Southeast Asian-American Communities
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Vietnam Generation
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Kali Tal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Southeast Asian Parent Empowerment: The Challenge of Changing Demographics in Lowell, Massachusetts</td>
<td>Peter Nien-chu Kiang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>The Vietnamese Amerasian Resettlement Experience: From Initial Application to the First Six Months in the United States</td>
<td>Liang Tien and Denny Hunthausen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Vietnam, My Country</td>
<td>Janet P. Chambers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Between Cultures: Oral History of Hmong Teenagers in Minneapolis</td>
<td>David L. Moore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>Reducing Teenage Childbearing in the Hmong Community: First Year Results</td>
<td>Sharon Rolnick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>The Education of Hmong Women</td>
<td>Mao Yang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88</td>
<td>Cambodians in the Bronx and Amherst</td>
<td>Photographs and Text by Leah Melnick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>107</td>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>111</td>
<td>Notes on the Authors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Kalí Tal

This slim volume has taken two years to assemble. The essays contained in Southeast Asian-American Communities were solicited through calls for papers in professional journals, newsletters and advertisements in Asian-American newspapers. Our respondents were few, and it has taken over twenty months to collect enough good material to publish an issue of Vietnam Generation.

The lack of scholarly response to our call for papers dealing with topics of importance to Southeast Asian-American communities is indicative of the reluctance of American scholars to take upon themselves the task of academic inquiry into the subject. American scholars are perhaps hesitant to venture into new and unfamiliar territory, and to undertake the intensive study and research necessary to explore and understand a foreign culture. Scholars who can write with ease and elegance of the effects of the Vietnam war on “American” culture may find Vietnamese-American, or Cambodian-American culture impenetrable.

Most of the essays published here are located in the disciplines of the social sciences. Faced with the reality of hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asian immigrants, social workers and social scientists have been exploring questions of assimilation, integration and cultural tradition as they assist refugees and immigrants with the problems of adapting to a new environment. Articles on education, mental and physical health care, and the adjustment process make up almost the entire body of literature on Southeast Asian-American communities.

Southeast Asian-American scholars are heavily represented in the body of social sciences literature dealing with Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese and Thai communities in the United States. But they, like other American scholars, are remarkably silent about other aspects of Southeast Asian-American life.

My intent was to compile a collection of articles which would cover the various aspects of life in these communities, including history, political culture, art, and religion. Quite obviously, this never came to pass. In the process of soliciting articles, I wrote to approximately sixty Southeast Asian-American scholars. Most never responded. Some did respond, and promised articles which never arrived. Others agreed to write for the issue, and then withdrew their offer at a later date. One or two quietly mentioned that there was strong pressure on them not to be associated with a “leftist” publication.
I therefore offer these essays to our readers as the first of a series of attempts to promote scholarship on Southeast Asian-American communities. I will make this an ongoing effort, and urge all of our readers to consider researching and writing on topics of importance to the Southeast Asian-American communities of the United States.
Southeast Asian Parent Empowerment: The Challenge of Changing Demographics in Lowell, Massachusetts

Peter Nien-chu Kiang

Introduction

Lowell, Massachusetts, a city famous in U.S. immigrant and labor history, is in the midst of a dynamic and inevitable, yet, at times violent and bitter process of transformation as it confronts the challenge of changing demographics. Like other cities such as Monterey Park, California\(^1\) which have undergone dramatic demographic change during the 1970s and 1980s, the rapid growth of Asian and Latino communities in Lowell has tested each of the city’s institutions including the hospitals, police, courts, and especially the public school system. Rapid demographic change is also redefining the popular conception of who is an “American.” At the same time, a climate of anti-immigrant resentment has developed in Lowell as reflected in incidents of racial violence and the advocacy of “English-Only policies by individuals and groups within the city.

This preliminary report analyzes the process of change taking place in Lowell through the issue of public school education and the emerging role of Southeast Asian parents who, in coalition with Latino parents, are demanding educational access and equity for their children. The Lowell case-study illustrates how community organizing and coalition-building around a specific issue have led to the demand for political representation and empowerment as the means to resolve the challenge of changing demographics facing the city.

A Brief History of Lowell

The town of Lowell was established in 1826 in the context of America’s industrial revolution. Seeking to expand their economic base, Boston-based gentry purchased land alongside the Merrimack River and built a chain of textile mills with an elaborate canal-lock system that powered looms with energy generated by the river’s current. As Lowell emerged as the country’s textile center, teenage girls were recruited from the area’s surrounding farms to work in the mills. Paid at half the male wage, yet earning more than they would from farmwork, the mill girls lived in dormitory-style housing constructed next to the factories. Harsh working and living conditions, however, led to some of the country’s first examples of labor organizing—including mill girl strikes in 1834 and 1836, formation of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association in 1844 and a petition to the Massachusetts Legislature for a 10-hour workday in 1845.\(^2\)
As successive waves of European immigrants entered the country throughout the 1800s and early 1900s, cheap immigrant labor entered the booming textile industry and replaced the mill girls in Lowell. The mill girls’ dormitories evolved into overcrowded tenement housing for successive waves of Irish, French Canadian, Greek, Polish, and Portuguese new immigrants. As the textile industry reached its height in the 1890s, Lowell became widely recognized as a city built by immigrants. Labor organizing also continued in the city as the Yiddish-speaking Lowell Workingmen’s Circle formed in 1900 and Greek immigrants led a city-wide strike in 1903 which set the stage for the well-known Bread and Roses strike of 1912 in the neighboring mill town of Lawrence.

But by the 1920s, the textile industry in Lowell entered a long period of depression and economic decline. By 1945, eight of the city’s eleven big mills had closed and unemployment skyrocketed. Foreshadowing the decline of many midwestern industrial cities during the 1970s, Lowell and other textile mill towns in the area all but died during this period.

In the 1970s, however, a constellation of factors, including the emergence of new industries fueled by high technology research at Massachusetts-based universities and the political muscle of the Massachusetts congressional delegation—which included Speaker of the House “Tip” O’Neil and Sen. Edward Kennedy as well as Sen. Paul Tsongas who was born and raised in Lowell—led to a turn-around in the state’s economic condition. A combination of federal dollars and corporate investment revitalized Lowell’s economy, enabling the city to move from 13.8% unemployment in 1978 to 7% in 1982 to less than 3% in 1987. The run-down mill factories were rehabilitated. The city’s vacant industrial land area dropped from 100 acres in 1978 to zero in 1987.

Central to the economic revitalization of Lowell was the decision of An Wang, a Chinese immigrant and Chairman of Wang Laboratories, Inc., to relocate the company to Lowell in 1976. Wang purchased cheap industrial land, and with the added incentive of $5 million in federal grants, built new electronics assembly plants and corporate office towers. The timing of the move coincided with Wang’s take-off as a company. Corporate sales rose from $97 million in 1977 to $2.88 billion in 1986. As the largest employer in Lowell, Wang’s payroll in 1986 accounted for $114 million. Furthermore, the company purchased $25 million worth of goods from local vendors and paid more than $3 million in local taxes—infusing the city with a strong economic base.

By the mid-1980s, Lowell was cited as the “model city” of the “Massachusetts Miracle”—a city whose legacy included pioneering America’s industrial revolution, becoming home to successive waves of ethnic immigrant groups, and overcoming industrial decline to reemerge as a leading center of the country’s technological revolution.
DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE AND NEW WAVES OF IMMIGRANTS

People in Lowell talk about it being an ethnic city, but they only embrace that and endorse that as long as they are white.
—June Gonsalves, Lowell Human Rights Commission Planning Committee

Beginning in the late 1950s as part of large-scale Puerto Rican migrations throughout the Northeast industrial states, a small number of Puerto Ricans settled in Lowell. In the late 1960s, a large group of Puerto Rican workers based at garment factories in New Jersey were transferred to Lowell. Through the 1970s, Puerto Ricans and growing numbers of Dominicans developed a stable Latino community. By 1987, the Latino community had reached 15,000 or 15% of the city. In neighboring Lawrence, Massachusetts, the Latino community swelled to 30% of the city's population—reflecting significant demographic changes throughout the Merrimack Valley area.

The most dramatic growth in Lowell, however, has resulted from Southeast Asian refugee resettlement and secondary migration. In 1980, less than 100 Southeast Asians lived in Lowell. Only a decade later, there are approximately 3,000 Lao, 1,000 Vietnamese, and more than 25,000 Cambodians. Lowell has become home to the largest Cambodian community on the East Coast and boasts the second largest per capita concentration of Southeast Asians in the United States after Long Beach, California.

The majority of Southeast Asians in Lowell are secondary migrants—having moved there from other states in the U.S. rather than coming directly from refugee camps in Southeast Asia. Many settled in Lowell because of the city's well-publicized economic health and availability of jobs. Others came because family members or friends, as well as a Buddhist temple, were already established there. Still other came, simply because they heard that Cambodians were living in Lowell—a self-reinforcing process that took on a life of its own via formal and informal networks of Cambodians throughout the country. Wherever there are Cambodians in the U.S., they have heard of Lowell.

As the numbers of Latinos and Southeast Asians expanded rapidly during the 1980s, the city found itself unprepared to address the multiple issues of housing, bilingual services, culture shock, and civil rights confronting new immigrants. Furthermore, Lowell's economic rejuvenation had failed to refurbish the city's 19th Century housing stock and public school facilities, particularly in neighborhoods such as the Acre where large numbers of Latinos and Southeast Asians had settled. Schooling and educational issues thus emerged as primary concerns for Lowell's new immigrant communities.
Access and Equity in the Schools

They don’t want our minority children mixing with their white children... they are not thinking of the education of all kids, only of their kids. We want to make sure our kids get equal opportunity.

—Alex Huertas, (PUEDO) Parents United in Education and the Development of Others

Lowell has the sixth largest Hispanic student population and second largest number of Asian students in Massachusetts. In 1975, only 4% of Lowell’s school children were minorities. By 1987, however, minorities made up 40% of the school-age population—half of them being limited-English proficient. As Southeast Asians continued to migrate to Lowell throughout 1987, as many as 35-50 new Southeast Asian students arrived and enrolled in school each week. Strains on the public school system quickly reached crisis proportions.

In response to the influx, the Lowell School Committee established makeshift classrooms in non-school facilities such as the Lowell Boys Club and Lowell YMCA. This process de facto segregated 170 Southeast Asian and Latino elementary age school children in buildings which lacked library and cafeteria facilities as well as principals and supervisory staff on site. Overcrowded makeshift classrooms accommodated students who ranged from grades one to six. Partitions separated bilingual classes in Spanish, Lao, and Khmer. Special compensatory education classes were held in hallways where it was quieter. Spaces within existing school buildings such as the basement boiler room and an auditorium storage area of the Robinson School were also converted into classrooms. A Lao bilingual class in the Daley School was even conducted in a converted bathroom which still had a toilet stall in it.

After three months of segregation in separate, unequal facilities, minority school children and their parents began to take action. The Latino parents had already seen the educational system take its toll on their children. While the Latino high school population had doubled from 200 to 400 between 1982 and 1987, the number of those who successfully graduated had dropped from 76 to 55. Southeast Asian students had fared no better. Over half of the Lao students who entered Lowell High School in 1986-87 had dropped out by the end of the year. For the Southeast Asian parents who had sacrificed and endured unspeakable hardships in order to provide their children with a chance for education and a better future, the conditions facing their children in school had become intolerable.
For the next eighteen months, from May 1987 through November 1988, Latino and Southeast Asian parents led efforts to demand equal access and equity for their children in the Lowell public schools. With organizing and technical assistance from Multicultural Education Training and Advocacy (META) Inc., and a statewide bilingual parents network, Parents United in Education and the Development of Others (PUEDO), the parents convened joint meetings in four languages between the Hispanic Parents Advisory Committee (HPAC), the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association of Greater Lowell and the Laotian Association of Greater Lowell to develop tactics and strategy. Eventually, a coalition of those organizations established the Minority Association for Mutual Assistance, affectionately known as MAMA.

The parents employed a range of tactics which included grassroots canvassing and petition drives combined with outreach to churches and other groups such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters in Lowell. When the Lowell School Committee failed to act, the parents organized press conferences and mass community meetings with state education officials to press their case forward. Eventually, the parents and students filed a lawsuit in federal district court against the Lowell School Committee and the City of Lowell on the basis of unconstitutional segregation of the Lowell Public Schools and the denial of equal education opportunities to students of limited English proficiency in violation of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Equal Education Opportunities Act of 1974.9

In the process, the parents developed a comprehensive 33-point program of education reform directed not only at desegregation and upgrading of facilities, but which also targeted issues of personnel hiring and training, curriculum reform, drop-out prevention, special education program development, and parent involvement. Furthermore, they demanded compensation and remediation for educational harms incurred by linguistic minority students placed in inappropriate classroom settings between 1984 and 1987.10 On November 9, 1988, after eighteen months of organizing and negotiations, the parents won their demands in an historic out-of-court settlement approved in a 6-1 vote by the Lowell School Committee.11 The settlement represented an unqualified victory for the Latino and Southeast Asian parents and children in Lowell, and set a precedent for educational reform in the interests of linguistic minority students everywhere.
ENGLISH-ONLY EXCLUSION AND VIOLENCE

English is our mother tongue and it’s the language that’s going to be used at our meetings. This is an English-Only School Committee in an English-Only America.

—George D. Kouloheras, Lowell School Committee

The success of the parents had not come without a price, however. Through the course of advocating for their children’s educational rights, the Latino and Southeast Asian communities confronted a reality of disfranchisement within the city’s political institutions and a climate of anti-immigrant resentment and racial intolerance.

At a School Committee meeting on May 6, 1987 when 100 Latino, Lao, and Cambodian parents first came to voice their concerns about their children being segregated in unequal facilities, they requested that the meeting be translated to allow them to participate. School Committee member George Kouloheras responded that this is an English-Only meeting, and went on to castigate the Latino parents as “those bastards who speak Spanish.”

While anti-minority and anti-immigrant incidents, including racial harassment, tire slashings, broken windows, job and housing discrimination were not uncommon in the city, little attention had been paid to minority concerns amidst the Dukakis campaign’s national promotion of Lowell as the model city of the “Massachusetts Miracle.”

Once Kouloheras took the offensive from his position as a School Committee member, however, public attention toward Latinos and Southeast Asians shifted from neglect and resentment to accusation and attack.

In June 1987, under pressure from the parents and threatened with funding cuts by the state, the Lowell School Committee adopted a desegregation plan which Kouloheras and some white residents vehemently opposed because it required mandatory busing to integrate several predominantly-white schools. The desegregation plan became the focal point for candidates’ campaigns during the fall 1987 School Committee and City Council elections. Fueled by Kouloheras’ racist English-Only rhetoric, anti-Latino and anti-Asian sentiment escalated throughout the summer.

On September 15th, one week after school re-opened amidst widespread bitterness and confusion over the busing plan, an 11-year old white student accosted Vandy Phomg, a 13-year-old Cambodian bilingual student while Vandy and his brothers were walking along the canal near their home. After making racial comments about Vandy’s background, the white youth punched Vandy in the face, dragged him down a flight of stairs to the canal and pushed Vandy into the water. Vandy was carried away by the strong current, and later drowned. The father of the boy charged with killing Vandy Phomg was, like Kouloheras, an outspoken advocate for the English-Only movement in Lowell.
Vandy Phomg's tragic death in Lowell was ironic yet predictable. Like the killings of five Southeast Asian children at the Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton, California, the tragedy of Vandy's murder was cruelly ironic because Southeast Asian refugees have escaped so much war and death in their home countries. The children are their hopes for the future—they are not supposed to die from war and violence here. Yet, given the challenge of Lowell's changing demographics and the climate of anti-minority, anti-immigrant sentiment promoted by English-Only advocates and ideologues who include some of the city's most influential political leaders and elected representatives, racial violence as exemplified by the killing of Vandy Phomg was predictable and, perhaps more importantly, preventable.

Political Representation and Political Power

We need to protect the civil liberties of the majority... let them take the minorities and do what they want with them.

—George Kouloheras, Lowell School Committee, on election night, 1987

The death of Vandy Phomg gave little pause to the anti-immigrant campaign of Kouloheras and others who rode its bandwagon to victory in the October 1987 primaries and November city elections. In the School Committee election, Kouloheras was the top vote-getter while his protegé, Kathryn Stoklosa, came in second. Sean Sullivan, a first-time candidate whose campaign focused exclusively in opposition to "forced busing" was also elected, while George O'Hare, a longtime incumbent who supported the busing plan was defeated. The struggle surrounding the schools also affected the City Council race as Tarsy Poulios, a vehement opponent of the desegregation plan, received the third highest vote total because, according to a former Lowell City manager, "he got every hate vote out there." The Southeast Asian and Latino parents, the election reinforced what they had begun to recognize—in spite of their significant and growing numbers, they had no political representation or even influence within the city's institutions. The only Hispanic in City Hall, for example, as many community leaders were quick to point out, was a gardener.

In the months following the city elections, the parents continued to press their case forward—united around their common interests and their vision of educational reform. The working relationships they had developed within MAMA continued off and on for the next year as their lawsuit against the city slowly made progress. Finally, in a tremendous victory in November 1988, the Lowell School Committee accepted most of the parents' demands for reform and agreed to an out-of-court settlement of the lawsuit. During that period, Alex Huertas, the most visible leader of the parents, decided the time had come for a minority to run for office in Lowell.
Education and Empowerment

The lack of Latino and Asian representation has made our struggle harder. In next year's elections, we need to promote our own candidates.

—Alex Huertas, PUEDO

Lowell is a city of 100,000 residents, but only 40,000 voters. The overwhelming majority of Southeast Asians and Latinos are not registered, and many are not citizens. Numerically, however, they account for roughly 45% of the city's population and are continuing to grow. Successful candidates in Lowell elections typically receive less than 10,000 votes. George Kouloheras, the top vote-getter in the 1987 School Committee race, for example, received only 8,400 votes. Although not a factor in the most recent election, the political potential of both the Latino and Cambodian vote seems exceptional in this context.

It is useful to remember that in 1854, when the city's population was nearly one-third foreign-born, the mayor was elected based on a "Know-Nothing" anti-Irish, anti-immigrant platform. Later waves of European newcomers continued to face resentment, exclusion, and exploitation characteristic of the immigrant experience in New England.

Yet, eventually each group achieved some measure of representation and political power. As early as 1874, with nearly 40% of the population being immigrants, Samuel P. Marin became the first French-Canadian to win elected office in Lowell. Under his leadership the ethnic "Little Canada" community grew and thrived. By the 1950s, most of Lowell's ethnic groups, including the English, Irish, Greeks, and Poles had succeeded in electing their "favorite sons" to the Mayor's Office and had won basic political representation within the city.

Will the newest immigrant groups of Latinos and Southeast Asians follow this same historical pattern of European ethnics' structural assimilation into the social, economic, and political mainstream of Lowell? Time will tell. One might argue, however, that the current state of disenfranchisement for Latinos and Asians reflects their status as urban racial minorities as much as it does their being new immigrants. In sharp contrast to the European immigrant experience, the status of Latinos and Asians as racial minorities presents a basic structural barrier which restricts not only their own but their succeeding generations' full participation in society. Recognition of their own minority group membership, in fact, may be essential if they are to strengthen their organizations, develop leadership promote consciousness, and build coalitions within and between the Southeast Asian and Latino communities which can lead toward empowerment.
Schools, Southeast Asians, and the Future of Lowell

The Puerto Ricans... it's so easy for them to get up and yell, "WE WANT THIS!" For us, we hide our faces and whisper to ourselves, "we want this"... But give us a couple more years, we're still learning.

—Sommanee Bounphasaysonh, Laotian Association of Greater Lowell

Schools have historically served as sites of struggle by minorities and immigrants for access, equity, and democratic reforms. Such landmarks in U.S. legal history as *Lau v. Nichols* and *Brown v. Board of Education* testify to the significance of the fight for educational rights.

