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Interview with Lee Pao Xiong

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Lee Pao Xiong

Interviewer (Parts 1 & 2 – December 7, 2005)/Transcriber/Editor: Paul Hillmer
Interviewer (Part 3 – February 9, 2006): Mai Neng Vang

Born in Long Tieng, Laos in 1966, Lee Pao Xiong lived with his father, who had already been recruited into the Hmong army at age 12. His mother and grandparents lived nearby. After the fall of Long Tieng in May 1975, Xiong and his family spent more than a year in Thai refugee camps before migrating to the United States in 1976. Settling first in Indiana, his family moved to the Twin Cities in 1979. Xiong earned a B.S. in Political Science from the University of Minnesota, an M.A. from Hamline University, and is currently pursuing his Ph.D. He has held a variety of important positions, including: Executive Director of Hmong-American Partnership; Executive Director, State Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans; Director, Government & Community Relations, Concordia University; President & CEO, Urban Coalition. In 2000 he became the first Hmong American presidential appointee when Bill Clinton named him to serve on the President's Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. He is currently the Director of the Center for Hmong Studies at Concordia University – St. Paul.

***Editor's note: One should note that laughter can express a wide range of emotions. In Mr. Xiong's case, laughter is often used to defuse a tense or even tragic story he is relating.*

Part I – 7 December, 2005

(0:00) Let's just start at the very beginning. What are some of your earliest memories?
My first memory in Laos would be living in the air base, Long Tieng, with my father, and also just the constant T-28 flying in all the time, and also being out in the fields, the rice fields with my mom, and also with the uncles as we watched over the farm—and raising water buffaloes [Laughs].

(0:49) What are your parents' names?
My father's name is Song Khoua Xiong, and my mother's name is Mee Vang. In my eyes they're heroes. I just imagine if I was their age during that time, and being able to navigate all of the turmoils, and also leaving their life behind—I don't know if I could do that. [Laughs]

(1:24) It's understandable.
Yeah.
Well, you're in this place that's city but air base and also nerve center for the Hmong army and air force, as it were…Let's talk about that air strip. Did you know any of the men who piloted the planes?
No. Of course, we always hear about Ly Lue, the Hmong pilot. But I don't know any of them, but back then I was only nine years old. That's my recollection. And I know that, because our school

was right next to the air base, and so we'd see them coming in all the time, and some tended to be much more cocky than others. And when they came in, what they'd do is fly over the air strip really low, and then they'd climb off, and twist and turn, and come back again. So they're showing off. It would be great to know who those people are. But they were kind of like the elite, and they were untouchable. But I grew up watching those planes, and I even witnessed one accident where a jeep was crossing the air strip, and the T-28 came and clipped the jeep, and the T-28 flipped, and the pilot ejected. I always wondered what ever happened to the pilot, and it was during recess, so I always wondered, 'What ever happened to the pilot?' But I think I read one of the books that said that the pilot actually ejected—so he was safe. And he landed over by the movie theater. That's the other recollection of that field, of growing up in that town, is there was a movie theater there, and how we always looked forward to the movies—kung fu movies and sword fighting movies. They were very popular back then—Chinese kung fu.

(3:52) Was this an indoor or an outdoor theater?

It was an indoor theater. Once in a while they would show the movies by the temple—which is a little bit south of the air base, southeast of the air base—and they would have this big screen and show movies. The last time I remember watching—I remember movies on the big screen outside by the temple, it was a movie about war. And it would be great to go back and try to find out what that movie—to see that movie again. So it's these little pictures in time.

(4:30) What do you remember about your parents from that time?

I think that—my father was in the military, and I lived off and on—I would say most of the time I lived with my dad, because he was stationed right next to the air base. He was a lieutenant, so he was sort of in charge of the 150s, 155 cannons. And I often would go down there. And he was stationed right next to—well, there were two places. There's south of the air base, there's a little karst, or whatever you call it. And right underneath there was where they stored all of the cannons. And then—so often times I would go down there, and visit him down there. And there's also somewhat like a mini-headquarters more or less on the right side, south right side of the air base, and my father was also stationed there. I lived with my father in Long Tieng so I could go to school. And my mother and my grandmother and all the rest of my brothers, they actually lived in Phou Sanh, the base that was just about to the southern part of the city. So I lived with my father so I could go to school. Sometimes I would go down there, and he would give me those military meal packets. You know, you get this big meal packet with fried rice, and they're all freeze dried. All you had to do was—you could eat it like that or you could add water. A fig bar—whenever I eat a fig bar here it reminds me of the military food packet there. And so there's fig bars, there's also canned meat—so I just remember my dad being always at the base. So whenever he couldn't come home he would give me money and I would go and eat pho [noodles]. I would go to the market myself. So I remember just living alone when my dad was away. But I also remember—again, the time when I lived with my mother because my father was in the field and I would go live with my mother, and she would have this military radio, and sometimes I would go with my mother, and she would be carrying my brother on her back and we would go to the highest point, and she would call into the field and talk to my dad. I mean, talk about romance! That's pretty romantic there. We would go and she would call him and try to find out how he was doing, and that stuff. And I remember as we walked, it was usually in the evening or early in the morning. And when you walk through this tall grass you would get all wet and all of that. So those are memories of my parents during that time.

(8:33) And what was school like?

It was kind of interesting in that some of my teachers were my mom's teachers. My mom has formal education. But school was hard. There were always two bullies that always waited after school to beat me up. That something that—

(9:00) Some things are the same everywhere.

I will always remember that [Laughs]. They were always waiting to beat me up, and it would be interesting to find out who those people are now. But they always waited to beat me up. School was—I think it was fun. I also remember—see back then, teachers commanded a lot of authority and respect, and so I also remember us—my teacher taking the whole class to cut bamboo for him, for his house, to build his house. And people don't question that. The teacher is sort of an extension of the parents back then, and command a high amount of respect, so if the teacher tells you to do something, you do it; you don't question it. But school was good, and it was hard. I know it was hard because we had to memorize things. And we can't leave our fingernails long, we can't leave our hair long. And if you have long fingernails, what the teacher will do is they'll ask you to put your hands up and put your fingers together, and he'll smack it with a ruler. Or if you don't memorize the verse that you were supposed to memorize the night before, the teachers would ask you to kneel down in front of the class and hold two large rocks in your hands [extends arms out].

(10:32) Just hold them out

Yeah, just hold them out until the teacher—I mean, just like in the old days. You wear this 'dumb hat' [dunce cap] [Laughs] to embarrass and punish you just so that you can learn. But it was fun. It was fun. I enjoyed growing up in that environment, in that town, and it's kind of interesting. I mean, I remember the two times that communists infiltrated the base. I remember the one time I was with my dad, actually, on the side of the hill that we called the Mountains of the King, because that's where the king's palace was. I remember staying in a fox hole with him, I remember all the rockets coming in, because—

(11:25) You were under fire?

Oh yeah! Oh yeah, I remember that

(11:29) I would remember that, too! [Both laugh]

But it's kind of fascinating in that the valley is—Long Tieng is in a valley surrounded by two mountains. So if the enemy were to fire, if they fired too far it would hit the other side of the mountain, which is where the base is, and that's where the king's palace is, and so it'll fly over there. And if you don't fire high enough, you'll hit the side of the other mountains. And so either way Long Tieng is protected, and that's why it's there for so long—because it was protected by this valley, I mean by these two huge mountains. And, of course, it's a nightmare for the pilots [chuckles]. I read *Sky is Falling*, the book by Gayle Morrison, so now I see the perspective of the pilots who were trying to land and trying to take off and you have these big mountains in front of you—underneath there is where my dad's base was, and on the other side was where my grandparents from my mother's side was, and there was also a cemetery back there. And then you would walk through there, and then as you approached the hill and you go downhill, if you take a left and go through another valley on the other side, that was our farm as well. So that's where we farmed over there. And then that road would actually take you all the way to Vientiane. So it's an interesting time being with my dad. It was a lot of bonding with my dad. The other thing in living with my dad was—in living with my dad in Long Tieng was going to the garden with my dad or going hinting. We cultivated a little plot, which was kind of far—I don't know why we cultivated that far, but whatever we planted, we'd eat. Whenever I eat green beans, I remember that

experience with my dad. You know, we would go over there and pick it and bring it home. Also going hunting with my dad, hunting for bamboo shoots and also for wild animals. Those are times that—sometimes I'll just think about it, when I eat certain things…I was also raising a little pig in Long Tieng, and I remember waking up every morning, very early in the morning, just to find food for the pig. And there's certain kinds of plants. It's a very young shoot, and it's very (***). And you would go and it's growing wild out there, so you'd go and pick it and bring it back, and then you boil it and then you would feed that to the pig. So I remember doing that. I remember one time asking my mom and dad, 'Whatever happened to that pig?' [Laughs] And they said, 'Oh, we killed it and ate it. I didn't remember that part! [Laughs] I just remember raising the pig, you know? So time back then, I think, was really fun.

(15:09) Were there times before the evacuation that you remember being attacked or having to take shelter?

Oh yeah. I know that we evacuated Long Tieng twice, and that's why our house—we had two houses and that's what—Phou Sanh was a new house. We were evacuated, and the first time we went there and we lived in two places—or was it three places? I remember one time we stayed in the jungle for a while, and I remember to this day—you know, when you go to the woods there's a certain smell to the forest [Laughs], and I remember when we evacuated, a whole bunch of people went with us. And my dad chopped down bamboos and built a temporary shelter for us to stay in—so I remember <u>that</u> part. But I have no idea where that is. I have not interviewed my dad to try and find out about some of these things. It's very uncomfortable for us to have conversations with our parents, to ask about these things—culturally, so it's very hard. But that was—and then we eventually moved on and that's where we lived in Phou Sanh, and that's where, with my grandparents we lived there until the day—with my dad and mom, until the day we evacuated. So we had a house there and we had a house in Long Tieng. But yeah, we were attacked, and I remember right in front of our house we would have a shelter. And it's a dug-in shelter, it's a bomb shelter is what it is, and it's pitch dark, and whenever we'd get attacked we would run and hide there in the bomb shelter—and it's all covered and it's dark and dirty…So whenever—I was telling my wife, you know, when I'm sleeping at night—my wife accuses me of having PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder] [Laughs]—al the traumas, you know—but I told her, 'In the middle of the night, don't suddenly wake me up. Wake me up slowly, don't wake me with a loud noise or that stuff, because automatically I go back to that. You know, that's a challenge. We would be sleeping and my parents would come in and just go, [frantically] '<u>Wake up! Wake up! Let's go! Let's go!</u>' in a rush, you know, and we would rush out of there and go down to the bomb shelter and stay there. I remember one time we were attacked the evening before, and I woke up the next day really early in the morning, going out there searching for parachutes. Because those flares—what kept the flares up was a parachute. And the flare's a long metal tube. What you would do is just hit it on the ground or on a hard surface, and it would go up and it would shoot just like a rocket [makes the sound of a small rocket shooting off] up there, and then the parachute would go up there and the flare would just float down.

(18:48) And the flare was from the enemy? [Interviewer was thinking of flares more as an offensive weapon used to invade than a defensive weapon used to identify invaders]

No, the flare was just so people could see light, so that you would see where the enemies are, basically. So it provides—it's really high, and it comes down slowly, and so it's like projecting light in that immediate vicinity…These flares were for the soldiers, and whenever you hear noise, [makes bursting noise] then you can see. And so if you see the enemies, then you would shoot the enemies. So I suppose some were—I would say it was being used more by <u>our</u> team, by our side more than

the other side, because what they want is they want to be quiet [Laughs]. They don't want us to be able to see them. And so I would go and try to find these flares and get the parachutes, because that's toys [Laughs]. You'd get these parachutes, these cool parachutes. I know how to make parachutes. You know, my son—one day we were making parachutes out of plastic, and he said, 'Oh you know how to do that, Dad?' And I said 'Yeah! I was doing that back there.' You just tie string to it, and then you tie a rock [to the strings] and you throw it up there and it would [makes sound of chute opening] and it would come down. And so I would go, and one time I went to, I walked all the way to the airfield, and I saw—

(20:19) How far would that have been, roughly?

I would say about from Concordia to, probably to St. Paul Technical College [about two and a half miles] [Laughs]. It would be kind of that far—because we're on this side [far from the air strip], and I saw a lot of dead people, but more importantly I saw the dead enemies, and I saw a couple of them, and one of them was in a trench right by the air fields. Another one was—I think it was around the soccer area. And so, as kids you are curious, and I saw them lying there—and I read about that in one of these books. It's really fascinating for me to have experienced it and then to read from a scholarly perspective or from a military perspective and say yes, they died here, yes, yes—and I say, 'I saw them! I was there, you know?' And there was nobody around. It seems like I was the only one there. There was nobody around. It was really early in the morning. People were still afraid to come out, but as kids, there's no fear, you know? So I saw, actually, two of those dead people, and they were—those two enemies were trying to infiltrate, and they probably did sabotage a T-28, but they were killed. But they were just lying there. [Pauses] So I remember that about that. The air fields—there were a lot of things happening on the air fields, and a lot of accidents. There was one time when the C-47—we called it *Lakota*. The airplane—my understanding was that they forgot to untie the weight that kept the plane down and so they crashed at the end of the runway, and it killed a lot of people, 'cause I was there—I was a kid, I was there, and I could smell the jet fuel, I could hear the people screaming for help, I could see the bloody bodies that were pulled from the airplane. And people weren't being pulled nicely. People's hair was being dragged out and they pulled out people's arms and all that. I <u>saw</u> all of these—the rescues…

(23:25) Well, maybe your wife is right…

Yeah! That's why on September 11, when the planes crashed into the two Twin Towers, I dreamt that I was there, and I could smell death, because I've been in those situations. I could smell the jet fuel—I know what jet fuel smells like, and I know what flesh smells like, and I know what blood smells like, and I know what rotting bodies smell like. Because I've experienced all of those—I've <u>seen</u> all of those at a very young age. As a young kid you are curious about these things. You see body bags being unloaded from helicopters and from airplanes, and decomposed bodies—and I was there, and I saw all of these things. So those are the negative side to my experience at Long Tieng.

(24:38) Have you reflected back on that as an adult—about how you think those experiences might have shaped the person you became? You were trying to have this semi-normal childhood, but you're dad's a soldier, you're right next to this air strip where you see crashes, you see dead bodies, probably—did you see American soldiers?

Oh yeah, oh yeah. American soldiers would land helicopters in the soccer fields. And we would go and they would give us gum. They would also give us—not only just gum, but <u>chocolate</u> [Laughs]. And also often times there were all these parachute air shows. And the soccer field is right next to the air strip. And the other thing I remember about Americans is [I thought] 'they must be bored, because they had these remote controlled airplanes. It's not the fancy kind where you just use the

remote, but it's the kind where you turn it on, and then there's a long string attached and then they go around like this [circles around himself like a lasso, showing how men whipped the plane around them in a circle, Laughs]. In fact I just saw an advertisement for one of these remote controlled planes the other night, and I was telling my wife and son, 'Let's go get this!' So it's kind of fascinating. You remember that, you know. And I was telling my wife, 'I want to get that!' But yeah, there were a lot of Americans there. They would come in also with the C-130s, these cargo planes—C-130s, or actually Americans [Laughs]

(26:24) Do you have any recollections of what you actually thought of them or how you saw them fitting in to the picture of your life on Long Tieng?

Well, they're big; they're big and tall, and they're also very friendly. Yeah, they were very friendly [pauses] which is kind of fascinating how people label Americans. They label the Americans as enemies [Laughs] or as devils. You know, it's kind of fascinating where we are. And so war is all about that, and yet people are really part of it. Yeah, they came in with the big helicopters. And these helicopters would land in the fields and we would go and interact with them. They were all in pilot uniforms. I never saw them in civilian clothes. And that's really fascinating. And as you read, you know, 'the Americans are there, they're dressed as civilians. You've got these American GIs in civilian clothes. And all I saw—I guess the folks that I see, they're all in their pilot uniforms—you know, military outfits, uniforms. So I suppose that's because we were right next to the airplanes [Laughs].

(27:50) Did you at any time—were there any places where soldiers or Americans left stuff behind and you could make toys out of them or grab souvenirs or anything like that?

No, it was more the parachutes and the [pauses] Styrofoam, because they shipped bullets and all of that stuff in crates with Styrofoam. And what we would do is we would make model airplanes out of it. So you use a knife and just cut it. The other thing that we used—as kids that we made was the metal strip that kept the boxes together—the ribbon, you know—they were all made of metal. There would be a lot of those around, and so what we would do was we would go and break it off and we would sharpen it and use that as knives. So those are our toys, you know? So we would try to find those. Also, when they dropped the—when they did rice drops or food drops, there were these big ropes that they tied these bags of rice and canned food and that, and when they dropped it from the plane we would try to find those ropes and use them. So those are things that we [Laughs]—you organize, you hunt, you go out there and try to find. You know, that's all, we didn't have any—

(29:52) That's what boys do!

Yeah! So Styrofoam was a really important thing. Bullet casings were also very, very popular. Batteries were also something that we—you know, batteries for flashlights and all that. And we would go and scour and try to find batteries, and we would make toys out of them, and we would make games out of them. We would stack them and trade—you know, hit 'em and trade 'em—we didn't know it was toxic! {Laughs] Bullet casings were also very popular. You would go and pick them up. Now, like when I lived in Frogtown, I found a bullet casing, a long bullet casing, and I thought, 'Wow! I found this!' And it brings back memories! And when you go and you find batteries hidden somewhere when you're cleaning up, you go, 'That's cool!' So those are some of the junk that we turned into fun. Parachutes, plastics—we made parachutes out of plastic, we made knives out of those metal ribbons.

(31:21) I started one question and then took us another direction, so I should go back. Do you think your childhood influenced you in some way?

I think it has, because I think that—let me give an example. My daughter—when we discovered that she was hard of hearing, deaf, I didn't take it that hard. My wife took it really hard. And I attribute that to the fact that I grew up around much more traumatic kinds of experiences. You kind of put things into perspective. You know, as people suffer here, you think, 'Oh, I've seen worse' [Laughs] And so I think that, subconsciously, I think that's who I am, and that experience made me much more tolerant and made me much more accepting—maybe much more than I should—at least that's what my wife said [Laughs]. [It's] made me certainly a much more patient person based on that, because I've seen worse, and I've seen struggles. I remember when my wife and I went to China, and she was just in tears because the bathroom conditions were—I mean, she grew up in America. She came here when she was only two years old, so she was not used to that kind of experience. And for me, going there it was like, 'Oh yeah, the bathroom's dirty? Big deal! [Laughs] It's dusty, it's dirty—big deal!' So I think it's that kind of thing; you learn to appreciate things more. Maybe that's why I always argue with my wife about the fact that she says I'm a pack rat. And I said, 'You know, it's like people.' I'm thinking of Dr. [Robert] Holst [President of Concordia University]. You know, when we cleaned out this house [Dr. Holst and his wife moved out of the President's House into a private home. The house is now the home of the Center for Hmong Studies and the Hmong Archives], it was very difficult for him to throw things away, because there's some emotional attachment to them. As for me, I keep things. I still have stuff from my elementary school days, and it's very important. And I was telling her just the other day—two weeks ago my daughter took some of the Hmong clothing to school and she left it at school and didn't bring it back, and my wife was just, 'We'll get it back,' and I said, 'No, these are heirlooms. This is clothing that your parents gave you for your wedding!' [Laughs] So for her, it's just very easy for her to throw things away and forget about this, forget about that. But for me, when we left the country of Laos—to this day, my father has only one brother. My grandfather has two kids—my dad and my uncle, who was older. And he died in the war. And his son lied with us, and I sort of made him the older brother. When people ask me, 'Are you the oldest in your family?' I say yes and no. Biologically yes, I'm the oldest one, but my cousin lived with us ever since he was small and we grew up together, so I see him as an older brother. And so he is the oldest in the family. So I'm not the oldest, he's the oldest of my brothers. And we have seven brothers, no sisters. We have no pictures of his dad, you know? We left all of that behind. Some of my dad's stuff, some of our stuff—when we left, we left with just the clothes on our back and the clothes in the bags we were carrying across to Thailand, and that's it. And when we came to America, we just brought our clothes, and that's it. So you learn to value those things, small things. And I often tell my wife, these are functional, they're usable. Don't throw them away! [Laughs] Use them! And so it's just a different mentality. I think we just have totally different ways of perceiving things. I tell my wife, 'Those are your heirlooms. One day you will learn to appreciate those things when your parents are long gone. When you don't have them anymore you'll say, 'I wish I kept them. I would have loved to have them.' So I keep a lot of things of mine, because it's meaningful—and things that we should have brought with us, but we left it in a cave somewhere or we left it in the house. I would love to go back one day to visit the house. My dad told me that they probably dismantled the house and used all the materials. But I say, 'I don't care, I want to see that place!' [Laughs] I want to be able to go see the peach that's in front of my house, or the banana trees that are in front of my house, or the hot peppers that we planted. I would love to go back! I mean, as far as I'm concerned it's still preserved in time.

