.’

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

Did you have a sense of that as a young boy, or do you think you were really too young to understand that?

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

When you put it that way…[Laughs]

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

At what point do you think your language skills began to kick in? Do you have any specific memories of thinking, ‘Oh wow! I’m starting to get it’ or ‘It’s coming together for me now’?

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

(14:16) So what was life like for you in Appleton?
It was a—I think it was a normal life. I mean, I went to Catholic schools, so relatively bland. I grew
up just like any kid. I think when you grow up in that kind of environment, you grow up running
away from the environment. And when I grew up, I was fortunate to be relatively athletic, so I
played a lot of sports, hung out with a lots of friends—and I had a lot of white friends. And I was
also fortunate in that my English was pretty good, and so my white friends related to me pretty well.
I think they overlooked the fact that we lived in the projects, stuff of that nature. I mean, I sensed
some of that, but I think they kind of got over that as they got to know me. So I didn’t really hang
around with a lot of Hmong kids in high school. Granted, Appleton had a pretty nice Hmong
concentration, but I really didn’t hang around with a lot of Hmong kids. I didn’t really realize my
“Hmongness,” if there’s such a word, until I got to college, where I started looking around, I started
re-evaluating myself. And my first year was very similar to high school, where I had a lot of white
kids, a lot of white friends. But by my sophomore and junior year I was pretty exclusively hanging
out with a lot of Hmong kids. And I think a lot of that is just me being more comfortable with
myself.

(15:48) Do you think that you and your siblings—well, I’m sure you did—but how would
you describe the way in which you and your siblings served as an interpreter for your mom,
and as someone who sort of helped her function as best she could in this country?
Absolutely. We—my mom didn’t speak English, so [Pauses] we would translate for her at our own
parent-teacher conference, so… [Interviewer laughs] it gives you a lot of power, you know? You
can tell her what you want her to know! [Both laugh] So we would do that, we’d take her to the
hospital, to the clinic, and we’d translate for her there. I remember I was in sixth grade, my aunt has
a son that was born with fluid in his brain, and it had to get drained. And they did that when he was
just born, and when he was three years old, we had to go down to Milwaukee, to the Children’s
hospital in Milwaukee, for them to replace the shunt. I went down to translate that procedure to my
aunt, and I was in sixth grade! I had no idea what a shunt was, I had no idea what the heck they
were doing, but you kind of make do with it. And I—so, we were that link for our parents.

(17:06) Do you have a sense of how difficult that must have been for your mother and for
people of her generation to come here and try to function here?
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
own value of having—and I would think that if I was in my parents’ shoes, having my kids translate
for me, I think I would just—that that would be a tremendous—that would do tremendous damage
to my own self-esteem, that we reversed roles. I think it’s one thing if it was at this stage of life,
where I’m married and I have my own family and I’m assisting my parents. That’s a totally different
issue. But when you’re 12 years old and you’re the face of the family, I think it is a real damage to
the parents, and I think that’s why you have a lot of the issues you do in the community now, is
because kids are in defiance of their parents because they view themselves as being the key to the
outside world for their parents. And I think it’s tough, it’s very tough, because unless I can sit there
and tell—and present an image that I know more than my kids, otherwise they won’t listen to me,
it’s going to be tough.

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

[Yes.]

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

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

Oh boy…

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

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

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

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

—that you talked about, that you can defy the clan.
Absolutely. And I think a lot of the clan’s acceptance is I have defied the clan, and I’m still, for lack of a better word, successful. And our marriage is successful, and we coexist, me going to church, 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 speak English, White Hmong, and Green Hmong, depending on who they talk to. [Laughs] So it’s—you know, if my kids are with a White Hmong, they don’t know that—they all speak White Hmong. [When] my kids are with Green Hmong, they all speak Green Hmong. And people are going, ‘Well, gee, that’s interesting.’

I’l have to hire them in a few years to do some translating for me!

