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Interview with Lee Pao Xiong

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Lee Pao Xiong

Interviewer (Parts 1 & 2 – December 7, 2005)/Transcriber/Editor: Paul Hillmer

Interviewer (Part 3 – February 9, 2006): Mai Neng Vang



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

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

14 Part I – 7 December, 2005

16 (0:00) Let's just start at the very beginning. What are some of your earliest memories?

17 My first memory in Laos would be living in the air base, Long Tieng, with my father, and also just
18 the constant T-28 flying in all the time, and also being out in the fields, the rice fields with my mom,
19 and also with the uncles as we watched over the farm—and raising water buffaloes [Laughs].

21 (0:49) What are your parents' names?

22 My father's name is Song Khoua Xiong, and my mother's name is Mee Vang. In my eyes they're
23 heroes. I just imagine if I was their age during that time, and being able to navigate all of the
24 turmoils, and also leaving their life behind—I don't know if I could do that. [Laughs]

26 (1:24) It's understandable.

27 Yeah.

28 Well, you're in this place that's city but air base and also nerve center for the Hmong army
29 and air force, as it were...Let's talk about that air strip. Did you know any of the men who
30 piloted the planes?

31 No. Of course, we always hear about Ly Lue, the Hmong pilot. But I don't know any of them, but
32 back then I was only nine years old. That's my recollection. And I know that, because our school

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

45

46 **(3:52) Was this an indoor or an outdoor theater?**

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

52

53 **(4:30) What do you remember about your parents from that time?**

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

79

80 **(8:33) And what was school like?**

81 It was kind of interesting in that some of my teachers were my mom's teachers. My mom has
82 formal education. But school was hard. There were always two bullies that always waited after
83 school to beat me up. That something that—
84

85 **(9:00) Some things are the same everywhere.**

86 I will always remember that [Laughs]. They were always waiting to beat me up, and it would be
87 interesting to find out who those people are now. But they always waited to beat me up. School
88 was—I think it was fun. I also remember—see back then, teachers commanded a lot of authority
89 and respect, and so I also remember us—my teacher taking the whole class to cut bamboo for him,
90 for his house, to build his house. And people don't question that. The teacher is sort of an
91 extension of the parents back then, and command a high amount of respect, so if the teacher tells
92 you to do something, you do it; you don't question it. But school was good, and it was hard. I
93 know it was hard because we had to memorize things. And we can't leave our fingernails long, we
94 can't leave our hair long. And if you have long fingernails, what the teacher will do is they'll ask you
95 to put your hands up and put your fingers together, and he'll smack it with a ruler. Or if you don't
96 memorize the verse that you were supposed to memorize the night before, the teachers would ask
97 you to kneel down in front of the class and hold two large rocks in your hands [extends arms out].
98

99 **(10:32) Just hold them out**

100 Yeah, just hold them out until the teacher—I mean, just like in the old days. You wear this
101 'dumb hat' [dunce cap] [Laughs] to embarrass and punish you just so that you can learn. But it was
102 fun. It was fun. I enjoyed growing up in that environment, in that town, and it's kind of interesting.
103 I mean, I remember the two times that communists infiltrated the base. I remember the one time I
104 was with my dad, actually, on the side of the hill that we called the Mountains of the King, because
105 that's where the king's palace was. I remember staying in a fox hole with him, I remember all the
106 rockets coming in, because—
107

108 **(11:25) You were under fire?**

109 Oh yeah! Oh yeah, I remember that
110

111 **(11:29) I would remember that, too! [Both laugh]**

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

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

139
140 **(15:09) Were there times before the evacuation that you remember being attacked or having**
141 **to take shelter?**

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

169
170 **(18:48) And the flare was from the enemy? [Interviewer was thinking of flares more as an**
171 **offensive weapon used to invade than a defensive weapon used to identify invaders]**