Furthermore, for immigrant and refugee parents who have sacrificed their own lives and dreams in order to give their children opportunities for security and social mobility, the schools often represent their single most important investment in this country.

As cities undergo shifts in their ethnic and racial make-up, the schools quickly emerge as one major arena, and often as the initial battleground, where contradictory agendas unfold based on conflicting relations and responses to the demographic changes.

Anti-immigrant sentiment, racial harassment, and English-Only advocacy characterize one set of responses to the challenge of changing demographics currently facing many American cities. These reactions, framed by struggles over turf and the interests of a shifting electorate, lead to divisiveness and segregation as in the case of the Lowell Public Schools. Typically, this leads to violence and tragedy as in the killing of 13-year-old Vandy Phomg.

An alternative set of responses, however, recognizes that when a city's population changes, the city's institutions must also change in order to reflect the needs and interests of its people. An example of this basic demand for access and equity has been crafted by Latino and Southeast Asian parents seeking educational reform in Lowell. Typically, however, this approach meets resistance, if not overt hostility, and leads directly to the demand for political representation and political power as exemplified in the initiation of Alex Huertas' campaign for City Council.

Alex Huertas withdrew from the City Council race in Spring 1989 due to family responsibilities. By taking that initial step in declaring that minorities should run for political office, however, Huertas and Lowell's Latino parents made their intentions and aspirations clear. Although it is difficult to know whether or not the Lao and Cambodian parents would have felt sufficiently inspired to mobilize their communities and participate actively in the elections if Alex Huertas had stayed in the 1989 City Council race, it is, nevertheless, clear that empowerment is on the agenda of Southeast Asian and Latino parents in Lowell. While the Latino parents have clearly set the tone for the movement thus far, the Southeast Asian parents are learning quickly through the process. A
Cambodian community activist, Sambath Chey Fennell, in fact, considered running for school committee in 1989, and will likely run in 1991—perhaps becoming the first Cambodian American elected official in the country.

The city's political dynamics, however, are fluid and volatile. With the Massachusetts economy facing recession and companies like Wang Laboratories, the foundation of Lowell's economic infrastructure, having laid off more than 6,000 employees in 1989, social conditions are becoming more polarized. In November 1989, Lowell's electorate voted on a non-binding referendum introduced by George Kouloheras to declare English the official language of the city. The English-Only referendum passed by a wide 72% to 28% margin with 14,575 votes for and 5,679 votes against. While more research is needed to analyze the meaning as well as the consequences of the English-Only referendum vote, the message to minority and immigrant residents, for the time being, seems clear and chilling.

As a case study illustrating the challenge of changing demographics, the story of Lowell is unresolved. The three-to-one referendum vote for English-Only in Lowell undoubtedly reflects popular opposition to those demographic changes, but, in many ways, it comes too late. The city's transformation is already in progress. In time, Cambodians, who represent the largest minority group in the city with a population approaching 25% of the total, will have an especially critical role to play in determining the future of Lowell. The Latino and Southeast Asian parents' successful eighteen-month struggle for access and equity in the Lowell Public Schools represents the first step in an ongoing process of organizing and coalition-building that may eventually lead not only to a defeat of the city's anti-immigrant, English-Only forces but to the election of Cambodian and Latino candidates to city office and to the eventual empowerment of the Southeast and Latino communities. Perhaps then, Lowell will rightfully be considered a "model city" in a "Massachusetts miracle."


3 Ibid.


5 From 1988-90, however, Wang Laboratories has faced severe economic difficulties, leading to lay-offs of thousands of employees, drops in quarterly earnings and stock prices, and resignations of many managers, including An Wang's son, Frederick. An Wang died in the spring of 1990, leaving the fortune of the company in question. The socio-economic impact of Wang's difficulties on
the city of Lowell needs further study.

6 Quoted in Doris Sue Wong, "Lowell is Seen Not Fulfilling its Promise for Asians, Hispanics," The Boston Globe, 3 Nov 1987.
7 Alex Huertas, personal interview, 11 Jun 1987.
9 Hispanic Parents Advisory Council, et al, Complaint, U.S. District Court District of Massachusetts, Civil Action No. 87-1968 K.
11 The settlement was approved by the court in February 1989, and did not include monetary compensation for educational harms, although $80,000 in attorney's fees and costs of $5,000 were awarded eventually in November 1989.
12 George Kouloheras, quoted from Lowell School Committee meeting, 3 Jun 1987.
16 On January 17, 1989, Patrick Purdy fired over 100 shots from an automatic assault rifle into the Cleveland Elementary schoolyard—killing five Cambodian and Vietnamese children. Witnesses observed that Purdy had aimed specifically at Southeast Asian children before firing. An investigation by California state Attorney General John Van de Kamp, concluded in an October 1989 report that, "Purdy attacked Southeast Asian immigrants out of a festering sense of racial resentment and hatred." The report also noted that Purdy, according to his half-brother, often confronted people speaking in a foreign language and told them to speak English in America (see Asian Week, 13 Oct 1989).
19 Alex Huertas, personal interview, 11 Jun 1987.
THE VIETNAMESE AMERASIAN RESETTLEMENT EXPERIENCE: FROM INITIAL APPLICATION TO THE FIRST SIX MONTHS IN THE UNITED STATES

LIANG TIE
DENNY HUNTHAUSEN

INTRODUCTION

They treat me bad. They tell me I can't do things because I am American. They tell me to go home to America. Everyone says America is free. In my country if you want to buy a stereo you have to go to the government to get permission. I want to come to America to enjoy my freedom.

The enactment of the 1987 “Amerasian Homecoming Act” provided an opportunity for Vietnamese Amerasians to enter the United States. These Amerasians are children fathered by U.S. military servicemen and born in Vietnam after January 1, 1962 and before January 1, 1976. Abandoned by their American fathers, they grew up with the disadvantages of being mixed-race, a racial minority in Vietnam. They are “Children of Dirt” who became the “Children of Gold” as they and their Vietnamese families left Vietnam in search of a better life in the land of their fathers.

In the summer of 1989, Vietnamese Amerasians and their adopted families began arriving at the approximately fifty “cluster sites” located in various regions of the U.S. This article describes the government process and the personal experiences of the Vietnamese Amerasians who were resettled through the United States Catholic Conference Migration and Refugee Services at the Catholic Community Services in Tacoma, Washington, referred to as the Tacoman cluster site. The article follows the process Amerasians experience, from filing for exit documents in Vietnam to six months after their resettlement in the U.S. The information presented in this article is based on the experiences of 33 Vietnamese Amerasians who are non-relative sponsored “free cases” and the 75 accompanying family members who resettled in Tacoma, Washington between September 1, 1989, and March 31, 1990. In addition, information contained in this article is based on a review of the United States statutes, some documents released by the State Department and other governmental entities, and the experience of the resettlement program staff working with the Amerasians in the Tacoma cluster site.
My mother told me my father wanted to take us with him. But the government would not let him. So he gave her the dog tag, in case one day I could leave and come to America.

The history leading up to the arrival of the 33 Vietnamese Amerasians and their families in Tacoma has its roots in the efforts of many U.S. servicemen with Vietnamese Amerasian children. In April of 1975, when the U.S. armed forces withdrew from Vietnam, the U.S. government denied the legitimacy of the Amerasian children’s claims to follow their fathers home: in some cases, denying the fathers’ explicit requests to bring their Amerasian children with them back to the States. These servicemen and other concerned individuals persisted in exploring ways to bring their Vietnamese Amerasian children to the U.S. The first Amerasians to exit Vietnam left in 1982. They were processed through the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) under the auspices of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). These first few Vietnamese Amerasians were children whose fathers had filed visa applications for them. They arrived as U.S. citizens.

The first legislative recognition of the U.S. responsibility for the plight of Amerasians was in the form of the Amerasian Immigration Act (PL 97-359) signed in October of 1982. This Act provided immigration opportunities for Amerasians, not their family members, from Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Kampuchea, and Thailand. It explicitly stipulated that mothers must sign an irrevocable release and disavow any future claims on their child, forcing the separation of the Amerasian child from their biological mothers. The Vietnamese government objected to the separation and did not participate in this program. Critics in the U.S. cited the forced separation of children from their mothers and care providers as being insensitive to the human needs of these children.

"On September 11, 1984, Secretary of State Schultz announced on behalf of President Reagan that the U.S. would accept for admission through the ODP over a three-year period all Amerasian children and their qualifying family members then in Vietnam." With this administrative sanction, the second group of Vietnamese Amerasians entered the U.S. as refugees with their accompanying family members. From September 1982 through July 1989 approximately 8,000 Amerasians and 16,000 accompanying family members departed Vietnam for the U.S.

In December of 1987, still under pressure from servicemen, the U.S. passed the "Amerasian Homecoming Act." This act opened the way for a third group of Amerasians to enter the U.S. with their accompanying Vietnamese families as immigrants with most of the refugee privileges and benefits. This time the Amerasians entered not as unaccompanied minors, but as young adults in the company of their families. This group
of individuals comprise the 33 Vietnamese Amerasians and the 75 accompanying family members who resettled in the Tacoma Washington cluster site.

Filing for Exit Visa in Vietnam

I know we could leave if I had a white boy like my son.

The process of obtaining permission to migrate from Vietnam to the U.S. is complex and requires the collaboration of numerous organizations, agencies and individuals. Procedurally, the experience of the Vietnamese Amerasians does not significantly differ from the experiences of other Vietnamese nationals applying to enter the U.S. under the ODP. The process for the Vietnamese Amerasian “free cases”—meaning Amerasian families without sponsoring relatives in the U.S.—starts with the Amerasian and his or her accompanying family filing for an exit visa with the Vietnamese government. Since migration from Vietnam is voluntary, no action on the part of the U.S. government or Vietnamese government officials can occur unless, and until, the Amerasian makes his or her interest in leaving Vietnam known through the filing of this application.

The nature and extent of the efforts undertaken by the Vietnamese government to inform the Amerasians of their eligibility for migration to the U.S. is unclear. However, it is clear that the Vietnamese government does make it generally known that Amerasians and their adopted families are eligible to exit Vietnam for the United States. This is done through local officials in urban as well as in rural regions. As one adopted father of an Amerasian said, “I know we could leave if I had a white boy like my son.” However, he could not identify the source of the information except to say that “people were talking about it.”

After an application for an exit visa is filed, the Vietnamese government then reviews the applications. None of the Amerasians resettled in Tacoma knew the Vietnamese government’s criteria for review. Some suspected that the process is cursory because the Vietnamese government “wants us to leave;” some suspect that if one paid the officials enough there was no problem in processing one’s documents.

The U.S. Interview

[The Americans take me outside in the sun and look at me....

They ask me questions like what do you want to do in America? When you live in America will you think of Vietnam? It makes me scared. I have never do it before. That is the first time I have seen Americans.
Vietnamese Amerasians

After the Amerasian's application clears the Vietnamese government, their names, along with all other eligible Vietnamese citizens, are forwarded to the U.S. ODP office in Bangkok. The U.S. ODP, based on this list, then compiles a list of individuals to be interviewed by the U.S. This U.S. list is then submitted to the Vietnamese government. The Vietnamese, based on the U.S. list, notifies the families of the date of their interview with the U.S. officials.

Once a month, usually for three weeks of each month, a team of four to five counselors from the USODP program in Bangkok fly into Ho Chi Minh city to conduct the personal interviews with those Vietnamese who have been scheduled by the Vietnamese officials, including the Amerasians. An average of 5,500 individuals are interviewed each month. Of this number, only a small percentage are Amerasians.

The interview is two days in duration and is conducted in two parts: one part is a face-to-face interview with the U.S. interview team which lasts approximately four to five hours; the second part is a medical examination with the medical personnel from the International Organization for Migration (IOM). IOM, formerly the International Commission for Migration (ICM), is an international non-profit organization based in Geneva, Switzerland. The medical examination screens for all communicable diseases and categories of medical conditions which render an individual ineligible for migration to the U.S. as specified in U.S. statutes.

On the day of the interview all family members appear at the hotel in Ho Chi Minh city which acts as a temporary office for the U.S. team. According to the cluster site resettlement program staff, the Amerasians report that they had to arrange for their own transportation, and some family members were not included in the application due to the lack of funds to transport all members of the family. Once at the interview site, some Amerasians, again due to lack of funds, report spending the night on the street in order to return for the second day of interviews. (Based on hardships of this nature from Amerasians interviewed in the past, the U.S. ODP currently arranges for transport to the interview site, through contracts with local travel agencies, all Vietnamese who are scheduled for interviews and who do not reside in the city. In addition, agreement has been reached for the establishment of an Amerasian Transit Center in Ho Chi Minh City in order to house those Amerasians who are without funds during their interviews and who are awaiting ODP processing and departure.)

One of the primary purposes of the face-to-face interview with the U.S. team is to obtain evidence of Amerasian status. This evidence may be any written documentation such as marriage certificate, birth certificate with the father's name on it, or any pictures of the U.S. father with the Amerasian child. With or without material documentation, the U.S. team conducts a visual examination. Many of the Amerasians in Tacoma describe this visual inspection as being taken outside in the sun.
and their physical appearance scrutinized. As one ODP official stated: "It is very apparent, the Amerasians look very different from the Vietnamese."

Accompanying Family Members

I don't know why she [biological mother] don't want me. I don't understand why she did this.

The Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1987 permits family members to accompany the Amerasian. This stipulation has been interpreted and operationalized as meaning one set of family members. Family members are considered to be either the parents and siblings or the spouse and children of the Amerasian.

Though visual inspection is accepted as evidence of Amerasian status, other types of documents are necessary to verify the relationship of the accompanying family members. While the Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1987 permits family members to accompany the Amerasian, this stipulation has been interpreted as meaning one set of family members. Family members are considered to be either the parents and siblings or the spouse and children of the Amerasian.

If the Amerasian is migrating with his or her family of origin, then the mother or adoptive mother, step-father when present, and any half-siblings, when present, may file for resettlement. Certificate of birth is the usual documentation requested as proof of relationship. The Vietnamese and the U.S. government usually accept the word of the filing adult and the Amerasian as to the legitimacy of an individual's claim to family membership status. This ability of family members to migrate with the Amerasian has given rise to government suspicions of Amerasians being sold to families who wish to leave Vietnam for the U.S. Of the families resettled in the Tacoma cluster site, 13 (39 percent) of the Amerasians arrived with their biological mother. Fifteen (45 percent) of the Amerasians arrived with family members who were not their biological mothers or biological half-siblings. Three (9 percent) reported that they had been sold to their present family members for the purpose of migration. Two (6 percent) migrated as independent adults. The adopted family members are usually aunts (the biological mother's sister) and the aunt's families. Migrating to the U.S. is experienced by some of the Amerasians as yet another rejection. One Amerasian's response to the situation of migrating with his or her aunt's family is: "I don't know why she [biological mother] don't want me. I don't understand why she did this."

If the Amerasian is migrating with his or her own family, then the marriage certificate between the Amerasian and her spouse, and certificates of birth of the children are usually requested as documentation of relationship. The Amerasian cannot emigrate to the U.S. with both their family of origin and their own family. This has created difficult
Vietnamese Amerasians

choices and painful situations for married Amerasians with parents. One Amerasian in the Tacoma site migrated with his biological mother leaving a wife and a child in Vietnam. Another Amerasian was forced to break an engagement of marriage in order to immigrate to the U.S. with her aunt and the aunt's family. Increasingly, this situation is thought by many in Congress and the resettlement field to be unacceptable. To rectify the problem, there is currently an effort underway to amend the statutes to allow extended families to remain intact.

After the face-to-face interview, the U.S. government reviews the case. If the Amerasian and the accompanying family members are medically cleared and their status as Amerasian is accepted, the family is accepted for migration to the U.S. Once accepted, the U.S. ODP program places the names of the eligible Amerasian and accompanying family members on the list of eligible individuals and forwards this list to UNHCR and IOM. The UNHCR then works with the Vietnamese government to compile the final list of individuals who receive exit visas from the Vietnamese government.

The Amerasian waits again. At this point the Amerasian and family members are aware only that they have filed for the exit visa, were interviewed by the Americans, and were medically examined. They do not know how their application is processed, or the length of time they must wait before they can depart, or even if they may depart at all. According to the U.S. ODP, the time between the personal interview and the reception of exit visas from the Vietnamese government varies from one to several months, but is always less than six months.8 The interval for the Amerasians who resettled in Tacoma ranged from one to four months.

However, the time period between the initial filing with the U.S. government and the interview with the USODP, for the group of Vietnamese Amerasians who are resettled in the Tacoma cluster site, is approximately four years. The time period between initial filing and final notification for departure was approximately four and a half years. This group may have waited an abnormally long time since the ODP was halted for two years, from January 1986 to September 1987.

LEAVING VIETNAM

When all the paperwork is done they tell you to come and take all the paperwork and that's it. You have to bring letter [from the Vietnamese government] and the military will sign it. Then you can leave.

The Vietnamese government notifies the Amerasian and accompanying family members of their eligibility for migration with the issuance of the exit visas. There is approximately two months between reception of the visa and the date of departure. This is usually a time of great excitement.
All but one of the Amerasians in the Tacoma cluster site had looked forward to going to the United States with great hope. The Amerasians reported anticipating a life without the type of discrimination they experienced in Vietnam. They looked forward to a life filled with material wealth and limitless possibilities. Yet, for many, this departure is bittersweet. It marks the separation from loved ones; people who had cared for them all of their lives—in some cases their mothers, in other cases their spouse and children—perhaps forever.

The Amerasians and their accompanying family members wait at the departure point with their worldly belongings packed into an array of small boxes wrapped in twine or bundled into plastic bags. From this departure point they are transported by local ground transport, to the airport in Ho Chi Minh city. Then they fly directly on to the Philippines.

Under an agreement with the U.S. State Department and the various Voluntary Resettlement Agencies (VOLAGs), the IOC makes all travel arrangements, provides all necessary travel documentation, and administers all necessary immunizations. IOC asks the family to sign a promissory note to repay the cost of the flight from Bangkok to the U.S. beginning six months after their arrival in the U.S. Payment is made through their VOLAG. This is the first time in the process of migration that the U.S. asks the Amerasian to pay a fee.

State Department releases do not indicate any fees or payment for any segment of the migration process except for the flight ticket. However, an informal survey of the Vietnamese Amerasian families in Tacoma suggest that the average amount of money spent in the process can range from one to four teal of gold. (One teal is equivalent to one ounce of gold.)

**Philippine Refugee Processing Center (PRPC)**

It's like an army camp, not like here. I don't like it there because nothing to do there. It's boring. Leave home for one, two, three, five hours to school, then go home and have nothing to do. For six months you have to live there.

Upon arrival in Manila, Philippines, the Amerasian family is met by PRPC staff at the airport and transported to the camp site. The PRPC is where U.S. bound Asian refugees receive cultural orientation and English-as-a-Second-Language classes (CO/ESL).

Up to this point, the migration experience of Amerasians does not significantly differ from other Vietnamese nationals who are bound for the U.S. under the ODP. However, starting at the PRPC, the Amerasians are processed in "clusters." The U.S. policy of resettling Amerasians in clusters is an effort to increase their network of social support.

Amerasian families are usually housed together in a portion of a barrack-like structure. There are approximately sixteen bunks per building. They receive rations of rice, meat and other items, depending...
VIETNAMESE AMERASIANS

upon the size of the family. Their daily routine consists of attending ESL classes and CO classes. They are in ESL classes an average of eleven hours a week, and in CO classes for an average of eight hours a week. The ESL classes teach basic survival proficiency in English. The CO classes introduce the refugees to common U.S. cultural skills, ranging from identifying how Americans write their names, to problem-solving skills in the work place.