[Laughs]

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

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

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

Absolutely. Absolutely. You know—a marriage ceremony. Only my clan can marry off my daughter. We have a saying: ‘The older brother can [birth] the child, the younger brother can marry them off.’ Somebody wants to marry my daughter, I call my clan together, we sit down, we talk: ‘Is it a good family? Is it worth it? Should we do it? [et cetera],’ and it’s a clan effort. Because if that girl goes off and her marriage gets screwed up, it’s [the] clan pressure that keeps that marriage together. You don’t have that, because now, you go to church and you say, ‘Well gee, my clan—I’m not going to use my clan, so I’m going to have the elders of the church come and act as my clan. Well, the elders of the church are maybe from six different clans! They’re not going to pressure that marriage to come together if there’s problems. So you have a lot of those things, and as I tell ministers, I say, “I think you guys really need to define this—that culture and religion are so intertwined that if you want the intertwining of Christianity and Hmong culture together, that’s fine, but you have to fess up also, that when the crap hit the fan, you’ve got to be there to clean it up. Otherwise, you shouldn’t be there. And so I think that the culture is turning, and because of the vacuum, or that void that is created because the clan is losing influence, something needs to step into that. And is it the church? I don’t know. But quite honestly, the bulk of Hmong Christians belong to the Christian Missionary Alliance denomination. That’s an incredibly conservative denomination—very, very conservative. And I think—a couple years ago they had a celebration: Fifty Years of Christianity to the Hmong people, and I had the opportunity—I get called in to these
sessions and I don’t know why they do it. I was in the session talking to the superintendent of the CMA. We sat there and we talked and talked and I said, ‘Let me ask you guys a question.’ They said, ‘Yeah.’ I said, [Sighs, Pauses] ‘Let’s say that we have a really big church, and they’re building this big building and I am a major contributor. And my daughter happens to marry a non-Christian. And I say to your church, I want a church wedding. In your guidelines, I cannot have a church wedding. And I’m saying I want a church wedding, and you’re saying I don’t think so. I’m saying, Well geez, this wing has my name on it. If I don’t get the church wedding, this wing doesn’t exist.’ I said, ‘I think eventually there will be people like me who are going to do this, and the church and the local church are going to have to decide if you are going to change principle, or are you going to lose me as a member?’ And I said, ‘At the end of the day, I think you’re going to change principle, because you’re probably going to lose my $120,000 a year contribution.’

(28:54) Now this probably isn’t a fair question to ask, but I’m going to ask it anyway. Sure.

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

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

(30:06) Well, and I suppose it doesn’t help that you see this sort of breakdown of Hmong community at the same time that you see this questioning of the Christian faith—Absolutely.

—so that you don’t have the community to sit around and discuss what should be happening.

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

That’s OK.

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

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

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


(33:19) So where’d you go to college?

I went to the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

And how would you describe that experience? You’ve already said that you experienced an awakening of sorts there.

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

What do you think made you uncomfortable before that time?

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

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

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

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

Would you say that thinking about those things made you, in any way, reconsider the loss of your father and other members of your family in a broader context, maybe in a more personal way?

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

Did college affect you in any other ways that you think of as significant now?

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

OK. What did you graduate with?

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

And did you already have a sense before you graduated about what you wanted to do with that degree, or were you open to possibilities at that point?

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

Did you initially stay in the Wisconsin area, did you come to St. Paul right away, or…?