(37:40) And it's still preserved here [points to head]

Absolutely! So I still see that, and I want to go back and see if I can see that again. It's just fascinating. I mean, even going back to Ban Vinai, or going back to Nam Phong, which is the air field where we originally landed when we were airlifted out of Laos. And it was a chaotic time, because we didn't know whether the plane was going to come or not. There's always, 'We don't know,' and there's deceptions everywhere, and it makes you kind of angry that these military leaders abandoned the people. So today when I hear General Vang Pao say, 'I brought you here,' I think, 'you didn't bring us here.' You were intending to bring only 2000 people. You were intending to leave everybody behind, so for you to say that you brought me here, I got here on my own! You know what I'm saying? So when you think back to that—I have great respect for General Vang Pao, but we just need to agree to disagree. And I appreciate what he has done back then, but to take credit for everything—it's unbelievable. You know, for me it's kind of hard. And knowing that he was only planning on bringing 2,000. And that was the first time—I learned about it from the book, Gayle Morrison's book, and then listening to Yang Long saying, 'Yeah, there was only 98 families [Laughs], and that Jerry Daniels asked General Vang Pao, 'How many people do you want to be airlifted out of Laos? Give me a list.' And if I was General Vang Pao I'd say, 'I want all of my people out of here' [Laughs] instead of giving him a list and saying, 'Here's 98 families and here's 2000 people. And this is all the people that's going to get on that plane, and this plane's for this family and this plane's for that family.' It's just—I don't know whether he's regretting it. I doubt that he is, but there's still people out there waiting to get out. We <u>fought</u> to get on that plane, and my dad got left behind, and came on one of the last C-130s that General [Harry "Heine"] Aderholt ordered…He was in charge of Air Force over there, and when he heard that all of the military leaders were going to abandon all of the Hmong people, the Americans were going to abandon all the Hmong people, he ordered, he <u>paid</u> one of the pilots $5,000 to fly. He put the pilot under house arrest [Laughs] and so he flew down there (and it's also mentioned in Gayle Morrison's book, and I've heard it directly from him [Aderholt], too). And he paid the pilot $5,000 (the pilot is dead now). The pilot was on his way home, and so he called the air field, and put the pilot under house arrest. And he went down there and said, 'How much do you need?' General Aderholt said, 'I have $5,000 on me. Will this be sufficient?' And so he went down and found some more pilots, and hired some pilots, and went back and got us out of there—<u>not</u> General Vang Pao. General Vang Pao didn't ask Aderholt to do that. General Aderholt felt that General Vang Pao abandoned the Hmong people. All the military leaders abandoned the Hmong people, and that's not right. I would say 99% of the Hmong people out there don't know these things—only the people who read, that are able to read and are able to connect with these people, understand all of this. And that's why—General John Vessey. He was in charge of the whole operation over there! But if you talk with Hmong people, [they'll ask] 'Who's General John Vessey?' They know Jerry Daniels, they know Colonel Bill Lair, but they don't know Aderholt. Only the people that are pros know Aderholt. They know General Vang Pao, and they know all of the close people, but they don't know any of the larger perspective. And I think that's—but we got on that plane, and my dad was pushing us. So I got in, my mom got in, a couple of my brothers got in. I remember how tightly packed we were in that C-47, the *Lakota* airplane. And you have to climb—it's quite high, the stairs are pretty steep, so you have to climb up there in order to get in. And my dad was pushing us in, and so we got in. And my dad, I think one or two of my brothers got left behind, my uncle got left behind—my uncle from my grandpa's second marriage, and my aunt from my grandpa's second marriage, and my grandma and my grandpa, they all got left behind. My dad was telling me the story of how the C-130, people—in the C-130 the back of the plane, the doors would open and close, and people would just flock in. But there's—between the door and the opening there was nobody trying to get through there, so my dad went in there, and he got everybody through that door. And he also helped a couple people get on there. That's what he said. So it would be interesting to find out who those couple of people were

that he saved, because the door was closing, and my dad pulled them in, quickly pulled them in. Otherwise they would have been like [makes the noise of the doors closing]. So I remember when we first arrived at the airport at Nam Phong. We got out of there, probably in the afternoon, because they're always tricking us. They said, 'Oh those planes! Get back, get back! Those planes are enemy airplanes!' See, that's what these military leaders did. They were 'enemy airplanes,' and they would come, and people would be afraid, so they would move back. They would land. And they would just land down by General Vang Pao's house, and then all these colonels would just flock, jump in, and then take off, and abandon the people. And we were all back in there. And suddenly we realized that they were playing games, so we went down there. We searched for a plane and got out.
[End Tape Side 1]

[Side 2]

[Do remember if you had much warning about the evacuation of Long Tieng?]
(0:00) Well, my dad was in the military, and he knew. We had heard rumors that they were going to evacuate people from two places. And I'm glad that we chose Long Tieng. So we heard rumors that there was going to be an evacuation. We didn't know, couldn't confirm that there was going to be an evacuation. So my dad quickly rounded everybody up, and we went—and at that time [pauses]…See, I don't remember if I went with my dad to the village to pick up my grandma and my grandpa and my mom or whether I was over there already. I don't remember that part. Probably traumatic! [Laughs] Probably too traumatic or something. But I remember that we were arguing with my grandma and my grandpa. They didn't want to come. They didn't want to come. So we got in the car—I don't remember if it was a taxi—it must be a car. Because we went back. We decided, 'Okay, if grandma and my grandpa don't want to come, then they can stay.' We went half way, then came back and got them, and forced them in the car, and went to Long Tieng.

(1:18) So your father just decided, 'I don't care what they think…'
Yeah, my dad was saying later on—and this was through conversation with other people [Laughs], not my conversation with Dad, that I picked up all these pieces, you know? But I remember that we abandoned, we left my grandma and my grandpa behind, and that we came back and got them. And so we also brought some of our ducks and chickens. And so we went to Long Tieng and when we got Long Tieng, it was pretty much an abandoned town. It was like it was deserted. People were all at the air base waiting for the evacuation So we stayed there, we quickly cooked—I remember us having chicken—I mean, I can just taste the chicken soup in my mouth right now. And we butchered the chicken, butchered the two ducks, and we ate some of the food, and took what was left and went to the air field. And my dad, during the time when they were saying, 'That's an enemy airplane, enemy airplane,' my dad went into the cave right next to the airfield—there's caves there—and he took off his uniform and all that, and left it. I thought he left his gun there, but he said he brought his M-16 all the way to Nam Phong, Thailand. And it was over there that General Vang Pao and his people said—and the Thai military asked people to turn their guns in, so he did. I thought he left it in the cave. But when we got there, we heard about that—I forgot what the other place was [where the Hmong were told to go for evacuation out of Laos]. And actually, I met one of the other colonels, Colonel [pauses] Yang—I can't remember what his first name is. He's in Michigan. I have a picture of him. He was saying that he took his family over there. I think he's in Gayle Morrison's book. He took his family to the other base, the other place, the other air field that was supposed to be the other site for evacuation, and the plane never came. [Voice drops very low.

This section is hard to hear] *Also my uncle (I called him uncle or I would call him grandpa, because he married my mother's sister) was there, and two of their children died, and the Colonel, two of his children died.* They went to that field, and then they realized that it was not the right field, so they came back, and as a result of that his children were killed on the way back. They were ambushed on the way back; they were mistaken for enemies and got killed on the way back. [Laughs] He still lives here, but he's very old now, and in very poor health. He'd be another great subject for you to interview. He's a commander.

(4:34) What's his name?

Chong Je. But he's—he lived a little bit north of the air fields. So I've heard about his children being killed, but I thought that they died <u>before</u> the evacuations—see, I didn't know that until I read this book and then I went back and confirmed with my mom and my dad, and they said, 'Yeah, it was because of the false information, and that's why they went back and forth, and that's how his children got killed. So this book is such—it's a wonderful book, in that for me it, it connects all the dots for me. So it has been really good. But yeah, some people went to the other air fields. We took a chance and we stayed in Long Tieng, because that's where all the military leaders were [Laughs]. But each of the colonels, there's a plane designated for them. And we got on Colonel Xai Dang Xiong's airplane. (He lived in Milwaukee, but now he has moved to Florida). We got on his airplane. My dad was saying, they would announce, 'Get back, get back! This is so-and-so Colonel's airplane.' So it was Colonel Xai Dang Xiong's airplane, and my dad said, 'Oh, that's Colonel Xai Dang Xiong, let's go!' And he so pushed us in. And I have yet to ask Colonel Xai Dang whether he got on his plane [Laughs]. My understanding was he probably got on his plane! I guess what would happen is that those planes would come in, and they would radio the driver, and the driver would just drive to the whole family and back it right up the opening, and just climbed in. So he probably got on. So it was—when you think, when you really think about it—and I've gotten into trouble for making this statement, you know, the fact that our military leaders abandoned us. They didn't bring us here. General Vang Pao didn't bring us here. It was the refugee program that brought us here, our sponsors brought us here. General Vang Pao may have had something to do about the war, the evacuation and the war, but he was a pawn. [Laughs] The Hmong people were <u>used</u>! So I question—you know some of us were debating this, and I said, 'Did the General know that the Hmong were being used? And if he knew the Hmong were being used, and he proceeded on with the war, then he was looking out for his own interests—looking out for his own interests, and not the interests of his people. But if he didn't know, and he fought, not knowing that the Hmong people were being used, then he's OK. Then it's OK, you know? But as far as people like my dad, as far as people like my uncle who died, and as far as many countless people out there who died fighting the war, as far as they're concerned, they were fighting to protect their homeland. So for them, I give them great respect. But for the military leaders, I'm not so forgiving. If you knew that you were being used, and you knew that you were making and you were profiting from people's death, and you were profiting from this war, then you're wrong! [Laughs] Then you are wrong. So that's, just for me as I've gotten older and have started reading these things and been fascinated by—understanding the chain of events, you kind of have a different perspective on many of the heroes.

(9:01) Yeah.

They were heroes like that, but during the time when all hell broke loose, they only looked out for themselves. And even the book was really disturbing. General Vang Pao. Some people were asking whether General Vang Pao was going to come back or not. And he said, 'Sit still. I'll be back.' Okay? That was just so people wouldn't come, people wouldn't flock to the airfields, so they could

get out. [Laughs] And that's a—I'm not so forgiving of those things. People know that I have criticized General Vang Pao and some of the other military leaders on this stuff. I'm a Hmong speaking from my perspective, my values, based on the information that I have. I appreciate what he has done, and I have great respect for him, but at the same time, I was one of the people that fought to get on that plane. There was no plane designated for Lee Pao, [Laughs] or Lee Pao's family, or any other (***) families. Only 2000 people, 2500 people, were on that list to come, to be airlifted out of Laos. And 300,000 or so Hmong people that are here in the United States are here, not because of General Vang Pao, not because General Vang Pao did it. So my experience there kind of made me who I am, and shaped my career, shaped my life, shaped my perspective of events, shaped my perspective on how I view things, certainly.

(11:16) So here you are, you're on this plane, it's as packed as it can possibly be…I assume that when you get on the plane you don't have a very strong sense of where you're going.
No, we had no idea. We had no idea where we were going. I mean, you had no clue where you were going. They never announced that we were going to go to Thailand. [Laughs] Just an evacuation. When we arrived in Thailand, we were like, 'Where are we?' It was kind of dark. It was kind of dark when we arrived in Thailand. When we got there, my mom and I, we searched for my dad, and the rest, and my grandma and my grandpa and uncle. And then they took us to a place, a holding place. The other thing I remember about that place, that compound there. The first time they put us there (and I'd love to go back again to see that. I thought about going back and taking pictures of all the military bases. But I have no clue where it is in Thailand. [Laughs] I have no clue even where Ban Vinai is, you know?) But to go back [to what he started earlier], I remember the food. The food was very good. The Thai food was very good. And once in a while I cook that food at home, just to bring back that flavor, just to have a taste of that memory. The food—and then they also gave us ID tags, and then we had to show our ID tags in order to get a meal. And then they moved us to another larger compound, of course, more organized—teams to cook food and to bring food and I remember fish, vegetables, ice—it was very hot. Ice. And then pretty soon some of the Thai merchants came and started selling outside the camp gate, so we could go buy produce from them.

(13:21) What was the name of this camp?
Nam Phong.

Oh, so this was all still at the base.
Yeah, we waited and then my dad and the rest of them finally stepped off the plane that came. At Nam Phong camp, it's also fascinating that there's a pond with lots of crocodiles, and there's also a tank there. I remember us climbing that tank. And life there was good. You know, life in Nam Phong was very good. Food was provided, there were not a lot of people, and then they recruited all the men to go and help build Ban Vinai. And so they took everybody to Ban Vinai. And when we got to Ban Vinai, one of the things that I remember about, that brings back memories of Ban Vinai, is lime. For some reason, as part of the rations, they would give a family half a piece of chicken, raw chicken, half a piece of chicken, some vegetables, some rice, and then they give you limes. [Laughs] So whenever I smell limes it reminds me of Ban Vinai. I mean these little food things! {Laughs] And so each time I go to the store I smell it and ZOOM! I'm back in Ban Vinai. But at that time when we were in Ban Vinai, I remember that the houses were wooden houses, and they were all on stilts, 'cause this is on a hill. So they were all on stilts, and they would put us in these temporary houses, and we would stay there. And there wasn't any place for a kitchen, so they built—the Hmong men went and cut down some of the grass and started big cooking houses—

kitchens—for that. And at that time in 1975 (because the airlift was in May of 1975), '75, '76, people could still go to places. There was no fenced area. People were allowed to go and forage for food. That's one of the things—foraging for mushrooms after a rain. We would go and pick mushrooms, and that tasted really good. Mushrooms and bamboo shoots, and also go and fish—but the leeches were terrible! [Both laugh] There were leeches were terrible! Fish, crabs—so you could actually do that. There was a little creek that meandered through. So we could go and do that. And then we would also go and ask Thai farmers if we could work as laborers, as migrant workers, and work in their fields. So I can totally understand some of the Hispanic migrant workers here. I told my wife, 'Give 'em a break! They're trying to make a living. I was in that situation. You were in that situation! If we can help them, we should help them!' Maybe that's where my advocacy kind of thing comes from! {Laughs] I guess I've just been an advocate all—once in a while this advocate inside of me jumps out and starts to push people. Maybe that's how I made a name for myself, just [makes a sound like a flashing sword] attacking injustice, [Laughs] and pointing out where it's needed, you know? But we would go and—it's hard labor, and we would go and work on these farms and the Thai farmers sometimes would feed us foods they had. They would feed us sticky rice, so I remember that! [Laughs] They would feed us sticky rice, and sometimes [long pause, can't quite remember]. It was just a good experience. But we had to go very far and just go and knock on the Thai farmer's houses—I suppose in the same way the Hispanic migrant workers go around and see if anybody has work. And when we came to the United States here, when we came to Minnesota here, we came [to the US] in 1976, October, November of 1976. So we were there for about a year and a half.

(18:37) You went to Indiana first?

Yeah, we were sponsored by a Mennonite church in Morgantown, Indiana. Several years ago I actually visited the town, and the church is much smaller than it was back then [both laugh], and the town was much smaller, the grocery store was much smaller—still very beautiful. It was in Brown County. It's a very beautiful place, and it's very famous in Indiana. There's hills and mountains [?] and oaks and all the Amish out there—Mennonites, Mennonites. We were sponsored by a Mennonite church. But I remember the first time we arrived—well, let me back up. Our name came up twice to come to America. We didn't want to come. But we finally decided, 'OK, fine, let's go.' When they bused us to Bangkok, we went through all the immunizations and all that stuff, but they put us—I'm still trying to remember. I don't think they put us in a nice, fancy hotel. I think it was like in an open are. I think the first time was in a big warehouse. There was no mattress, none whatsoever, so we all slept on the floor. And at that time there was some protest in Thailand, so we could hear the students protesting outside, screaming and yelling. So it was a big warehouse, and then they moved us to a hotel, which we—we didn't stay in a hotel, I don't think we stayed in a hotel., I think we stayed in a makeshift place, because I remember me climbing the hotel stairs and going up there to visit—it wasn't a hotel, I think it was an apartment complex. Because people were living in those, and we would go in there, and sometimes some of those people, they would watch TV and they would open—that's something about China and other places. The doors are wide open, and so we would go in there as kids and we would watch TV with those families—Thai kickboxing. That's something I looked for when I was in Thailand [later in life]. I said, 'Where's the TV show with the Thai boxing all the time?' because at that time it was on all the time! And then—bread, eating bread, buying bread from the streets (***21:17***). Then we flew to Hong Kong first. I remember when we arrived in Hong Kong they put us in a nice, fancy hotel, and they brought us to a room. And that's the first time we'd ever been in a hotel. And we got in and there's a TV, you know, a standard hotel with bathrooms and two big beds. So we got in and we turned the TV on, and I can still remember some of the Chinese movies. And we didn't know that the sheets, the

blankets on the bed were meant to be used. So we slept on top of that thing, all cold, all night! And we knew that in the morning we had to go and meet our people downstairs so they could take us to the airport. Nobody came and took us. And so we had no idea what floor we were on, we had no idea how to operate the elevator, we had no idea. And we got in the elevator and we were going, 'How are we going to get out of here?' And then somebody came in and they pressed '1' and we rode the elevator all the way down to the first floor, and looked around, and they came and got us. But for you, it's a no-brainer! [Laughs] You get in the elevator, you push the button, you go down. This is the first time ever we experienced an elevator, that we had to operate [it] by ourselves, that we had to be in a hotel room, so it's a new experience for us. I remember when we got to the—we flew and we were waiting for our sponsors when we arrived [has to think—no, they were not yet in the US]. Still we were in Hong Kong waiting for the airplane. I saw this white woman with black legs. And I thought, 'This is interesting! Why is this white woman—she's white, but her legs are black. She was wearing stockings. That was my first time ever seeing stockings. So I was thinking, 'Why?' I remember thinking about that. 'Why is that white woman [Laughs] with black legs?' She had a skirt on, but—first time ever exposed to that. And I got my first taste of apples in America. That was good. I think at that time they also served hot dogs on the airplane. I hated hot dogs. Tasted terrible—tasted bad, you know? So I didn't eat. But we got to Indiana and our sponsors were waiting. They put us into a little room, a little nice room and we waited for our sponsors. So our sponsors came, picked us up, drove us to Morgantown, Indiana—and I think it must have been a two hour drive, 'cause I remember us sitting in the car for a long time. We were fascinated by all the lights, the big city lights and everything. And when we arrived at our house, it was a Japanese woman that came, that our sponsor went and found in Bloomington, Indiana—at the University of Indiana-Bloomington, and she came and cooked an Asian meal for us. And they didn't know whether we used chopsticks or forks and spoons—of course, the Hmong don't use chopsticks! [Laughs] So they had both; they had forks and spoons and chopsticks. I remember my first meal there, too, was very good. I remember just the rice [Laughs]. But our house was in the middle of nowhere. It was a farm house on a hill in the middle of nowhere. It was on top of a hill with a valley down below. But it was a good time, and I remember each time I see—what do you call it? [Both try to remember the name of a particular yellow flower that was common in the area that bloomed in the spring.] For some reason that place, that house there, was a lot of crawfish, and a lot of those flowers. So each time I see that I'm reminded of that, and each time I eat crawfish I remember that place. It was just fascinating. And there were three big apple trees and a pear tree and a plum tree around there. And, of course, we didn't go pick any of it at all, because it wasn't ours—as opposed to if we'd lived there [owned the place] we could. [Laughs] But we didn't know. And it produced some good fruits, these big, nice ones, and we just never picked them. And it just fell and rotted away. But that's the way we grew up: you don't touch anything that's not yours [Laughs] without permission. So there was a strong ethic, strong values that we brought to the United States. And then we moved to another house—but I also remember the first fight that I had in school. There was a kid that was harassing me all the time. I remember just crying about it. And then also the time we went to the fair—the school fair, and I won two goldfish and came back and tossed them in the creek—our house was right next to a creek. And you know what? A year later they were still there! They were big! [Laughs] So there's a creek here, there's a little bridge, an overpass, and underneath it, I put them there, and over a year they grew, and they were still there! [Laughs]

(28:22) Who would have ever guessed that goldfish would have survived in there?

