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The University of Montana

NEWS RELEASE

University Communications
Missoula, MT 59812
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This release is available electronically on INN (News Net).

NOTE: This story is embargoed until Thursday morning, Feb. 16.

Feb. 16, 1995

UM STUDENT NAMED TO USA TODAY FIRST ACADEMIC TEAM

By Jessica Smith
University Communications

MISSOULA--

Bounthavy Kiatoukaysy didn't expect to go to college.

When the University of Montana - Missoula sophomore first came with her Hmong family to the United States as a teenager, it was all she and her siblings could do to figure out what their teachers were saying.

She's made considerable progress in the 16 years since then. Kiatoukaysy, a native of Laos, was selected as one of 20 undergraduates on the USA Today 1995 All-USA College Academic First Team, the national newspaper announced Thursday. The 20 students were chosen from more than 1,400 nominees from 558 colleges and universities across the nation.

"I want to say how proud we are of her accomplishments and to have her as a student at The University of Montana," said UM President George Dennison. "That's a success story that should make all of us feel good."

Kiatoukaysy will receive the \$2,500 award Friday, Feb. 17, at a luncheon in Arlington, Va. She will be accompanied by UM Educational Opportunity Program Visiting Instructor Suzy Hampton, who nominated her for the award.

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"She's just so uniquely special," said Hampton, who first met Kiatoukasy through a mutual friend. "She does a lot of work communitywide ... to increase community understanding about her people."

Kiatoukasy, whose Hmong clan name is Thao, has worked with local groups on projects such as a city art program about the Hmong culture. She has also given speeches to educators in Montana and beyond.

Before coming to Missoula in 1982, Kiatoukasy lived in Arkansas and Minnesota. In Minnesota, she attended a Catholic school with a large population of Hmong students, where she was chosen to be an interpreter for the other students.

"That's when I really started to get into (teaching)," she said. Now she's working on her elementary education degree at UM.

She works with the Hmong children and families in Missoula's School District 1, helping them to adjust and learn in the American education environment. In 1993, she was nationally recognized as the Bilingual Instructional Assistant of the Year for her work in the Missoula district.

When she has her own classroom, Kiatoukasy plans to integrate both her native and adopted cultures into her teaching.

"I want to help both Hmong and American children to live together as a whole," she said. "When children learn from each other, they don't feel they are different."

In high school, she said, she tried very hard to become completely American before eventually realizing that she needed to balance both of her heritages. Now, she said, "my children are growing up in both cultures." She gets help teaching her children traditional Hmong ways from

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her in-laws, who share a home with Kiatoukasy, her husband and their four daughters.

Kiatoukasy's goal is to inspire other Hmong women to follow in her footsteps on the University campus.

"I really want to provide a role model for Hmong women," she said. "Most of us don't make it to college. If I can do it, they can too."

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Editors, news directors, reporters: Kiatoukasy and Hampton leave for Washington, D.C., Thursday morning and will return late Sunday night, Feb. 19. They will stay at the Mayflower Hotel, (202) 347-2000. In Missoula, Kiatoukasy can be reached at (406) 721-5445; Hampton's office number is (406) 243-5033.

Kiatoukasy's name is pronounced "Bone-ta-VEE Kya-toe-KAY-see;" she often goes by the nickname "Vee."

JLS

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