I graduated, worked for a year as a controller for a company called Graber Products. I—Lee Pao [Xiong] and I are very good friends. We were in the same youth group together. He was at Hmong United Methodist Church up here, we went to Appleton United Methodist Church up in Appleton. And we ran across each other. He was a couple years older than me, but we ran across each other at youth camps. And I was working for Graber. He called me right after he got hired as executive director for Hmong American Partnership, and said, ‘Hey! Why don’t you come up here?’ I said,
‘For what?’ He said, ‘Just come up and see me.’ I said, ‘Sure.’ So I went up, I saw him, we talked and caught up and as I was leaving, ‘Say, why don’t you come work for me?’ I said, ‘Yeah, right, whatever, man.’ [Interviewer laughs] So we talked, going back and forth, and I said, ‘Well, let me think about it.’ So I went home, I didn’t think about it. So he called me again. He said, ‘Did you think anymore about it?’ I said, ‘No, not really.’ He said, ‘Well why don’t you?’ I said, ‘You can’t afford me.’ He said, ‘Well how much are you making?’ So I told him, and he said, ‘Yeah, you’re right. I can’t afford you.’ [Both laugh] I said, ‘So it is what it is.’ And he said, ‘Well, let me ask you a question.’ He says, ‘Do you want to spend the rest of your life making bicycle racks or do you want to take that education and do something to help your people the way you always talk about—and the way you and I always talked about when we were sitting at those camp fires?’ And I thought about it. I said, ‘Yeah, you are right.’ So I left my job, came up here and worked for a third of what I was making, [Interviewer laughs] but I think it was a good thing; it was a blessing in disguise, because it allowed me to see the community. And a couple of years ago, I was over at that symposium at Concordia [University in St. Paul], and I said to people, I said, ‘This is the epic center of the Hmong community in the United States. And I truly believe that. Anything that is good will come out of here. Anything that is bad will come out of here, because this is the epic center of the Hmong community.’

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

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

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

Yeah. Yeah, but they’re interesting points of discussion.

(42:44) So you come here, you’re working for slave wages, or something close to that—Yup.

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

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

(43:38) You’ve already said that you think this is the epicenter of the Hmong community nationally. What impression did—I assume more St. Paul than Minneapolis, but even so, what impression did the Twin Cities make on you when you first decided to come, and then actually did come and live here?
Well, it was the same thing. We thought that— I thought that anything good will come out of here, and anything bad will come out of here, and if you’re going to make yourself into somebody, then you need to do it here, because this is where the best and the brightest are. If you’re going to compete, you compete here. There’s no use in being—the smartest of the stupid people. [Interviewer laughs] That doesn’t make any sense, OK? If you’re the smartest one in your class, but everyone in your class is below median average, it doesn’t make any sense. You can’t be the smartest of the stupid people, you’ve got to be the smartest of the smart people.

And before I came up here, that was the intention I had, was I want to go and—because in Hmong we have a saying that after you sharpen your knife, you need to go try it out. Well, I’ve sharpened my knife. I’ve gone to college, I have three degrees, I graduated in three years—quite honestly I thought my shit didn’t stink and I walked on water, [Interviewer laughs] and so I needed to come and test out my blade, you know? [Laughs]

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

Absolutely.

—to just see the number of Hmong businesses and Hmong churches and Hmong homes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I know. [Interviewer laughs] Isn’t that funny? [Laughs] Yeah, I mean, there were times when I would get home and the phone would ring, and people would say, ‘We know you’re home. We’d like to (***
So do I. [Both laugh]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Absolutely.

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

Neighborhood Development Center.
OK. And how long did you work there?
For about three years.

And what did you get out of that experience?
[Pauses] I understood how… [Pauses] I understood how the white man went around trying to,
[Chuckling] trying to create a need to service the poor people.

Create a need…? A need for whom?
For them.