Yeah, it was really amazing! And of course, in the end it wasn't all that cold, and so it's not like it was frozen solid. But I remember that.

(28:38) Do you think your classmates and the people of that town understood who the Hmong people were?
I don't think so. I don't think they had a clue.

(28:49) They probably thought you were Vietnamese or—
Chinese! [Laughs] Yeah, I don't think they knew who we were or where we came from. There was actually an article that was written about us—and we still have that article. It was all laminated for us. We were all in our winter clothes [Laughs] in our little small house. But I remember also it was very cold in that house. And I also remember trapping birds—where we would put some rice on the ground, and then tie the lid of the trash can with some string and then stay in the house and then the birds would come and just [makes the sound and motion of the lid dropping on the birds, laughs]. Trapped a lot of birds and brought 'em in the house and they were flying all around! So that was fun. It was quite an experience.

(30:02) Do you have any specific memories of the process by which you went from being a Hmong boy in Laos to being a Hmong young man in the United States and having to sort of figure that process of moving out of one and becoming the other?
I don't know, because I think, for us, we were integrated into the classrooms (I know that we were different), and yet we were taken out of classrooms for special English language classes. We were also being bused to the University of Indiana - Bloomington—maybe once or twice a night [week?] [this part hard to hear] *for English classes so we could work on our classroom English, and we were the only family, of course*! [Laughs] We received it from Bloomington—the University of Indiana – Bloomington. And then on the way back our sponsors would buy dozens of donuts! That's the other thing! I loved going to Bloomington! [Laughs] I think it's a 45-minute drive or something like that. But donuts—oh, I <u>love</u> donuts. That was my first exposure to donuts. [Laughs] So once in a while I still go and buy dozens of donuts when I get home! The other thing I remember is—because driving at night and during Christmas—Christmas was a new thing. And receiving my first race car toys, that was one of the biggest things. It was one of those Indy 500 kind of cars. You know I've always been fascinated—Evel Knievel! [Both laugh]. The [Winnebago] Evel Knievel! Oh, I had one of those like that. That's why I kow exactly who Evel Knievel is. 'Oh, cool!' you know? But it was only later on in life here that I heard about Evel Knievel and I thought, 'Oh yeah! I remember him! I have his [Winnebago]! It's a collector's item now, I should have kept it! I remember when we left that house, I buried some of my cars next to a propane tank—because back in the country you have propane tanks for cooking and for heating. I'd love to go back to that house and dig up those cars, you know? [Both laugh]

(33:16) Or what's left of them…
Or what's left of them. I buried them way down underneath, because we always played around there. So I think growing up, being exposed—also my first bikes. My first bicycle was a girl bicycle, and I painted it white. You know, people donated it, so…[Laughs]. And riding the first time in my dad's car—they bought my dad a car, one of those Chevrolets. So I think growing up and being in that kind of community—being part of, but not really a part of, being separate…[Laughs]

[New track]
When we came, they found a job for my dad. He became the janitor for that school, Sprunica Elementary School. So my dad was the janitor at that school. And that time—he was telling me that he was only making two dollars an hour, so…[Laughs]. So in 1979 we decided to leave—and

Pastor Kou Seying [a former Concordia University faculty member], his family was living in Indiana—Indianapolis at that time. And our sponsor took us, and we went and visited his family in Indianapolis. (His father just moved here last year, so they've lived there all that time!) So we visited him, and that's how we—I didn't even know it was him, but he was much older, so he knows. He knows my parents. When I came here [to Concordia University] in 1997 I found out that, 'You guys came to visit us in Indiana.' And Mr. Long Yang also lived in Indiana. He was working as a refugee services worker or something like that. And he came and visited us. So I found out when he came here and I told him, 'My dad is Song Khoua Xiong and all that stuff, he was like, 'Your dad is Song Khoua? [Both laugh] Don't you remember me? I visited you guys in Indiana?' Well, I don't remember any of that stuff. I know that people came and visited us and I had no clue. I know there was another gentleman that served under my dad and also lived in Indiana. He often comes and visits my dad. And so I remember that. I don't remember Mr. Long Yang, but yeah, he said, 'I came to visit you guys a couple of times and then I called and your phone was disconnected and I talked to your sponsor and they said you left already, you moved out already.' So he just finally discovered that I am Song Khoua Xiong's son! And that's why he's helping me so much, too. [Hard to hear] *But I/he felt bad about that?* But we moved to Minnesota in 1979.

(2:59) Do you have a sense of what brought your family here?

Yeah, it was my mom's brother and my mom's mom and dad that were living here. One of my uncles was one of the first people to move to Minnesota—one of the first Hmong people to be here. So that's why. Something else—

(3:21) Did your grandparents come with you to Morgantown and then here also?

Yeah, they came to Indiana in 1978. We came in 1976, so they came two years later. And they didn't live in Morgantown; they were sponsored by a church in Evansville, Indiana, which was kind of far for us to visit them. And it's a small town, it's a fascinating town. We moved—we lived in Morgantown, Indiana, and then when my grandma and grandpa came to the United States to live in Evansville, Indiana, which is near Fort Wayne—that's how I know about Fort Wayne [the home of Concordia Theological Seminary]. So we moved to Evansville, Indiana. We moved and we lived in a arm house right next to this busy road, and of course my grandma and grandpa lived right in town. And the town is quite small. That's when I remember collecting baseball cards. Baseball cards at that time—the Pirates and Cubs—that's how I knew about those teams, you know? [Laughs] I don't know what got me, but there was a grocery store, a small grocery store, and I would go there and I—I was telling my sister-in-law the other day, talking about watermelons. And I said, 'I was selling watermelons from a flat bed truck during the summer in Indiana for two dollars—a lot of money! So that was my job! I don't know how old I was, probably about 11, 12 years old, selling watermelons out of the back of a truck. But that town, you could walk from one end to the next. It's very small. I'd love to go back and just visit some of these towns—more importantly, visit Long Tieng and visit my house. There's also a desire of mine to go and find the bones of my aunt, because this is from my cousin who lived with us a long time. After my uncle died—and he died trying to retrieve an AK-47. [Laughs] There was a battle, and he was part of the most famous battalion—very brave. They're the ones that would go to the front line and clean up everything and then go back and get on with it. There was a fight all night. It was a battle, a firefight all night. A lot of dead people. And so they weren't sure whether there were some enemies still alive, so he saw some dead enemies not too far—probably from this room to the [campus] chapel [about 20 yards]. It was on top of a hill (at least that's how it was described). And at that time, if you go and retrieve an AK-47 and bring it back to General Vang Pao, you get a reward. So he saw that and he went,

and one of the Vietnamese soldiers was not dead, and he shot him. And he wasn't dead, and he was asking for help. And what they did is someone threw a grenade. And so my uncle was killed. And of course, some of the people that were there who were good friends of my uncle, felt that it was an assassination, because he was moving up in the ranks. So I think it was felt that that was probably what happened. So then my aunt, because of tradition—other uncles would marry my uncle's wife. And so we have another uncle that married, that took her as his second wife. And during the evacuation and all of that—this was later on—she had a lot of sickness, because of the 'yellow rain' [poisoning of the Hmong people by the Pathet Lao]. Because of the yellow rain, everything that they ate, everything that they drank poisoned their body. So my aunt and three of her little kids were all sick. So she asked my other uncle—we say my dad's cousin—to just leave them on the side of the road at the house (there was a house that was just there, an empty house, an abandoned house), to leave them there, and just go on, because she doesn't want to compromise their safety. So his [Lee Pao Xiong's cousin's] three siblings and his mom all died at that house. And the reason we know they died at that house is that other people came and they said that they saw dead people lying at the house. So I'd like to give [them] a proper burial. And I told my older brother, 'That's what you should do. Go back and give your mom and your brothers and your sisters proper burial.' And of course I keep on bringing this up to my parents. And they say, 'Well, people probably don't know where it is now, it's probably overgrown with jungle growth and all of that. It's impossible.' But at the same time there's still—that's probably one of my missions in life one day is to go back and give them proper burial. Of course, my brother is not talking to his step-dad at all, and his step-dad often calls. And my aunt is the sister of Dr. Pao Ge Vang of the Lao Human Rights Council, who just recently died. So it's that family; it's <u>his</u> sister. [Laughs] That's something that I want to do. I will often tell my wife that I don't know why my older brother isn't concerned or why he doesn't think about it. Maybe it's because it's not his training, or…

(10:42) He may feel like it's too late and there's nothing he can do or—

But it would bring closure, and he needs to bring closure to it. And I would love to just go back and bring closure to that. But the war itself, it still—and of course right now we have no clue where it is. We understand that all of the graves at Long Tieng were bulldozed over, so we have no clue where his dad was buried. My grandma's grave [Pauses] was not too far from our house, and I would love to go back, just to put a headstone. You know, it's these little things that you want to bring closure to life. I never knew my grandma. And of course my grandfather just passed away about two years ago. And my step-grandma just passed away last year. So there's still a lot of pain. [Laughs] Still a lot of pain that I want to just bring some closure to. [Laughs] 'Cause it's still there, you know? And I think maybe that's why I'm just so fascinated—so fortunate to be in this position. 'Cause to be able to understand the history, to understand the context of what really happened. And so I find it very therapeutic. [Laughs] That's what my wife said: 'Yeah, I don't know whether it's good for you to be in this position, because you're always talking about over there and I think you have issues.' She said, 'You have issues,' and I say, 'What issues?' [Laughs] People who are sick often deny their sickness, so maybe I am sick somehow.

But yeah, so we moved to Minnesota in '79 and it was very—I remember the very first snowfall during this time. Of course, it's very hot over there [in Laos], and there's this type of tree with flowers. The wind will blow the flower petals, and I thought it was that when I saw snowflakes. Either that or it was ashes, because we practices slash and burn farming. You know, so you'd burn down the whole side of a hill and the ash would fly everywhere. It thought it was that. I thought it was either flowers or ashes the first time I saw snow. [Both laugh] First exposure to that.

[Tape runs out]

Part Two – 19 December, 2005

I moved to Minnesota in 1979 and came to the United States in 1976 when I was nine years old. And when we came to Minnesota we rented—we lived in a duplex in the North End area, on Rice Street. And my grandparents were living upstairs, we were living downstairs—and I remember the bunk beds [Laughs]. And so we lived there and then waited until our name came up for public housing. So it finally did come up for public housing—McDonough Housing Project. So we moved over there—1483 Timber Lake Road [Laughs]. So when we moved up here and lived in the North End area I went to North End Elementary School. What they did was they tested all immigrants. At that time the Title I program was like the ESL program. And all of those who didn't pass the test would be hipped over to Highland Park. And so Highland Park was the place for all the limited English proficient students. And somehow all my brothers didn't pass and I passed! [All laugh] So I ended up alone at North End Elementary School, in the 6th grade. I think when I first came here [to the US] I was in the 4th grade. And so [when we] moved up here I was in the 6th grade—and I think I was probably one of the few Hmong students at North End Elementary. And of course right now over 50% are Hmong—I think it's 60% now. And it was pretty lonely at that time, but at that time—I also remember each time I watch *Grease*—the movie—[All laugh] that's when it came out! [Laughs] So *Grease* reminds me of 6th grade. And then after I graduated there I went over to Cleveland Junior High. But I remember, because we lived in the North End area, I always walked to school. And there was this bully. I mean, he's always—

(3:17) Again?

Oh yeah. There was always a bully. There was this bully that always waited for me to beat me up. And one day I just got angry and I carried a nail with me to protect myself. And I got in trouble! [All laugh] But then later on he became—

(3:36) Now how did you get into trouble? Did you use it?

No, I showed it to kids at school and they ratted on me [All laugh]—which was a good thing. I wasn't going to hurt him, I was just going to show it to him—'Come close and I'll show you!' [Laughs]. But there was this bully always harassing me. And later on we became good friends, which is kind of fascinating. We became good friends. And when we went over to Cleveland Junior High, there were only five or six Hmong students—and of course there are now a lot of Hmong students over at Cleveland Junior High on the east side of St. Paul. And my classmates were Chia Lo, who was working for Mayor Randy Kelly [of St. Paul] and others. It was an interesting time as well. I was never in ESL classes; I was always mainstreamed. When we were over there—I mean, it seems like everywhere I go I always remember this big bully. There was this African American kid. He pushed me down stairs, he spit on me, he threw snowballs at me, he—I mean, he was always after me! I must be a magnet for—[Laughs]. I looked really weak, probably. I probably looked really weak, really weird or something. But yeah, he was always harassing me all the time. But I remember one of my—one of the comforting parts about Cleveland Junior High was the nurse. She was always encouraging me. If I was sick I would go down there and—just built that relationship, you know? And she was always encouraging me and she was always telling me, 'You're a handsome man.' [Laughs] So building up your self esteem, you know? And she was always supporting and saying, 'You study hard, you work hard.' The other person that was also very supportive was my orchestra teacher.

(5:59) What were their names?

I know the orchestra teacher's name was Connie. I don't know her last name. And she would—what was really fascinating is that she would always drive us around for concerts and all that, but it was always faith, too. In the morning we would go early and we would be in Bible studies—several of us would be in Bible studies. In fact, the Bible study activities took place at the Union Gospel Mission on Payne Avenue. And so we were always there in the morning. Early in the morning she would come and pick us up and do that, and then [we would] go to class and play in the orchestra. I played the violin, I tried the cello, the viola—so I played it all the way to high school. And then for High school we went over to Johnson. They had very few Hmong people at that time.

(7:16) Let's go all the way back to elementary school at North. What do you remember about that experience? What was that adjustment like?

I think it was kind of difficult, because my English was still limited, and I didn't really interact much with people, because you didn't know many people. But I always remember my teacher. He was always—he dressed like in the '50s—well-dressed and all that. I always liked the lunch time. That was good. [Laughs] And in fact he drafted me to be part of the School Patrol. So I was part of School Patrol. I was so proud—you know, wearing this badge! You know, at that time, if you were there a long time they would give you the badge and they give you the leather strap. And then when you go—every year they would take us…[Pauses] I remember participating in a parade Downtown. I don't know what parade that was. But you're always so proud of that, you know, when you're—and always great to be on the corner helping people cross. And that is something I remember to this day. I still tell my kids! I told my daughter, you know, 'I was a School Patrol!' [All laugh] She said, 'You?' 'Yeah!' [Laughs] But it's—yeah, that was something that—and the playground. That was a fun place. That was a fun place. But that school, I just have a lot of fond memories of that school. The library—I <u>loved</u> the library. I loved checking out books and going in there and reading. I think that kind of carried over. This weekend alone I bought five books at Barnes and Noble. [All laugh] 'I like that book! I like <u>that</u> book! I'm gonna <u>read</u> that book!' [Laughs]

(9:38) What were your parents doing? You said your father had worked as a janitor in the school you attended in Morgantown. How did they—

Well when we moved up here, my dad went to Dakota County Vo-Tech to study welding. And then my mom went to St. Paul TVI—at that time St. Paul Technical Vocational Institute, now St. Paul College. And my mom was in the chef program mover there. And I remember she was always making hamburgers and bread and everything, and that was nice. That was very, very nice. So she was all into baking bread, baking cake, making hot dogs, making all this Western food for us to eat. I mean, that's exposure to that kind of food. And, of course, this was in 1979 [Laughs]. So that's the elementary school years. I just remember walking along—you know there's a cemetery over there by Jackson Street. We lived on the other side, so when I'd go to school I'd always walk the path right next to the cemetery. I forget what that cemetery is. Is it Roselawn? I can't remember. So we always walked along that path. I also remember I had a paper route. And that was my territory, right where I lived, you know? [Laughs] So a newspaper route. I remember at that time you still collected money from people. So you have this little book and you tear off the month and you collect money from people. Some people were really nice. They'd invite you in for cookies and milk. And one time I remember they gave out coupons. I didn't know what the heck a coupon was. You know, you always expect to get money, so I get the coupon and go 'OK,'—throw away [Laughs]. All of those [were worth] I think about $100, but [I] didn't know. And at that time it was a lot of money. But I didn't know. So they kind of forgave me. [Laughs] They kind of forgave me.

But yeah, it's a new experience. I also remember going to the Union Gospel Mission to get clothing [something in Hmong to Mai Neng and Youa]—always fascinating—to the Clothes Closet, with all the old clothing. [It was] great, and we were dressing up [Laughs] in these old hats and these coats. And my brother is a slick dresser. He knows how to combine those things. So that was the other thing that we always looked forward to going down there just to look at the toys and everything. There was a lot of cool stuff down there!

(13:16) So have both of your parents learned English reasonably well? They both went to school—

I would say moderately well—yeah, moderately well. My dad knew a little bit of English when we came to the United States. It's kind of fascinating in that about 10 years ago my mom and dad received their GED. And they received it over at Central High School—their GED program. So they were quite proud—and of course, we were as well. In fact, this weekend one of my cousins just graduated, so my dad was giving him a lecture. And he was saying that people—there's a saying in the community that maybe the kid will be graduate first before the parents. And my dad's saying in this particular case it's true, because we've only just got our GED and you guys have your Bachelor's Degrees already! [Laughs] So that saying came true, my dad was saying…

(14:26) Do you remember any particular instances in which things were going on in the home that were still traditionally Hmong in nature, but here you are as a kid in the United States, in Minnesota, being pulled toward the culture in which you find yourself?