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

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

185

186 **(20:19) How far would that have been, roughly?**

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

206

207 **(23:25) Well, maybe your wife is right...**

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

215

216 **(24:38) Have you reflected back on that as an adult—about how you think those experiences**
217 **might have shaped the person you became? You were trying to have this semi-normal**
218 **childhood, but you're dad's a soldier, you're right next to this air strip where you see**
219 **crashes, you see dead bodies, probably—did you see American soldiers?**

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

225 remote, but it's the kind where you turn it on, and then there's a long string attached and then they
226 go around like this [circles around himself like a lasso, showing how men whipped the plane around
227 them in a circle, Laughs]. In fact I just saw an advertisement for one of these remote controlled
228 planes the other night, and I was telling my wife and son, 'Let's go get this!' So it's kind of
229 fascinating. You remember that, you know. And I was telling my wife, 'I want to get that!' But
230 yeah, there were a lot of Americans there. They would come in also with the C-130s, these cargo
231 planes—C-130s, or actually Americans [Laughs]
232

233 **(26:24) Do you have any recollections of what you actually thought of them or how you saw**
234 **them fitting in to the picture of your life on Long Tieng?**

235 Well, they're big; they're big and tall, and they're also very friendly. Yeah, they were very friendly
236 [pauses] which is kind of fascinating how people label Americans. They label the Americans as
237 enemies [Laughs] or as devils. You know, it's kind of fascinating where we are. And so war is all
238 about that, and yet people are really part of it. Yeah, they came in with the big helicopters. And
239 these helicopters would land in the fields and we would go and interact with them. They were all in
240 pilot uniforms. I never saw them in civilian clothes. And that's really fascinating. And as you read,
241 you know, 'the Americans are there, they're dressed as civilians. You've got these American GIs in
242 civilian clothes. And all I saw—I guess the folks that I see, they're all in their pilot uniforms—you
243 know, military outfits, uniforms. So I suppose that's because we were right next to the airplanes
244 [Laughs].
245

246 **(27:50) Did you at any time—were there any places where soldiers or Americans**
247 **left stuff behind and you could make toys out of them or grab souvenirs or anything like**
248 **that?**

249 No, it was more the parachutes and the [pauses] Styrofoam, because they shipped bullets and all of
250 that stuff in crates with Styrofoam. And what we would do is we would make model airplanes out
251 of it. So you use a knife and just cut it. The other thing that we used—as kids that we made was the
252 metal strip that kept the boxes together—the ribbon, you know—they were all made of metal.
253 There would be a lot of those around, and so what we would do was we would go and break it off
254 and we would sharpen it and use that as knives. So those are our toys, you know? So we would try
255 to find those. Also, when they dropped the—when they did rice drops or food drops, there were
256 these big ropes that they tied these bags of rice and canned food and that, and when they dropped it
257 from the plane we would try to find those ropes and use them. So those are things that we
258 [Laughs]—you organize, you hunt, you go out there and try to find. You know, that's all, we didn't
259 have any—
260

261 **(29:52) That's what boys do!**

262 Yeah! So Styrofoam was a really important thing. Bullet casings were also very, very popular.
263 Batteries were also something that we—you know, batteries for flashlights and all that. And we
264 would go and scour and try to find batteries, and we would make toys out of them, and we would
265 make games out of them. We would stack them and trade—you know, hit 'em and trade 'em—we
266 didn't know it was toxic! [Laughs] Bullet casings were also very popular. You would go and pick
267 them up. Now, like when I lived in Frogtown, I found a bullet casing, a long bullet casing, and I
268 thought, 'Wow! I found this!' And it brings back memories! And when you go and you find
269 batteries hidden somewhere when you're cleaning up, you go, 'That's cool!' So those are some of
270 the junk that we turned into fun. Parachutes, plastics—we made parachutes out of plastic, we made
271 knives out of those metal ribbons.
272

273 **(31:21) I started one question and then took us another direction, so I should go back. Do**
274 **you think your childhood influenced you in some way?**