The staff of the Tacoma cluster site reports Amerasians' complaints about PRPCs: 1) ESL teachers, who are Philippine nationals and could not accurately impart the American accents of spoken English; 2) Cultural orientation classes which ill prepared them for daily living in the U.S.; and, 3) Poor environmental conditions.

Amerasians were surprised to discover that after six months of ESL classes in the Philippines, they were not able to understand English in conversation with U.S. speakers, nor were they able to make themselves understood by native English speakers. They often made statements like, “The Philippine camp ESL teachers had different accent. The teachers did not talk like the Americans here.”

The cultural orientations did not prepare the Amerasians for life in the States. The Tacoma cluster site report having to show every incoming Amerasian family how to use major home appliances such as the stove and vacuum cleaners; how to use personal care products such as shampoo and deodorant; how to use public transportation, etc.

Recent arrivals complained of significant food shortages in the PRPC. Stories of either not having been given the full quota of their food rations, or of receiving spoiled inedible food were common. In addition, two families claim that young Amerasian females were sexually abused. These were recounts that camp guards detained young Amerasian women for minor infractions of camp policies, such as breaking curfew. The women were placed in detention for the night in a facility shared with male prisoners. The families claim the girls were sexually abused while in detention.

LEAVING PRPC

About five months into their six month stay in the Philippines, the process for departure is initiated. The Amerasian is given the opportunity to indicate a preference for the geographic location of their resettlement site. Most Amerasians do not have preferences. Some may indicate a preference to join a close friend or relative. None of the Amerasians in the Tacoma cluster site gave a geographic preference.

A month before the departure date, the PRPC staff notifies the VOLAG of the approximate date the family will be ready to leave, and of their destination. The VOLAG national office attempts to honor the family's request. It is the experience of the resettlement agencies that, unless this request is honored, the refugees will move to their preferred destination within two to three months of their arrival. The secondary migration is a financial hardship for the family, and disrupts their
resettlement process. If no preference is provided by the Amerasian family, then the national office distributes the cases among the fifty-odd Amerasian resettlement cluster sites.

Once the destination is decided, the local resettlement agency is contacted to confirm that all arrangements to receive the family are indeed in place. These arrangements primarily include the assurance of a sponsor who is ready to receive them. The VOLAG in the Tacoma cluster site acted as the sponsor for a few of the families in the first three months of the program. Other initial sponsors included several local Vietnamese associations and individual volunteers from the general community.

The process of notification and confirmation usually takes approximately two to four weeks. Once assurance from the local VOLAGs is confirmed, then the PRPC staff notifies the Amerasians of their destination in the U.S. The VOLAG national office in New York notifies IOM to make the reservations and schedule the flight. The IOM schedules a departure date that is usually set for one to three weeks after completion of the CO/ESL curriculum.

On the departure date, each member of the family is allowed to carry two pieces of luggage and is outfitted with an IOM bag full of official documents. The family boards a bus for the Manila airport where they then board a commercial flight for the United States. Even if no other families are coming to Tacoma, there are usually families flying to other U.S. destinations, so the family often travels with hundreds of other refugees. The usual duration of the flight is eight to eleven hours, depending upon whether or not the flight is direct or includes a stopover in Tokyo. This travel period is again a time of great anticipation, anxiety and sadness. During the six months in PRPC, the Amerasians and their accompanying families often make friends with fellow camp mates and teachers. The sadness of leaving these new friends and the familiar camp, as well as the anxiety of heading for an uncertain future in the U.S., are acutely felt during the hours spent on route to the U.S. mainland.

Local VOLAGS vary greatly in the models employed to resettle new arrivals. While the federal government and the voluntary agencies try to provide the Amerasian accompanying family members with some consistency through the use of cluster sites, they experience the resettlement process differently from site to site. The remainder of this article reflects the experience of Amerasian resettlement through the Tacoma, Washington cluster site.

**Arrival**

Everything so big and big noise.
There are so many Americans here.
I thought I was in heaven.
For these Amerasians, the port of entry is SeaTac International Airport. After landing, the Amerasian and the accompanying family members navigate through customs for about two hours. Most of this time is spent standing in line to pick up luggage. When the wait is finally over, "an official looking person" gestures for the IOM bag and the luggage. The customs officer rifles through the bags, looking at everything in them, and pulls out various pieces of paper from the IOM travel bag. The usual inspection for refugees consists of a very brief search of all possessions. The examination of the documents consists of verifying the authenticity of the passports, the presence of the I-94 issued by the U.S., and medical documentation of current immunizations.

After clearing customs, the family finally steps onto the soil of the country that will be their new home, a place they have anxiously anticipated for months and sometimes years. They are exhausted and hungry.

Emerging through the door to the international arrival waiting area, the Amerasian and accompanying family members first meet their sponsor and the local resettlement staff. The sponsor/resettlement program staff, and the Amerasians have no prior knowledge of each other. Sometimes new arrivals offer unexpected surprises—pregnancies or physical disabilities—with which the local staff and sponsor must cope.

Most families expect their sponsor to greet them at the airport and to be there for them from that time forward. Indeed, the best sponsors are waiting with flowers or some small welcome gift. After meeting their sponsor, and prior to leaving the airport, the families make one last check at the IOM desk in the waiting area to confirm their arrival. The Amerasians in Tacoma report that their first impression of the U.S. was formed during the car trip from the airport to Tacoma. They were impressed by the loudness and largeness of everything—big cars, urban freeways, high-rises and tall people, the cold weather, and the large number of non-Asians in the U.S.

**First Two Weeks**


Overwhelmed by physical exhaustion, the environmental differences, a long international flight, and days of tiring anticipation, it can be weeks before the new arrivals feel like themselves again. However, instead of rest and relaxation, they are off to a new world filled with countless changes and challenges. From the airport, the new arrivals travel with their sponsor for about a forty-five-minute car ride to Tacoma. At the end of the ride, the family arrives at the Amerasian Program's transition house.
The Tacoma cluster site rents a house close to the office for the specific purpose of housing newly arrived Amerasians and their accompanying families. The family can live in this house for two to four weeks, depending upon the time it takes for the sponsor to make long-term housing arrangements. Usually the Amerasian Program staff or the sponsor readies the house for new arrivals. The house is stocked with enough food to last a few days and some basic cooking equipment, including a rice cooker, bowls and eating utensils. Beds, bedding and furniture are provided by the VOLAG or sponsor. The family pays for a portion of the rent, the purchase of the food and kitchen items out of the family's reception and placement grant. The reception and placement grant is funded by the federal government and issued by the VOLAG to the family on the day of arrival. Each family receives an average of $200 per person, depending on family size.

Once in the house, the new arrivals are given a tour with instructions on how to use all kitchen appliances, all instruments in the bathroom, and the control for the house's central heating. After the tour, the sponsor usually leaves the family to themselves. It is not unusual for this to be the first time the family has been alone since leaving Vietnam.

The next morning, the sponsor, with staff assistance, appears at the transition house to shepherd the new arrivals on a series of visits to government offices. Within the first two to three weeks each family is taken to the following places:

1) the bank, where they may cash their reception and placement grant check;
2) the social security office, where they apply for social security cards;
3) the health department, where they receive refugee and health screening;
4) the licensing department, where they receive an alien identification card;
5) an ESL class, where they enroll the adults for English classes;
6) the school administration building, where the children are enrolled in public school; and,
7) the welfare office, where they apply for refugee assistance.

During these first few weeks these new arrivals are totally dependent upon the sponsor, the VolAg staff, or volunteers for transportation and interpretation. Each stop at a government office is always the same: the officials dig into the IOM bag, take out forms, and then hand over more forms. These forms are then handed over to the sponsor who fills out the necessary information. Often the new arrivals experience this process as a blur of forms, appointments and new people. In general, there is an overload of information, much of which only begins to make sense with the passing of time.
THE FIRST TWO MONTHS

My English is not good. I can't get a job with my English. My welfare check stop soon. I don't have good English to go to school or to get job. I wish I come to America when I was younger so I have more time in school to learn English.

As the dust settles from the flurry of activity in the first two to three weeks, the new arrivals settle into the semblance of a new daily routine. The adults attend English classes and those under 21 attend the public schools. However, the seeming normalcy of a daily routine does not diminish the urgent problem of securing affordable permanent housing and an income to assure the provision of such basic survival needs as food and clothing. Like all other refugees, the family is faced with the need to make long-term plans.

With assistance from the sponsor, they have secured the necessary documents to qualify for public assistance. This becomes the family's source of income for the next two to twelve months, depending upon how quickly the adult members become employable and actually find jobs capable of supporting the family. All of the families resettled in Tacoma initially relied on public assistance. One month after arrival, Washington state recipients receive approximately $325 in cash each month for adult individuals over the age of eighteen. In addition to cash assistance, public assistance for refugees also includes medical coverage under Medicaid and food stamps. (The amount of cash assistance and food stamps varies from state to state.)

When public assistance is secured, the next task is arranging for long-term housing. The search for housing is frustrating. The family is usually taken to view apartments and houses by their sponsor or the resettlement staff. Because they are new to the country, the new arrivals are unable to determine what constitutes fair rent, a desirable location, or reasonable access to public transportation. Sometimes the family is unable to assess their own financial situation. At the Tacoma cluster site, the resettlement staff encourages the family and the sponsor to locate housing in close proximity to the resettlement office. This region contains a high concentration of other refugees, and is within walking distance of all major social services needed by the new arrivals. This requires negotiation between the family, sponsor, and program staff. The majority of Amerasians and their families choose housing close to other newly arrived families.

FIRST SIX MONTHS

Things are not what they tell us in Vietnam. They say America will give you a house, a car, and money when you come. They say you don't have to work in America. Why don't they tell us what it's like?
The family will usually have received their first public assistance check and will have arranged for a permanent place to live within two months of arrival. Their attention is then turned to long-term planning for employment. While new arrivals are encouraged to seek employment as soon as possible, the resettlement staff and sponsors often recommend they spend some time taking English classes before attempting entry into the job market or before undertaking vocational training. Individuals with poor English skills and less than six years of formal education cannot manage in the mainstream vocational or community college environment. Nineteen (57%) of the Amerasians in the Tacoma cluster site had less than six years of formal education in Vietnam, and none had high school or equivalent education or training. All of the Amerasians were initially placed in some type of educational program.

Individuals who are under twenty-one years of age and who do not hold a high school diploma are eligible to attend public school. Twenty-two (66%) of the Amerasians at the Tacoma site are below age twenty-one. They all initially chose to enroll in the public school system. The eight Amerasians who are over twenty-one chose to attend ESL classes. (ESL classes are held daily in three different sessions. Amerasians may attend one session per day, plus one additional class per week.) In addition to ESL classes, the Tacoma site has developed specialized training programs in cooperation with local schools. These programs address the training needs of Amerasians who are pre-literate. Thirteen (39%) of the Amerasians have less than four years of formal education. They participate in special tutoring sessions in literacy and math to acquire basic skills.

Concurrent with ESL and other basic education, new arrivals who are over twenty-one, and all other adult family members, are encouraged to improve their employability through enrollment in a refugee employment program. The employment program provides employment counseling, pre-employment training, and information about job openings.

As of March, 1990, there were twenty-two Amerasians attending high school. Six Amerasians are attending vocational training school, and one is working to pass his GED while awaiting financial aid to attend college. Three Amerasians, two mothers of Amerasians, and one step-father have become employed. One Amerasian and his mother were employed within the first month of their arrival. Most, however, choose to first improve their English and vocational skills before seeking employment.

By the end of six months, the family has established a new set of routines and relationships that address their immediate and long-term needs. The combination of stable housing, school and training, employment services, and a new network of friends serve as a foundation to meet future challenges.
**BEYOND THE FIRST SIX MONTHS**

My mom don't understand. I want to do American things. She wants me to be like I was in Vietnam.

Because refugee public assistance is only available for twelve months, the need to become employed arrives quickly. Amerasians and adult family members must answer difficult questions in a relatively short time frame: What kind of job is best? How much do I need to earn? How much English and training do I need? Integration into the mainstream American community is hindered in large part due to the Amerasian's lack of English and transportation.

Depending upon their educational background and their individual motivation, it may take from six months to over a year before an Amerasian young person is able to converse with a native English speaker. Their mothers, stepfathers, and older siblings may never have sufficient command of English to make themselves understood without an interpreter. This greatly inhibits interaction outside of the Vietnamese community. Feelings of isolation and alienation which persist well beyond the first few weeks of resettlement are not uncommon.

Financial limitations make it infeasible to purchase a car. Public transportation has many limitations in a society that relies heavily on individual auto transportation. Until a license can be obtained and a car purchased, new arrivals walk or depend upon friends, sponsors, or resettlement program staff for transportation. This hinders the Amerasian's ability to attend training institutions, find jobs, and engage in recreational activities.

Beyond these seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the typical resettlement experience for new arrivals is further compounded by strained family relations. The "children of gold" were prized as tickets to passage out of Vietnam. Once in the U.S., they have lost their original value, and those "families" constructed for convenience are no longer obligated to remain a "family." To date, five of these "families" have separated from the Amerasian.

Family relationships are further strained by the young Amerasian's struggle for individuation. The Amerasians in Tacoma range from age 15 to age 24; 21 is the modal age. This is a period when young people normally establish a household of their own and decrease dependence upon their family of origin. Though there have not, to date, been any marriages in the Tacoma Amerasian community, there have been romantic liaisons among the Amerasians. Two young women have temporarily moved in with their boyfriend's families, and one family has refused to allow their son's girlfriend to move in with them. These romances have produced stress for the family as well as the community.

Finally, program staff have observed that Amerasians, once they reach the U.S., are more likely than other Vietnamese youths to adopt their American surroundings. Their assumption of American ways is
aided by their physical appearance, and further separates them from their families. Strained family relationships inevitably develop in response to a member of the family who rebels against Vietnamese values and too quickly adopts American attitudes and habits.

**Conclusion**

Migration from Vietnam and resettlement in the U.S. is a lengthy process for Amerasians and their accompanying families. For some of the Amerasians in Tacoma, this process began when they were only ten years of age. They arrived with great hopes and dreams of a better life, but the Amerasians quickly became aware of the numerous challenges they must face in adjusting to the radically new and different American culture. Gold does not flow in the streets; not everyone is rich, or even well-off. The lack of English and job skills foster feelings of alienation. Amerasians are threatened, once again, with living on the economic margins of a society. The transition from Vietnam to the U.S. does not come easily. Vietnamese-Americans, the latest legacy from the Vietnam war, face daunting challenges to realize the goal of the 1987 Act for an Amerasian Homecoming.

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1. All quotes are from Amerasians and family members resettled at the Tacoma cluster site.
2. As defined by PL 97-359 Sec. 584 (b) (1) (A) (i)
5. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
Vietnam, My Country

Janet P. Chambers

It is a small brick house, one of a number of small houses lined up side by side on pint-sized plots. The address is 14 Ranger Road, in a suburban town in New Jersey. In the untended yard, trampled grass shoots struggle for life and scruffy bushes grow along the roadway. Tattered windowboxes poke out from the house sprouting, in place of petunias or geraniums, glass fragments, pieces of rope, fallen leaves and old tools.

In the backyard there is a garden. It alone is well tended. Special Asian vegetables thrive. Around it is a conglomerate of clutter. An old chair teeters near a large tree. From the tree a makeshift exercise apparatus made of ropes and wooden rungs swings. Bits of bicycles, pieces of cars, a tired shoe, and swatches of old clothes are scrambled together like a careless mosaic.

I park my car on the narrow street, nudging it close to the bushes to allow room for traffic to pass. Every yard on the block is clipped and trimmed except this one. There are at least two cars or trucks parked in each narrow driveway, and sometimes another at the curb. At 14 Ranger Road there are five cars—mine will make six. Three are squeezed into the inadequate driveway. Two more are nose-to-tail at the curb resembling an elephant line, and my Toyota butts up to the last auto like the last tail holder.

I feel uncomfortable walking to the door. The neighbors are surely not pleased about the condition of this property. They must wonder what business I have here. And I can't help but wonder about the occupants. I knock and hear harsh, staccato voices spitting words at each other. There is a scurrying, shuffling sound, and the door opens.

"Hello," I say, "My name is Janet Chambers. I am the new English tutor." The family gathers about, greeting me with almost imperceptible nods. With gentle deference they beckon me into the room, clearing the way, and indicating that I should be seated on a worn couch.

The room is small, the bare floor is stained with greasy spots and scratches. On a shelf, high in one corner, sits a smiling Buddha honored with a display of fresh fruit, shiny red apples, golden pears and bright orange tangerines.

Two sagging couches line two walls, and a shabby cupboard of sorts leans on a third one. Above one couch, an oriental calendar is hung by a nail, and a picture of a beautiful Asian woman is centered above the cupboard.

Strains of haunting music are coming from somewhere upstairs.
Aromatic scents waft into the room from the nearby kitchen.

A tiny girl darts about, her black eyes gleaming like raisins, her dark, lank hair flying about her wizened little face. She bounces, jumps and scrambles about among the group, hopping onto laps and snuggling into arms. "What is your name," I asked. "Dyeeng," is the sound to my American ears. D-u-y-e-n, they explain is the spelling: "It means lovely in Vietnamese." "You are lovely," I told her. She grins impishly clambering onto my knee.

Five other Asian faces, alike with their black hair, dark eyes and warm brown skin, cluster about me, two females and three males. They look at me with questioning eyes. In later discussions they will tell me how strange it is for them in this new country to see people with so many different colors of skin, hair and eyes.

Dong told me once, "So mixed up, the people, everybody different. Some so funny, orange hair, green eyes, white skins with speckles, and black people with blue eyes! So funny." It is easy to understand their surprise at such a polyglot of nationalities and races when they are accustomed to a single race and culture.

The older boy, Sau, begins speaking very carefully in an effort to pronounce the English words correctly. He tells me about the family. Muoi, his aunt, is the mother of the little girl and the head of the household based on seniority. Sau, Muoi, Duyen, and Hung, a younger cousin, arrived in the United States a year earlier, in 1983. His brother and sister, Dong and Nam, just arrived a few days ago; and it is these two for whom I am to be the English tutor.

Not knowing quite how to begin, I attempt to communicate. I ask questions. "How old are you Dong?" He frowns and squints his eyes in confused concentration. "Unh?" He does not understand. Sau answers for him. "In this country he is about fourteen."

"When did you arrive here?" I ask Nam. She lowers her eyes, smiles shyly and whispers to Sau in Vietnamese. Neither Dong nor Nam can understand anything that I am saying.

"Have they had any lessons in English?" I ask Sau. "Yes, yes," he assures me. "In the camp...they have English in the camp."

"What camp?" I asked.
"The refugee camp."
"Where was that?"
"Singapore. You know? Malaysia, Singapore?"

I have heard the names of these places, but I have no idea where Singapore is. "Oh, Singapore, how long were they there?" There is a discussion in Vietnamese—hard, strident, brusque sounds. They decide—and Sau explains that they were in the camp for about two years.

That was the first of many exchanges between the Nguyen family and me. A one-line announcement in the church bulletin at a local Catholic church had caught my eye: "Needed, English tutor for Indochinese family." It was exactly the kind of commitment I was looking
for. My telephone call was answered by a cheerful man who referred me to a teacher, a woman who was responsible for finding volunteers to be English tutors. I was one of several.

As I worked more closely with Dong and Nam I began to learn from them about their native land and their culture.

Nam—so pretty with those high cheek bones and doe eyes cast down, in gentle timidity. The sponsor group encouraged her to go to English classes. She went to some. When I asked her how they were she told me she couldn't learn there because of the variety of people who all spoke with different accents. None of them were Vietnamese.

Just going to the class location in Hackensack was frightening to her. She had to take a bus and the very act of getting out of the house, waiting for the bus and boarding it along with strangers terrified her. She worried that she might get off at the wrong stop, or that she would get lost. She was afraid to speak since her English was practically nonexistent, and she was painfully uncomfortable in this strange new environment. She desperately wished she was back home in “my country.”