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

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

(53:33) And where’d you go next?
I decided that it was time for me to go try out my entrepreneurial skills, so I went off and bought a
little company called Cherta International Trading. [Interviewer asks to hear the name again.] And
we imported food products out of Thailand, and we brought in vegetables. I did that for about two
years, and then I sold that to a company called International Foods out of New Jersey. Then I
didn’t really have anything else to do, so I kind of sat around, and Bill Sand, who owns Western
Bank, called me up one day and said, ‘Let’s go have lunch.’ So I went to have lunch, and he said,
‘What are you doing?’ I said, ‘Really nothing.’ He said, ‘Why don’t you come back and work for
me?’ And I said, ‘Doing what?’ And he said, ‘Well, we figured out that our Hmong deposits have
gone from being 35% of total deposits down to fifteen, and we’d like to figure out a way to bring
that back up.’ So I said, ‘Well yeah, OK.’ So he says, ‘What do you want to do?’ And I said, ‘Well, I
want to be a commercial lender.’ He said, [matter-of-factly] ‘OK.’ That was at noon, and by three
o’clock I was hired as a vice president at a Western Bank, as a commercial lender—the first Hmong
commercial lender in the country—for a conventional bank. Did that for a couple of years, [Pauses]
went from a zero portfolio to about a $30,000,000 portfolio, managed the investment department,
which had about $70,000,000 under management for a year.

(55:05) I assume some significant percentage of that was loans to Hmong businesses.
I considered it my obligation to pull every single Hmong that wanted to start a business out of
poverty, so yeah. The Hmong loan, in terms of the sheer number of loans, was probably 60% of my
portfolio. In terms of dollar value they were probably 20%

(55:29) So were there specific initiatives that you could create that would help you do that?
I was very fortunate that Bill Sands trusted me. And so at the end of the day, as I’d tell Bill, you
could—I could analyze numbers with the best of them. At the end of the day, the last question a
lender asks himself is, ‘What does your gut say?’ And this is in—maybe in lending it shouldn’t be
done this way, but this is the way that I do it. I can analyze all the numbers, I can find every single
reason in the world to make that loan, I could find just as many reasons to not do that loan. But at
the end of the day I sit there, I go, 'Do I trust that the people can make this happen, and am I willing to collect if it goes to hell?' And if my answer is 'yes' and 'yes,' I make the loan. And Bill and the leadership at the bank were real supportive of that—real supportive. They didn’t question me, which was a great thing. [They] allowed me to do—I would say that probably 90% of the businesses up and down the Avenue [University Avenue], and in St. Paul and Minneapolis, I had a hand in. I walk into any store and I get stuff for free all day long. [Interviewer laughs] 'Hey, Kou! Have a drink!' I walk into four stores and I walk out with a bag of stuff, and people are just amazed. I walk into restaurants. I eat—they won't let me pay. And it’s just amazing. I mean, I have a lot of friends that I’ve been very blessed. I mean, a couple years back, Administrator Baretto, which is the SBA [Small Business Administration] administrator, came to town. And we had a breakfast session with him. And we’re talking about how to get more loans into the communities of color, and everybody’s coming up with their ideas. We’re sitting in here with all bank CEOs coming up with their ideas, blah, blah—and I just started listening, at the end I said, ‘You know, what? I think those are all great ideas, but I think you guys are missing the point. They said, ‘What do you mean?’ I said, ‘Here. The SBA has all of these quotas that they want to meet. They have all of these non-discrimination policies that banks can’t do. Well here’s the thing: you have—every single gate keeper is white. Every single gate keeper is white. I’m the only Asian lender that has any lending authority whatsoever in the Twin Cities here. You can have all those systems set up, but here’s the gate, OK? I can’t even get past the gate keeper to participate in the game. I’m not even good enough for you to discriminate against.

That’s a pretty ironic way of putting it!

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

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

The rooster sauce.

OK! [Laughs]

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

But you don’t know that unless you’re me, unless you’re part of the community. Western Bank has $350 million in assets, and I walk up and down University Avenue, and I do business on a handshake. You tell me you’re going to pay me next week? Not a problem. Next week, I don’t 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 he’s going to say, ‘Pay Kou!’ [Interviewer laughs] You pay. It is what it is.

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

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

I guess!

Just a little bit.