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

319
320 **(37:40) And it's still preserved here [points to head]**

321 Absolutely! So I still see that, and I want to go back and see if I can see that again. It's just
322 fascinating. I mean, even going back to Ban Vinai, or going back to Nam Phong, which is the air
323 field where we originally landed when we were airlifted out of Laos. And it was a chaotic time,
324 because we didn't know whether the plane was going to come or not. There's always, 'We don't
325 know,' and there's deceptions everywhere, and it makes you kind of angry that these military leaders
326 abandoned the people. So today when I hear General Vang Pao say, 'I brought you here,' I think,
327 'you didn't bring us here.' You were intending to bring only 2000 people. You were intending to
328 leave everybody behind, so for you to say that you brought me here, I got here on my own! You
329 know what I'm saying? So when you think back to that—I have great respect for General Vang
330 Pao, but we just need to agree to disagree. And I appreciate what he has done back then, but to take
331 credit for everything—it's unbelievable. You know, for me it's kind of hard. And knowing that he
332 was only planning on bringing 2,000. And that was the first time—I learned about it from the book,
333 Gayle Morrison's book, and then listening to Yang Long saying, 'Yeah, there was only 98 families
334 [Laughs], and that Jerry Daniels asked General Vang Pao, 'How many people do you want to be
335 airlifted out of Laos? Give me a list.' And if I was General Vang Pao I'd say, 'I want all of my
336 people out of here' [Laughs] instead of giving him a list and saying, 'Here's 98 families and here's
337 2000 people. And this is all the people that's going to get on that plane, and this plane's for this
338 family and this plane's for that family.' It's just—I don't know whether he's regretting it. I doubt
339 that he is, but there's still people out there waiting to get out. We fought to get on that plane, and
340 my dad got left behind, and came on one of the last C-130s that General [Harry "Heine"] Aderholt
341 ordered...He was in charge of Air Force over there, and when he heard that all of the military
342 leaders were going to abandon all of the Hmong people, the Americans were going to abandon all
343 the Hmong people, he ordered, he paid one of the pilots \$5,000 to fly. He put the pilot under house
344 arrest [Laughs] and so he flew down there (and it's also mentioned in Gayle Morrison's book, and
345 I've heard it directly from him [Aderholt], too). And he paid the pilot \$5,000 (the pilot is dead now).
346 The pilot was on his way home, and so he called the air field, and put the pilot under house arrest.
347 And he went down there and said, 'How much do you need?' General Aderholt said, 'I have \$5,000
348 on me. Will this be sufficient?' And so he went down and found some more pilots, and hired some
349 pilots, and went back and got us out of there—not General Vang Pao. General Vang Pao didn't ask
350 Aderholt to do that. General Aderholt felt that General Vang Pao abandoned the Hmong people.
351 All the military leaders abandoned the Hmong people, and that's not right. I would say 99% of the
352 Hmong people out there don't know these things—only the people who read, that are able to read
353 and are able to connect with these people, understand all of this. And that's why—General John
354 Vessey. He was in charge of the whole operation over there! But if you talk with Hmong people,
355 [they'll ask] 'Who's General John Vessey?' They know Jerry Daniels, they know Colonel Bill Lair,
356 but they don't know Aderholt. Only the people that are pros know Aderholt. They know General
357 Vang Pao, and they know all of the close people, but they don't know any of the larger perspective.
358 And I think that's—but we got on that plane, and my dad was pushing us. So I got in, my mom got
359 in, a couple of my brothers got in. I remember how tightly packed we were in that C-47, the *Lakota*
360 airplane. And you have to climb—it's quite high, the stairs are pretty steep, so you have to climb up
361 there in order to get in. And my dad was pushing us in, and so we got in. And my dad, I think one
362 or two of my brothers got left behind, my uncle got left behind—my uncle from my grandpa's
363 second marriage, and my aunt from my grandpa's second marriage, and my grandma and my
364 grandpa, they all got left behind. My dad was telling me the story of how the C-130, people—in the
365 C-130 the back of the plane, the doors would open and close, and people would just flock in. But
366 there's—between the door and the opening there was nobody trying to get through there, so my dad
367 went in there, and he got everybody through that door. And he also helped a couple people get on
368 there. That's what he said. So it would be interesting to find out who those couple of people were