Nam wanted to learn enough English to qualify her to get a job and send money home. All of her countrymen who come to the United States consider it a duty to send money home. Everyone in Vietnam is poor, they tell me. Sau explained that a man works all day for what is equivalent to fifty cents a day in American money.

In her home culture, Nam was not expected to become a wage earner. She was brought up to be a proper Vietnamese woman—modest, submissive, and gentle. Her family was comparatively well off in Saigon. The Nguyens were considered well-to-do by most of their countrymen. They had servants to do the cleaning and laundry. Now, with just two women in the house, Nam is expected to cook, clean and do laundry for the entire household.

Since Muoi has a job and Nam does not, she is expected to carry the burden of the housework. The men will help with laundry, but they refuse to do any cleaning or cooking. As Dong told me, “In my country, a man not do these things, it make him a little man—no dignity.”

Another complication is the natural grouping of Vietnamese refugees. Many visitors, mostly men, are constantly coming and going in this Vietnamese household. They play dominoes and cards, drink beer, smoke and joke. Often, some of them stay over, a hospitable custom. This makes more work for the two women with no help from the men. When I asked Muoi why she didn't ask them not to come so often or stay so long, she said, “Oh, cannot do that. It is my duty, must take care each other, Vietnamese.”

Finally, partly to escape this dilemma, Nam chose to marry a young Vietnamese man who had been coaxing her to marry him since her arrival. “At first, I no like him,” she explained to me. “I have bigger idea of who I want. but then, I think, I need somebody take care me. I cannot do for self and I not able do work here.”
Slowly we begin the learning process—the struggle to make the English words comprehensible. Pictures, gestures, mime, searching for communication. Words repeated—airplane, bowl, cat, door, egg, food—charades help us to translate our meanings to each other. Now and then their eyes light up with recognition and we struggle in awkward conversation to gain understanding. We talk about foods, what are bowls, and how Americans treasure pets. (Vietnamese think the American devotion to cats and dogs is funny and foolish.)

Even gestures are understood differently. The waggling motion with a forefinger that we use to indicate "come here" means, to a Vietnamese, "go away."

The personal story of their flight from their war torn country began to evolve:

Dong is a fourteen-year-old boy who left his country at the age of twelve. Nam, his twenty-eight-year-old sister accompanied him. Saigon had been their home. They got a boat to Malaysia. That was extremely difficult because "everybody wanted to leave after the Americans went away." The South Vietnamese knew that when the Communists took over they would have much trouble.

For Dong and Nam it took eight tries before they got on a boat. Each time, arrangements were made and money paid. Each time, they waited in the woods, squatting in the often wet, warm dark. They heard animals moving and grunting in the darkness, and watched the moon wend its way across the night sky and disappear behind the trees. They were tense and fearful as they huddled miserably, waiting and waiting, and when no one came, stumbling home. Again and again they went through this painful process. It has been said that the Vietnamese are willing to do things the hard way when the hard way is the only way possible. If hiding and waiting in the woods, over and over again, was the only way to accomplish their purpose and find their way onto a boat away from Vietnam, then that was what they must do.

Dong had been "mainstreamed" into the local New Jersey high school. The only special assistance offered by the school was the English as a Second Language class. I asked him about it. He looked at me uncomfortably and said, "It okay." Later he explained that he thought it was "silly, not worthwhile, she talk about funny things—not make sense." But he didn't want to tell anyone what he thought because he didn't want to get the teacher in trouble. Another Vietnamese characteristic, so different from the American code of "forthrightness," is that they tell you what they think will please you rather than make you uncomfortable with what they really think.

"In my country," Dong told me, "I go to school. I very smart. I learn quick. Here, I have much trouble."

I asked him to tell me about school in his country. "Oh, have much respect for teacher—not like here. We do exactly what teacher tell. Must memorize oh so much, a lot. I do it good pages and pages. No one
ever ask teacher question, very respectful. Teacher important person. I not understand here. No respect.

"In math I very good. Always get right. But I trouble here—not understand." Even with his good math ability, he was having trouble because of his lack of English. Another major problem for Dong was his discomfort in asking questions. He would not do it. Not only did he think it impolite, but he was also embarrassed because his English was so bad that he did not want to call attention to his inadequacy. I suggested that he talk to the teacher after class. "That okay," he assured me, "many students have question for teacher after class, I just tell you."

And the differences in how people in the community dealt with each other was baffling to them. "Ms. Chambers, why people hide in houses? In my country, everybody outside, smile, friendly, talk, visit each other. Here everybody stay by self, why?

"Ms. Chambers, I try help lady, she fall off bicycle, she jump up and holler me. In my country, is polite to help somebody, especially older person. Why she angry me?"

Hard questions for me to answer, but I try. "Here we have the idea that we can stay young longer. Maybe she didn't want to feel old, and resented you making her feel older. It is still the right thing to do, Dong. Most people would be grateful."

We discussed other differences. Why didn't Americans take care of the older people in their homes? Why didn't I have children? Why were teenagers so openly sexual and immodest about their bodies? Why didn't the students have more respect for the teachers?

Dong got very excited about one of the English assignments. He was to write a story and illustrate it. He had the story all put together in his head and he showed me the drawings he was making. "See Ms. Chamber, it is a story about a little fish. He swims with his family." And he told me just how it should be, that the little fish went off by himself to explore near the shore. He swam closer and closer to the bank to see what was there when suddenly a huge bird swept down and nearly caught him. Terrified, he raced back to the safety of his family in the middle of the little pond. "The moral of the story," Dong explained, "is that a child should stay near home until he knows enough about the world to take care of himself because others might destroy him." It was a sound and understandable moral.

Dong spent hours working on the drawings. The little fish was shown swimming with a school of fish. A large ugly bird with cruel eyes and a knife-like beak was portrayed striding along the bank peering hungrily into the pond. "It's good, Dong, really good," I told him. "I'm sure the teacher will be pleased with your work."

The following week when I came to tutor, I asked him how it went. He made a long face and rolled his eyes. "Don't know," he said. "What do you mean?" I asked him. "Oh, she say not mine—she say I not do work, must be somebody do for me."
I was furious. “What do you mean? did she give you a grade?”
She say it good, but not believe I do it, so she say I get a ‘C.’ That okay.”
I didn’t agree. “But Dong, it isn’t okay, you wrote the story and you did
the work. It was very good. All I did was help you with the grammar. You
should get the credit for it. You should tell her that. Do you want me
to call her?” “No, no, that okay, not matter.”

After that Dong didn’t get excited about his classes. Often when
I came, he looked exhausted and he had a harsh, ugly cough. I asked
him about it. “Don’t know why,” he would tell me, “Hurts—head hurts
too. Can’t think right. Worry in head what happens. All night, sit, think
and try know what to do.” He would slap his head, “Can’t do good, can’t
think right, can’t make head go good. What you think?”

I knew he was in despair. He said he liked to swim. In my
country, oh so beautiful, always beach and ocean and water, can swim
anytime. Where can swim here?” We went to the YMCA in Hackensack.
The membership cost was $50 a year for him, and he talked a Vietnamese
friend into joining with him. “How I get here Ms. Chambers?” he asked.
“Well, you can take a bus, or have someone drive you, or ride your
bicycle,” I told him. It was difficult because the family members were all
too occupied with jobs and schedules to drive him, and biking on the
busy suburban roads was treacherous.

He tried, but the first time the two boys went, they were scolded
for a rule infraction which they had not understood—swimming during
lap time. He had also eagerly anticipated playing ping-pong. But that
was restricted, too. It was required that there be an adult with him and
he had no one who could accompany him. Then his friend decided to get
the money back and forget it. Dong didn’t go very often after that. The
swimming venture didn’t work out very well.

He also rejected high school sports activities. He scorned
football, baseball and track. “I know karate,” he would say proudly. “I
do that all time. I getting good.” He desperately wanted to buy a
“stretching” apparatus to grow taller. We found them advertised. You
hang upside down by your feet. He had read this exercise would stretch
the spine and make the user taller. Unfortunately, the outfit offering the
item had gone out of business. So he and his friends constructed their
own body stretcher in the back yard. Every time I came to the house he
would ask, “What you think, Ms. Chambers, I taller? What you think?”
He remained a solid 5’2” despite his efforts.

Dong also loves music. He bought a guitar and one of his friends
taught him to play. Sometimes when I came he would play and sing
romantic Vietnamese songs for me. He had a strong, deep voice and sang
the haunting music soulfully. “Vietnamese music very deep,” he told me.
“Much meaning, very sad—young man loves girl and is longing to see her.
Much heart in songs. You like?” Yes Dong, I like.

Dong did graduate from high school, but he can still barely read
and write English. He can speak English, but not always understandably,
and he has had several different jobs: dishwasher at a local Chinese restaurant ("Very bad job Ms. Chambers, hot, sweaty, not good"); assistant in a print shop ("It okay, long time work every day, hard, not pay good"); and, clean-up person in a hospital ("They pay $6.50 an hour and if I good, maybe will pay more"). He will manage, but his prospects for satisfying work are poor.

His sister and her husband have a baby boy. The baby has a Vietnamese name, but his mother calls him by his American name, John. "So when he go school, he have name they know, not difficult, you know?" Nam explained. She calls me Grandma for the baby, since her parents remain in Vietnam and she may never see them again.

Dong speaks often of Vietnam. "Someday I go back to my country," he tells me. "You come, too, you come, I show you. Very beautiful. Will you come with me, see Vietnam, my country?" Maybe I will.
Yer, the Bad Scout, sat quietly, his head lowered. He looked at the floor between his feet. Beyond him, his mother sat and talked to Yee Chang and me. Since I could not understand the Hmong language, I did not know what she was saying, so I listened intently to the cadence of her voice. But my companion, Yee, understood, and he listened, nodded, and now and then responded in Hmong. Yer said nothing. He just sat and looked at his feet. The tiny livingroom in the public high-rise housing project was bare except for three chairs, a threadbare sofa and some family photos from the Hmong refugee camps in Thailand on the wall.

I had called this meeting, or, rather, at my suggestion Yee and I had dropped in unannounced on Yer and his mother to find out if there was any way we could get him back into our all-Hmong Boy Scout Troop. A few days earlier, Yer’s mother had pulled him out of Scouting, and now she was telling us why. As she talked, she began to cry. But, softly sobbing, she went on talking.

“What’s happening? What’s she saying?” I asked Yee.

“She’s saying he’s her only son, and the only male in the family since her husband is dead, and she was counting on him to get her out of this poverty. But since he’s joined Scouts he’s gone bad. She says his friends in Scouts are a bad influence. He wears his hair funny and he won’t do any work. He just watches TV all the time. And every weekend he wants to run off on a Boy Scout activity when he has work to do. She wanted him to be a good son like his cousin Nou, but he’s gone bad and so he can’t be a Boy Scout any more. She won’t let him.”

I said to Yee, “Tell Yer if he wants to be a good Scout he has to be a good son first.”

I could have spoken to Yer directly in English, but I wanted his mother to hear what I said. So Yee translated my words and Yer nodded politely, his eyes on the floor. Yee went on at length, elaborating on my remarks, adding his own thoughts. Yee Chang was an Eagle Scout, a freshman at St. Olaf College and a role model for many a Hmong boy. He had an exam the next day. He had his own struggles but he was taking precious time out to be my interpreter. Yer listened to him and nodded.

I spoke to Yer in English. “Would you like to be an Eagle Scout like Yee some day?” I asked.

Yer nodded. “Yes,” he whispered, not looking up.

“Then you have to figure out how to be a good son. Yee is a good Boy Scout, but he’s a good son, too.”
Again Yer nodded.
I spoke to Yee. “Tell his mother I know it’s hard to raise a Hmong kid in America. But I can help.”
Yee translated and I said, “Tell her that her boy has been a pretty good Scout. He’s very ambitious. He works hard on his badges and he’s quick to learn.”
“Yes. I already told her all that,” said Yee.
“And he’s a leader,” I said. “He’s recruited nineteen Scouts for us this year, practically single-handed. But I understand that of course he has to be a good son or none of that matters.”
Yee spoke to the mother. They talked back and forth for a long time, Yee patiently explaining, smiling a little sometimes, with no urgency or pleading in his voice, just conversational and easy. They might have been talking about the weather. At last Yee turned to me.
“She says it’s all right for him to be a Scout again. She doesn’t want him to fall behind. She apologizes for making him quit Scouts. She says if you come all the way over to his house to talk to him, you must really want to help him. She wants him to be a Scout.”
I said, “Thank her for me and tell her I think it’s a good decision and I think Yer can change. From what I know of him, I think he has it in him to be a very good son.”
Yee and I stood up to go. Yer stood up and stepped toward me, smiling shyly but not looking me in the eye. He started to give me his hand but instead he gave me a hug. I had my Scout back again. Yer, my Good Scout.
Yee and I went out to the car, and I drove him back to his dorm at St. Olaf College. On the way, I asked him what he had said to Yer in addition to my short remarks.
Yee said, “I told him to do it the way I did it.”
“And how did you do it?”
“Well, before I did any Scout activity, I always told my parents where I was going and what I was doing. And then after it was over, I told them about it. I never waited for them to ask. If they have to ask what I’m doing, it’s already too late. You have to tell them before they ask. Then when the big questions come, the answer is going to be yes because they trust you by that time.”
“Yee,” I said, “How did you know to do that? How did you figure all that out?”
“I don’t know. I just figured it out. It’s the only way.”
We pulled up in front of the dorm. I stopped the car and gave Yee my hand. “I think we might have saved a kid tonight, Yee,” I said.
“Yeah, I think we did,” he said.
We shook hands. Then he got out and I watched him walk up and disappear into his dorm.
I organized the Hmong Boy Scout Troop of Minneapolis in 1981. Yee Chang joined the next year. He was a thin, slight kid with a nice smile, hardly distinguishable from dozens of others. But he grew up in the Troop and became one of its leaders.

Yee says, “The Hmong Troop is important to the Hmong community. It gives families a chance to see what their children have learned in America. It says to everyone, Hmongs can accomplish something in America, as Hmongs.”

Yee goes on, “I’m an advocate of Scouting to the Hmong community. I’ve gotten a lot out of Scouting. But everybody’s different and Scouting’s not for everyone. Some Hmong Scouts take advantage. Not most of them, but some. They use Scouting to get away from their responsibility to the family. Those guys probably shouldn’t be Scouts. Maybe they’re the oldest son or the oldest male. There are things they just have to do and they can’t get out of it. They have to help out. They have to take care of younger brothers and sisters. And they have to take care of their parents. That’s the Hmong way. You take care of your elders. If they work it right, maybe they can do both their family responsibilities and Scouts. Or maybe they can’t do both. But some of them have the attitude that they will see what they can get away with. Anyway, the family comes first and they just have to accept that. But some of them don’t accept it and that’s where they get into trouble.”

For the past four summers, Yee has worked as a counselor at Camp Ajawah, a summer camp for kids which I direct. He is chief of the Junior Camp, for boys age eight to twelve. He has six counselors working under him, some of them Hmong. Many of his thirty-five campers are Hmong.

Yee says, “The biggest problem for the American kids is teasing that leads to fighting. Kids will have those problems no matter what, so I try not to act on it. I try not to be an authority figure and punish kids for doing that. I just take them aside and make sure they understand that that’s not tolerated. I don’t say, ‘You did this so I’m going to send you here and there. I’m going to punish you.’ That’s really bad for the kid. He’ll never learn why you did that, why you punished him. Just take him aside and say straight out, ‘We don’t do that around here.’ Then he won’t do it again.

“Camp is really important for Hmong kids. Having been a camper up there and the experience I had up there, I want other Hmong kids to have the same experience—which is learning about other people and learning a lot about yourself as an independent person. Hmong kids are so exposed to the inner-city life. Just being away at camp for two weeks, away from bicycles and TVs and from their housing units—the whole atmosphere. Just being away from the whole atmosphere for a while, it’s pretty good for them, being away from their Hmong life for a little while.”
Jim Masters, an American counselor under Yee, says, “I want to take a summer and study Yee. I want to watch him handle kids and see how he does it. The kids love him. They’re always all over him, asking him for stuff and getting him to show them stuff. He never gets mad and he never gets tired. He really seems to like it.”

When Yee was sixteen years old, his father suddenly died of a heart attack. Yee was totally unprepared for this and it affected him deeply. Yee says, “When he was alive my father meant a lot to me, but he means more to me now because he’s gone. I’ve started to realize what role he would’ve played in my life. He was a really good father. He got us all to America.”

Yee’s dad You Mai Chang, was a clan leader. People would often stop in at the Chang home for advice or just to visit. Yee says, “When I think about him I think of him talking to other people, just talking about everyday things: life in Laos, farming, life in America, all kinds of things. He cared a lot about us, but he didn’t show it as much. You just know it. You don’t know it right away but when you grow up and get older you know how much he cares.

“It’s different now that my dad’s not around. I have to take care of my family, worry about family matters a lot more. You have to worry about a lot of things. You don’t just do this and that anymore.”

Yee says, “The thing about my mom is, she’s my mother and she cares for every one of us. She cares about everybody’s safety. She wants to know where everybody is all the time. She gets very worried when you don’t tell her. She doesn’t know where you’re going, for what, and she’s scared. She probably wouldn’t be that worried if we were living out in the country. Like when I had that car accident. I called her up and said I was in an accident. She almost went into shock. I don’t remember exactly what she said, but she was just glad I was OK.”

Yee’s oldest brother Sia has taken over the role of family head. Sia lives two or three doors down from Yee. He has six children of his own and is a bilingual aide in the Minneapolis Schools. Yee looks up to him and respects his concern for the family. Sia has high expectations of Yee, but they go unspoken. Yee says, “Sia is my role model. He sets the example and tells me what to do.”

Yee is closer in age to his brothers Pao and Chan and his sister Koua. They have the common experience of being raised in America and educated in American schools, so they can relate well to each other. Do Yee’s younger brothers listen to him? “Yes, but not as much as I listen to my older brothers. That bothers me. They’re growing up here. They’re free. They can do whatever they want.”

Yee feels perhaps closest to his youngest brother, Doua. He says, “Everybody relates to him because he’s the youngest.” Like all the Chang children, Doua was born in Laos. On the way out of Laos, he crossed the Mekong River clinging to his mother’s back as she swam. They almost lost him.
One day at a two-day Hmong soccer tournament, Yee met a pretty girl, Chia Vang. She and her cousin played softball with Yee and his friends. After that, they sat on the grass and talked.

At the end of the day they were playing touch football when another Hmong girl whom Chia did not know came up to her and said to her, “Are you and Yee going out together?”

Yee said, “She’s just a friend.” But the other girl didn’t seem to see it that way.

Next day at the soccer tournament, Chia sort of avoided Yee. She figured if Yee had a girlfriend, she didn’t want to make any trouble between Yee and the girl. Shortly after that, Yee went away to Camp Ajawah for the summer. All through the summer, the camp absorbed most of Yee’s time and energy. But still he thought about Chia. He wrote to her several times and she wrote back. She sent him some pictures. He talked to her a couple of times on the telephone. But they didn’t see each other until camp was over in late August.

It was clear to Yee that if he was really going to get to know Chia, he would have to do so in the appropriate Hmong way. So he called her on the telephone and asked if he could come over to her house and pay a visit. She said sure.

When he got there, she and her parents were there, waiting for him. He found to his relief that the parents were gracious and friendly. They talked about all the correct things. They talked about Laos and where each family was from. They found out that there were mutual friends of the two families, and so Yee and Chia’s family had a little in common. Yee and Chia talked. It was their first real meeting and Yee thought it had gone well. Chia’s parents seemed to like him, and he had managed to show poise and confidence.