I would say the—you do things as a family. That's something. The other piece is the folk tales, the story telling. That's something that I always looked forward to, and my grandpa tells a story every night. Nowadays, instead of telling them a story I read books to my kids before they go to bed. And now they expect that. If you put them to bed and you don't read them a story, they say, 'Dad! Story time! You forgot!' I'll say, 'I'm tired! Go to bed!' [Others laugh] And they're, 'No! Story time!' and they start crying and they go and pick up a book from the shelf. We give them a lot of books. We buy a lot of books and so we take and we read the stories. I think it's very much similar in that way. It's the story telling and some of the—I mean, it's folk tales. And you learn a lot from it. A lot of orphan stories, a lot of scary stories and love stories, and a lot of those. I've recorded some of my grandfather's stories, and I was hoping that one day when I have time I will be able to transcribe them, or, I would say, record them with all of the bells and whistles the way he told them. Because he was from my mother's side. He's a shaman, and he's well-versed in Hmong traditional things, and he's well-versed in the *qeej* and also the flute and when he tells the story he reaches the point where *xxxxxx*, the Hmong hero, at the point where he's using that [the flute] to cure the sick person, he will grab his and he will start playing, and he says, 'This is how he plays it.' You know, [Laughing] that's pretty innovative! That's pretty good! He says, 'This is how he plays it. He's at this point and he would say these words, and this is how *xxxxxxx* would say it. And he would sing that tune.' And I have yet to see people out there telling stories like that. [Laughs] But he was gifted. He knows how to do all of this. And I think that nowadays with young people, they don't—for a while the TV kind of dominated over the story-telling time, and books kind of dominated over it, but I think that if you were able to play that for people, maybe it would be different. It's just like nap time for kids. That was—we would listen to it and fall asleep. So it was very soothing that way. It's just like nap time at day care. They play music. Well why can't you tell, play stories? So those were interesting times. And the house that we lived in—because we were a large family—my grandma, my grandpa (this is my mother's and my dad's side now), we all lived in one house. We couldn't find a single house that would fit all of us, so we had to rent a duplex, the entire duplex. So my grandma and grandpa, and my aunt and uncle lived upstairs, so we all lived downstairs. You

know, once in a while I still drive by it and just look at the house. It's just warm, nostalgic. It's just a different look. And sometimes I still have dreams about that house. I don't know what they mean. I have lots of dreams about the house over—the McDonough Homes apartment over there. And I don't know what that means, either! I have nightmares about the house over there…

(19:11) Oh my!

[Laughs] Sometimes I have nightmares about it and—yeah, just—[Pauses]

(19:17) Now was it primarily Hmong families living in McDonough Homes at that time, or was it—

No! At that time it was predominately African American

OK.

And kind of like the African Americans moved out and slowly Hmong moved in. And at one time, about 70% of the people living there were Hmong. And I think now it's more Somalis and Ethiopians. So now it's—sort of like a stepping stone for immigrants. And my parents (according to them) they made too much money, so we had to leave, and we moved into Frogtown, Charles Avenue. I think it's 4—something on Charles Avenue. And then also, the house was too small. We had to rent a duplex. So all the kids lived upstairs and my parents lived downstairs—in different apartments! I have seven brothers, no sisters. But when I was—throughout my junior high and high school years we were living in McDonough—until 11th grade when they kicked us out because of income restrictions. And so I transferred over to Como Park High School. That's why when they—one day I received a phone call from Como Park High School, and they said, 'Congratulations, you've been nominated and we've accepted you into the Como Park Hall of Fame.' And I said, 'Hmm…What's that? [Laughs] And for what?' and they said, 'Well, for your contributions to society and for your work in the community.' And I thought about it and thought, 'You know, Johnson should have claimed me.' [Laughs] because I spent more time at Johnson—9th, 10th, 11th, you know? And in 12th grade [I] transferred over to Como Park. But one of the things that I remember about high school even at living at McDonough and even junior high and high school is—I remember I bought myself a short wave radio. When I was in junior high I worked in the CYET program—it's a summer youth employment program, basically, for low income kids. And so we worked during the summer we worked at Afton State Park. A lot of the trails there we built way back then! Afton State Park, Swede Hollow, we worked in there. A couple of the bridges we built in there. And I remember how—[gasps] mosquito-infested swamp! But we worked there during the summer to get money. I was working when I was in 7th grade, 8th grade, 9th grade, 10th grade [Laughs] and I think 11th grade, too, because in my 11th grade year we worked at the Minnesota Zoo. We put up the trails, we did most of the projects down there where they have the ducks—the (***) area. We did some of the project down there. But yeah, one of the things that I did, I bought a short wave radio in junior high, and then there was also the movie—the Chinese movie theater, the World Theater. That's where I—I still have the programs. I collect those programs [Laughs].

(23:19) So what's now the Fitzgerald Theater…

Yeah, what's now the Fitzgerald, but every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday they would show triple feature Chinese movies. So they would show two kung fu movies and one love movie. And every Friday night we would look forward to just going to the movie, and it was just packed with people. And that's where we saw all the Jackie Chan movies [Laughs] . But I still have all those programs at home. And I told them I should bring them to the archives. And I also bought magazines—movie magazines. And in the back (it's all Chinese) there's always pen pals. And so I have pen pals in

China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Tibet [Laughs]! I was writing to pen pals everywhere! This was in junior high and high school [Laughs]! And so the people over there, they're looking for pen pals, they want to improve their English, and so we'd write back and forth. And that was something that was really fascinating. And that's what probably got me interested—and so that and also I was always listening to short wave radio, 'Voice of Free China,' which Taiwan broadcast, and then 'Voice of America.' I always listened to those: "Voice of America'—'Voice of Free China' was broadcast from Okeechobee, Florida. That's what I knew. A lot of people didn't know where Okeechobee was [Laughs]! Way down there—it was broadcast to China, trying to democratize China. So I was listening to that. That's where I got interested in learning Chinese, because toward the end they would always have Chinese language lessons. So if you write to them, they will send you a booklet and you can follow along and you can study Chinese. So I was studying Chinese on the radio. And that's what got me interested in wanting to pursue international relations. And so during my senior year—well, my high school counselor didn't think I was college material. He told me to go to St. Paul Technical Vocational school, and gave me an application and said, 'Just go there,' and 'You're not good enough'—I don't know how he phrased it, but he told me I was not good enough. And I applied to St. Paul Technical, I applied to Inver Hills Community College, I applied to Century College, I applied to Concordia University [Concordia College at that time], and I also applied to the University of Minnesota. Concordia accepted me. And so I came here, I registered, everything, and a week before classes started (because we <u>always</u> start before the University of Minnesota. I think the University of Minnesota class starts the middle part of September. I know because that's hunting season—squirrel hunting season [Laughs]. So each time it's hunting season I know it's University of Minnesota class time.) So I registered, everything at Concordia, and then I got this letter from the University of Minnesota saying, 'You've been accepted to the University of Minnesota'—to the General College [Laughs] because my English wasn't good enough, so I had to take the TOEFL test. And this is amazing—I mean, I didn't qualify for ESL classes, but—[Laughs] I was put in mainstream but I was in General College. That's when I met Dr. Yang Dao, too. Dr, Yang Dao was my counselor back then. He was a counselor in the General College at that time. But prior to that I met Dr. Yang before—in high school. There was a lot of racial tension in high school, particularly over at McDonough Housing Project area—conflict between African American and Hmongs students. I always say, 'Is it racial? I don't really think it's racial. It's more economic. When you have people with limited means living all together and they've not interacted with each other, and people don't—you know, [with a] lack of education, you're going to have confrontation [Laughs]. That's how I view it. And we were always fighting over there. One day I was sick from school, stayed home. I stayed home and took the trash out and this little African American kid came and threw a rock at me and hit me <u>really</u> hard. And I ran after him and he went into the house and I went and knocked on the door. I was going to tell the parents! And the kid came out with his big brother and his big brother held my hands behind my back and just beat the crap out of me [Laughs]. And after that—I went home crying, and after that I said, 'Nobody's going to ever do that to me again,' so I took kung fu classes [Laughs] at the old YMCA which is now where the parking lot is for the Children's Museum right behind the Fitzgerald—that was the old YMCA. Lao Family Community was also in that building in there. So we were practicing in the auditorium upstairs—big theater, stage, but it was an old (***) floor. So [I] learned kung fu there. And then when they tore down that and they opened up the new YMCA Downtown, we were all transferred over there and continued to study—studied for a long time. And then I wanted more, and so I went and studied from a Chinese master—Master Al L***—who I still see once in a while—long hair, though! [Laughs] He's a young man, but—I studied there, did line dancing, did all of that. I was probably one of his best students, because I had motivation. When you have motivation, you want—[Laughs] you study hard, right?

(30:14) There's been this recurring theme, so I can see why you were ready to just take care of business.

So I did that, studied there, and when I left to go to study with the Chinese master, it was on the West Side—Smith Avenue, across the bridge—and my Hmong master was kind of ticked off, because when I went over there—a couple of my friends, we all went over there [Laughs]. So we kind of betrayed him—you know, he viewed it as betraying him, but [pauses] he wasn't teaching us fast enough [Laughs]. So then we went to that. I was studying that. In high school I was doing that. In college, I did that a little bit, studied at the University of Minnesota, did Tae Kwan Do, did Shoto-Kan karate, did some kung fu over there, too—did all of that. And it was more—people always say that when you don't know enough you want to beat people up and you want to kick every tree and you want to jump—you think that you're…[Pauses]. But once you know it, you kind of have compassion for people. You don't want to hurt people, you don't want to harm people—you're patient. And I think it's a combination of my experiences in Laos and the martial arts training that made me really patient. You don't make a big deal out of things, you just [Laughs] 'Yeah, whatever.' And when people—you know, a lot of people throw me racial slurs and I'm just like, 'Forget it. I could kick your butt any time [Interviewer laughs], but this is not the day. I'm out of here.' You know what I mean? But that whole experience there is really fascinating, because we grew up in a time when there was a lot of tension—racial tension—and it was always African Americans and us, and the reason was these low-income neighborhoods were predominately Southeast Asians and African Americans [Laughs]. So in there it's inevitable. I suppose if you were integrated into the Hispanic neighborhoods you'd probably do the same thing; you'd probably fight among yourselves. You integrate into predominately white neighborhoods and you have a whole bunch of kids without means and without things to you, you're probably going to go after each other. I kind of classify that as racial tension, but there <u>was</u> racial tension. I think it carried over. And the perception about the community that you lived in really framed many of the thought processes of your parents—<u>our</u> parents. I mean, my mom's purse was snatched by an African American person and so each time she sees one she [clutches an imaginary purse close to himself], you know? It's based on experience [Laughs]. You cringe, you know. And when I worked as a director of Hmong Youth Association in North Minneapolis, same thing. It was predominately African American. And a lot of the kids harassed each other, intimidated each other. So yeah, when the University of Minnesota letter came, I looked at the financial aid package. After I paid off all my tuition I still had $2000 left over. Coming from a family of limited means, I said, 'That's a lot of money.' [Laughs] So I transferred over there. Here, after I paid all of my tuition I still had to put in about $500. So I looked at that $2000 [I would have left over], the $500 [I would have to pay]—2000! And some of my friends were over there at the University of Minnesota, so I went over there. The time over there was quite interesting in that—I mean, in the classes that I registered for. The intro classes were like huge. They were like in an auditorium [Laughs]. It was like in a movie theater—larger than <u>that</u>. You had to work really hard, and discipline was a major issue. Discipline was a major issue. And so the second year we decided—I think it was the third year—a couple friends and I just decided to rent a room at the University of Minnesota. And that didn't help either, because we were raising fish and [Laughs] playing video games, and chasing girls.

(35:20) Of course!

So I moved back home during my senior year. But I changed my major. I wanted to continue to do my International Relations, and eventually also move into Business Administration at the University of Minnesota. And then I registered and I took the Macro- and Microeconomics courses. [I] didn't do too well {All laugh]. I had to re-take my Macroeconomics course [Laughs]. I had to do it twice.

And then you have to also take Finite Math. And I went to the book store, opened up the book. It's a math course, but there's no numbers [All laugh]. All word problems! And I was terrible—I was not good at word problems, solving math word problems, even when I was in high school. I knew then, 'That's not for me!' And then—it's kind of interesting in that I had an opportunity to—I saw a posting. When I was over there I was always over in the Social Science Department, sometimes looking at postings and all that, and I saw a posting for an internship in Washington, D.C. And, of course, the three friends—one of the persons is *Kao Lee*, and the other person is *Jo Va Lee*—now he's still over at the University of Minnesota working at the Asian Pacific Cultural Resource Center. We all took Chinese and we were acing Chinese. We studied for four years. And during the third year we all decided, 'We're going to go to China to go study at Nankai University—Nankai (***), to improve our Chinese language skills, and so on and so forth. And then I saw this posting about working in Washington, D.C. I have no idea why I responded to that. I applied for it, I was accepted. I remember working for Rudy Boschwitz, 'cause at that time Rudy Boschwitz and—I think it was Dave Durenberger were the two Senators. And this was in 1988. I graduated in 1985, this was 1988. So I decided to go to Washington, D.C. And when I got to Washington D.C. they placed me with Senator Carl Levin of Michigan. Now I see him on TV all of the time. I thought he was going to retire in 1988 [All laugh]. That's what he said; he was going to retire '88. He's still there as a ranking of the Armed Services Committee. I worked in there, and I remember drafting a lot of letters to the South African government to free Nelson Mandela. I did a lot of that, did a lot of responding to—and at that time, you think this is bad. At that time we still had typewriters. And we would write letters for the Senator. We would do all the research, write memos and write letters to the Senators or write letters to respond to constituents, and we had a signature machine. So next time when you receive a letter from a Senator congratulating you for graduating, most likely it's a machine, but I don't want to tell you that [Laughs]. It's a machine, it's a big machine, and it's signs [makes noise of machine writing]. But we were drafting letters, and so on and so forth. I was also in charge once in a while of bringing the Senator his lunch. And he always eats the same sandwich every day: a Reuben sandwich. He eats that every single day—never changes [Laughs]. And so I was the only Hmong in Washington, D.C. There were no Hmong there. And I missed Hmong people. I was there for three months and I missed Hmong people. I missed the food. So I decided—I went to Chinatown and brought me a little pan. I got sick and tired of Pizza Hut, because we stayed at the Catholic University of American in Washington, D.C., right next to the train station—the Red Line station. And there's only so much pizza you can take. So I went to Chinatown, bought me some rice, bought me a pan, and sometimes I would just go and buy and cook in the dormitory and share with the people, because they don't have any fresh food. They don't know how to make anything [Laughs]! I remember the first time we were there, there was a group of [pauses to try to remember] I think it was about 16 of us as part of that program, from throughout the United States—from California, from all over the place—and I was from Minnesota [Laughs]. And one of my friends who's African American, from Los Angeles—Paul, his name is Paul. He's a musician, a very good musician. And then another friend of mine, from Oklahoma, he's a Choctaw Indian—first time I ever heard of it—the Choctaw tribe, Choctaw nation. The three of us kind of clicked, you know, always hanging around together. So we got there; the first time we got there we kind of hung together and started walking through the neighborhood. We were all excited—'Here we are in Washington, D.C., the nation's capital!' And then it was kind of dark, and a police officer in a squad car drove up and said, 'You guys must be new here, aren't you?' And we said, 'Yeah.' [And he said,] 'You don't walk in this neighborhood at night!' [Laughs] He was like, 'Get in the car! I'm driving you back. Where are you guys from?' 'Catholic University.' 'You don't walk in this neighborhood at night!' That was our first introduction to Washington, D.C. So he drove us back to our dorm room and we stayed there. But

I came back and changed my major to Political Science after that. And I said, 'Here we are, in the most powerful place in the world, the nation's capital; there's no Hmong people here. And at that time, in 1988, I approached Senator Carl Levin at the time—and I delivered a lot of secret documents to the Pentagon on behalf of the Senator [Laughs]. Seems like I'm one of the persons that delivers that. So the Pentagon is highly secure—holy smokes, talk about that…And it's quite an experience being in the Pentagon. Levels to level. And they always had to call the Senator's office to confirm with the Senator's office that I was legit. That was in 1988 [Laughs]. High, top security. I was delivering to the Secretary of Defense. But one time—I always took the cab down, carrying this confidential envelope [Laughs], riding a cab! One time the cab's wheel had a flat on the way down there. So I said, 'I'll just walk; it's just right over there.' [Gasps] It wasn't like that at all! [Laughs] Yeah, it wasn't like that at all, and I had to walk really far before I could get to the pentagon. And of course, you can just see it right there, but you can't get across. But that was quite an experience. And at that time, it was before Campaign Finance Reform. So every night there's always receptions for staff and for Senators. But Senators don't go, they just send staffers. We'd get free meals, elaborate food, everything, every night, every night—almost every night. Lunch—and we'd have all these lobbyists always throwing parties. But once you're involved in lobbying work, it's the staff that you need to build a relationship with, it's not the Senators themselves, because the staff does all the work. And so they knew it well—but that was my first learning experience. So I came back and I said, 'I want to change my major.' So I changed my major to Political Science. And I also said I want to know more about the Minnesota system, so I wrote letters to all of the Minnesota State Senators and Representatives. And Representative Andy Dawkins was the only one that responded. Andy Dawkins used to represent the Frogtown area. He held the position that Cy [Thao] is holding now. He said, 'We probably don't have a job for you, but I'd like to have your help. So we were door-knocking in Frogtown, 1988, and trying to canvass the community—we asked the community for support. And that was when I realized the number of Hmong people in Frogtown. Like per block you're probably looking at at least two thirds or half of the people on each block are Hmong, happen to be Hmong. So we were doing the Homestead program and trying to get the support of his constituents. And then [I] found a job with State Senator Joe Bertram, from Paynesville, and Scott Magnuson, who is still at the Senate right now, at the Senate information office. Each time I go there he still recognizes me [Laughs]. [He] still remembers who I am, you know? And I worked for Senator Joe Bertram. Joe Bertram was from the Paynesville area. And I did a lot of similar things like I did in Washington, D.C.—draft letters for the Senator, do reports, research. He was doing a lot of work on POW-MIA. And that's when I hooked him up with General Vang Pao—at that time. And we were working with an organization called 'Minnesota Won't Forget,' which is a POW-MIA organization based here.

(46:25) Now when did you first meet General Vang Pao?

I met General Vang Pao when I was…[Pauses]…I think I was in high school, providing security [Laughs]. General Vang Pao came and had dinner at Dr. Yang Dao's house on the east side (Dr. Yang Dao used to live in the Payne-Phalen area). And they were having dinner over there, and they asked my kung fu master, a Hmong person (Yang Long. He lives in Appleton now) to bring all of us over there for security detail. So we were providing security. I was in charge of making sure that no one touched the food [Laughs]. I could look at it, but I couldn't eat it. And then after that I was moved into the back yard just to provide security detail back there. I'm thinking I was at that time, you know? I mean, think about it. You think you can live forever, and someone can just come in and knock us off [Laughs]. So that's when I met Dr. Yang Dao officially, in that capacity, and also General Vang Pao. That was the first time I met General Vang Pao. And Dr. Yang Dao—we kind of met before because he came to some of our king fu events, but this was all in high school. But

that was how—but yeah, when I worked for Senator Joe Bertram, we worked with General Vang Pao. And here's what I told General Vang Pao: I said, 'The POW-MIAs—you know which plane goes down where, and your men know which ones you were able to save and which ones you weren't able to rescue, okay? So here's an opportunity to, as a good gesture, as a partnership, as friends, here's a good way for you to help 'Minnesota Won't Forget' identify where these sites are.' And he said, 'Well, it's a long time ago, we don't know,' and all that stuff, but we were working with him, and then I quit my job and went to work (this is after I graduated. And then I went to work) for Hmong Youth Association of Minnesota as a youth counselor, because I felt that now that I had legislative experiences and knew how to break down barriers, that I would be much more efficient and effective helping my community by working in the community. So that's why I decided to take that youth counselor position, working with serious juvenile offenders. And then after a year the director left, and I became the executive director, and moved the agency from a $25,000 budget to half a million dollars a year.