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

379 [End Tape Side 1]

380

381

382 [Side 2]

383

384 **[Do remember if you had much warning about the evacuation of Long Tieng?]**

385 (0:00) Well, my dad was in the military, and he knew. We had heard rumors that they were going to
386 evacuate people from two places. And I'm glad that we chose Long Tieng. So we heard rumors
387 that there was going to be an evacuation. We didn't know, couldn't confirm that there was going to
388 be an evacuation. So my dad quickly rounded everybody up, and we went—and at that time
389 [pauses]...See, I don't remember if I went with my dad to the village to pick up my grandma and my
390 grandpa and my mom or whether I was over there already. I don't remember that part. Probably
391 traumatic! [Laughs] Probably too traumatic or something. But I remember that we were arguing
392 with my grandma and my grandpa. They didn't want to come. They didn't want to come. So we got
393 in the car—I don't remember if it was a taxi—it must be a car. Because we went back. We decided,
394 'Okay, if grandma and my grandpa don't want to come, then they can stay.' We went half way, then
395 came back and got them, and forced them in the car, and went to Long Tieng.

396

397 **(1:18) So your father just decided, 'I don't care what they think...'**

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

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

424

425 **(4:34) What's his name?**

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

459

460 **(9:01) Yeah.**

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

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

475
476 **(11:16) So here you are, you're on this plane, it's as packed as it can possibly be...I assume**
477 **that when you get on the plane you don't have a very strong sense of where you're going.**

478 No, we had no idea. We had no idea where we were going. I mean, you had no clue where you
479 were going. They never announced that we were going to go to Thailand. [Laughs] Just an
480 evacuation. When we arrived in Thailand, we were like, 'Where are we?' It was kind of dark. It was
481 kind of dark when we arrived in Thailand. When we got there, my mom and I, we searched for my
482 dad, and the rest, and my grandma and my grandpa and uncle. And then they took us to a place, a
483 holding place. The other thing I remember about that place, that compound there. The first time
484 they put us there (and I'd love to go back again to see that. I thought about going back and taking
485 pictures of all the military bases. But I have no clue where it is in Thailand. [Laughs] I have no clue
486 even where Ban Vinai is, you know?) But to go back [to what he started earlier], I remember the
487 food. The food was very good. The Thai food was very good. And once in a while I cook that
488 food at home, just to bring back that flavor, just to have a taste of that memory. The food—and
489 then they also gave us ID tags, and then we had to show our ID tags in order to get a meal. And
490 then they moved us to another larger compound, of course, more organized—teams to cook food
491 and to bring food and I remember fish, vegetables, ice—it was very hot. Ice. And then pretty soon
492 some of the Thai merchants came and started selling outside the camp gate, so we could go buy
493 produce from them.

494
495 **(13:21) What was the name of this camp?**

496 Nam Phong.

497
498 **Oh, so this was all still at the base.**

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

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

534

535 **(18:37) You went to Indiana first?**

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

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

605
606 **(28:22) Who would have ever guessed that goldfish would have survived in there?**

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

609

610 **(28:38) Do you think your classmates and the people of that town understood who the**
611 **Hmong people were?**

612 I don't think so. I don't think they had a clue.

613

614 **(28:49) They probably thought you were Vietnamese or—**

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

623

624 **(30:02) Do you have any specific memories of the process by which you went from being a**
625 **Hmong boy in Laos to being a Hmong young man in the United States and having to sort**
626 **of figure that process of moving out of one and becoming the other?**