Yee saw Chia again on several occasions, always in the correct way. He also saw her at Hmong celebrations and athletic contests. Chia was on her school soccer team, and sometimes Yee would come to watch the games. Then he would drive her home. They were becoming good friends.

Was Chia Yee’s girlfriend? Traditionally, Hmong boys don’t really have girlfriends. At seventeen, Yee was not too young to marry by Hmong standards. And as for Chia, many, if not most Hmong girls are married by the time they graduate from high school. Chia was sixteen. The two of them started feeling pressure from their families—unspoken but palpable. But marriage was unthinkable for Yee. He had ambitions for education and a career and for doing something for his family.

And so a dilemma was forced upon him: Should he be an American kid with a girl friend, risking the subtle disapproval of both families; or should he be a proper Hmong young man and forget about Chia?
When the time came for Yee's high school senior prom, Yee decided to act. The prom was part of any American's normal high school experience. Yee wasn't all that clear about what to expect at a prom, but he didn't want to miss it. So he asked Chia to be his date. She hesitated. She wanted to go with him, but she wasn't sure her family would approve.

So Yee visited Chia's parents, as he had already done several times, laying the groundwork for just such an encounter as this. He explained to them what a prom was. It was part of the high school program, part of his education. He would bring Chia back home by midnight.

The parents listened and gave their consent. Yee borrowed a relative's flashy sports car, rented a tux, and took Chia to the prom. The two of them had a great time. But Yee was left wondering whether he hadn't taken advantage of the ignorance of Chia's parents. Hadn't he betrayed his Hmong heritage, just a little? Or was the whole prom experience a justifiable compromise, a necessity if he was to thrive in America? It was a question he couldn't answer.

Yee says, "One of the worst problems for a Hmong kid is being in a situation where you have to decide if you're going to respond as a Hmong or as an American. It happens all the time. An American kid just goes to the prom and thinks nothing of it. But for me it's almost impossible. I have to work everything out. And then I still don't know if I did the right thing. It's like that in almost every situation. I have to decide who I am. When I'm at school, I'm an American. But as soon as I walk in the door at home, I'm in a different world. If one of my uncles happens to be there, how am I supposed to address him? If I talk to him in respectful terms, calling him 'uncle,' that might be the right thing to do. Or it might not. In Laos it would be right, but this is America. How should a Hmong kid behave in America? Maybe I should just call my uncle by his name, like he's my equal. He might accept that and feel it's OK. Or he might feel bad that I didn't show respect. He might resent it but he feels there's nothing he can do about it because this is America, so he has to accept it. But he feels bad. And I feel bad."

Chia Vang says, "What do I like about Yee? Well, he's taller than most Hmong guys," and she laughs. She goes on, "What I really like about him is, he knows what he wants and he goes after it. He's not afraid to dream. He doesn't say, 'I can't do it,' he says, 'I'll try.'

"And he never puts anyone down. He's just a nice guy. He can get along with just anybody. We had a get-together at my house. I took Yee with me. It was just a bunch of girls. Yee was the only guy, but he didn't feel uncomfortable at all. I thought he was going to be uncomfortable, but actually he was the center of attention.

"One thing is, I sort of have a bad temper. But what I like is, he doesn't get mad with me. And when I get mad with him, after a while I think, why am I mad?"
Chia Vang escaped from Laos with her family when she was just a little girl, but she still remembers it. They crossed the Mekong River to Thailand in a small boat. When they reached the Thailand shore, a Thai woman offered to buy Chia from her parents for cash. Chia says she doesn't know whether to laugh or to cry when she thinks about that incident.

Chia says, “I'm hoping to go to law school some day. Most Hmong girls prefer to be teachers if they have a career at all, but I'm just a little weird. If I were in Laos right now, I'd be somebody's fifth wife and have three or four kids. A lot of Hmong girls have really low self-esteem. They think, 'My life is no big deal.' They don't care. I know a senior at my high school. She just married this Hmong guy who's a junior at the university. She thought it was a way out, a way to get away from family obligations. But she's not happy. She still can't do any of the things she wanted to. She doesn't go to parties or dances or anything. When you marry, a wife isn't supposed to do that.”

When Chia decided to be a lawyer, she got a lot of opposition from Hmong school officials and clan members. She listed to some long lectures from them. They told her, “Just don’t do it. It’s no good for you. Just go to the ‘U’ and become a teacher.”

Chia says, “I told them that’s not what I want, but it seems what I want doesn't matter. That’s where Yee’s been good to me. He says, ‘Chia, you can choose. You can choose the people to support you. You don’t have to listen to them.’”

When Yee Chang comes home from college on weekends, as he does frequently, he is apt to find five or six of his friends and cousins hanging around his house—his buddies, his “gang.” They like to talk among themselves and the talk turns often to the future. Yee seems to be the informal guide and counselor for this group. His friends look up to him with great respect. All of them are at some point in their educational careers. All are struggling. Some are floundering. They lean on Yee for support. Yee’s friend Tsa says of him, “Yee really understands me when I talk to him. Yee can talk to me about anything. He’s really open and he can relate to you really well, so it’s easy to talk to Yee. We talk about life here and how hard it is to live here and stuff like that. Yee usually doesn’t talk about it, he usually explains it and gives you things to think about. And it’s true, after he says it, you think about it and it’s true.”

Yee takes the problems of his friends seriously. He takes them upon himself and they become his worries, too. There is a lot of pressure on these Hmong teenagers—from family, from clan, from school. Sometimes the pressure is overwhelming. Once a boy broke down and cried on Yee’s shoulder.

Yee says, “I just say what it’s like for me, and that seems to help. Sometimes it’s hard for me to listen. I’m struggling myself. Sometimes after a hard weekend I go back to school with a feeling of relief.”
There is pressure on Hmong youngsters. Take the case of Tou. The only son in his family, Tou is expected to marry and have children to carry on the family in a culture where the spirits of the dead depend on the living. Yet Tou says, "I have no taste at all for Hmong women. But when I showed my mother a picture of my American girl friend, she cried. She said, 'If you marry an American girl, you're no longer my son.' So the elders told me to get rid of the American girl friend. I broke up with her, but she wants me back. I told her no, it'll just make us both unhappy if we keep seeing each other."

Chue's father has two wives. Chue is the son of the second, and less important, wife. He doesn't see much of his father. Chue is a good mechanic and can fix anything from a car to a wrist watch. He wants to get an education, but he has no money. His mother wants to move the family to Detroit to be close to relatives. But this would take Chue away from his only support system, his Hmong peers.

Xoua came to this country with his older brother about ten years ago. He grew up pretty much on his own. He had fun. America was a blast. But he missed his parents, who were still in a camp in Thailand. Then last year his parents suddenly arrived from Thailand. Xoua was beside himself with joy at seeing them again. But he found it hard to adjust to being a good, dutiful son after running around free for so long. "I feel like a Hmong, but I'm a changing Hmong. You have to adjust to both cultures." Xoua goes on, "I don't think about my future. There's nothing to think about. Sometimes I think I should have been dead instead of coming here because I have to struggle—not just for me, but for my parents. They're depending on me. And I just have to struggle. Sometimes I think I'd be better off dead.

"Remember that incident with those two Hmong kids who stole that care and they ended up dead, killed by a policeman? With my clan it's like that, too. Sometimes I come home real late. And they think that, since I'm out, I'm doing something bad. I need support from my clan, but they don't give me that support.

"In my whole clan, I'm the only kid that's in college right now. Why not make it through and see what they think of you? Because right now they think of me as being a real bad, good-for-nothing kid. And I want to succeed and see what they think of me when I finish college, see if they give me any respect.

"Hmong elders think you should be just like them. And it's nice to be like them, too, but this is a changing world and you have to change along with it. I think I'm more modern. The only thing they know is, we go and we farm, we get all our stuff and we eat. We repeat the whole process every single year. But here, you don't have an education, you don't get a job. You still get a job, but you don't get a good job. It's not going to be enough to support you and you're not going to make it. It's really hard."
Xoua finds himself in an extremely precarious and ambivalent situation in his clan. “I know a little about Hmong customs and that’s about it. I know how to respect those who are older than I am. I know how to participate in a gathering so that I’m there and they can look up to me, ask me things, just simple questions about America that they don’t know. If I’m there, then they’ll ask me.”

Tsa managed to win a scholarship to a private prep school. The work there was quite advanced, and Tsa was in over his depth. Besides, he had eight younger brothers and sisters, and he was expected to take a major part in caring for them and rearing them, as well as doing cooking and house chores. And there were traditional Hmong clan activities to attend to. His parents didn’t seem to appreciate how difficult it was for him to keep up both with his studies and his family responsibilities. Sometimes he couldn’t get a ride to school so he had to miss a day. He was so far behind that he had to drop out. He enrolled in a public school but he couldn’t catch on there either and so he started skipping school. He still wants to get a good education and maybe he can start over from scratch next year. But right now he is doing nothing.

Tsa says, “It’s hard for kids born in Laos and growing up here. Because you have to face two cultures, yours and the one around you. And it gets harder as you grow up because you have to make a decision what your goals are, or what you want. My dad, he wants me to know all this cultural stuff, but I have to go to school and learn all those things to survive in the other society. And therefore I’m not sure which is best for me, so I’m just caught in the middle.”

Yee says, “A lot of my friends are depressed because they can’t get along with their father. I always end up talking to them about my father because losing your father is the worst thing that can happen. But these guys have fathers. So I end up talking to them about how I would have related to my father if he was still alive. It’s sort of wishful thinking, I guess. And they start realizing what their own problems are, why they’re not getting along with their fathers. They just don’t want to deal with their father because he tells them to do so many things. But the kid wants to do what he wants. He wants to play soccer, go to this school instead of that one. He wants to go out with his friends. But he can’t

“I don’t tell him anything, I just tell him what I would do. I would have to adjust my schedule, put family first, because that meant more to my father. You’d better listen to your dad. If you don’t he’ll get mad at you and then you’ll have problems. So the kid starts to realize the situation, what he can do and can’t do. There’s too much pressure everywhere. So he ends up not doing anything. He can’t really go in one direction or the other. I think about that a lot. I think of how, no matter what, you’ve got to have some way, somehow. There’s no good in failing. The hole just gets deeper, I guess, if you just sit and don’t do anything. And it’ll be harder to get out.”
Yee Chang is a freshman in college. He enjoys learning and experiencing new things. He likes to write and he gets particular satisfaction out of his art classes. As for a career, he would like to be a newspaper reporter, or perhaps a counselor and advocate for Hmong people. But he is well aware that his educational and career options may be severely limited. He is part of the first generation of his clan to receive higher education. What will he do with his education? Whatever he does, it will not just be whatever pleases him. Clan members will say to him, “You went to college for four years with our encouragement and support: now what do you have to show for it?” His career will have to carry income and prestige. He will be expected to pull his family out of poverty. He is being counted on as a role model for the youth of the entire clan. Engineering and medicine would be acceptable options, but Yee has no taste for them. Law would seem more in his line. But journalism or social work may not be high enough on the scale of prestige or income.

Yee says, “It’s hard to be a Hmong kid in America because you live in the American culture and you’re the first generation of Hmong and you have to deal with both cultures at the same time. The hardest thing about adapting to America was going to college and being away from the family. In the Hmong family everybody stays together and it’s hard for a member to be separated. It’s easier now. My mom is beginning to understand. She realizes the purpose of education.

“It’s good for me personally to go away to college because I have a lot of friends at home and being away from my friends I can concentrate more. I like living at college. I like the college life. You live in a dormitory. There are always a lot of activities and you make new friends.

“If I’m still in Laos, I’m probably a farmer working in the fields. Maybe I’d have a family by now. I think I’m glad I’m here.”

Yee Chang is what I call an American-Hmong. In my experience, there are three kinds of Hmong young people. I call them the American-Hmongs, the Hmong-Americans, and the Rebels. The American-Hmongs have resolved to make it in America in the American way, with the American definition of success. But still they are resolved to be good Hmongs and to turn any success they may achieve to the support of their families. They are oriented toward education and career. They are willing to move out of the home and to another city to pursue their education. They may adopt an American lifestyle outside the home. They may have to give up some traditional Hmong activities for lack of time or energy. But always the intention is to come back and to return any benefits earned to their elders and their families. They consider themselves to be Hmong first and American second.

Of the three types, the American-Hmong certainly feels the most pressure. His elders look to him for future support. They call on him to interpret for them the American culture and to be the intermediary with American neighbors, school personnel, health-care officials, police. He
looks over the mail and explains what of it is junk and what is important. His role is fraught with ambivalence. Sometimes he is treated as a boy who needs to be told how to behave, especially when Hmong cultural mores are the subject. But at other times, his advice is sought out, because he best knows the American culture, with all of its incomprehensible demands. The elders want him to sacrifice and to study hard and to learn to do things the American way, but at the same time they want him to be a good Hmong, to show deference to his elders, to take family responsibilities seriously. They do not always understand that as a student he may not be fully able to make an economic contribution, or to give time to help with child-rearing or participation in family activities or rituals. The American-Hmong’s peer group may become extremely important to him, because only they can understand the pressure on him. He may feel obligated toward his younger brothers and sisters. Since his parents may have no understanding of the educational system, he may become the supervisor of his siblings’ education. He sees that they do their homework and that they hold to the directions put out by the school. He knows when the younger brothers and sisters are trying to get away with something, and so he becomes in many ways their unofficial guardian.

If the American-Hmong youth is under great pressure from many directions, he also has many support systems, because each group that places a demand on him is also giving him its support. This tends to give him a tremendous sense of security and confidence.

The Hmong-Americans, in contrast to the American-Hmongs, have decided to make it in America in the traditional Hmong way. This may mean marrying early and having children. It may mean participating fully in Hmong traditions, ceremonies and activities. It may mean dropping out of school to get a job or to take care of elders or younger siblings. It probably means postponing indefinitely one’s educational dreams.

With many children, and with an education which may be inadequate to provide him with significant income-earning employment, the Hmong-American finds it very difficult to hang onto even the minimum essentials required for the security and well-being of his family. He may have to hold down two jobs, and work six or even seven days a week. His wife and children are cooped up in a tiny inner-city apartment, afraid to open the door to strangers. And yet these frustrations may be more than compensated for by the satisfaction and joys of having his own home, a loving wife and children. And there is always the support of the larger family and clan to lean on when things get really tough.

The third type of Hmong young person is the Rebel. He has given up on the American dream of success as well as the Hmong standard of being a good son or daughter. He has turned his back on his culture as well as on his elders and their aspirations for him. Instead he has
grasped onto a caricature of American culture which is attractive to him. He has fallen in love with popular culture—the heavy metal music, the fast cars, the flashy, outrageous dress, the easy moral standards. In some cases he is starting to find himself in trouble with the police. He has cut himself off from all support systems, except perhaps the company of other Rebels. He has gone bad, in Hmong terms, and no one in the Hmong community knows what to do with him.

Every Hmong youth is a mix of all three of these types, and whichever type predominates in any one individual may be due at least partly to luck or circumstance.

Yee Chang says, "The biggest problem I have right now is music." Yee is fascinated by the popular culture. I once said to him, "Yee, you're more American than I am," at which he laughed and responded, "You're not American, Dave."

Yee is drawn by the siren-song of popular music. He says, "When I listen to it, I don't want to do anything else. I just want to do what the music tells me to do."

Yee Chang had been away at college for about two and a half months when I called him on the telephone. It was always good to hear his voice.

"I know a way you can earn a thousand dollars without doing anything," I said. "Are you interested?"

"Sure, tell me about it."

"OK. You just enter the Hmong Teenager of the Year contest at the Hmong New Year party and win."

Yee laughed. "You mean that beauty-contest thing? No way! I don't have any talent, Dave. I can't sing, I can't dance. And I'm already shaking just thinking about it."

"That means you've decided to do it, am I right, Yee?"

He laughed. "No, not really."

But deep down, he wanted to do it. It was the idea of going out and trying.

"I can help you write the speech," I said. "But you'll have to give it in Hmong, so if I help you'll have to translate it into Hmong."

But first Yee would have to talk to his family and see how they felt. He would have to get their permission.

His oldest brother Sia said no, don't do it. It was never the Hmong way to compete and find out who's better than whom. What was the need? Hmong are too gossipy. They will tear someone down if he tries to stand out. The whole family will lose face.

But Yee's second-oldest brother Pao was enthusiastic from the start. He urged Yee to go ahead. It would be a fantastic experience for him. For his talent act, he could learn a Hmong song from his mother. Anyway, it was the tradition for young men to sing lullabies at New
Year’s, but hardly anyone was doing it any more and this could be a way for Yee to get back in touch with his culture.

Yee’s mother was supportive. Whatever Yee wanted to do, that’s what she wanted for him. She had already made him a beautiful Hmong costume to wear. Now she could teach him a Hmong lullaby.

Yee’s two younger brothers and his sister Koua were, of course, enthusiastic, and so Sia was at last won over. Or at least he was willing to stay neutral.

So Yee called me and told me he would enter the contest. He only had two weeks to write and memorize a speech and learn a lullaby. He had never made a speech in Hmong. He had never sung before an audience, let alone in a highly stylized language with which he was not very familiar. But after attending a meeting with the other contestants, he called me again and said, “I think I have a chance.”

I mailed in a check for fifty dollars and a registration form listing Boy Scout Troop 100 as his sponsor. Then I drove over to his house to help him with the speech. He sat at his computer and typed it out in English. I mostly watched and gave encouragement. His theme was “Being Hmong.” In it he talked about a time half a year before when he and I travelled to Thailand to visit the refugee camps where he had lived for a time as a little boy. He walked into the camp unannounced and met his buddies from ten years before. He was free, growing, learning, thriving. But for them, time had stopped. For ten years they had been waiting, hanging around the camp, living in limbo. But they welcomed him like a brother and treated him like a king. They asked him about life in America. And Yee realized that in spite of all the differences, he was one of them, a Hmong kid who had been a little more fortunate than they, but deep down no different at all. He resolved to make good use of his opportunity and turn it to the benefit of all his clan and people. That was how Yee’s speech went. His brother Sia helped him translate it, and Pao worked with him until he had it memorized. According to Yee, “Pao suffered as much as I did. He was just exhausted. He wanted it just right.”

Later, one evening, I took Yee over to Westminster Church with its large sanctuary. He stood at the pulpit, while I went way up into the far balcony to listen. He sang the song his mother was teaching him. I listened transfixed as his strong young voice rose and filled the empty room. It was a demanding tune, requiring an enormous voice range. But he sang it with confidence and I marveled at its bizarre cadences and rhythms, utterly strange and foreign to me., especially in this place I looked around the empty sanctuary, with its orderly, wooden pews and its Christian symbols everywhere visible. Surely nothing like this has ever been heard in this place before, I thought. How fortunate I am to be sitting here, a part of this.

When the contest came, Yee was ready for it. Need I say that he swept every event with style and confidence? I was there, in the front row, to cheer him on. So were his friends and family.
A few days after his triumph, his family held a ceremony of blessing for him. He asked me to come. When I got there, the small livingroom was already crowded with Chang elders and friends. Sia had put two large hand-lettered signs on the wall. One of them said, “Happy New Year” in the Hmong language. The other said “Yim Tsaab tub zoo nraug 1989-1990” (“Yee Chang, our handsome young man, 1989-1990”). I found that I was to be a special guest. A place had been made for me at the elders’ table and just before the meal, Yee appeared and made a little speech. It was addressed to me. He thanked me for helping him on the New Year and on other occasions. Then he said that from now on, I should consider myself to be a part of the Chang clan.

Overwhelmed, I stood up to reply. Yee’s cousin, True Chang, stood next to me to translate my words. I hardly knew what to say, but I must have thanked him for sharing so much with me, told him I admired his drive and ambition, his willingness to strive hard at a time when everyone else was just having fun. I ended by saying something like, “If I ever have a son of my own, I want him to be just like you. You know I look up to you.” Then I sat down and True Chang translated my words into Hmong.