(49:50) What kinds of things are involved in that institution? What were you trying to accomplish?

Well, there's a couple of things. One is to keep the kids away from—well, career exploration was a key thing, and really helping young people explore various options that they have in life. The second piece was to keep kids away from criminal activities. At the time, gang activity was on the rise, particularly 'smash and grab' activities where the kids would drive into gun shops and then scoop all the guns into the car and drive off [Laughs]. And then home invasion. They would go into the houses and tie people up, then rob them and then leave. And so to create a program, a diversion program for them. And then mentorship. I probably started the first program for young girls, young women, because I was concerned that some of the young women that we worked with were getting married while they were in junior high and high school. At that time it was pretty acceptable, because the community was still very traditional. And I was concerned, because here you have these young girls, and then next week comes, and 'Where is the other one?' Well, 'She got married' [Laughs]. And then I would hear the other one say, 'Well I'm getting married because all of my friends are getting married.' And I was saying, 'No, you don't have to get married because all of your friends are getting married.' So I created a mentorship program, basically identifying mentors out there, working mentors out there, where the mentors would have lunch with the mentees once a month so they could have a conversation, explore various career options. We would take them out to the various work sites so they knew what their options were. We would take them to college—this was like 1990 I was doing this [Laughs], 1991. I think that was part of—again, being in the Capitol, being in Washington D.C., seeing how important education was in really helping some of the young girls already, and then creating a program working with serious juvenile offenders. I remember one agency that will remain nameless came to me and said, 'Lee Pao, what are you wasting all this money for working with all these lost kids?' And I said, well, these are <u>our</u> kids. Whenever they commit a crime—front page news—they didn't say 'This is another person's kid,' they said, 'This is a Hmong kid' [Laughs]. I mean, these kids, they say, 'Well, they don't care about the Hmong people, but these kids, they feel strongly about the Hmong, their Hmongness. I mean they have great and strong self-identity and cultural identity. They just happen to hang around the wrong crowd. So I was doing that and…[Pauses]…Bob Fletcher, who is now Sheriff Bob Fletcher, was a good partner of mine. And that's where Bill Snyder [a sergeant in the St. Paul Police Force's Asian Gang Strike Force and creator of the Mike Force] to Joe (***)—all of these guys were all my partners [Laughs], and we crafted many programs together, and one year we had a double suicide—I mean murder, on West Seventh. There's two gas stations before you approach the airport—there's two gas stations on the right, one on the left. The—(I can't think of the name of that gang)—one

night they robbed the two gas stations simultaneously and executed the owners in there [Laughs], and executed in cold blood. I mean, they were lying down and BOOM. And one of them was a customer. And so two people died in two, two (I think—it's been a while). And there was great negative media. And they caught all the kids [Laughs]. And that gang was the first time ever that the Cambodian, the Hmong, and the Vietnamese gangs came together. That was the first time that all the gangs kind of joined in together. And after they arrested those guys that gang kind of dismantled, which is great [Laughs]. Otherwise it would have been really bad. And I credit United Cambodian Association for being able to work with the Cambodian Creepers [Cripps?] (that was the name of the gang back then). And at that time White Tigers and Cobras were very much famous back then. So we worked with all of those. And then Sheriff Bob Fletcher and I, and Joe (***), we decided, 'Let's pull all of these organizations together.' I mean, it's ridiculous that everyone's fighting among themselves for funding. And so I told Sheriff Fletcher that what you need to do is, you need to take the initiative, because if Lee Pao takes the initiative as director of the Hmong Youth Association, the other MAAs—Hmong American Partnership, Lao Family, Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women, Women's Association of Hmong and Lao will think that Lee Pao has an agenda. I have no agenda. My agenda is the kids, [Laughs] is to be able to help the kids. So you take the initiative. And he did, and we went to the State Legislature and we called it the Southeast Asian Gang Prevention Program. (I think that's what it was called.) And we went to Randy Kelly, and Randy Kelly introduced the first legislation to appropriate money for this initiative. Give Randy Kelly credit: $500,000 a year for this initiative. And then the state heard about it, the (***) office heard about it and said, 'We have an opportunity to apply for some federal money. Would you be interested?' And so, of course, we all said, 'Let's do it. Let's leverage this money.' But they brought in the Vietnamese, they brought in the Lao and the Cambodians. It was more beyond than just Hmong now. And so we called ourselves the Southeast Asian Community Coalition for Youth and Families. And we went to the Fed and we got a million dollars, divvied up the money, and we kind of coordinated the services—basically, 'You take care of this gang group, I take care of that gang group,' and 'You take care of this age group, we'll take care of the parent over here.' We all divided up. That was very coordinated, very innovative. Because then we were also able to share case files. So we know for sure that you're not going to be served to death and that this person is not going to receive any services—you know, to make sure that you receive the services that you need, but at the same time that person receive the services that they need, but at the same time, be able to tap into other services; sort of like an all-inclusive, in-house package. That's what we were doing—very innovative at that time. And then Hmong American Partnership was very controversial. Because when Hmong American Partnership was founded, it was founded by Christopher Thao, the first Hmong attorney in the world. And Dr. Yang Dao was a part of it—Neal Thao, former school board member, and now a social worker in Ramsey [County] and also teaches at Metro State. He was also one of the founders. They founded that organization—very controversial. Lao Family, General Vang Pao and all these groups called the organization a communist organization, lots of death threats and all of that, and yeah, it was really amazing just to see all of this happen in the community. And here I was, a naïve young person [Laughs]

(58:24) Was there something apart from this organization being founded outside the auspices of Lao Family and other organizations that alarmed people, or was there something else going on?

Well, I think it was more—they'd say Dr. Yang Dao is a communist. They labeled Dr. Yang Dao as a communist back then, and Dr. Yang Dao was involved in it, so they accused the organization of channeling funding to the communist Lao government, to buy helicopters to kill people, you know? But Hmong American partnership initially talked about a program to send nurses and doctors and

medical supplies to villages in Laos, and also to build a school in Laos, and they say that by doing that you are indirectly financing the Lao government and supporting the Lao government's oppression of Hmong people. So that's their argument [Laughs]. And it was a $25,000 project—I mean, holy smokes. The executive director, who was a Caucasian—he resigned. He retired, more or less, and then they searched for an executive director. And so we were meeting at the Capitol, and one of the staff persons at Hmong American Partnership—we were talking about the position and the development director over there said, 'Lee Pao, you don't have the guts to apply for this position' [Interviewer guffaws]. Wrong move [Laughs]. I was really happy where I was.

(59:59) May as well have tried to beat you up!

Yeah, I was really happy where I was over at Hmong Youth Association, I was building the organization, we had half a million dollars, twelve staff, and over ten programs, and she said, 'You don't have the guts to apply for this. You're too afraid of controversies.' And so at 4 o'clock [Interviewer laughs] the day the application was due, I dropped [off] my resume. And [the rest is] history [Laughs]. And then they did all the interviews, and I became the executive director of Hmong American Partnership. And I started a lot of the self-sufficiency programs, I brought many of the—[Pauses] serviced juveniles, I created the first after-care program to work with serious juvenile offenders that were Southeast Asians in Minnesota. And it was a combination of hiring a social worker who would be housed at the probation office and working closely with families. 'Cause many of the kids that came out of corrections—they came out corrected, reformed, but they came back to the same environment that got them into trouble in the first place. So we wanted to change the family environment. We knew we couldn't change society, but we could change the family environment. Our first test was—we received a $50,000 grant from the state to work with 50 kids. And of that, 47 became crime-free; only three went back to the system [Laughs]. And that was probably my proudest program. And before that, they were repeat offenders, going back and forth. But what we did was we brought the family into the system, educated the family about what the kid is receiving, and let the kid interact with the parents to understand what the parental expectations were. So you basically opened up clear communications so you don't assume, you don't make assumptions.

(1:02:09) I assume a lot of these parents are maybe working two jobs and very busy, and so—

Yeah, but when their kids are—[Laughs]

Oh, yeah, but I assume that's how many of them got into trouble to begin with…

Yeah, yeah. That's what it is. But once the kid understood the parental expectations, that all changed. To this day I still dread—and City, Inc. We were working with City, Inc. in Minneapolis, and at that time City, Inc. was very controversial, too—working with gang members. But I saw that that program was a good model program for us. In order to address crime, gang issues, you had to have somebody that's involved in that activity to participate, to work with you, so they can talk from experience instead of an educator or somebody that has no experience and is telling you, 'That's not good.' [Laughs]

(1:03:00) What year did Hmong American Partnership—

Hmong American Partnership was founded in 1990—I think it was like '89, '90, around there.

[Interviewer switches tape over, but digital recorder is still running]

1:03:29

But yeah, Hmong American Partnership was very much—and the other thing that I did at Hmong American Partnership which I was really proud of was I brought structure to the organization. I changed my management team, reorganized my management team. J. Kou Vang, who is with JB Realty, was my director of finance and operations—which was really fascinating. When he applied for the job, I said, 'Why would you want to work here?' Well, [he answered], 'I heard a lot of good things about you and I want to work for you.' Cool [Laughs]! What a good way to boost my ego! But he was very good, too. He was very good. Now he's running the 12th-largest real estate company in Minnesota. So he's doing all right [Laughs]. And then while I was doing work at Hmong American Partnership [I] received—it's kind of interesting. The first week I was there I received a death threat, with a bullet mailed.

(1:04:37) Oh, very nice!

Yeah, they mailed the bullet and the death threat, and said, 'We know what kind of car you drive: you drive this car and the license plate is like this and if you don't have a life insurance policy for you, then go and get a life insurance policy, because this bullet is going to lodge between your neck and your ear.'

Nice.

[Laughs] 'And we know that you come to work at this time…' [Voice rises] They did all of that! They did their research! And so what I did is I turned around—and I won't name that person—but I turned around and wrote a letter to that particular person, because I knew who that person was.

(1:05:16) How?

I kind of had a hunch I knew who that person was…And this is how I knew: when I was at Hmong Youth Association, after all these controversies between Hmong American Partnership, Lao Family, General Vang Pao, Dr. Yang Dao—all this infighting in the Hmong community, I talked to William Yang, who is now executive director of Hmong American Partnership, and I said, 'Let's cut the crap. Somebody's going to get hurt, because a lot of death threats are flying around.' And I said, 'William, why don't you talk to the Mayor. Let's have the Mayor pull all of the groups together?' (I was working secretly behind the scenes, [Laughs] working on both sides.) Because people respected people in positions of authority in our community. And so let the Mayor take the lead. So the Mayor—we concocted a plan to bring them all together and to say, 'Stop this stuff.' In this room, going to the heads and telling them to do this. And then, of course, one party member decided not to participate, because he said, 'I don't view that person as a leader of the community, so I'm not going to show up.' And so we had to go to Plan B, and Plan B was that then the Mayor would sit down separately with each of the groups, and one of the groups came and said, 'Would you help us draft a message?' because they didn't know that I was behind the whole thing. So I helped them draft the note [Laughs]. That's how I knew: the handwriting, the style, the speaking tone, all of that. And so when I got the letter threatening letter I wrote back to them and said, 'Don't think that by eliminating me you eliminate a whole bunch of people with my mindset. There's a lot of people like me out there. So you're going to go and kill off everybody that thinks like me [Laughs]? I know that you're committed to the Hmong community, and you know that I'm committed to the Hmong community, so let's just work together and let's move the community forward. And the guy wrote back and he demanded that I send two elders to his house and apologize. And I said, 'No, I'm not going to do that [Laughs]. And then later on my Xiong clan basically confronted this man, too, ('cause they're part of the same political parties) and said, 'Did you write the letter?' And he never answered. So he did [Laughs]. But that's how I—and one thing I learned from that experience: you learn by mistakes. What I learned from that experience is, next time when you know it's that person who's threatening you or doing something, you don't write to him and challenge him, but

you basically go ask him and say, 'Hey, I received this letter. What should I do?' Ask him to be part of the solution [Laughs]. Ask that person to be part of the solution, even though you know it's that person, to see their reaction. That's something I learned.

(1:08:38) Sounds like it was effective. For someone who is outside of the Hmong community, could you talk for just a moment about how that process of bringing something to your clan's attention works and how they decide to act on your behalf?

There are key leaders within each clan, and they're sort of like designated as a spokesperson. And so sometimes when you have conflict between individuals, and you can't resolve the conflict between the individuals, sometimes the clan will intervene—if it's a major issue, they will intervene. And in this particular case I didn't bring it to their attention, but I cc'd it to them. I wrote the letter and cc'd to them [Laughs]. So they kind of intervened on my behalf, in that sense, because then when he saw that I cc'd to all these clan leaders, what he did was that he wrote, and then he wrote the letter and cc'd all these people, too. And so they said, 'What's up? [Laughs] What's between the two of you?' And so they kind of questioned him, and he couldn't answer. So usually you would approach—because I was a young person I didn't know the clan structure. I didn't know the power structure within the community. I always joked that, for Pete's sake, my degree was in Political Science, and we're supposed to challenge [Laughs] the actions of people, right? So here I was challenging people. And I was very controversial. Even to this day I think I am still very controversial, because the people always say, 'You speak your mind, and you always say what's the truth. You always tell the truth, so that's what we respect about you.' And I don't think I want to be any different than that. I mean, say what needs to be said? Why beat around the bush and [snaps his fingers, as if to say, 'Let's get it done"]. So that's the thing about me. So when I was there, death threats, death threats, people even—this is the pre-Caller ID days [All laugh]. People call and leave messages threatening your life. People call and you pick up the phone and they threaten your life and they hang up. There was nothing you could do back then! Now there's Caller ID and you don't get that anymore. I just received two leteers over that, too. You just continue to—it's like Dr. Holst says. There's a Korean saying: the tallest tree gets the most wind. It comes with the territory, you know? So you just accept it. When I was there—at that time, at the Asian-Pacific Council, there was great controversy at the Asian-Pacific Council. I mean, holy smoke, people were suing each other left and right. The State Council of Asian Pacific Minnesotans is a state agency established by the State Legislature to advise the Governor on issues affecting the Asian-Pacific community and so on. And we had another great controversy there and members of the Vietnamese community and others came to me and said, 'Lee Pao, why don't you apply for that position and bring us out of this chaos?' And I thought—you know, wherever I go I like to build things. You know, when I was at Hmong Youth I built Hmong Youth Association from the ground up. Hmong American Partnership—I built Hmong American Partnership from the ground up. Asian-Pacific Council the same thing. So I found my calling. I like to build things [Laughs]. And I feel like I'm getting pretty good at building things. So at Asian-Pacific Council, every year—every two years the Council would have to worry about the State Legislature coming down and closing down the Asian-Pacific Council. So when I got there I did a strategic planning session, went to all my other colleagues, other foreign/minority councils and said. 'Why do we need to justify our existence every two years? Then we just focus on survival instead of doing good work for the community?' So when I accepted that calling I went over there and introduced legislation to re-vamp the Asian-Pacific Council—not just the Asian-Pacific, the four minority councils—and to exempt councils of color fro being sunsetted. And [I] participated in education reform—welfare reform was a major issue. I still feel good about the fact that I introduced up a provision into the welfare legislation which made it immigrant-friendly. So these are little things people don't know, but [Chuckles] we contribute bits and pieces.

The education reform, I was part of the whole debate about school vouchers, the debate about charter schools, land [?] schools—it came out of the Carlson administration. I worked closely with Governor Arnie Carlson on that. So we were able to inject some ideas into the legislation. I feel good about that. We got some gambling, compulsive gaming treatment programs going for the community, moved welfare reform beyond just the Southeast Asian population. I mean, I've had to tell Chinese—the Chinese and the Koreans and the Japanese communities, the Filipino communities that were established, 'This bill goes into effect, your grandma and your grandma or your mother and your father who are non-citizens in a nursing home, will be denied benefits. This is your fight as much as it is a Southeast Asian fight. So don't make it into a Southeast Asian issue [Laughs]. So Chinese, you have mom and dad in the nursing home or mom and dad at home, they're not United States citizens. Their benefits' gonna be denied, so this is <u>your</u> fight.' That's what I was saying. So I was able to unite the more than 40 Asian ethnic groups in Minnesota into one group, [an] effective voice. People said it couldn't be done. I said, 'Yes it can—right issues.'

(1:15:21) Find the common interests.

Absolutely. If you don't find the right issues and common interests, it's not gonna work. And so we exempted the councils of color from being sunsetted, we also prevented the governor from arbitrarily removing board members. Board members were appointed by the governor. And so I introduced legislation in there, language in there to say that the governor cannot remove officers, board members, without notice and hearings, and without cause [Laughs]. So de-politicize it. Before the governor could come in and pick you up and pick you up and push you out and put in whoever he wants to. So it was a political thing and I said, 'No, let's keep it away. Keep it neutral.' That language, I put that in there and I said, 'You can't do that. Let's change that.' So that's why the councils—they're not sunsetting and they have a good structure in place and development and—I figure that development can, to some extent—at Concordia, there was a meeting that [Vice President] Mike Flynn organized and Pastor Kou Seying organized to talk about training DAs and TAs for licensure—the SEAT [Southeat Asian Teacher] program. At that time it was not the SEAT program [Laughs]. And I was part of the advisory group and I went to Mike and I said to Mike, 'Why don't you go to the State Legislature and ask for some money?' And Mike kind of whispered and said, 'We have this position; would you be interested?' And I said, 'Send it to me.' And so he sent it to me, and I said, 'OK, fine, I'll put my name in there.' So I put my name in there and then BFI International, the trash company, also—the director of community relations position was available, and they were offering me that position, too. And so Concordia was delaying offering their position, so I almost took the BFO job. And BFI flew me down to Texas and I met with the CEO. I met with the management team and everything, and they were putting a package together, and I said, 'Am I going to get this position or am I going to go over there?' The package over there was great [Laughs]!

(1:17:52) Oh, I have no doubt!

It was really, really, really good.

Corporate America versus Concordia?

Yeah, it was very, very good, but you know what? What changed my mind was in my conversation with the CEO (I think he was ****), he said, 'If we're going to put a landfill here, your job would be to go and convince the community that it's safe to put it there. And that kind of got to my conscience. You know, I'm not going to <u>lie</u> [Laughs]! I'm not going to go tell them that their landfill's going to be bad environmentally—not environmentally sound, and that it's going to have all kinds of health effects on people there! I'm not going to go and lie to them! So that was the turning point for me. The money was good, the travel, the perks, everything was <u>great</u>, but the

conscience—I mean, I just couldn't do that. I just couldn't do that. So I kind of waited to see what Concordia would offer. And they were offering—when I came here from the Asian-Pacific Council to Concordia, I took a pay cut.

(1:18:59) Oh, I have no doubt!
[Laughs] I took a $20,000 pay cut. But it's like doing the work that you want to do and that you like and that you see value in. I mean, that's for me; that's the most important thing. And so I came here. Brenda Legred was probably the best boss I ever had. She was the best. She was always encouraging me, always commenting positively on my work, and she was the greatest. Every day she was, 'Have a great day, Lee Pao!'

(1:19:38) I never saw her angry or cross at all about anything.
Yeah! She was wonderful. That's the best boss that you could ask for. So I did that, and then I had a chance to go work on my doctorate. I won a Bush Fellowship to work on my doctorate. But I didn't finish it—two more classes to go.