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

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

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

I get to do a little bit of everything that I love to do. I am a social creature, as you can probably tell. I understand numbers, so I get to do a little bit of finance work. I like to see things get built, so I get to do a little bit of construction, a little bit of design, which meets just, just enough of my creativity juice, which I don’t have that much of—just enough. And I’d like—I’m a student of politics, and I get to deal with political officials on a little, on a small scale. I never want to be any of 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 finance, construction, design, and politics. I get to touch everything that I love to do. And I get to deal with people. I [Pauses] my clients here are—there’s a good chunk of them that are Hmong. And that’s just by default.

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

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

Absolutely.

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

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

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

(1:08:18) So here’s someone who’s paying you to get the expertise you need—Right. —to go out and—
Yeah.  —like you say, provide opportunities to other people.

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

Wow. Wow!

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

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

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

Happy to help out!

A lot of it is positioning, and that’s why I love inner city development, because it’s all positioning. When I built Hoa Bien, [Interviewer asks for the name again] Hoa Bien restaurant down on University and Lexington, the neighborhood group said, ‘We want two-story, housing on top, density development. I sat down with the neighborhood group, and after numerous meetings, I finally figured out how to craft my approach. And so I sat down with them, I said, ‘I agree with you.

Two, three stories, density housing, everything you want. I think that’s a great idea. But here’s the thing: she’s got no money. All she has is enough to build this. But if you deny this project you’re not just denying a construction project, you’re denying a woman a chance to live out the American dream. Seventeen years ago she got off the boat in California, somehow made her way to Minnesota, worked her fingers to the bone, saved every single penny she’s got, slowly and methodically accumulated this land for the last 17 years, to build her dream restaurant, and you’re going to deny an old Asian lady her dream of building a restaurant? Do you not like Asian food? Everybody likes egg rolls and fried rice, right?

(1:11:49) See, I’m going there today to eat lunch just based on that! That’s where I’m going! [Laughing] In the end, they backed off, and we got the project built. But I think a lot of it is just putting it in a way where everybody can relate to it. And this I learned from Steve Wellington.

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

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

(1:12:20) What do you think the Hmong community here in the St. Paul area has given you, in terms of picking up the ability to serve the community, but also providing you with
connections and wisdom, and anything else that you see as a part of what has enhanced your ability to, in turn, serve them?

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

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

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

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

No. Appleton you can. There’s New Year every year in Appleton. But here it’s more of an event. It’s a function, it’s an event. I did not realize how big the Hmong New year is to the River Center until I sat on the River Center board. It’s one of the top five events annually at the River Center. But the thing is, the River Center staff doesn’t give ‘em that much respect. It wasn’t until I sat on the board that I said, ‘You know, this is ridiculous. You guys shouldn’t do this.’ I said to the River Center guys, ‘We play a thousand hockey games a year. You can’t move one hockey game so we’re not fighting for parking?’ I mean, how ridiculous is that? ‘There’s a thousand hockey games! Move it to a different day!’ Last year they moved it back; the year before they actually didn’t put hockey on that day. Last year they moved it back. I wasn’t on the board anymore, so they moved it back, ‘because it’s a tradition.’ And I say to folks, ‘Yeah, it may be a tradition, but the hockey tradition is a lot shorter than the Hmong New Year tradition.’ So now you got 30,000 Hmong and 18,000 white dudes trying to find parking in a two-mile area. How ridiculous is that? And I think some of that is just a lack of respect—in my mind it’s a lack of respect. When you’ve got a thousand hockey games, and I’ve got one thing going on, is it going to kill you? Lord knows I’ve got enough tickets to hockey games. [Both laugh]
So in dealing with your clientele who are not Hmong, do you think there is still sometimes a cultural or a racial barrier to overcome? Not anymore. I think my experience speaks for itself now. But in the first couple of deals, absolutely. But now I feel that I am on even ground with a lot of stuff that I go after. But at first it was. But I think right now I’m on even ground. Then again, I have a company of 18 people. My wife and I are the only two Hmong people in the company. I don’t know what that says about us, anyway, [Pauses] but it is flattering that so many good people are willing to come and work with me, which is a good thing.