Is there anything that individual Americans can do for Hmong teenagers? Yes, of course, and it’s simple: every Hmong kid needs an American friend. Or, think of it the other way around: every American needs a Hmong friend. I once heard it said that if a Hmong person is your friend he will die for you. I believe it.

A few weeks after the funeral of Yee Chang’s father, I telephoned him. “Yee, I want to talk to you,” I said. “Can I come over to your place and talk?”

“What about?” he said.

“Oh, just about how you’re doing. If everything’s OK and so on. I think about you and worry about you. It’s more for me than you, I guess, that I want to see you.”

“OK, but I have a lot of homework, Dave. I missed so many days.”

“Bring it along. I’ll look at it. Maybe I can help with some of it.”

I picked him up and took him to a little restaurant where we sat and talked. I had worked out in my mind some open-ended questions to ask him just to get the conversation going. I can only remember one of the questions. It was, “When you have children of your own, how will you raise them differently from the way you were raised?”

He answered, “I won’t let them wander so much.”

Yee talked about his dad, what an important factor he had been in his life. His father had stood between him and all the destructive forces that had been zeroing in on the family ever since Yee could remember. His dad had protected him from the Communists in Laos, had gotten him safely across the Mekong River into Thailand, and when Yee had almost died of disease in a refugee camp, his dad was there with
him in the crowded camp hospital to see him back to health again. Then
he had stood as Yee’s protection against the menacing, unknown factor
of America. And he had stood between Yee and the rest of the clan. Now
he was gone. Yee felt the outside world closing in on him, the clan making
claims on him.

As Yee spoke, he didn’t look at me. He had a faraway look in his
eyes. I could see he was not happy, that his sparkle was gone. He must
have talked for an hour or more. At the end of it, I thanked him for talking
to me and apologized for taking so much of his time and for dragging all
these unhappy thoughts out of him. He just said, “No, I was glad to get
it off my chest.” I took him home and we worked on his homework. I
asked him if there was anything I could do for him. He shook his head.
“Just be there,” he said. “Just be around.”

Sometimes, when I’m in a difficult predicament where there’s no
obvious way out, I think, “Now how would Yee handle this?” At times I
used to feel sorry for myself because I had no younger brother or son of
my own. But now I do.
Reducing Teenage Childbearing in the Hmong Community: First Year Results

Sharon Rolnick

The high incidence of teenage pregnancy and parenting for Hmong girls is culturally rooted in century-old traditions and values. Traditionally the Hmong marry during their teens with childbirth closely following. Within the Hmong's native community, such practices do not necessarily pose problems for the future of the teens involved. Here in America, however, consequences of early marriage and childbearing are numerous, as those who do not complete their education severely minimize their opportunities for the future. The Southeast Asian Community leaders in St. Paul, Minnesota, have come to recognize the ramifications of maintaining these traditions within the American culture. They were disturbed with 1980s data indicating that many Hmong girls were not completing their high school education. They were also concerned that in the special program designed for pregnant high school girls, 40 percent were Southeast Asian. These leaders have concluded that they must find ways to discourage the practice of early marriage and childbearing. To this end, Lao Family Community has undertaken a multi-faceted program to reduce the rate of teenage pregnancy within their community. The program, which will be in effect for three years, has just completed year one.

Program Components

The Lao Family Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Project has three major components directed toward 1) junior high school girls, 2) high school students, and 3) parents. The junior high school support groups are designed to help Hmong girls in grades 6-8 better understand issues of early marriage and pregnancy, and the importance of education in the American society. The groups also work to develop decision-making skills, to assist the girls in making choices and coping within two cultures with differing values. The support groups are offered throughout the year in ten week sessions. The high school students are targeted to see Lao Family counselors and to use the school-based clinics for general health needs as well as for family planning and prenatal care. The parent groups are designed to assist Hmong parents better understand the limitations that early marriage and pregnancy place on the personal development of their children in America and the importance of education to their children's future (girls as well as boys). The group also attempts
to help the parents adjust to customs that differ greatly between countries (e.g., dating, parties) and stresses the need to communicate with their children regarding the issues. Parent groups are scheduled for six sessions.

**Program Participation**

A total of 138 students from thirteen junior high schools and 203 students from eight high school programs participated in the program. Seventy-five parents were recruited through neighborhood affiliations with Lao Family Community. These numbers approached targeted projections.

**Obtaining Information on the Program**

To obtain data on the various program components, several surveys were developed. Junior high and parent groups completed questionnaires preceding and following their support group sessions in order to document changes over time. For high school students, who may have had only one interaction with the counselor, records were kept on issues discussed during the session. In addition, 75 of the high school students seen were selected at random for a more in-depth telephone interview. Junior high school students were surveyed on self-esteem and how they view their interaction with their parents. All participants in the program were surveyed on attitudes toward education, marriage, child-bearing, birth control, and parent-child communication.

**Background on the Hmong Community**

The Hmong involved in this program came to the United States from Laos. Most arrived in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Historically, the population made their livelihood by farming in the mountains of China and Southeast Asia. With the war in Laos, however, it became increasingly impossible to maintain stable fields. Many were forced to relocate, sometimes rather abruptly [see case history]. In fact, after the collapse of the Royal Lao Government, the new leadership's policy was quite anti-American. Any Hmong village considered pro-American was to be burned, the animals slaughtered and the people chased down and killed. To escape, many fled to surrounding jungles. The survivors ultimately made their way to relocation camps.

It was in these camps that the concept of formal education grew in popularity. Traditionally, there was no strong cultural need to read or write. Customs were passed orally from generation to generation. Until 1939 there were no local schools at all for the Hmong to attend. When some schooling became available, opportunity to attend remained quite limited. Relatively few young men whose families could afford to have them move to more urban areas received the formal education. Most families lived too far without transportation and without the ability
to allow their children to leave their farming responsibilities. Even today older people and women over age twenty remain illiterate.

With the growth of refugee camps, which developed into fair-sized towns, schools were established. The increased availability of formal instruction altered attitudes about education. Learning the basics of reading and writing became viewed as beneficial to improve the individual and to help with adjustment to their new lives. Attitudes toward marriage postponement, childbearing and women’s roles, however, were far less affected. In Laos, women marry early, have several children and accept the strong patrilineal clan system which serves as the primary integrating factor in the Hmong culture. Promoting decision-making skills for females, postponement of marriage and family, and the idea of educating young people beyond basic skills remain quite foreign to this population. This makes the program being conducted particularly ambitious.

The following are results from year one.

**Attitudes Toward Education**

The most encouraging area of the study was on attitude toward education. Its importance is clearly evident. All parents rate education as “very important” to their children’s future. The students also ranked education as a priority. Asked about plans for future education, 63 percent of junior high students and 86 percent of high school students reported they plan to obtain education beyond high school. Further, when asked to name one goal they have for themselves, 45 percent of the junior high students and 75 percent of the high school students gave responses that were education related. Other goals stated by students included to work (12%), to be successful (8%) and to wait before getting married (5%).

**Attitudes Toward Marriage and Childbearing**

Questions about marriage and family showed some change from baseline to post-session survey with the junior high school students. After the sessions, these students appeared to be more aware of the American society’s preference to delay marriage and family beyond the teenage years. Whereas in the baseline survey 54 percent of junior high school girls selected ages below 20 as the best age for marriage, the percentage had declined to 39 percent following the sessions.

Comparisons of the best ages to marry among junior high students, high school students and parents can be found in Figure 1. Parent responses were clearly toward the younger ages. Although no parent reported age 16 or under as the best age to marry, over 60 percent felt marriage before age 21 was preferred. Only 39 percent of junior high students selected ages under 21 as best to marry and only 27 percent of those in high school did so.
Regarding childbearing, the age range where the biggest shift was noted in junior high students was between the ages of 23 and 28. In the baseline survey 25 percent of the students indicated they would probably have a child between 23 and 28 years of age. Following the sessions that percentage had increased to 39 percent. Fifty-nine percent of high school students selected that age range. Parents, who had selected earlier ages to marry also showed a preference to childbearing in the late teens and early twenties.

**Attitudes Toward Birth Control**

The area of birth control is one of some discomfort for this population. Even after attending the sessions, several of the junior high school students were unsure of their attitudes toward birth control. High school students indicated less ambivalence about birth control but were not likely to use it. Of the 75 students interviewed following their meeting with Lao Family counselors, only two reported having used any form of birth control. Both of these students had used condoms. Parents also found this an area of discomfort. Asked if they felt their children should use birth control at times they did not wish to become pregnant, 62 percent were unsure. Even when asked if they would like more information on birth control for themselves, 30 percent did not know. This is not a topic that is easily discussed.

**Junior High Student Responses to Self-Esteem Questions**

An examination of items on self-esteem found the junior high school girls somewhat modest. One-third answered “I don’t know” when asked if they were a “good person,” or “able to do things as well as others.” Of the five items asked, two showed shifts from data collected at baseline. Following the support group sessions 72 percent of those responding claimed they could speak up for themselves, as compared to 61 percent at baseline. However, 55 percent of the post-session respondents claimed they feel they can make their own decisions, whereas 69 percent had answered “yes” to that item at the baseline survey.

**Interaction With Parents**

Junior high students overwhelmingly reported that their parents interacted with them in positive ways “very often” or “sometimes” (Figure Two) and responses were consistent both pre and post session. Sixty percent of the students indicated that their parents encouraged them to do their best “very often” and approximately one-third reported parents often “do all they can to help their children” and “give reasons when they ask their child to do or not do something.” In only one area did fewer than 85 percent of the students respond with an indication of support from
Figure 1: Best Age to Marry
Responses from Junior High Students, High School Students and Parents

* Junior high and parent responses reflect post-session data.
Figure 2:
Junior High Students' Perception of Interaction With Parents

How Often Do You Feel Your Parents...

give your reasons when they ask you to do or not do something?

trust you to make good decisions?

respect your opinion of things?

let you know they appreciate what you try to accomplish?

encourage you to do your best?

are direct and clear when you talk?

are too strict?

are doing all they can to help you?

are around when you need them?

listen to your concerns?

0.00%  20.00%  40.00%  60.00%  80.00%

Very Often  Sometimes  Never  No Data
parents. This was the item asking if parents “trust you to make good decisions.” While this was the item with the fewest students indicating that parents did this “very often” or “sometimes,” even here, 83 percent reported parental support.

**Parent-Child Communication**

Parent responses on their ability to communicate with their children on various topics generally reflected the responses of the students. All groups indicated good communication on school, friends, and the future. Weak communication was indicated by all groups on sex and birth control. Discrepancies in perceived ability for communication were found on topics of feelings and dating. High school students were more likely to indicate an ability to talk to their parents about their feelings (95%) than were parents (55%). Junior high students felt the least able to discuss feelings with parents (31%). Parents felt more able to discuss the topic of dating with their children than did the students (70% vs. 23-26%).

Figure 3 presents comparisons of the three groups on their view of parent-child communication of various topics.

**Case History**

Mao (who may change her name to Mckenzie), is 24 years old, unmarried, and is one of the counselors for the junior high school component of the project. Like many of the Hmong, she was forced out of her village and fled to the jungle with her family. The family lived in hiding for over a year. At age 15, Mao moved to the United States. First she moved to Illinois, where one relative was living, and then her family came to Minneapolis to join her uncle. Her life while in Laos was fairly typical. Mao was one of ten children. From age five, she helped watch over her younger brothers and sisters, as her parents worked on their farm raising animals and growing rice. When she arrived in the United States she had not formal education and had to learn her "ABCs."

Yet Mao has adapted quickly. She completed high school and is currently enrolled in a technical college. While she may "marry one day," she is not yet ready to make that decision. When asked what she feels is the biggest difference between life in Laos and life in the United States, Mao is quick to point out that in the United States there is greater freedom. She feels her parents have less direct control over her life, although she is sensitive to communicate her choices to them. She also feels she has more choices to direct her own future without facing as many cultural pressures. Mao recognizes that what is right for one person, however, may not be the choice of another. For example, her sister married at age 14, dropped out of school, and now has three children. This may be fine for her sister, but not for Mao. Mao is excited
Figure 3: Comparison Among Junior High School, High School, and Parent Group: Reported Ability to Communicate on Various Topics
about her ability to pursue further education. She would like to become a social worker or work in some aspect of human services. Mao is also very proud to serve as an example for the junior high girls in the groups she leads.

**Summary**

Participants in the Lao Family program have been quite positive about the sessions. Parents have appreciated the ability to talk about their concerns regarding their children. They are especially concerned about dating, parties and gangs. The former two areas are so different from appropriate courtship patterns in their native country that United States customs are difficult to accept. The issue of gangs is one of great confusion and concern for the parents. Having an arena for discussion has been beneficial.

The students have also expressed benefits from their participation. Like the parents, the high school students have a need to discuss customs that vary between cultures. They express most interest in learning to better communicate with their parents about customs like dating. They are also pleased with the advice about education they have received from their counselors.

Junior high students, who have had the most extensive component of the program, have indicated several areas where the group support sessions have been beneficial. They have appreciated the ability to share their thoughts and concerns with others. They have found the discussions on the importance of education and the postponement of marriage and family important. For many of these young students, the support group discussions have given an accurate and realistic portrayal of the responsibilities one faces with early childbearing. Hearing this message from those within their own culture, rather than from Americans, has greater impact. It is hoped that such information will serve to encourage them to continue their education and to postpone marriage and family.

**References**


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*I would like to thank the following Lao Family Staff who have worked on this project: Ai Lee, Mao Yang, Mai Yang, Geu Vu, Pao Vang, Yong Xiong, Koua Moua, Katherine Cohen, Lynne Batzlie and Diana Rankin.*
The Education of Hmong Women

Mao Yang

Hmong Women: High School Survey

General Information
The Hmong women who replied ranged in age from 15 to 22 years. Of this total 70.7 percent of the women were single, and 29.3 percent were married.

Education
There were a large number of students who started school in the U.S. at the level of ninth and tenth grade, as well as first and second grade.

High School Classification
Students were to indicate the year of school they were in: 21.3 percent were freshmen; 28 percent were sophomores; 26.7 percent were juniors; 24 percent were seniors.

Plans for the Next Four Years
A very high percentage of the young women have chosen to "continue on to college/vocational school," or at least "graduate from high school." Marriage received the lowest percentage. Perhaps with the opportunities that are available to them, they are breaking away from tradition—Hmong women usually marry between the ages of 12 and 19 years. These young women have a very strong determination to do something else.

When asked what field of study they would like to pursue, most of them said "business." Asked to indicate other majors (not listed) which they have an interest in, they indicated: History, Word Processing, Secretarial Work, Sociology, Human Resources, and Psychology. Some of the students did not know what their academic interests or majors might be and responded "Don't know." (Students were to check all majors which interested them.)

Family
Most of the students have been in the U.S. for quite a number of years. 20.5 percent of the students said they have been in the U.S. between 1-2 years; 9.6 percent said 2-4 years; 6.8 percent said 5-6 years; 43.8% said 7-8 years; 9.6% said 9-10 years; and, 9.6 percent said 11-12 years.
The survey showed that these students came from families in which the number of children ranged from three to five in the household. In the family birth order, most of the students were middle children: 50 percent were middle children; 24.3 percent of the students were the oldest child; and, 25.7 percent indicated that they were the youngest child.

There is a possibility that in Hmong families, most of the oldest female children married before immigrating to the U.S., or were married during their first few years in the States, so that there are very few of them in high school. There is also a low percentage of youngest children—perhaps those girls are still in elementary or junior high school.

16 percent of the students were from households which had 1-2 children, 45.3 percent were from households which had 3-5 children, 25.3 were from households which had 6-8 children, and 13.3 percent were from households which had 9-11 children.

When asked about the number of relatives in higher education, most indicated that they either had 1-2 male and/or female relatives in higher education. The number of male relatives in higher education is greater than the number of female relatives.

**Education of Parents**

When asked about the education of their parents, most (70.9 percent) indicated that their fathers were more educated than their mothers. However, 29.1 percent said that their mothers were more educated than their fathers. Of the educated parents, 52.5 percent were educated in Laos, and 41 percent were educated in the U.S. 6.6 percent were educated elsewhere.

When asked whether their parents were in school, and, if not, would they like to be, 46.6 percent indicated that their parents are in school, and 53.4 percent said their parents were not in school. 70.6 percent of the students said their parents were not in school but would like to be in school, and 29.4 answered "No" to the question. (Family support is very important to any Hmong family.)

**Education of Friends**

When asked about the different types of friends that they have, 50 percent indicated that they had more Hmong friends than friends of other ethnic backgrounds. Another 4.1 percent said that they have more American friends, and 1.7 percent said they had more friends of other nationalities. 44.6 percent of the students have an "Even" number of friends (Hmong, American, and other nationalities).

The majority of the students indicated that most of their friends (54.1 percent) were attending high school or that most of their friends were in both high school or college (71.9 percent). Only 4.1 percent said that most of their friends were attending college. When asked if most of their friends were planning on continuing on to higher
Figure 1: Years in Which Students Were Born

- 1966 or earlier (1.4%)
- 1967-1968 (11%)
- 1969-1970 (50.7%)
- 1971-1972 (35.6%)
- 1973 or later (1.3%)

Figure 2: Grade Levels at Which Students Entered U.S. Schools

- Kindergarten
- First or Second Grade
- Third or Fourth Grade
- Fifth or Sixth Grade
- Seventh or Eighth Grade
- Ninth or Tenth Grade
- Eleventh or Twelfth Grade
**Figure 3: Plans for the Next Four Years**

- Work: 43%
- Get Married: 9%
- Continue on to College/Vocational School: 61%
- Graduate from High School: 47%

**Figure 4: Interest in Fields of Study**

- Science: 2.20%
- Home Economics: 2.20%
- Education: 13.00%
- Political Science: 2.20%
- Business: 43.50%
- Others: 21.70%
- Multiple Response*: 15.20%

* (History, Word Processing, Secretarial, Sociology, Human Resources, Psychology)
Students were asked to indicate what their plans were after graduation. Most (55.6 percent) said they were planning to get a job; 3.7 percent said they planned to get married; and 29.6 percent said that they plan to do both. 11.1 percent checked “Other,” but did not indicate what they were planning to do.

**Relationships with Men**

Most of the students (73.7 percent) indicated that they were not in any type of intimate relationship at the moment; 56.6 percent said that they were in some type of intimate relationship.¹

When asked when they were planning to get married, 26.4 percent indicated that they plan to marry after high school, 9.4 percent said while in college, 41.5 percent said after college, and 22.6 percent checked “Other.” Some of the students who checked “Other” wrote in “Never get married.” This suggests that women plan to do things other than get married; early marriage now is not as important as it used to be.

Students were asked if they were planning to get married before graduation, and, if so, would they still plan on continuing their education further. They were then asked to explain the reasons for their chosen answer. 90 percent said they would continue on to further their education, 91.8 percent said “Yes,” and 8.2 percent said “No.”

Students were asked to indicate what their plans were after graduation. Most (55.6 percent) said they were planning to get a job; 3.7 percent said they planned to get married; and 29.6 percent said that they plan to do both. 11.1 percent checked “Other,” but did not indicate what they were planning to do.

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¹ Some of the students who checked “Other” wrote in “Never get married.” This suggests that women plan to do things other than get married; early marriage now is not as important as it used to be.
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ducation
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Women

education, and 9.3 percent said they would not. Now that the women have the opportunity to go on to higher education, they apparently won't let marriage stop them. They seemed very serious about their education.

The students who said they will further their education, gave the following reasons for choosing to do so:

- Need more education.
- Learn more about self and to be able to help others.
- Getting married doesn't mean you should stop your education.
- Life would be difficult without an education in the U.S.
- Better career.
- Tired of poverty.
- Want a better future.
- Want a diploma.
- Want a decent job.
- Want to be education.
- School is important.
- Would like to become a business person.
- Want to be able to help husband and do the things that he does.
- Education is the key to life.
- Need education to help family.
- To be able to learn more about America.
- The future is greater than the friendship.
- To be able to help oneself in the future.