(1:20:00) [Hillmer turned to Mai Neng Vang and Youa Vang to see if they had any questions to ask] Youa: About the mentorship program—how successful was it? Did the parents allow their daughters to participate in it?
Yeah, it was very successful, because what we did was we—the person that coordinated that was not a Hmong person, but an American young lady. And so she—if you put a Hmong person there, it might not be successful [Laughs]. And also we needed somebody that would be able to connect with mainstream—I mean, these are some top women leaders out there. And just to give them, just to say, 'Wow, I'd like to be like you,' but just to have these people give the time of day once a month to have lunch with young ladies, young Hmong ladies, that was just amazing, too. So it was a good program. And when we did the Career Connection program at Hmong American Partnership—that was also to—that was a college program. And they're not doing it now, which is too bad. This is the time when students need it the most. Even when I was at Hmong Youth, what we also did that I forgot to mention was that we created a Hmong Higher Education Encouragement Program to work with—we knew that the ACT test determined the amount of scholarship you're going to receive, the school you're going to go to, if you're going to be accepted so we worked with—and this is where I worked with Dr. Yang Dao, too. We want the student to prepare for the ACT test. We worked with 11th graders. And we would bring the 11th graders to our center for tutoring. We would also bring [them] to the center for math, science, and comprehension—reading comprehension. And we contracted with Stanley Kaplan Test Center to do that. So they were doing that. And then we also contracted with Dr. Yang Dao to teach them Hmong history, because we wanted them to be grounded in Hmongness [Laughs] as well, because once you know who you are, then you feel proud and you want to work harder. And so we kind of built all of that. Some of our students went on to Harvard, went on to some of the best schools—Harvard, Princeton—so it was a very good, successful program as well. But the other program I was talking about—Mentorship and Correct Connection at Hmong American Partnership—what we found was that students, college students, during their second year and third year is when they drop out. Because during their third year they realize, 'I don't want to go into Accounting [Laughs]. This is the worng field for me.' You know what I'm saying? Or second year, 'This is terrible! I don't want to do this!' And then by that time it's too late. It's too late. And so some time the option is you either go to school more or you drop out. So we didn't want to see that happen. So we created a Career Connection program, so that when you're in your first or second year, you say you're going to declare an Accounting major or Economics or Finance major. We will find somebody in the

Finance field to pair with you. And so you will have ongoing mentorship with that particular person. So then you will know everything, so by the time you get to that point you already know what you want to do. And if you don't know what you want to do in the beginning, and you learn that that's not the field where you want to go, then you change, or you can say, 'I want to go.' So the Career Connection—that's where Mai Neng Moua and (there are other people, but it's been so long…) many other people who are active in the community now—they were my students back then! That's just to show how old I am [Laughs]! That's like when Professor *Houa Ka Lia* [??] was saying, 'Yeah, I read so much about you when I was in high school, and when I told my dad I was coming to see you, I was so excited,' and I said, 'Boy, that makes me feel old [Laughs]. But those are some innovative programs that I created—no, that many of us created back then, I would say. I don't want to take all the credit, but many of us created, because we didn't have those programs in place. We were the first generation of college-educated in America. And we did everything ourselves. We had to tumble and stumble through darkness to get to where we are. So we were like, 'Here's an opportunity to do something for the next generation.' And right now I see it's hard for an old geezer like me who's been around for so long to see no innovation emerging out of many of these organizations. I mean, it just bugs the heck out of me. It just bugs the heck out of me, but that's the social justice in me, just to say, 'I don't see nay innovation. I see complacency.' You don't see leadership emerging, you just see management—you know, people who are just managers—same old, same old, same old stuff. I mean, you would think that after almost 20 years now you would see innovation coming out of these organizations. It's a job, it's not a passion. Back then it was my passion. I felt passionately about it, and so I was doing things because I wanted to do, and I wanted to see it happen. And that's a big difference nowadays. People are just too relaxed and—I was in Florida this past week and there was this speaker there, and one of the takeaways from that speaker was, 'Somewhere along the way we've lost our moral anger, and it is up to us to find that moral anger back.

(1:26:24) Outrage.

Yeah. Because we're always so complacent, you know, and we always say, 'This is good enough,' and we leave it at that. We don't say there's more. Maybe that's why I'm starting to read all these self-help books [Laughs]—just to tell myself, 'Lee Pao, this is not your battle anymore. This is other people's battles. That's why when the Hmong American Partnership does things or the Asian-Pacific Council does things, or other community [agencies] do things, I don't try to go, because I don't want to want to go there just to vent my anger.

(1:27:04) You get all worked up?

Yeah, to get all worked up and I'm just like, 'It's their turn. Let's see how they're going to do it.' And so the mentorship is very, very important. I think our mentorship program is very important. And I think we should think about—that's why for me, to see all of you guys, the seniors [at Concordia], the seniors and the juniors mentoring some of the younger freshman students. That was my passion back then, to see that happen. I think that's wonderful, that's what they need, because when you—you remember the first time you go to school, you're lost, you don't know—and that's why I fought so hard to get the [President's] house [now the home of the Center for Hmong Studies]. Come over and get—develop your identity, secure your base first, and then we can be integrated, but don't be too comfortable in one area. Because you continue to be isolated, and you don't want to be isolated, and you need to continue to be integrated into the larger campus community. Because if you don't so that, the larger campus community is very comfortable; they've been here for over 100 years [Laughs]. They've been doing the same thing all the time! So let's look at how we can (I call it) introduce Hmongness—that's what I always say—in terms of classes. Let's

see how we can introduce Hmongness into the Political Science course or into International Relations—it's there, you know? Make it relevant for the population that's here, as well as for the population around us, so that you can have a perspective, because it's not that you can't so it—yes you can. It can be incorporated. And that's the same thing with people, with students. You can incorporate students into the life of the community. When I went to the University of Minnesota, I had no affinity to the university. I didn't even go to my graduation [Laughs]. I didn't go to my Bachelor's degree graduation, my Master's degree graduation. My excuse is, 'I'm not done' [Laughs]. Wait until I'm done and I'll come and get the degree. You can send it to me [Laughs]. But I think it's the loyalty to the institution. And the reason I don't have the loyalty to the institution is it's the tool to help us get to where we want to go. It's not and end-all for all. And I think for mainstream America, for European students, it's different. Sometimes it's, 'Oh, this is mine. I'm here, part of here.' But I think for Asians it's like, 'This is a tool to help us get to where we want to go' [Laughs]. So there's no ownership, to some extent. So with me knowing that, how do we create that kind of ownership here with a new generation of students, so that when you leave this institution you feel proud: 'This is my institution. I graduated from there.'

(1:30:11) Well, speaking of something you must be proud of, how did President Clinton appoint you to the Presidential Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and what was that experience like?

I had always been an activist, active not only locally, but nationally as well. I knew a lot of friends in Washington, D.C., too, and I guess one day—I was here at Concordia. I went on vacation to Gull Lake, and Mary Voyda, who was the secretary here, called me up and said, 'Lee Pao! The White House is looking for you!' And I said, 'Yeah, right.' 'Yeah, somebody called from the White House and said they're looking for you. Here's the phone number. You need to call them right away. They want to talk to you right away!' So I saw [area code] 202—that's Washington, D.C.! So I called and it was the White House! [Laughs]. And ***Laura Efert*** (??) was the person I was supposed to call. So I called and said, 'This is Lee Pao. I understand you're looking for me.' And she said, 'Yeah! The President would like to meet with you.' 'About what?' 'Anything that you want to talk about.' That was pretty broad, you know? It made me nervous [Laughs]! 'Anything you want to talk about—community issues.' And I said, 'Yeah, that's fine, but when would the President like to meet with me?' Now this was a Tuesday and they said Thursday. 'Can you fly out here on Thursday to meet with the President?' And I said, 'OK.' So I called back [to Mary Voyda] and said, 'Make the flight arrangement' [Laughs]. And so I flew out there and when I got to the White House I was sitting in the lobby area and saw some people I knew, and met with the President. And what I brought to talk to the President about was, one, issues of mental health. And I told the president—and I brought the issue [of] that Hmong [1:32:22 - speaks in Hmong for a second or two], that Hmong Her family or Kong family that killed six of her children at McDonough [Laughs]. She killed them all. And I said, 'President Clinton, you've done a great job of Americanizing, you've done a great job of settling the Hmong people and the Southeast Asian population after the Vietnam War, so I thank you for that, but one thing that you're missing: you forgot that we came from a war-torn country with war trauma [Laughs]. And I said, right now what you have, what you see within the community, the murder, suicide rate within the community has gone up. And at that time it was once, twice every year we see something like that. And I said, 'This is a mental health issue, in that now people have a roof over their heads, food on the table, and now they start thinking about all the losses in their lives. Why can't my father be here to share this wealth with me? Why can't my mother be here? My understanding is' (and I did my research) 'there is no dollars available to address mental health issues within the Southeast Asian population. That is very broad.' So I said, 'There are no resources, and if you would consider allocating resources to address mental health

issues within the Southeast Asian population, that would be wonderful.' The second piece was the Bruce Vento bill, the Hmong Naturalization Act. And I told President Clinton, 'You know, for the sake of honoring Bruce Vento, Congressman Bruce Vento.' This is something that he's been pushing since 1990. I heard about it in 1988, when I was in Washington, D.C. There was a conversation about it—I think it was introduced later on. And I said, 'The Naturalization Act will not provide for citizenship. It only provides an interpreter in the room. So I think you should support that bill.' And he said, 'What is that bill?' So I had the bill number and I had the author and I said, 'Here's the bill number' (I forget the number now) 'and here's the author, I appreciate it if you support it. It passed the House already.' So he wrote it down—he was taking notes! I was pleased! He was really good, because the minute you walk in, he stood up—he's such a charismatic leader, it's amazing. He stood right up, shook hands, calls you right by the name, and pronounced my name correctly [Laughs]. I was surprised—I went 'Ooo!' But what I talked to him also was the issue of juvenile delinquency, because that's an issue I feel passionately about, because I've been working on that issue. So I brought all of the issues I feel passionately about. I don't care what the community said [Laughs], but I knew that was an issue that the community cared about! So juvenile delinquency—and I said, 'The last time the community received support from the federal government was the million dollars we received from the Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, part of the Department of Health and Human Services. And so what you see here now, the murder/suicide, the juvenile delinquency—they're all tied in together. And so we'd love to have your support on that as well. And if you can allocate some resources through the Department of Justice of the Department of Health and Human Services, that would be wonderful. So those were three things that I talked to him about. And I talked to him about the fact that—and when I mentioned to him the cases of the six children, he read that story. He said, 'Oh yeah, I heard about that! That was a tragedy.' So to have the President be— [Laughs]. And then I also told him, 'You know there's ten million Hmong worldwide and eight million in China,' and he said, 'How many? I didn't know that!' I said, 'Yeah. There's only 300,000 Hmong in the United States, but there's eight million in China. And then we started talking about China. And he said there were a lot of people in Congress that wanted to make China the enemy of the United States of America. And he said, 'That is just plain wrong.' So it was a fascinating kind of—I said I had my 15—I don't know. I must have been 15 minutes or 20 minutes of fame with him [All laugh]. And that's—the picture you have there [He has a picture in the Center for Hmong Studies of himself shaking President Clinton's hand] is a picture of when I first entered the room. And he came in and shook my hand. That's the picture. The press photographer took that picture—the White House press photographer. And that was a fascinating time. During his first term, I worked on his campaign. And, in fact, there's a picture that was printed in the *Star Tribune* where I was standing behind him [Laughs]. I don't know where that picture is. I've moved so many times! But I want to get that picture. I was standing right behind him! He was standing right here, and my friend and I were standing behind him. But after that I was so—lost touch, and then afterward—I think that meeting was his way of interviewing for the commission. There were going to be 16 of us seated on the commission—the President's Advisory Commission on Asian American Affairs, and we were going to advise him on—and we produced a really thick report [Laughs]. We were going to advise him on issues—health disparities to looking at ways we can integrate Asian/Pacific Islanders into government programs, and vice versa. And Norman Mineta was there chair. So I sat on that Commission with the inventor of the Pentium chip, the inventor of the AIDS drugs to suppress the—he was Dr. David Ho. There were just all these people, and I felt like I was—here I was the youngest around, the youngest, and the person with the least experience, and you have all these people with wealth. And we had a lady in there that, everywhere we go, she would bring her own wine bottle. They were expensive! And she would drink the wine and say, 'Oh, this is terrible!' And so everywhere we go,

she would bring her own wine [Laughs]. That's the world, that's the life that all the others have lived! But that was really fascinating. Clinton was amazing. We had several interactions with him, and it was a good time. I learned a lot. We did a lot of traveling throughout the country listening to people. And I was telling my colleagues that the report that we provided to Clinton was probably the most comprehensive report that's ever been done on the needs of the API community—Asian/Pacific Islander community—in the United States. And that was the first time ever. That was all from all regions of the United States. We even had a hearing here in Minnesota to get input from the API community. So that was a highlight. I think that was a highlight. And then the other piece was getting appointed by [Minnesota Governor Jesse] Ventura—Jesse Ventura. I worked for two of the most controversial people [Laughs]. Jesse Ventura—and he appointed me to represent the City of St. Paul, Falcon Heights, and Lauderdale on the Met[ropolitan] Council. So the Met Council basically—the bus systems, Como Regional—the Regional Park system, sewage treatment plants, money for affordable housing, all of that—that's under the Met Council. Regional planning—a city cannot grow without the authorization of the Met Council. That's how powerful the Met Council is. They govern the seven county metro area; and that's why cities sue the Met Council [Laughs], because they say, 'You know, we don't believe that we're going to grow this much,' but the Met Council said, 'Yes, you will.' Or they said, 'No, we're not going to build enough housing.' Met Council says, 'Yes, you will, to accommodate the growth in population. You can't keep people out. We want you to build the infrastructure so you can accommodate the growth in the population.' And I was the chair of one of the two most powerful committees: the Livable Communities Committee, which is the community development committee, and provides money for [brown ?] clean-up, parks, housing and that. And then the other powerful committee would be the transportation committee. And we built the light rail line [Laughs]. If it weren't for Ventura the light rail line would not have gone up. If it weren't for our term, it wouldn't have happened. So when they asked me to run—I chaired the Audit Committee (and that's basically to make sure that all the money gets spent appropriately). I also chaired the Livable Communities Committee. And it's great to be sitting in there with mayors—you got former mayors, former senators, former city council members, and here I was, this activist [Laughs], herding cows and making decisions, spending millions of dollars. That was also just amazing. It was a good time, it was a lot of learning, but it was a learning time. It was a fascinating time. You get to see how government <u>really</u> works. When I worked with [Governor] Arnie Carlson at the Capitol—it's fascinating. And all of my experience has always been like that. So when the Mayor and my good friend at the City of Minneapolis called and said, 'Would you come and run—we're consolidating departments here at the city and we're merging development with planning. Would you come and put the Housing Department together?' And I was in charge of 40 staff—over 40 staff and over $44 million—housing dollars and development dollars. And my first interaction with the union…[Sighs]. If you're unionized, it's great for you. If you're a leader or a manager, and a political appointee, it's not too good [Laughs]. 'Cause you can't move things as fast as you would like to. And many people who are in the system are complacent. They're in the system and they're comfortable, they'll give you the minimum; they won't give you their maximum. They've lost their zest for innovation. That's what my view is. And they're just counting their time until they're retired. Some of them are like that. But before they came in, they weren't like that. When they decided to work for government, they were passionate, gung-ho, and then [slaps his hands together, as if they hit a brick wall]. And they say, 'Oh, gotta back up' [Laughs]. And then they became the system, which is very unfortunate. That's the unfortunate thing. You have a lot of people who are passionate, but then later on they got tired of fighting the system, and then they became the system. And then they became part of that. And that's what I always told them. Public service is not about self-service; it's about the public. Keep the 'public' in the public service. So I was doing that, and it was a difficult

time when we were consolidating all the housing policies. Housing policies were like all over the place, and we eliminated all of the duplicated ones, we eliminated all of the old ones, put it all together, pushed it forward. That's probably our biggest accomplishment [Laughs], consolidate that, consolidate some of the funding, secure additional resources. It's great to be within an agency where you don't have to go and fight for more money, but you're always in a position to always defend your money [Laughs]. And it's great that—here's what the Mayor [R.T. Ryback] said: 'My [re-]election hinges upon whether you succeed in this job or not.' Because housing was his number one priority during the election. So talk about the pressure [Laughs]! And here I was going in there, learning all the terminology, learning all the programming services and so on and so forth, trying to get a better understanding while at the same time creating new initiatives—I started the North Side Partnership, which is a $40 million initiative. So if you add up $40 million dollars to my 44, you go, '80 million dollars' [Laughs]! But basically to really address issues in North Minneapolis in a long-term way—in economic development, housing, jobs, education, and entrepreneurship. So I crafted that plan 'til two o'clock in the morning overnight and gave it into the Mayor next day, and it became policy [Laughs]. And it was based on all my experiences throughout all of my career, pulling all of those pieces together and saying, 'In order for this to work, we've got to do this.' I went out and raised all the money, raised $40 million. So we were doing <u>way</u> more—we were doing like, for housing issues, [St. Paul Mayor Randy] Kelly wanted to build 5,000 houses in four years. We were doing 5,000 housing units per year in Minneapolis. But we were frustrated because we had a Communication Department, we didn't have a PR Department. There's a <u>big</u> difference between PR and Communications. Communications can put nice things together in report format and give it to everybody. But a PR department knows how to work the media, knows how to sell the story and have relationships with reporters. And we didn't have that; we were <u>frustrated</u>, because we were getting <u>kicked</u> [Laughs] by At. Paul left and right, and we were doing <u>way</u> more than the City of St. Paul, and yet they were getting all of the credit and that was something that, from the inside, that was the hard part. That was the hard part for us.