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

Good.

As you think of where you stand now, and you look at the generation that’s coming up, including you own kids, and you’ve already expressed that there are some significant problems, as there are in any community in this country, are there specific concerns that you have or specific initiatives that you either have seen or would like to see that might address some of the problems that you’ve alluded to? I think we will lose our community as our kids come up. I think they are more for themselves, they are more mobile, they’re more educated, and they’re able to weave in and out of Hmong and non-Hmong communities a lot more easily. And because of that ability and mobility, I think you lose the community cohesiveness. I think that the clan will lose more and more of its power base, and I think that the gap between the haves and the have-nots in the Hmong community is going to get quite a bit wider. I am sad to see kids that grew up in this country, were born in this country, grew up in this country, and are stuck in dead-end positions or dead-end jobs or no jobs at all. They don’t know enough Hmong to rely on the support system of the clan, however small that may be. They don’t know enough English to survive in their own. And it’s a shame, ‘cause all they know is street slang, and it doesn’t work—not in the real world. It may work if you’re flipping burgers, but not in the real world. And I feel bad about that. As prosperous and as much advancement as the community has had, you drive up and down University Avenue, you can see the difference. There’s a huge difference. And I think that gap needs to come together. And I don’t know how that—but you know, those things are left for much brighter people than me.

Well, and I guess that’s the positive and the negative of seeing your children assimilate, at least on some level, into American culture. Like you say, they have greater opportunity, they have greater flexibility in how they interface with the culture, Absolutely.

...but they’re losing something.

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

What do you hope for your own children? What do you hope that they will hang on to—or at least try to hang on to about their heritage and their identity, and what are you, perhaps, happy to see them let go of?
I am happy—’cause I have three girls, and I am happy that they will have opportunities that they would never have had if we were back in Laos. They will have the opportunity to be independent, which they would never have if they were back in Laos. What I hope that they don’t lose is that sense of family—that family goes beyond mom, dad, and siblings. The family is extended, and that they will cherish that and they will take that into consideration when they do things. My hope, and my aspiration is for my kids to start a little bit better than where I started, and hopefully by that they don’t get complacent and not lose out. In the Hmong community we have a saying that, ‘Do not look down on the orphans, because one day God is going to turn the end of the spoon for them.’ As you know, the spoon has the end where you hold it. What that means is, if you look down on orphans, one day they’re going to become adults. And one day God is going to allow them to hold that end of the spoon and feed themselves, and maybe feed you. So I hope that a lot of those senses of community aren’t lost.

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

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

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

Yeah, you know, you get a lot of people, who [Pauses] how we view education today is how they viewed political appointments thirty years ago. The doctors and the lawyers, they think they know everything and that they should be revered upon like the generals and the colonels of the old days. Maybe, maybe not, I don’t know. Eileen Her and I are very good friends, we were not always good
When Eileen graduated from law school, she was the vice chair of HAP when I got hired. And she went off on a tangent on a couple of things—and again, I was out of college, I thought my shit didn’t stink, so we got into—Eileen and PanYing and I got into some argument and I said to him, I said, ‘Hey, just because you walked up on stage, got your law degrees, doesn’t mean that the heavens opened up and the knowledge of time got bestowed upon you two. So get off the high horse, get back down in the community, and figure out what the hell’s going on before you guys start talking about this crap.’ [Both laugh] In the end all three of us made up, and we’re good friends, but I think a lot of it is that, that a lot of these kids, they look down on their own people. They think that serving the Hmong is below them. They think that now that they got all of these acronyms behind their name that what they say should matter, and stuff of that nature, and quite honestly, if you’ve ever been through the trenches with me, it doesn’t work that way. You know, I think people should really realize that, because it’s tough. I mean, I did the funeral home project at the request of the General. We started last January, and we’ve been running for about six months, and it got in the paper about all of this *** shit, and a lot of people say to me, ‘Well gee, why didn’t you ask the general to see if he’s got money before you did this, so they could buy it. I’m like, ‘Yeah, right.’ Your mom and dad say to you, ‘Hey, you know what? Now that you are educated, you’ve got a good job, would you buy a car and I’ll make the monthly payments? Because you’ve got good credit and I don’t. Are you going to say to your mom and dad, ‘Yo, mom and dad, you got the monthly payment lined up somewhere? They’d say, ‘Come on!’ [Laughs] Give me a break, OK? The General says, ‘I think you’re in a position to do this to help me out. Would you be willing to?’ I’m honored. I’m honored. I’m honored for you to even think that I would have the ability to help 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. 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 sense of respect and obligation and position in the community. I think you have to have that.