These responses indicated that the young women would like to give themselves the opportunity to have a good future. They are tired of the way things are for them today. They want to be educated so they can live the way they want.

Those students who said they would not continue schooling gave the following reasons: they do not feel like going any further than high school; they feel they are not smart enough for college; and, they have financial problems. Some of these women have very low self-esteem.

**Competence in English**

The Hmong high school women were asked if they feel that they as Hmong students still need special assistance because English is not their native language. They responded affirmatively: 74.2 percent answered “Yes” to the question and 25.8 percent answered “No.”

Students were asked if they thought their facility in English would keep them from attending college or vocational school. 49 percent said “Yes,” and 50.7 percent said “No.”

When asked if they felt that they would graduate with a grade point average of 2.5-3.0 or better, 58.6 percent answered “Yes.” 40 percent said they were not sure if they will receive a GPA of 2.5 or better; only 1.4 percent said “No.”
**Education Plans**

Students were asked about the type of school they planned on attending after high school. These women seem to know what they want and where to go after high school. It is encouraging to find that they are planning to further their education.

When the students were asked if they had enough confidence to do "OK" in college, 72.1 percent indicated that they had the confidence and 27.9 percent said they did not.

In the multiple answer question regarding student encouragement and support, students were asked to indicate who encouraged and supported them in continuing their education. Almost 20% of the students indicated that it was "self-encouragement" that did it all. Some said that it was their spouse who encouraged them and a few said that their boyfriends gave them support.

Students were asked what their plans were for the next four years, and were to check all that applied to them. 44.4 percent checked that they were planning to graduate from high school. Quite a few of the students (47 percent) said that they were planning on getting a job after high school. 76.4 percent of the students said they plan on attending vocational school or college. 11 percent did say that they were planning on settling down and starting a family, and 6.9 percent checked “other” as their choice. One student said that she would like to go back to Thailand and learn about the Thai.

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**Figure 6: Types of Schools Students Plan to Attend After High School Graduation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>School Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29%</td>
<td>Community College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39%</td>
<td>Vocational School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12%</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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FIGURE 7: STUDENTS' ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION
"WHO ENCOURAGED AND SUPPORTED YOU IN CONTINUING YOUR EDUCATION?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Others (including self-motivation)</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>59.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kin</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

REASONS OR CAUSES

In a multiple answer, open-ended question, the students were to indicate the reasons or causes for the Hmong women not continuing their education. More than half the women (53.4 percent) felt that it’s the fear of being called an “old maid” if they were over 18 years of age and not married; traditionally women were expected to get married between 16 and 18 years of age. 19.2 percent feel that it could be that traditionally the women were not expected to go into vocational school or college. 16.4 percent of the women felt that it could be that Hmong men are not inclined to marry educated women. 37.2 percent agreed that traditionally, women’s place was in the home serving men and family. 31.5 percent also felt that financial impediments could stand in their way. Just about half (49 percent) felt that being unaware of or not understanding opportunities could be a possible reason. And 12.3 percent checked “Other” as their decision and indicated that family problems, or a low grade point average could be reasons women are not continuing their education.

The women were asked what they thought were the most important reasons Hmong women married very young. 37.8 percent said that their friends were doing it, and they didn't want to be left out.
"Parent arranging or forcing marriage" was agreed upon by 36.5 percent. "Pregnancy before marriage" was also agreed upon by 45.9 percent. 40.5 percent chose "Other" and listed the following reasons:

- Their parents get divorced, and they don't have places to go.
- They fear being refused by men if they are over 18 years old.
- They need someone to be there for them.
- Family problems.
- Tradition.
- Pressure from the person that they are dating.
- When things are rough they need someone there.
- They need someone to care for and need attention.
- Parental pressure.
- They get married to escape from problems at home.
- Their parents are being too strict.
- They feel that it takes too long to attend vocational school or college.
- They are afraid of losing the person that they are in an intimate relationship with.

The young women may marry at a young age because of family problems. Many apparently feel they are pressured by their loved ones, which leads them into planning for their future families.

**Support Organization**

The women were asked if they felt that there was a need to organize a support group in Wisconsin and Minnesota to promote education of Hmong women. They were asked to explain the reasons for their answer. 91.9 percent felt that there was definitely a need to establish such an organization, and 8.1 percent felt that there was not a need. The following were some of the reasons that women felt such an organization was necessary:

- The organization will help increase the number of Hmong women in college.
- The women need encouragement from such an organization.
- The organization can provide information concerning education or decisions to the young women.
- The women need Hmong women leaders to help other women.
- The young women need to know that they are not alone, and that there are others like them.

The young women feel that Hmong college women could serve as role models and offer encouragement to Hmong women who want to continue on to higher education. Since the college women have more influence, they would be able to recruit more Hmong women into colleges
and universities. With the establishment of the organization, information could be provided as needed.

The following were reasons why some of the women feel that the organization is not necessary:

- Some just don't like the idea.
- Many women would not be able to attend because their parents won't trust them.

A related question was asked: If a special organization was established, would they join or support it? Most (88.9 percent) feel that they will support and join the organization. Some (11.1 percent) said they will not support or join such an organization and gave the following reasons:

- They were not smart enough.
- They were not strong enough.
- They are too busy taking care of their family.
- They might if their husband approved.
- People would not understand and they will not agree with the idea.

These women seemed to have a low self concept. They put themselves down before even trying. This suggests that a support organization could perform valuable services for them.

**Recruiting More Women**

The women were asked what would they recommend doing to help recruit more Hmong women into vocational school or college. The following are some of the suggestions that the women gave:

- Provide information about financial aid and child care.
- Have college women talk to the high school women.
- Inform them of what is going on in the U.S.
- Inform them of the advantages of attending some type of institution [of higher learning].
- Have group sessions and meetings concerning education.
- Have activities between the Hmong and American women.
- Have American women talk to the Hmong women.
- Have the Hmong college students come in and talk about college life.
- Have an awareness program in town and given them the opportunity to find out about the advantages of attending college.
- Show film strips illustrating the advantages of going to college.
It seems that in order to recruit more Hmong women into higher education, more dissemination of information is needed throughout the high schools. More information could be provided by having special educational conferences, group sessions, meetings, and arranged visits to colleges and technical schools.

The respondents made some suggestions about what could be done to encourage women to pursue the goal of higher education:

- Talk to their parents and have them encourage their daughters to continue on to higher education.
- Talk to the men and have them encourage their girlfriends to go on to vocational school or college.
- Show them how much education will benefit them in the future.
- Go to "Upward Bound Program" or other programs.
- Teach them how to set their goals and how to go about achieving them.
- To have examples of success: Have the women who have graduated from vocational school or college talk to the women and show what they can do.
- Have surveys show more women are educated despite the harsh environment that they are living in.
- Have programs within the community or high school present the types of jobs they will be eligible for if they attend some type of college.
- Inform them of the opportunities that are available.
- Have special programs for Hmong women, so that they could gain some insight into what college is like or what it is all about.
- Provide information on financial aid.

In order for Hmong women to want to pursue the goal of higher education, they need to be encouraged by others. They would need to be encouraged to attend some type of pre-collegiate programs. The women seemed to need proof that there were other successful Hmong women. They also need to be more informed about the process of continuing on to higher education.

**Comments, Concerns, Questions**

Additional comments, concerns, or questions were given as follows. I have added my own comments in parentheses:

- Let us know the result of the survey.
- Do you feel pressure is one of the reasons for Hmong women getting married so young? (Yes.)
- I feel it's a good good idea to have a support organization. More of our women need to get into higher education.
I am glad you are interested in helping Hmong women. If there is anything I can help with, contact me. (Thank you.)

Hmong women do need education, if we don’t have education, our lives will not improve in the future.

Looking forward to this survey, it will have an impact on the improvement the Hmong women education.

If you could make this happen, I think a lot of other Hmong women would like to join and learn to prove to the men that they can do more than what the men think.

No money to go to college. (Check with your counselor concerning scholarship and financial aid. There is money out there available for school purposes, you have to take the effort and apply for it. Good luck to you.)

For those that want to go to college, but there is not way to get help, financial and transportation etc. (If you really want to go to college, there are financial aid and scholarships available to help you pay for your school costs. Don’t worry about having transportation [car] while you’re in college, you will not need one.)

Inform me more about education. (What exactly would you like to know? Please, write and let me know, because I would be more than willing to help out.)

What can help us in the future? (Personally, I believe that education is one of the keys to a better future. I’m sorry, if I don’t seem to understand your question. Please, write and let me know what exactly do you mean, so I can better assist you.

How to study? (If you are still interested in getting some assistance in “How to study,” write to me and I will try my best to help you.)

I am looking forward to the organization. The organization will help us Hmong women to succeed and bring us status to the U.S., so that Americans won’t call us names in the future.

It’s great that somebody is trying to establish this kind of organization. Because when it comes to education, Hmong women are always looked down upon. This is a great opportunity for the women to help each other and themselves. But, more than that, an opportunity to prove to the men that the women are good and can achieve many more things than just stay home and have kids, clean the house, and cook. You have all my support. (You have a good point, and thank you.)

I have heard that there are a lot of Hmong women that went away with gangs and drop out from high school in California, and I just want to know, why doesn’t anybody in California do something to help the women? (I am
sorry that I am not aware of the problems as I should be, so I can’t really tell you much. I do wish that we could do something to help, but as it is now, it’s not quite possible. Perhaps in the future we could help these women. Remember that it takes one step at a time to get to where we want, so it will be quite awhile before I [we] can really do anything. For the time being, I will see if I can find out more information about the problems and see if I can help in any way.)

- Poor English, need support. (I think it’s great that you know your weaknesses, because by identifying your weaknesses you will be able to improve them. Since you already recognize that you have poor English skills, keep on working on it and you will eventually get better. I feel that the best method of improving one’s English skill is by constantly writing and proofreading after you have your paper written. Have someone else point out one’s errors is really helpful too. Another thing is reading out loud. By reading out loud, one is able to practice speaking, hearing and comprehending, etc. Write to me and we’ll discuss this further if you like.)

- Don’t know what major or course of study to take. (The best advice that I can give is to decide what you would like to do with your life. Decide on something that you would enjoy doing. Feel free to call or write if you would still want further discussion. The best of luck to you.)

Summary

The purpose of the study was to find the causes or reasons for Hmong women not continuing their education: What is holding them back? The High School Survey results show that Hmong women feel reluctant to further their education for three major reasons: 1) Lack of facility in English; 2) Traditional Hmong culture; 3) Unawareness or lack of understanding of the available opportunities.

Lack of English facility appears to be one of the principal reasons for young Hmong women not continuing their education beyond high school. Confidence levels are low; 40 percent of the high school women responded that they are not sure whether or not they will graduate with a decent grade point average (2.5 to 3.0 or better). It seems as though the women tend to have a low concept of themselves. Traditional Hmong women were brought up to have a low self-image, and this is hard to change. Many young women today still have this low self-image, so this makes it very difficult to see things differently. This is one of the major problems. Because English is not their native language, the Hmong women were asked whether they still need special assistance and if it will have any effect on their decisions to attend a vocational school or college. An overwhelming 79 percent feel that they, as Hmong students, still need
special assistance because English is not their native language; only 26 percent feel they do not need assistance. Just about half (49 percent) of the women feel that their English ability will keep them from continuing their education. The other 50 percent feel that this will not affect their decision.

Another major reason that Hmong women are not furthering their education seems to be due to “culture,” that is, Hmong traditions. When the women were asked what they thought were the causes or reasons for Hmong women not continuing their education, they answered as follows: 1) The women fear being called “old maids” if they are over 18 years old; 2) Traditionally, the women are expected to get married between the ages of 16 and 18 years old; 3) Traditionally, women’s place was in the home, serving men and family.

Since these Hmong women are the first generation coming from their native land to the United States it is hard to let the traditions go and adapt to the new society so soon. Perhaps the next generation will change.

A Hmong person’s identity is from his or her family. The expectations of the family, especially the parents, put a lot of pressure on young people. A Hmong person has to be careful of what he or she is doing so the family name (reputation) will not be ruined. A traditional family expects more from the males than the females; therefore, the males have more freedom and rights than the females. Because of this situation, the males are under more pressure, and the females are limited in their options and choices. This creates a very difficult atmosphere for a Hmong person to go against the expectations of the family.

The third major reason why Hmong women are not furthering their education appears to be the lack of understanding or lack of awareness of the opportunities. When the young women were asked what the causes were for Hmong women not continuing their education, 50 percent of the respondents agreed that it was the lack of awareness of opportunities. The young women were also asked for their recommendations in recruiting more Hmong women to vocational school or college. The following suggestions were offered:

- Have panel discussion.
- Show film strips showing the advantages of attending college.
- Talk to the women about the fact of education.
- Inform the women about what education can give in the future.
- Have college students come and talk to the women about their free time, and what college is like.
- Have an awareness program in the community.

If the University of Wisconsin system would set up a special program so that Hmong women from different universities could go to the
high schools and recruit Hmong women, the women that are already in higher education would have a strong positive influence on the high school women. High school Hmong women would be more comfortable in approaching them and asking questions than they would if recruiting were done by non-Hmong or among Hmong men.

Perhaps a special organization could be established state-wide to support Hmong women's education. Many young women need to see and talk to the Hmong women in higher education. Only the Hmong women that have been in their situation can really understand their concerns and answer their questions effectively because they themselves were once there. At the same time, the Hmong women in higher education could inform the young women concerning education.

In conjunction with the reasons discussed above that cause Hmong women not to further their education, the women tend to get married at a very young age. There appear to be three primary reasons for this: 1) Pregnancy before marriage; 2) Escape from problems at home and pressures from their boyfriends (both were listed as second primary reasons); 3) "Peer pressure"—their friends are marrying, and they do not want to be left out.

The respondents were asked to make any comments or list concerns that they might have. Two examples indicate that these women need support from other females: "The women need to be told that they need to know that they are not alone if they are not married yet," and "Women need education, so they will not have to depend on their spouses for the rest of their lives."

Also, it is important to remember that the survey showed that young women have more male relatives than female relatives in higher education. Women do not have as many female role models, and could use a support network which includes Hmong women in higher education. These women need support from other women as well as female role models, so that they will see the advantages and opportunities of furthering their education, instead of getting married at a very young age.

It is very encouraging to see the survey results which show that many high-school Hmong women not only plan to graduate from high school, but wish to continue their education at a college or vocational/technical school. These women are quite determined, and are interested in a wide range of subject areas. In addition, they have support for continuing their education. Not only do they have educated parents and relatives in higher education, but they also have friends in college. For many of the women, men are still important in their lives but education is a higher priority.

A University of Wisconsin state-wide support network organization would function to encourage the positive attitudes that are already present. Many of the high school Hmong women already have the determination to continue on to higher education, all the University of Wisconsin system has to do is send college Hmong women to recruit.
Hmong Women: College Survey

General Information
The women who responded to the survey were all single. Their ages ranged from 19 to 26.

Educational Interests
Most of the women surveyed started school in the U.S. in the elementary grades. 7.1 percent of students started school in kindergarten; 42.9 percent started in third or fourth grade; 21.4 percent started in fifth or sixth grade; 14.3 started in seventh or eighth grade; and another 14.3 percent started school in the U.S. at the ninth or tenth grade.

All of these women received a high school diploma. None of them had received a general education diploma or a vocational degree. They have gone through the formal process of obtaining a high school education. Most were freshmen (42.9 percent); 28.6 percent were sophomores; 28.6 percent were juniors.

Most of the studied Political Science, followed closely by Science. Eight percent were interested in Education, and the 23 percent who chose "Other" were interested in Computer Science, Anthropology, Social Work, and Business.²

Figure 8: Educational Interests of College Women

- Political Science: 39.0%
- Science: 31.0%
- Education: 8.0%
- Other: 23.0%
Family
The majority of the women have been in the U.S. for seven or more years. Only 21.4 percent have been in the U.S. for six years or less, whereas 42.9 percent have been here seven or eight years and 35.7 percent have been here for at least nine or ten years.

In most of the families (64.3 percent) the women had 6-8 brothers and sisters; 14.3 percent had 3-5 siblings; and 21.4 percent claimed twelve or more siblings. Most of the women (64.3 percent) were middle children in family birth order. 28.6 percent were oldest children, and 7.1 percent were youngest children.

Relatives in Higher Education
The women were asked to indicate the number of male and female relatives in higher education:

![Figure 9: Number of Relatives with Higher Education](image)

Education of Parents
All of the women said that of their parents, their fathers were more educated, and that they were educated in Laos. The women were asked if their parents (the ones not presently in school) would be interested in attending school: 76.9 percent said their parents would like to attend school and 23.1 percent said their parents would not like to attend school.
Education of Friends

In a multiple answer, open-ended question, the women were asked to identify the nationality of the majority of their friends. Most of them (92.3 percent) said that they have a fairly even number of American and Hmong friends, and 7.7 percent said they have more Hmong friends. Most of the women’s friends (84.6 percent) were also attending college.

Friendship and Education

In a multiple answer, open-ended question, the women were asked what their plans were for the next four years. 85.7 percent said they plan to graduate from college; 71.4 percent said they will get a job; 28.6 percent said they plan to marry; 64.3 percent said they will continue their education in graduate school; and 14.3 answered “Other,” but did not indicate what their plans were.

About half of the women said that they were in an intimate relationship and the other half said they were not. Most of the women (69.2-5 percent) were planning to get married within the next five years or more. 15.4 percent said they planned to marry in 1-2 years, and another 15.4 percent said they planned to marry in 3-4 years.

Figure 10: Plans for the Next Four Years

- Go to Graduate School: 64.0%
- Get a Job: 71.0%
- Graduate from College: 86.0%
- Get Married: 27.0%
- Other: 14.0%
FUTURE PLANS

All of the unmarried women said that even though they may get married before graduation, they will still continue their education for the following reasons:

• I have to get my education in order to fulfill my dreams and needs.
• Marriage won’t stop my education.
• Getting a degree is very important to me.
• Education is important to my future.
• Education would lead me to a better job and higher salaries.
• Education would give me the ability to help the elderly and children.
• I want to reach my goal.
• Education is my life; I want to compete and get even; I want to know myself and my abilities.
• I want to be considered a valuable person.

Education is very important to these women because it is their dream and goal to receive a college degree. They realize the benefit of a higher education for their futures. Their education would lead them into a good job and good pay. Not only that, but the women would like to prove that they can be as educated as the men, and would like to be considered as valuable people, not “properties.”

EDUCATION

They also feel that because English is not their native language, they will need special assistance. Most of the women (92.9 percent) see themselves graduating with a decent grade point average (2.5 to 3.0 or better). Only 7.1 percent believe they will fail to achieve that GPA. Most of the women (85.7 percent) feel confident enough that they will get a job that is related to their field of study after graduation. 14.3 percent said they do not feel confident about getting such a job.

In a multiple answer, open-ended question, the women were asked to indicate who encourage, influenced or supported them in continuing their education. 64.3 percent said the support and encouragement were from their relatives; 57.1 percent answered that their peers supported them; 71.4 percent said their parents supported them; 71.4 percent said teachers supported them; and 7.1 percent said “Others” supported them, indicating self, American friends and families.

Family support is a big influence on the women’s education. If education what their parents want, then their family will do everything to make sure that marriage, for example, will not interfere with the plan.
Support Organization

All the women feel there is a need to establish a special organization to support the education of Hmong women. They also said they would support such an organization once it is established.

What is Holding the Women Back?