[Mr. Xiong had a staff meeting and needed to conclude, but then had a few last comments for the students present regarding working in a political environment]

(0:00) When you're working in an environment like that (this is particularly for the younger folks [Laughs] who are about to enter the real world of work [Laughs])—once you're in an environment like that [it's] highly competitive. And people will—that's when you know who's your friend and who's not your friend—who's a <u>real</u> friend and who's not your friend. There was a lot of back-stabbing around there. The reason that some people got to where they are now is that they did something to other people to get there. And that was just probably one of the biggest reasons why I decided, 'You know what? I don't know if I can take that much. I don't know if I can stand that.' And it goes up against my moral values, my ethics. And when Dr. Holst came calling [for the position of Director of the Center for Hmong Studies], I had two other offers on the table [Laughs] to go to the private sector. One of them was to work for an international company; and this would be the first foray into the housing market in the United States (this company's based in Malaysia). And I was going to be their person. And then there was another development company here that was trying to attract me as well. But again, I looked at the leader. You look at the leader. And you say, 'The money's good. The prestige is great. But do you really want to wake up every morning doing that?' And with the city job, most of the people who are working for the city—let me back up. Political appointees usually last between two to three years. They never last beyond that because of the environment. Because of the environment. So there's a lot of that stuff, and sometime people will take credit for what you do [Laughs] at the expense of losing a friend. And I

saw some of that in the city, and I thought, 'I don't want to do that. I don't want to be in that environment.' It was sort of like the BFI case. I don't want to be lying to people that that pile of trash is not going to hurt you when I know it's going to cause cancer. I don't want to do that! And at the city, the same thing. Don't get me wrong. There's some really good people and ethical people out there, particularly my boss, who was wonderful. He was really good. But I just didn't feel comfortable with some people that I worked with, to that extent. So when Dr. Holst came, he said, 'How much do you need, anyway? [Laughs] What does it take to bring you here to Concordia?' I thought, 'You don't have to go there. Who's your highest employee? Who's your lowest employee?' And I don't want to be way down, there, either. People always say the more you make, the more you spend, and the more you get yourself into debt [Laughs]. That was the thing. When I was at the city my salary was way up there, over $100,000 [tries to remember how much his salary was by the time he left]. When I came here I took a $40,000 pay cut, plus all the perks and benefits and everything, but I told my wife, 'I don't want to have to die on the job or have a stroke on the job.' I mean, that's what it is [Laughs]. So you choose—you think, you choose. You want to be happy. You want to feel like you're doing something and being able to do it in such a way that you get to spend time with your families. I have young kids. You've got to have time to spend your money, and doing something for the community. So this was the place. And [we] can continue there…

Part 3 – Interview conducted by Mai Neng Vang
9 February, 2006

(0:06) I think last time we left off we were talking about your position here at the Center for Hmong Studies. Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

Yeah, I think—first of all, I think what Concordia University is trying to do here is really exciting, and I know that when Concordia—when Dr. Holst and I talked about this, oh, five, six years ago, he called me again (this is after I sent an e-mail to him and said, 'Here's what people are saying on the internet discussion group about the need for such a center'), and so I said, 'If Concordia's going to do it, Concordia should go ahead before other institutions decide to launch it,' And so he said, 'OK, we're probably going to go ahead and do it.' And they did their own planning in here, and so he did the interview with a whole bunch of people, and I gave them some names to do the search, and then later on he said, 'We did all the interviews and everything, and you ought to really consider the position.' And I didn't apply for it, of course, but he said, 'You ought to consider it' and 'Send us your application and go through the process.' But the person who gave us the million dollars also had two conversations with me about asking me to just consider it. And I felt that, again, it's something that I believe—I mean, the work of the Center is something that I believe in, because I see that a lot of young people nowadays, they don't know the history of the Hmong people. They don't know language, they don't know—you know, even though they live in the culture and live in the community [pauses], ceremonies are just routine ceremonies with no meaning [Laughs], you know? So I thought, 'Whoa, what an opportunity to craft something, to bring understanding, to process into the culture, so that young people will appreciate it more—the general community will appreciate the complexity of the Hmong community and will understand and take interest, and not only view the Hmong community as a tribal group of people, but a people with history. So that's what prompted my interest in coming here and [I] left a very good position in the City of Minneapolis—I mean, I was—my organization budget over there was over $80 million, and I had

over 60 staff that I was supervising [Laughs]. So coming here, and I'm the only one, and my budget is like $240,000 a year, you know [Laughs]. And here, you don't get a lot of help. Over there I had secretaries, I had people there to help do all the work , and so—but it's something that I like, and something that—I think it's doing work for the right purpose, and for the right reasons. I mean, I'm at that point in my life where it's not about making money anymore, as long as I fulfill all my debt obligations [Laughs] and have a little left over to play around with, I'm OK with that, you know? So it's always been—I mean, I guess at this point in my life, I'm kind of looking for that: just to say I've got to do something that's going to bring meaning into my life, that's going to have a lasting legacy, and lasting impact, and be able to help my community at the same time. So even coming here, reading, I've had the opportunity to read books about the history and meet people who have done research work on the community and I think that was my…[trails off].

(4:28) Can you say your—I think you mentioned some of the stuff that you did, but can you maybe go into detail about what specific things you do as the director here at the center?
Yeah. Well, I think—there's a couple of things that I do here. There's too many for one person, but I think it's—if you're heart's in the right place, and you prioritize, which I think—you know, I think my management training (I've been in management for more than ten years, and also my—because of that work, I came across a lot of people in similar positions, and so we all learned from each other) allows me to prioritize, and allows me to segregate many of the tasks, which allows me to put time frame and deadlines and guidelines in place so that I can accomplish many things at one time [Laughs], or accomplish many things and get it all done. But my work here at the Center for Hmong Studies—basically the first and most important part is creating organization, creating a structure. Concordia University has this concept, and so it's my job to move from concept into something that's tangible, so that people can say, 'Oh, yeah, I know what research and publication means,' you know? [Laughs] 'I know what curriculum and teaching means; that means you're going to offer a class, you're going to have degree programs in place, so on and so forth—you know, conference and convening—'Yeah, I know that you're going to do organized conferences and have lectures and all that.' So the program aspect of it—creating the program and putting things into categories so that people can understand. I would call it speaking the—using the language (stealing from John McKnight, who's a great community organizing person, who writes a lot about community development issues, he says) 'speaking the language of community.' You know, the language of institutions are often very difficult to understand. And so trying to articulate what Concordia wants to do, of cultivating the past, interpreting the past, enriching the future—and learning about the past, learning about now, how to prepare the community for the future, the way to do it is through research and publication. You've got to be able to find out what [are] the latest trends within the community, and how can you be—I call it being much more anticipatory, thinking ahead, as when I was executive director of Hmong American Partnership I was telling my staff, 'You have to always be way ahead of the community, because you have to anticipate the trends, you've got to understand where will the community end up. And in order to do that you need to understand—you need to learn more about—from other cultures and other groups. When you pass this gate, what's coming up next? What's coming up next? As a refugee community, when you come to America, you are dependent on other people to help you, because you're still establishing your life. And then moving from dependency to preparatory—you know, you're preparing your life, you're going to school, you're learning a new skill set for your job; and then from there you move towards contributions, and that's giving back to the community. So looking at that and saying, 'OK, where are we as a community, and how can we anticipate—where can we get that? Where can we add values and help the community move towards what ultimately we want to do?' And so being able to articulate all of that, I think my experience in management kind of helped me frame those

into those kinds of things. And, of course, for institutions like this, you have—you can't just offer courses for no reason. You have to provide incentives for people to take your courses. So the minor [Laughs], you need credits to graduate, but if you're going to take all of these courses that you're interested in, we might as well give you a minor. So you graduate with a business or anthropology degree and you focused on or minored in Hmong Studies. Your chances of being successful out there, it's much better, and it gives you a greater appreciation of the people and their experiences. So the program aspect of it—my job is to develop the program—you know, put programs in place; the other piece is to build an infrastructure, a financial infrastructure, so that we won't have to continue to raise money all the time—there's a couple of things, there's raising money for the operation to keep the program going, to keep the organization—the work of the organization going, and then you raise money for programs, to continue to have programs and maintain the programs that you have. And then overall, what we also wanted to do was to basically—is to establish an endowment, a $5 million endowment, which would generate about $250-300,000 in interest payments per year. So that will sort of sustain the Center and make sure that the Center will be here indefinitely and moving forward. So I do a combination of things: fund raising, program development, organizational development, to public relations—I mean, getting the word out there to people that we exist, and that this is what we do—so interaction with—and that's what I put in even the brochures: that the Center for Hmong Studies will be the place where scholars and media and government people with interests in learning more about the Hmong people [can come]. So we [are] the one source, and that hopefully as we become much more stable and acquire more funds we will then have a research director that will continue to do research on the Hmong community, so that other people can rely on that research to make informed decisions. [Laughs] So those are—I would say those are the three, four things—you know, program development, organizational development, fundraising and public relations. So four things. [Laughs]

(11:24) Wow! That's a lot!

It is! And you can easily—you know, the program development, you can easily have a programming—at the City of Minneapolis I [had] a director of multi-housing, so she manages all of the multi-housing projects—you know, multi-housing meaning ten units, ten rooms and up—you know, ten units and up, and I [had] a single family program manager that focuses—he's got his own team that focuses on the single family aspect of building a house versus an apartment complex. Or when I was at Hmong American Partnership we had somebody that focuses on economic self-sufficiency. He's a program manager of that, and then I [had] a director of youth programs and a director of family programs. So all of the family-related activities kind of fall into that and he's got his own team. And so here at the Center for Hmong Studies we have four functions, core functions, and I'm the only one. [Laughs] So it's kind of—you know, it's a lot of things happening at one time, but I think that the better we can articulate the work that we do here, I think that we'll get the support from the foundation community and hopefully from Concordia University as Concordia thinks about 'how do we integrate the Center for Hmong Studies as an integral part of Concordia University program offerings?' So those are challenges and opportunities for us here at the Center. We start out small, and of course, you can grow. When I was director of Hmong Youth Association of Minnesota, which was way back in 1990, we started out with—I was the executive director, and I was the youth counselor and all that. Eventually we grew and I hired somebody to manage the finances, somebody to raise money, somebody to also manage the programs, so you have people in those places, and they can build their own team from there. And that's how you can become very efficient and effective in the work that you do. Because in the end, if you don't have people to help you in those areas, you may take on too many things and in the end, you can't do

anything well—you know, you do a lot of things, but you can't do anything well. Busyness doesn't contribute to success and accomplishment. Just because you're busy, it doesn't mean you're accomplishing things, [Laughs] or that you're successful. You've got to be very strategic and say, 'OK, I'm going to rise up today and I'm going to focus on this issue today, and I'm going to make sure I get that done.' And then the next thing is getting that done—so prioritizing is really good, being able to lay out time frames is also very good. And my training over the years, I think, has helped me in that light. Working in direct services and working at the management level when I was at the Urban Coalition, I had a director of research—you know, a director of development, a director of finance helping me, [Laughs] and we had a staff of about ten people. So specializing, getting people to think, 'I'm going to rise up today, [and] I'm going to just only think about that, and I'm going to bed thinking about that,' the quality of the work will be there. You know, we're much greater than one person doing four things. [Laughs]

(15:13) So how do you think the work you're doing here will affect the Concordia campus and the Concordia community in the long run? What do you see?

Well, I think that one of the things Dr. Holst talked about is, 'As you look at the future graduation rates, of who's graduating from high school and who's going to college, I think Concordia will be—if they're not thinking about it. I wish I knew Dr. Holst was thinking about it [Laughs]. If you're not paying attention to the trends, Concordia University in the future could close. Because if you're relying on high school graduates and you're looking at the state of Minnesota—this is the state of Minnesota! You will find that the white population has declined, the minority population has increased dramatically, and that the number of people graduating from high school—you have more Asians graduating from high school—well, you have more <u>minority</u> people graduating from high school, but the people that are going to college are Asians. And when you're in Minnesota and you're talking about Asians you're talking about Hmong, because the Hmong are the majority. And the other thing is, as you look at—I think the impact would be that Concordia University and all its faculty and staff here would see that the Hmong community can be an asset to Concordia, and that [in] learning about the Hmong people that they will learn about themselves—you know, I think that's for one. And the other piece is, I think, that by elevating the teaching of the Hmong—the Hmongness—you know, Hmong history, Hmong culture, Hmong language, Hmong arts, and so on and so forth, we are, in essence, giving Hmong people, <u>young</u> Hmong people the permission and the authority to feel proud to be Hmong. They can say, 'Yeah, I'm Hmong,' you know? [Laughs] And that it's OK to learn, it's OK to not know how to speak Hmong, because—or it's OK—it's <u>not</u> OK that you don't know how to speak Hmong. I think it's OK that you come to Concordia University and you're struggling, because we're going to work together. You're going to be able to <u>do</u> that—be able to communicate. You can say, 'Yeah, it's much more important.' It's OK to say, 'Yeah, I saw them playing the qeej and I really want to learn. And it's OK for me to learn it.' Hopefully we can teach that here in the Music Department, you know? And so I think giving Hmong students the permission to become Hmong, and allowing the non-Hmong students on this campus the opportunity to enjoy and appreciate a group of people that's been around—I mean, 10 million people, I mean the Hmong—to appreciate a people that [have] been around for 4,000 years. We're an old and rich culture and by doing that hopefully that will help them not only—again, to understand themselves, and to understand themselves and to appreciate their rich cultural heritage, and to: one, take advantage of the opportunity to be much more employable—I mean, if you have a degree in education here at Concordia University and you're going to go and be a teacher in the Midwest, if you have—let's say, for example, I minor in Hmong Studies. Your chances of being employed by the school district is going to be higher than somebody without any understanding of the culture or the social structure within the Hmong community—because we're everywhere.

[Laughs] So I think it's come from that respect, so I think that the impact—I think it will change. I hope that the work of the Center for Hmong Studies through our course offerings, through our research, through our lectures and conferences, would somehow help enhance and strengthen Concordia's appreciation of the enormous diversity that exists in the community, and appreciating the rich cultural heritage of the Hmong people.

(19:56) So going back to what you were saying about the community's changing, population's changing, what do you see as some changes now in the Hmong community that are here [from when] you first came? How is that different and how has that affected…the general population and the Hmong community and yourself?

I think that—first of all, my perception [was]—I mean, back then I was very active. I was an activist and [a] radical person. And one of the biggest things I've noticed that's changed within the community is [Pauses] people are moving away from the "familyness," (I don't know if that's a word) [Laughs] that sense of family, that sense of community, you know? Because people are becoming much more individualistic, versus being collective and working together. I think that's one. And you can't blame them for that, because they're struggling to survive. You know, I remember having this conversation with President Bill Clinton. I said, 'You guys have done, the United States of America—I want to thank the United States of America for your work in helping us become an integral part of the American experience' (this is the American experience, you know? And an American experiment, because we're <u>still</u> experimenting [with] a variety of things, right?) by helping us put food on the table, a roof over our heads, and clothes on our body, but the thing that you forgot about is we came from a war-torn country, and many of us have war <u>traumas</u> and so the next phase of the community will be moving away from that—from the need to survive—you know, food, clothing and shelter to really dealing with the physical aspect of, the health nature of, the psychological aspect of the community. And once you deal with health, we have a lot of people with high blood pressure, diabetes, and all of that now—and heart diseases. That's something that's unheard of within the Hmong community way back then. Now we have that. So that's one thing: the physical well-being and the psychological well-being of the community is a major issue. I said this in 1997 also when I left Hmong American Partnership—that's what I told the staff and I told the board—that we've done a really good job in helping people find jobs, but the next need would be different. So I think that's one piece, and again, in order to address that you need the collectiveness, so I don't see the leadership emerging within the community, and I think the people are—people have grown very dependent on other people to really address some of these issues. I remember when Community Action Against Racism—CAAR—when they protested against KQRS for making derogatory comments about the Hmong people. Many of the young people—and at that time I think I was at Concordia. I think it was probably 1998, '99 or so, and they said, 'Lee Pao, we need you out there. We need you to be our spokesperson.' I said, 'You know, I'm the usual suspect. Because each time something happens, you call me, and each time you call me, I'm always there. So you grow dependent on me. And that means there's no growth anymore. So what you need to do is, we need to step aside and let the next group of people emerge.' I just don't see that. I don't see that within the community. I don't see the passion or, when I was in Florida, a speaker said, 'the moral anger,' because 'you need to rise up because what they're doing to you, or what they're doing to whoever it is, is morally wrong. And therefore you should stand up and fight.' Now people are so politically correct, they're talking about their reputation and all that stuff, and so there's nothing like that. Or people rise up and scream, yeah, but they're not base don informed decisions—based on informed conversations or facts. It's more emotion than anything. And when I talk to some of the advocates—I won't name names—I say, 'It's great that you're using your heart, but you've got to use your head sometime [Laughs] as—you've got to use, both, you know? So

heart is the emotion, using your head is the logic, and then it's the strategy that you've got to put in place to address that. So I think that that's one thing but the other piece is that I think the mainstream community is less tolerant of the Hmong community, because each time they see something in the news, it's always something negative. And I think that that kind of—let me say it like this: when the Hmong people came to the United States, we were this tribal group of primitive people—it's like a little child, a first-born, you know? [Laughs] Everybody loved that child, no matter what race—like, [In a syrupy voice] 'Oh, he's so cute! Oh, he's so nice!' And then that person became a teenager. And we became a teenager, and we started going our own paths, started challenging this and challenging that, and then we—we've grown up! It's been 30 years, we're a 30-year-old child now [Laughs] and the community's saying, 'Well, you're no longer that tiny little person that we liked so much. You've become something else.' So that kind of dominates some people's thought process about the Hmong people. And it sometimes is a negative thing. So, to see, like in the summer, to see Chai Soua Vang's trial, to see the General Vang Pao Foundation things, to see the corruption in City Hall, to see the gang rape issue, and now there's the methamphetamine issue—to see all these things in the news all the time, I think people kind of grew tired of that. But more or less, that's a time when the Hmong community [has] got to come together, and I'm not seeing the Hmong community coming together. And at times I thought about just jumping into it and start having conversations, and pulling some key people together and start addressing it, from a federal level, from a state level, from a city level to a non-profit level. 'Cause it has to—each of those individuals and entities has a role to play in helping the Hmong community move forward, and to—even the Hmong community themselves. And how do you get that going? And so the lack of leadership within the community—that's very discouraging for me, from that respect. And so the tolerance level and the lack of connectiveness. The other piece is the loss of culture within the Hmong community and over losing it really fast. [Laughs] That's also something that I've noticed. But that's what I always tell people, that—you know, I've given speeches throughout the country, and even just when I was in Sacramento I was just asked to go and speak to a whole bunch of people, and I told them, I said, 'For any community to be strong, and for any people to be strong, and to live on, they need to be politically strong. That means they have to participate actively in the life of the community where they live in. You know, run for city council, run for school board, run for district council chair, get to serve on the planning commission, you know, get people—and if they have ambition, run for mayor, because if you have something to contribute, you ought to do that, because you are part of the American experiment. And America is a very young country; it's only—less than 300 years old. And so we've been around longer. We've been around 4000 years! They're still experimenting—you know, what is an American? And what is America? And that's a debate that I think people are having. So politically we need to be strong. Economically we've got to be strong—you know, economically [Pauses] we need to participate because we need to be entrepreneurs, continue to be entrepreneurs. I think we have a lot of people who are very, highly entrepreneurial. I'm very pleased to see that there is a lot of wealth in the community now. I mean, I know people who live in million-dollar mansions, half-a-million-dollar mansions, you know, there are people who live in a $100,000 home, a $200,000 home, or homes that they bought for 50,000 back then, so I know people from all walks of life. And it pleases me to see that there are people with a lot of enormous wealth. That thing that I'm discouraged the most about is somet time people have forgotten who they are and where they came from. And so it's like, 'Well, I make enough money. I'm going to go and fly down to Arizona to play golf, I'm going to fly down to Florida to play golf, I'm going to fly over to Thailand or China to go golfing—just for golfing—you know, just this individual consumption. And yet there's no collective thoughts about the need to help people who just came from [Wat] Thamkrabok, who are living in Mary's Place, [a homeless shelter] or who are struggling to find a place to live or who are struggling to make ends meet, or