(16:53) [Interviewer explains that part of his interest in the Hmong is that his own grandparents were immigrants and he has seen the loss of his own culture through the two succeeding generations] Do you eat sauerkraut? Very rarely! Wiener schnitzel? Not really. Then you’re not [German anymore]! Just kidding! [Laughs] But that’s just it! Now it’s a little different for me, because I’m white. So the Hmong have that additional difference—the fact that ‘we will never be white,’ Absolutely.

But even so—I don’t know if you were at Gary Yia Lee’s talk [at Concordia University in December 2005], but the question that seemed to come up over and over again…was, ‘What is it going to mean to be Hmong two generations from now? How do I know what that really means? Will it mean anything, other than my name, and some vague knowledge I have of how my great-grandfather fought in the war or whatever that may be? Do you ever consider that—?’ Yeah, yeah. What does it mean to be Hmong now? Is it the same as it was what it meant to be Hmong when we were leaving China? I think that that definition hasn’t been defined yet. [Paused] We have found through research that there are artifacts that tie us together, but our culture today is not the same as it was a hundred years ago.

(18:49) But you’ve been pretty successful as a people at remaining separate.
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 to be more like everybody else than we’ve ever been. I think we will lose more in the next 50 years than we’ve lost in the last 500 years. But then again, are we? Because a couple years back I was watching this PBS special about the people of the Yalu River. And as they went down the Yalu River, I saw bits and pieces of things that we do. I thought, ‘Well, wait a minute. We do that. We don’t do all that other stuff, but we do that piece. Oh yeah, we do that piece, too!’ So what really does it mean? It’s an ever-changing evolution, and I think it’s gonna—we’re gonna do some stuff here that we picked up and it may have—I mean, for example, when we tie the rope [the string around someone’s wrist], that’s not us, that’s Laotian. That’s not us. We don’t do that, Hmong people don’t do that. We never do that. We do it now, because it’s a Laotian thing. Marrying in a church? That’s a white thing. We don’t do that! [Chuckles] The Christmas tree? That’s a white thing! So I think that you’re gonna do that, but I think eventually it comes down to is the last name, in my mind, which is changing now anyway—I think it comes down to that last name. And I think it comes down to that whole sense of family thing. I could be totally wrong, but I think as long as we can keep the extended family, then I think we have our Hmongness—and the importance of that extended family. It may not wield decision-making influences—

[Phone rings]

—but the importance of that, then we have…

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

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

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

Yes! Yes.

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

I think it’s us searching for that comfort zone. You know, my father-in-law passed away last year, last November, and that was my first exposure to a non-Christian funeral, because he was a non-Christian, and he lived with me. And he didn’t have any sons, so I had to stand up and be his son. And I actually sat through the whole three days. And [Pauses] things made sense. It had a beginning and an end. I put that on top of the Christian funerals, and maybe I’m wrong, but it
doesn't have a beginning or an end. It has an event, but there's no reason why we're doing it this way, and there's no reason to tie it together.

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

Right, right.

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

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

(6:47) Or to connect…

Yeah, or to connect, absolutely.

[Interview concludes, Interview thanks Mr. Vang.]