In a multiple answer, open-ended question, the women were asked what they thought were the important causes or reasons for Hmong girls not continuing their education. The fear of being called “old maids” when they reach the age of 18 or over was agreed upon by 85.7 percent of the women. 71.4 percent said that in line with Hmong traditions, women are not expected to go to college or vocational school. 78.6 percent said that traditionally the woman’s place is in the home, serving the man and family. 50 percent think the causes or reasons could be parents’ arranging or forcing marriage. 64.3 percent gave the following reasons:

- Unaware of the opportunity.
- They don’t think seriously about their education and going on to college.
- They fear going to college and not succeeding.
- They just don’t care or see the importance of education.
- They fear losing the one they love, if they wait too long.
- No “self-motivation” to learn.
- They don’t think education is important to their future.
- Fear of men rejecting them because they are educated.
- Lack of financial support, and lack of family support.
- There is a norm that educated women will always be good to their husbands’ family, but not to their parents.
- Lack of English

“Fear” has a great impact on the women’s decision to continue or not continue on to higher education. As stated earlier, 85.7 percent of the women fear being called “old maids.” Perhaps if the college women could overcome these fears, the high school women would be more likely to continue on to higher education. If a group of college women were to go around to the communities that have young Hmong women, and talk about these fears, they might help the young women get rid of them.

In a multiple answer, open-ended question, the women were also asked what they think are the most important causes or reasons for the girls getting married at a very young age. “Their friends are going it, and they don’t want to be left out,” agreed 84.6 percent of the women. “Pregnancy before marriage,” agreed 84.6 percent of the women. 76.9 percent said that parents arranging or forcing marriage could also be a factor. And 38.5 percent said it could be because of the following:
• Marriage is a way of escaping from family problems and perhaps some just don't want to continue onto higher education.
• They have too many boyfriends.
• Falling in love too young, and blindly get married.
• Men prefer younger women.
• The other partner doesn't want to wait.
• They don't take life seriously, they just married for the heck of it.

RECRUITING WOMEN

The women were asked for recommendations on what can be done to help recruit more Hmong women to vocational school or college. The following suggestions were given:

• Provide more information about college.
• Have presentations for the women so they will know that they have choices.
• Talk to them.
• Have them tour vocational schools and colleges, and give them the chance to continue their education.
• Have representatives from different schools come and talk about personal experiences.
• Have a special organization, but parents must be involved, not just the students. Many parents fail to understand how important their roles are.

The above responses suggest that the young women do not have enough understanding of the process of continuing on to higher education. Perhaps if there were more information provided in a special kind of way for them, they would gain more knowledge of the process, and they would see more chances for them to seek higher education. They need to be convinced that the opportunities are there, and all they have to do is go for it. In order to be convinced, they need to see and hear from other women who have graduated or are currently enrolled in an institution of higher learning.

The women were also asked what college women can do to encourage other Hmong women to have the goal of higher education. The following responses were given:

• Encourage them as much as we can.
• By setting good examples of continuing our own education no matter what may happen.
• We can't do very much about encouraging high school students to graduate from a college until we graduate from college ourselves. Until our lives are more successful,
they are too blind to see and too young to understand the goals of their lives. They need examples. No one wants to be lectured on what to do with their lives.

- We need to carry on what we believe, and provide information to our younger women. If we can do it, then they can also do it, too.
- Set ourselves as role-models.
- Share personal experiences.
- Have them come and visit college and meet other Hmong women.
- Have presentations.
- We should be open-minded, and understand them.

Many times Hmong women do not have the encouragement and understanding that they need to be able to continue on to higher education. They need a lot of support from those women that are already in colleges and universities. These high school women need to know that there are other women that understand and have been in similar situations. They need to know that they are not alone. If only those women in higher education would go and share some of their personal experiences or share some of the secrets of how they got to be where they are despite the difficulties and conflicts in their lives, it would be beneficial to Hmong high school women.

**Summary**

The purpose of the study was to find the causes or reasons for Hmong women not continuing their education. The college study shows that “tradition” has a lot to do with their decisions. They fear being called “old maid” when they reached eighteen. They believe that “traditionally, the women’s place was at home, serving men and family.” Finally, they understand that “traditionally, the women were not expected to go to college or vocational school.”

“Fear” also has an impact on their decision. The women fear the unknown. They fear going to college and then not succeeding. They fear losing the one they love if they wait too long to marry. They fear being rejected by men because they are as educated as the men. (Traditional Hmong men prefer young girls as brides, and also prefer their brides to be less educated than they are.)

As a result of culture and tradition, many girls married at a very young age. When asked by they marry so young, they most frequently answer “Pregnancy before marriage.” They also answer that “their friends were doing it, and they do not want to be left out.” “Parents arranging or forcing marriage” was also a common answer.

The college women have high determination and high self-esteem. They have good future plans and they know what they want. A very high percentage of them plan to graduate from college in the next
four years and some also plan on continuing on to graduate school. Those that might marry before graduation indicated that they plan on continuing their education even after they marry. Education to these women is a primary goal.

The college women have high self-esteem and a positive attitude toward their grade point averages. They do not let "tradition" or "marriage" interfere with their education. These women have positive outlooks because they have support from families, relatives, peers, and teachers.

**Survey Comparison: Results from High School and Higher Education Surveys**

**Why Hmong Women Do Not Continue on to Higher Education**

The high school and college studies were compared to determine the reasons that Hmong women are not furthering their education. Both studies show that the number of relatives in higher education has some effect on the women's education. They also show that "self-assurance" is a major factor in women's education and, of course, that "tradition" does have a big impact on Hmong women's education.

The college survey shows that 57 percent of the women have six or more male relatives who have had higher education, and 43 percent have 3-4 female relatives who have had higher education. The high school survey shows that 36 percent of the girls have 1-2 male relatives who have had higher education and 46 percent have 1-2 female relatives who have had higher education. The college women have not only more relatives with higher education, but they have more female relatives with higher education than to the high school girls. As a result, it appears that not only does the number of relatives with higher education impact on the women's decision to continue her own education, but the number of female relatives with higher education also has a definite positive impact.

"Self-assurance" impacts on women's education. About 93 percent of the college women feel that they will graduate with a grade point average of 2.5-3.0 or better. The high school students survey indicated that 59 percent of the girls feel that they will graduate with a GPA of 2.5-3.0 or better. However, 40 percent of the high school girls were not sure if they would reach that high a GPA.

Of the college women, 86 percent indicated that they will do "OK" in college, compared to 72 percent of the high school girls. Of the college women, only 14 percent indicated that they do not feel confident that they will do "OK" in college. 29 percent of the high school girls felt they would not do "OK." The college women seem to have more confidence than the high school girls.

The college women know where they stand, whether they'll make it or not. They have taken the first very difficult step of choosing to
continue on to higher education. It takes a lot of encouragement from others as well as faith in oneself to take the chance, knowing that Hmong men are not inclined to marry older women especially if they are educated. (Traditional Hmong women have always been told what to do by Hmong men. They were not educated and needed men to depend upon. Traditionally Hmong men liked their women to be under their control. For this reason Hmong men traditionally avoid marrying educated Hmong women because educated women will be less likely to listen to the men.) Taking the chance of going on to higher education without knowing if one will succeed or not takes real determination. The Hmong women who are in higher education now are the ones with high self-image, self-concept and self-actualization.

The women in higher education should share some of their experiences and secrets of success with the high school women. They need to answer questions like the following: What did they do to help themselves take that first most difficult step? How did the reconcile the two societies they are living in—American and Hmong—to that life would be easier? The high school women need to know some of the ways they might improve their self-image, self-concept, etc.

“Tradition” has a big impact on women’s education. Traditional Hmong women have always depended upon men for support. After a certain age, the women were expected to get married so that they could depend upon their husbands. In order for a woman to be respected, she must have a husband. Traditionally, women married between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Women over eighteen years old and still unmarried were considered “old maids” and not respected as much as married women. Many women marry just for these reasons, and thus have no opportunity to further their education.

Both high school and college women agreed that the main reason women were held back from furthering their education was this fear of being called an “old maid.” But tradition alone does not account for holding women back.

The lack of higher education facilities and support systems for Hmong students is also an inhibiting factor. Equal opportunity for both men and women to continue their education is a new concept to traditional Hmong. In traditional culture Hmong men and women lived comparatively simple lives, providing their own food by farming. Education was not the priority it is in the U.S.

**Need for a Support Organization**

The purpose of the study was also to come up with suggestions that would help solve identified problems. Some of the problems might be solved in a support organization were established. About 92 percent of the high school women feel that there is definitely a need for an educational support organization, and 89 percent indicated that they will give their support to the organization. All of the college women feel
that such a support organization should exist, and they would give it their full support.

Recruiting Hmong Women Into Higher Education

On both the high school and college surveys, recommendations were given for recruiting more Hmong women into higher education. The following were some of the recommendations given:

- Have presentations for women, so they will know that they have choices.
- Have a support group.
- Provide information concerning college.
- Organize a “special club” which will involve both the students and parents.
- Hold a conference.
- Provide workshops and social gatherings just for women.
- Have the college women come in and talk to girls about college life.
- Have an awareness program in town.
- Give more encouragement.
- Give presentations on the independent women.
- Give film presentations on “the advantage of going to college.”

Recommendations were also offered on the question “What can be done to encourage the women to have the goal of wanting a higher education?”

- Get the girls together and talk about some of the subjects.
- Attend Upward Bound Program.
- Have Hmong women who have already graduated from vocational school or college talk to the girls.
- Give a presentation on “the importance of education” and the opportunities which lie ahead.
- Share personal experience with the girls.
- Arrange field trips for the girls to visit and meet the Hmong women in college.

In order to accommodate some of the needs of young Hmong women, I would suggest the establishment of a support organization. The organization could send representatives out to high schools to recruit women, and the women in the organization could go out into Hmong communities and meet the young women and discuss with them their concerns related to education. The organization could sponsor conferences, workshops and panel discussions for the Hmong women.
"Intimate relationship" means here that they are dating or "seeing" someone.

Political Science, Science and Education were the listed choices. There is a chance that they would have checked more choices if they had been available.

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Recent History of the Cambodian Experience

Cambodia had been ruled by Prince Norodom Sihanouk (and before him by his father) until he was overthrown in a CIA-supported coup in March 1970. He was an extremely popular leader with the general public, although under his rule, he had allowed American forces to bomb suspected Viet Cong forts on the Ho Chi Minh trail within “neutral” Cambodia. The bombings of Cambodian villages during “Operation Breakfast” (as it was called by the Nixon administration) gave the small groups of Cambodian communists a common banner under which to gain popular support. Sihanouk’s replacement was Lon Nol, a man whose corruption and ineffectiveness as a leader also consolidated sympathy for the Cambodian communist movement (Khmer Rouge). After “liberating” portions of the countryside from 1972-1975, the Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, invaded the capitol Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975. Initially Cambodians warily welcomed the Khmer Rouge soldiers, most of whom were teenagers from rural areas. But the liberation from Cambodia’s hard times that many had been hoping for, turned out to be a nightmare beyond anyone’s expectations.

From 1975-1979, Cambodia was virtually destroyed by the autogenocidal practices of Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge regime. The urban population was forced into the countryside to supply the labor needed to turn Cambodia into the ideal agricultural state the Khmer Rouge envisioned. Those they considered to be from the “elite” class—teachers, doctors, businessmen, civil servants, military and civil supporters of the former regimes—were imprisoned or executed immediately. Ethnic minorities such as the Chinese and the Muslim Cham were also persecuted. The rest of the population was controlled by fear, starvation and terror; much of which was enforced by the gun-toting youngsters the Khmer Rouge used to enforce their policies. Families were separated and put to work at forced labor under concentration camp conditions. It is estimated that between two to three million Cambodians were executed or died of torture, disease and starvation until the Vietnamese invaded and occupied the country in 1979.

The Vietnamese invasion enabled many Cambodians to flee to refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodian border. Some made it to United Nations-run camps where they could submit documents and wait indefinitely to be considered for admission into a third country. Sponsors from the United States, Canada, Australia, France, and other countries
brought refugees to the West to rebuild their lives away from the war zone. Thousands of refugees still live in legal and illegal border camps in a kind of limbo. They cannot return to Cambodia, nor can they go anywhere else unless accepted by Third Countries—a process that is nearly at a standstill. Cambodian, Vietnamese, Lao and Hmong refugees are truly the survivors of devastating conflict in Southeast Asia and their presence in the United States is evidence of the destruction of an entire region by war. Like other war refugees, Cambodians have suffered the loss of their homeland, culture, and families. Unlike most others, Cambodians have survived a holocaust in which every Khmer family has been affected by that experience.

At this point in history, many Khmer refugees cannot return to Cambodia and are struggling to rebuild their lives in foreign and sometimes alienating environments. Though Vietnam withdrew its troops from Cambodia, the future of Cambodia is uncertain as four factions are struggling for power: Prince Sihanouk and the KPNLF (Khmer People National Liberation Front), the Republicans under Sonn Sann, Hun Sen (the present leader installed by the Vietnamese and a former Khmer Rouge leader), and the Khmer Rouge itself. Some fear that if the Khmer Rouge are allowed back into power, there will be another holocaust. The Cambodian communities in Amherst and the Bronx are testimony to this spirit of survival and the struggle to begin again while living with the past.

Most of the nine thousand or so Bronx Cambodians live in one of approximately thirty tenement buildings distributed on twenty streets. Most arrived between 1981 and 1986, and were resettled by sponsoring agencies in New York who helped them get apartments, jobs, and English classes in the Bronx. These buildings, which have seen generations of newcomers, are like miniature villages; neighbors go from apartment to apartment visiting each other, kids play in the courtyard outside, sarongs on clotheslines run between windows and the Khmer grocery stores are practically right downstairs. This has aided their ability to continue some of their cultural traditions, but has somewhat isolated them from interaction with the larger community. However, those Khmers who have remained in the Bronx over the years (many have moved to the suburbs in Lowell, Providence or to California) are becoming more visible members of the community by owning businesses, building community centers and maintaining a Buddhist pagoda.

The Cambodians in Amherst came to the United States between 1981 and 1988 and were almost all originally from the same village in Cambodia—Kokolor in Battembang province. Therefore, many of the five hundred or so Cambodians living in Western Massachusetts are related to each other in some way. Cambodians in this area have managed to recreate some of their village structure, although like all Cambodians here, they have lost many family members to war, or left them behind in either Cambodia or the camps in Thailand. Cambodians
here are sponsored by area churches and have close relationships with American friends and sponsors. Many are working at farms, factories, colleges, or in shops, and have contact with the American community on a regular basis. However, many Cambodians in Western Massachusetts miss the benefits of living near a large Cambodian community where it is easy for them to get the kinds of food, clothing and videos they enjoy. Some complain that they miss their own people and feel isolated. Most live in housing developments such as Amherst Crossing, Brittany Manor, Watson Farms, Puffton Village and Hampton Gardens and recently several families have bought their own homes.

**Personal Statement**

I have been working with Cambodians in Western Massachusetts and Bronx, New York for almost three years on a volunteer social service level, a documentary level, and on a personal level. I create photographs to record the history of the Cambodian refugee experience with hopes that it will be an effective tool in educating and informing about the victims of war who are now living in our neighborhoods. I hope to create a symbol of remembrance for Cambodians and the global community; to help us never to forget the genocide that occurred in Cambodia and the subsequent displacement of thousands from their homeland, culture, and families. I am interested in examining the process of healing emotionally, culturally and spiritually from loss in two diverse Cambodian communities: an urban community and a semi-rural community. In a time when racism and anti-Asian violence is increasing in the United States and in Massachusetts in particular, it is my goal to show these photographs in areas where many Cambodians now live, to increase awareness, respect and sensitivity to the circumstances that have brought Cambodians here. These photographs also celebrate the spirit of survival that has enabled Cambodians to begin new lives here in the United States while living with their memories and the losses of the past.

Many thanks to Boreth Sun for translating the captions and his patience and support.

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Voeun Suy and her daughter, Sophol, cooking corn outside their apartment in Amherst, MA (Summer 1988).
Mrs. Bou and her relatives collecting cans and bottles for redemption money. They send their earnings to family living in Cambodia (Amherst, Spring 1988).
Sang Sokcheat Sisowath, a descendant of the Sisowath royal family, in her Bronx, New York apartment (Summer 1987).
Srey, a high school student, on her wedding day (Bronx, Summer 1986).
Ry Ruon in Khmer history class at Amherst Regional High School (Spring 1988).
Sithy, Tony and Sambath at their foster parents' Bronx apartment. Some were former child soldiers during the Pol Pot regime (Winter 1986)
Chhoeuth Phok playing violin for his father (Amherst, Winter 1987).
Khmer Buddhist monk on the New York City subway (Fall 1986).
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NOTES ON AUTHORS

JANET CHAMBERS lives in River Vale, New Jersey. "Vietnam, My Country" is based on her own experiences tutoring Vietnamese refugees in English.

DENNY HUNTHAUSEN has worked in the field of refugee resettlement for seven years. He currently directs the program which resettles Amerasians in Tacoma, Washington. A native of Montana, he earned his Masters of Social Work from the University of Washington.

PETER KIANG is a lecturer in the Sociology Department and American Studies Program at the University of Massachusetts/Boston and Research Associate with the William Joiner Center for the Study of War and Social Consequences where he conducts research on Southeast Asian refugee students and communities.

LEAH MELNICK has been photographing and volunteering for social service work within the Cambodian communities of Bronx, NY and Amherst, MA since the summer of 1986. Her interest in the subject emerged after she tutored a Khmer high school student in Amherst as part of a program sponsored through Hampshire College. In June, 1986, Melnick began working at a photo agency in New York City and decided to learn more about the Khmer who were resettled in the area: in this case, the Bronx. She worked in the Bronx community from June, 1986 to January, 1987, and over the summer of 1987. When she returned to college in February, 1987, she continued the project with the local Khmer population of Amherst.

Melnick has felt strongly about combining her documentary work with volunteer social work and has worked under the auspices of the Cambodian Women's Project of the American Friends Service Committee in New York and the Lutheran Child and Family Services in Amherst. With her photographs, she hopes to create a record of the experiences of two distinct communities of survivors of the Cambodian holocaust, in the hopes that the images will educate people and cause them to become concerned about the effects of war on humanity. She is also interested in examining the relationship between environment and resettlement experience. Melnick exhibits the work in publicly accessible spaces in Khmer neighborhoods with the hope that they will promote an understanding of the circumstances that have brought
Cambodians to the United States, and of the struggle they are undergoing to preserve their history and culture while adapting to life in the United States. This sort of media is greatly needed in a time when violence against refugees is increasing nationally.

In addition to organizing exhibitions of this project, Melnick is collecting oral histories in Cambodian communities to create a text for the photographs. A recent graduate of Hampshire College, she works as a freelance photographer for several publications and waitresses at a local restaurant. Melnick's photographs of the Khmer have been exhibited and published widely and have received a number of awards.

David Moore has introduced many Hmong refugee boys to Scouting. He and the boys organized Hmong Boy Scout Troop 100 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His essay, "Between Cultures" is based on interviews with Hmong Scouts and members of the Hmong community. Mr. Moore has also published a book of oral histories, Dark Sky, Dark Land: Stories of the Hmong Boy Scouts of Troop 100.

Sharon Rolnick is conducting a long-term study on teenage pregnancy and parenting in the Hmong community of St. Paul, Minnesota. She works with the Wilder Research Center, and Lao Family Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Project.

Liang Tien is an Assistant Professor at the Asian American Studies Program, Department of American Ethnic Studies, University of Washington. She has worked for many years in her capacity as a clinical psychologist with the resettlement of Southeast Asians. She is presently consultant to the Amerasian Resettlement Program at the Catholic Community Services in Tacoma, Washington, and the Asian Counseling Service at the Good Samaritan Mental Health Center in Tacoma.

Mao Yang is a student at the University of Wisconsin—Stout. She wrote "The Education of Hmong Women" as an independent study project.