children who are involved in activities, illiterate kids. Why don't you—just like I told one of the advocates who met with me the other day, I said, 'Take up things that are manageable. In China it only costs $300 a year to send somebody to high school, because the Chinese government will pay for elementary school, but beyond that parents have to come up with money. Well, they're so poor, they don't have money to send their children to school and so the children end up working as slave labor somewhere, you know? [Laughs] So if you want to make a big difference, sponsor five kids and send them to high school in China—you know, the Hmong Chinese. Send them to a high school. That's manageable, that's concrete, that's tangible. That's not a lot of money! [Laughs] And so we need to get people to come back and think about those things and this is where I talked about the moral anger, that there are things out there that morally you should do as a human being. And as Eleanor Roosevelt said, 'Service is the debt you pay for your existence.' [Laughs] So you should serve! I mean, serve the community! You got to where you are because of the community, so come back and help the community! Many people who are wealthy, they got wealthy because the Hmong people supported their business, and yet now they're living in a million dollar mansion, half-a-million dollar mansions in the suburbs, and they don't participate anymore. And that is just (***) wrong, you know?! So I think that the moral anger aspect of it kind of gets me—but you can't blame them. The reason I say you can't blame them is that lack of leadership within the community, lack of collectiveness within the community, and a lack of Hmong consciousness within the community, because we don't have any institutions or places where you can develop a consciousness. When we live in an individualistic society like America, it's going to be very difficult, too, because everything is always 'Me, me, me,' you know? [Laughs] It's not 'us' anymore, it's 'me, me, me,' so the work of the Center for Hmong Studies—I'd say, what it all boils down to is not only to elevate the Hmong people to being the people, and not just a tribal, exotic group of people that came from the mountains of Laos or the mountains of Thailand, but to view—for the mainstream community to view people as a people with cultures, with history, a 4000-year-old history and culture—but the other piece for the Hmong community is to say, 'We are here to develop the Hmong consciousness,' to say, 'Yeah, it's OK for you to speak Hmong. It's OK for you to feel proud that you're Hmong,' [Laughs] and it's OK for you [34:21 – in Hmong] xxxxx if you want to xxxxx. It's OK for you to do that! It's OK for you to do—you wear things. In was wearing a Hmong bracelet; I just took it off yesterday, but it's OK for you to wear Hmong bracelets—because you're Hmong! [Laughs] It's OK for you to hang a *Pa Ndau* [Hmong embroidery] in your office, because you're Hmong, you know? You shouldn't be shy about it—it's OK for you to come here and eat Hmong food. It's OK, you don't have to be ashamed about it. So developing that Hmong consciousness is going to help us be strong economically, to be stronger politically. If you don't have that Hmong consciousness, people can be in positions of power, be in office, but if they don't have that Hmong consciousness, they're going to focus on themselves, and they're going to be a liability for the community more than helping the community. And if the businessman is making all the money and so on and so forth, and he's not giving back to the community, then he's more of a liability, because he takes money from the community. He doesn't replenish the supply. [Laughs] He sucks the money out. So you've got to give it back, help the community, help those who are less fortunate and pull them up. I think that's just my thought process; that's how I see it within the community. And when you think about it, it makes you angry. When you think about it, you think, 'Dang, I should just do something.' And that's why I tell people, 'Stop talking—just do it. And do what you can.' It's just like the story about the starfish from the shore. There's two individuals walking on the beach and all these starfish were washed up on the shore. And this other person said, 'Let's save these.' And the other individual said, 'How can—there's too many of them. We can't save them all! There's no way we can make a big difference.' And the other one picked up a starfish and threw it out there and said, 'It made a difference for this one.' [Laughs] So that's why I

say, 'Do it one piece at a time, small thing at a time, something that's tangible, something you can do so that you won't be so overwhelmed that you don't lose hope.' But you can do little things like that. I think we've just lost that as a community. The tolerance level within the community, among the mainstream community of the Hmong people, I think it's going down. The dismantling of the sense of community has gone down, the loss of culture is—you know, we're losing that, and—I don't know where else to go. I tell this to [Pauses] people like General Vang Pao and Dr. Yang Dao and some other people—I said, 'We're a community—I think right now we are a community with lots of chiefs and no Indians. All the Indians are gone. [Laughs] Everybody wants to be the chief, and we need to just come down [Laughs] a little bit and work with people. So it's just a passion. I think for me this is not a job, it's a passion. And that's something that I notice about many of the people nowadays in positions of influence and positions of authority. Once they're there, they only think about themselves, and they only think about their job. It's not the passion anymore. And so when it's you're job, you do the minimum. You show up at 8 o'clock, you leave at 4 o'clock or 5 o'clock—that's it! You don't put in anything beyond that, you don't participate in anything. So that's—I think that's—we need the passion back! [Laughs] We need people to do things because it's their passion, and we need people to do things because that's what they value and that's what they like. So for me, bringing that to this job, I think is really critical. And bringing all of my experience, my ten-plus years of experience with fund-raising and management to this position, and dealing with multiple groups of people with different personalities, and putting my conflict resolution training into play—hopefully just mt being here would have contributed to the improvement of Concordia University. [Laughs] 'Cause I—just like I told [Executive Vice President and Dean of Diversity] Dr. [Cheryl] Chatman the other day, I'm an advocate at heart so when I see something that's—if I see mistreatment, if I see disparity in treatment, I'm going to point that out! I'm not going to sit back and just because of the fact that the perception by the mainstream community is that Asians are passive, they're not going to complain, and they avoid conflict, doesn't apply to <u>this</u> generation. [Laughs] It's like what applies to this previous generation doesn't apply to <u>this</u> generation, so we're going to do what we say! We're going to do what we can, and we just want equal treatment, just like I told people here. I said, 'I don't want special treatment, I want <u>equal</u> treatment. And if you treat everybody the same, then I'm OK! But if you treat me differently than everybody else, then I have a problem with that. So I don't want any special treatment. And if you treat me in a special way above and beyond, that's great for me, too' [Laughs] 'but don't treat me lower than you treat your peers and other people. <u>Then</u> I have a problem with that.' [Pauses] I could go on! [Chuckles]

(40:21) Yeah! That's a lot. With everything changing and where you are right now, what are some goals that you have for yourself and for the community, or maybe suggestions for the younger generation? What do you see yourself [doing] a few years from now or maybe ten or twenty years…

Yeah, I went through a lot of those [Pauses] 'recovering CEO' kind of retreats. [Laughs] And people always ask, 'How would you like to be remembered?' or 'If someone was giving your eulogy, what would you like them to say?' And I think that—I hope one day people will view me and mt work as—first of all, me being a fair and passionate person—you know, that I treated everybody fairly and that I did things because I cared about [them], and that I [gave] above and beyond what [was] asked of me. So I think that's one thing. The other thing is that I hope people can say, 'Yeah, it is because of Lee Pao that the elders are able and the non-citizens are able to receive welfare—because I did that, you know? [Laughs] It is because that—Lee Pao had something to do with the Hmong Naturalization Act, and that's the reason why President Clinton signed that bill, because they called me, and said, 'Should the President sign this thing?' But some of those things I don't say out there, so people don't know, [Laughs] but the ones that are close—hopefully the people that

know me, when they give the eulogy, they will be able to say, 'Yeah, he did things, not to be recognized, but he did things because they were right, and because they needed to be done. He did it.' And that, 'Yeah, he helped establish and solidify the Center for Hmong Studies! [Laughs] That would be something that I think that they would do, but I hope that in the future the Hmong people would—first of all we would not lose our Hmongness. And I truly believe that it's the language that's gonna define who you are as a people. That's why Dr. Holst is so passionate about Hmong language. I don't know if you guys know this, but he said, 'The Hmong language is the [Pauses] basically the soul of the Hmong people. if you lose your language, then you lose who you are. [Laughs] And so you can be Hmong—I mean, [43:26 – in Hmong] if you look at many of the people who have lost their identity—I mean, you can tell them that they're Asians, but they can't explain anything about themselves to you, what makes them who they are, you know? [Laughs] And I think that we [Pauses] I hope we can be like the Jewish community...They were a very oppressed group of people, Hitler wanted to wipe them out, and now people continue to discriminate against them, but what they did was that they focused on education. I mean, they sent their children to school and now the Senator is a member of the Jewish community, the mayor, the governor, all of these—I mean, you've got people in positions of power, people with influence, with wealth, you have the community there. But you know what? They didn't stop there. They created a Jewish Federation fund. And all the rich Jewish members contributed money towards that, and they fund all of the Jewish Community Centers and the Jewish Action Center—you know, all of these entities, which advocated for more opportunities for the community, and which also helped the people that are the least advantaged. And so I hope we use that model. I've been using this model for five years. I say, 'Look at that community! The reason that the Russian Jews kept coming from Russia, the reason that we didn't hear much about them—I mean, they're like you and me. They're like your parents and my parents who came here with nothing—the clothes on their back—but 'we don't rely on government.' The Jewish community embraced them, took them in, the Jewish Action Funds—I mean the Jewish Federation funds, the Jewish Community Center and all of these here in the Highland Park area took them in and helped them, and [they] became an integral part of the community. Did we do that with the Wat Tham Krabok people? No! Think about that. [Laughs] You see headline news about the Hmong living in a homeless shelter over there. I mean, just think, if we were able to come together and say, 'OK, let's pull our funds together, let's see if we can help the people from Tham Krabok. Buy 'em a bed, buy 'em a mattress, give them clothes to wear, or help them subsidize some of their housing, help them navigate the system.' That would be wonderful! One day I hope that people—the younger generation [46:15] in Hmong] [Laughs], 'cause I'm at the age where—we've been fighting for so long , and we just need to step aside a little bit, step aside so that the younger generation can assume that influence, that leadership role, and gain that experience to do that. And I often—for me, my management style is [a] more collaborative management style, getting everybody to be involved and the whole purpose for that is to allow people to grow. You can be a dictator and say, 'This is how it's going to be,' [Laughs] or you can say, 'You know what? This is not how it's going to be all the time.' I was watching "Power Rangers." We do that every morning, my kids and I, we watch "Power Rangers" at 7:30, and I feed them while they watch, and then after that it's "Dora." [Laughs] But I think yesterday morning it was the "Power Rangers" episode about how their leaders [were] always there to save them. And they talked about, 'Oh yeah, he's always there. We can rely on him.' So the leader decided not to intervene at all, and decided no to help them when they were losing and all that. He said, 'You can do it yourself.' And in the end, they did, they were able to do it themselves, and they were able to beat the negative forces. And he had a lecture with them. He said, 'When I overheard you guys talking about me, how you guys were totally relying on me, I decided to back out and let you take the lead. And look! You accomplished it!' And they said, 'Oh, yeah! OK.' So it's something like

that, and I think that good leaders are people that know when to step aside and let other people lead. [Laughs] The leaders that don't want to step aside are dictators, and they're not great leaders. They are not, because they don't know how to mold and how to train other people. And therefore they won't have a lasting legacy. They'll die a lonely person, [Laughs] because they've not developed anybody. So that's sort of like my vision for the future. I hope that people would, one, not lose their identity; secondly, be much more collaborative; and thirdly, have this moral anger and continue to say, 'You know, we're going to do something to help people who are at a disadvantage.' Just like this morning—I was very much inspired by the service this morning, by the memorial for Coretta Scott King, and—yeah, I want that speech. I want to get a copy of that speech. But that's what it's all about. You know, that's what it's all about. Sometimes we need doses of that, just to continue to motivate us—you know, for those of us who have been active in the community for so long. I was very—I was active in the community on issues when I was only 20 or 21 years old—no, I was younger than that, because I became executive director of Hmong Youth Association (the youngest executive director—'cause I'd go to meetings with all the mainstream organizations, I'm the young guy—I'm like the kid in the room) when I was only 21 years old. So I've been active [since] I was [Pauses] oh, I would say I was about 19—18, 19. And then over the years people always challenged me and I jut met the challenge. Just like I said last time, when the Hmong American Partnership position came up, people said, 'Well, Lee Pao, you don't have the guts to apply.' I said, 'I'll show you.' [Laughs] Got the position. But I hope young people—we have young people with passion like that, and really say, 'I want to do something.' And I have hope for young people, but I—one of the things that discourages me the most is the 'Hmongness' aspect of it, that we've lost that Hmongness—and we've got to bring that, because if you don't have that Hmongness, one day when you become very—I will call, I will use the word—I will say influential, then you forget where you came from, and you kind of wear your own hat. And that's when we get in trouble and that's when the community gets in trouble. There are a lot of people now in positions of authority and positions of influence [who are] extremely critical of the Hmong people. [Laughs] And we're like, 'Wait a minute! The reason that you're critical is because you don't understand the community and the reason that you don't understand the community is because you don't interact with the community. And you've got to understand that the reason you have that position is because of the community. If it weren't for the community you wouldn't be in that position. Because there are plenty of other people whose skin and whose hair color's different, and their eyes are probably much different than yours. They can do a better job than you can. But you got that position because of who you are, and because of your community. Remember that. [Laughs] You know, I've had a conversation with people who were critical before, so I just call 'em up and hold them to it. And that's why I think I'm always an advocate at heart. I'm an advocate first. But the other thing is that I hope my children will say, 'Yeah, my dad did some important things.' [Laughs] 'I'm proud of my dad.' Or after I'm gone, you know, they'll say, 'Oh yeah, I didn't know my dad was doing this' and 'I didn't know my dad did that.' So I need to do a better job of just writing things down. [Laughs] A lot of people came to me and asked me to write my memoir, and I don't have the time. Too busy building things. You know, I've been building things. When I was at Hmong Youth I was building Hmong Youth Association. Within two years we grew from a $25,000 a year budget to a half a million dollars with 12 staff. At Hmong American Partnership, the same thing: about a million-plus to when I left, we had over two million dollar annual operating budget with over with over 25—no, 42 staff. And to the Council on Asian pacific Minnesotans there, the organization was going to be dismantled and abolished by the governor. I introduced a couple—language into the legislation to keep the councils open, and to change the makeup of the Council and to protect the Council from politics—you know, from the governor just coming in and picking people up and removing them. I said, 'No, you can't do that.' So those are language that I put in there that they're using right now

that's keeping the four Councils of Color at the state—it's a state agency—that kept them alive to this day. [Laughs] Even the Urban Coalition—I said, 'You can't just do research for the sake of doing research. Research has to lead to something. And if you don't advocate for positions based on your research findings, who's going to do it? If you don't take ownership of it, who's going to do it? If you don't develop the capacity of the community to be able to move forward with your recommendations, who's gonna do it? It's your report! [Laughs] You think some else is going to pick up your report and start advocating [for it]? No, they're going to start cutting and pasting, taking from your report to enhance the work that they do—which is fine, but if you want major changes, you've got to go beyond that.' When I was with the city, I built the whole housing department of the housing division—over $80,000,000 and over 60 staff. Different divisions—I built that. So I'm always in a building mode. And here I am—I'm building this organization into the Center for Hmong Studies, so that may be my skill set. Maybe that's the other thing [I'd like to be remembered for] is that Lee Pao was always great at building things, and bringing order [from] chaos. And probably that is my skill set, is really building things.

(55:38) Well thank you. Aside from that I don't have any other questions. [Mai Neng asks Youa Vang if she has any questions. She says no] I think that covers everything. If you want to add any last comments…

Well, I think that—I appreciate you two interviewing me [Laughs]

Oh, no problem

…and also Dr. Paul Hillmer for even launching the whole project. I mean, he took this and just ran with it.

[Yes]

And I think that one day our children will look at this and say, 'Wow!' [Laughs]

Yeah, this in itself is already helping the Hmong community. It's preserving a lot of things—

Absolutely

—that we're losing today.

Yeah, and I think that it's so unfortunate that it takes somebody from outside to do this. And I think that when I was in California and I told the story about the golden house—and I think you may have heard this, but—there was a young man who worked on a farm and he worked day and night, and in the morning he would see out on the horizon a house that—very bright and shiny. It looked like it was silver. And he said, 'Wow, that's [56:55 – Hmong],' you know, like, 'Wow, that's a money house over there! Unbelievable! How can they be so rich?' And so one day he—it was his day off, and so he told his dad, 'Dad, I'm going to go and visit that house of money and gold over there.' And he walked and walked and walked, and got there—it was just an ordinary house. And he said, 'Wow, it's just an ordinary house.' And he turned, and looked at his own house, and by that time the sun already set. And so the evening sun is golden, right? So it reflected off his building and his window, and I was gold! And he said, 'Wow! That's my house over there!' [Mai Neng laughs] 'All along I've lived in a golden house and I didn't even know it!' And so the moral of the story is, sometimes we value other people's things more than our own. [Laughs] And hopefully, again, by building this consciousness, we will see that we have been living in a golden house all along, and that the house over there is just silver, and that we live in a gold house. [Laughs] So that's something that I hope that one day we will come to realize that—I mean, certainly I realize that; that's why I took this position. And I said, 'This is enormous. The elders that are right now in our community, if we have the institutions of teaching and learning, or institutions of higher education, they would be our professors. Your mom and dad and everybody else would be our professors, our historians, because of the fact that we don't have a country that we can call our own, that we don't have a

structure in place to teach our knowledge and to pass the knowledge on, we're in the position where we are. And so as an institution, as a Center fro Hmong Studies, we have a unique opportunity to develop that—with resources from the outside, so I'm very impressed, and I'm impressed with the work of Dr. Paul Hillmer, and hopefully one day we'll have someone who will say, 'Yeah, we'll do it ourselves.' [Laughs] And Dr. Paul Hillmer can just support it. [Laughs] So it should be, but it's people like that, it's people like Marlin [Heise of the Hmong Archives], who's extremely generous, who saw that we are actually—that the Hmong people are actually living in the golden house, and they took—and made an effort to preserve it. That's wonderful. So I hope the younger generation, as they listen to this one day, or as they read about this one day, will go, 'Oh yeah! I never thought [about] it from that perspective.' Just like when person when *Hmong Today*—their on-line edition, when they read about—after you read the article, there's a comment area down underneath that, and people were commenting about the $50,000 gift, and one person in there said, 'Well, not too long ago there was a foundation where $500,000 was missing and all of a sudden the Hmong Center got $20,000 and all of a sudden somebody gave $50,000 to the Center for Hmong Studies. Hmm, that's really interesting.' You know, I had to write back and respond and say, 'Shame on you for not believing in the potential of your people. And shame on you for not seeing the capacity within your own community. Drive around. There's a lot of people out there who've worked really hard to achieve the American dream, and they're making it. And they're <u>exceeding</u> the American dream. And so you need to believe in your people.' And it's just sad—see, what's really sad for me was that that person had to grow up in an era when they had to see those type of things happen, and that they don't make—that it impacted them so much that they didn't believe that their people could do such a thing. They didn't believe that somebody could actually be able to give $50,000 without strings attached, or that somebody would be willing to forego $20,000 without strings attached, and that there are people out there who are Hmong who are millionaires. So it's kind of sad, and that's why I'm saying that [Laughs] if people don't develop the consciousness and that appreciation for their own people, then they will only see the [Hmong word?? 1:01:36] things. And they only—I call it colonialism mentality. And that is, [1:01:45 – Hmong phrase], and that you're the stupid one, and that you're the uneducated one, and that you're the poor one, [Laughs] you know? And everybody else is better than you. And not really turning back and saying, 'Yeah, we're the smart ones. We survived 4,000 years of oppression, we survived the war, we came here with just the clothes on our back, and <u>look where we are</u>! [Laughs] Other immigrants that came before us, they came with wealth, they came with money! They came here so that they could forget the past. We didn't have a choice. The other night my aunt and uncle came from Wat Tham Krabok. You know what they brought with them? Just the clothes on their back and a little bag. I don't know what's in that bag, but that's all they came with. <u>Your</u> parents came here like that, <u>my</u> parents came here like that, and <u>look where we are</u>! That's the capacity and potential of a people. I could go on, but I think I'd like to end with that and just say that there's so much more for our people, and so much more that we can do as a Center, and so much more that we can do as individuals to continue to say, 'Do you know what?' People always ask me, 'Do you think the Hmong culture will just die?' And I say, 'There's still ten million world-wide.,' [Laughs] 'only 300,000 here in the United States. If the 300,000 people here in the United States decided to let it all go, we'd still have over 9,000,000 people in other parts of the world that are ready to keep it going [Laughs] and are ready to come here and educate the 300,000 people who've lost their heritage and their self-identity.' So we're ready for that. I'm an optimist. Let's conclude with that.