627 I don't know, because I think, for us, we were integrated into the classrooms (I know that we were
628 different), and yet we were taken out of classrooms for special English language classes. We were
629 also being bused to the University of Indiana - Bloomington—maybe once or twice a night [week?]
630 [this part hard to hear] *for English classes so we could work on our classroom English, and we were the only*
631 *family, of course!* [Laughs] We received it from Bloomington—the University of Indiana –
632 Bloomington. And then on the way back our sponsors would buy dozens of donuts! That's the
633 other thing! I loved going to Bloomington! [Laughs] I think it's a 45-minute drive or something
634 like that. But donuts—oh, I love donuts. That was my first exposure to donuts. [Laughs] So once
635 in a while I still go and buy dozens of donuts when I get home! The other thing I remember is—
636 because driving at night and during Christmas—Christmas was a new thing. And receiving my first
637 race car toys, that was one of the biggest things. It was one of those Indy 500 kind of cars. You
638 know I've always been fascinated—Evel Knievel! [Both laugh]. The [Winnebago] Evel Knievel!
639 Oh, I had one of those like that. That's why I know exactly who Evel Knievel is. 'Oh, cool!' you
640 know? But it was only later on in life here that I heard about Evel Knievel and I thought, 'Oh yeah!
641 I remember him! I have his [Winnebago]! It's a collector's item now, I should have kept it! I
642 remember when we left that house, I buried some of my cars next to a propane tank—because back
643 in the country you have propane tanks for cooking and for heating. I'd love to go back to that
644 house and dig up those cars, you know? [Both laugh]

645

646 **(33:16) Or what's left of them...**

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

652

653 [New track]

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

657 Pastor Kou Seying [a former Concordia University faculty member], his family was living in
658 Indiana—Indianapolis at that time. And our sponsor took us, and we went and visited his family in
659 Indianapolis. (His father just moved here last year, so they've lived there all that time!) So we
660 visited him, and that's how we—I didn't even know it was him, but he was much older, so he
661 knows. He knows my parents. When I came here [to Concordia University] in 1997 I found out
662 that, 'You guys came to visit us in Indiana.' And Mr. Long Yang also lived in Indiana. He was
663 working as a refugee services worker or something like that. And he came and visited us. So I
664 found out when he came here and I told him, 'My dad is Song Khoua Xiong and all that stuff, he
665 was like, 'Your dad is Song Khoua?' [Both laugh] 'Don't you remember me?' I visited you guys in
666 Indiana?' Well, I don't remember any of that stuff. I know that people came and visited us and I
667 had no clue. I know there was another gentleman that served under my dad and also lived in
668 Indiana. He often comes and visits my dad. And so I remember that. I don't remember Mr. Long
669 Yang, but yeah, he said, 'I came to visit you guys a couple of times and then I called and your phone
670 was disconnected and I talked to your sponsor and they said you left already, you moved out
671 already.' So he just finally discovered that I am Song Khoua Xiong's son! And that's why he's
672 helping me so much, too. [Hard to hear] *But I/he felt bad about that?* But we moved to Minnesota in
673 1979.

674

675 **(2:59) Do you have a sense of what brought your family here?**

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

679

680 **(3:21) Did your grandparents come with you to Morgantown and then here also?**

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

705 and one of the Vietnamese soldiers was not dead, and he shot him. And he wasn't dead, and he was
706 asking for help. And what they did is someone threw a grenade. And so my uncle was killed. And
707 of course, some of the people that were there who were good friends of my uncle, felt that it was an
708 assassination, because he was moving up in the ranks. So I think it was felt that that was probably
709 what happened. So then my aunt, because of tradition—other uncles would marry my uncle's wife.
710 And so we have another uncle that married, that took her as his second wife. And during the
711 evacuation and all of that—this was later on—she had a lot of sickness, because of the 'yellow rain'
712 [poisoning of the Hmong people by the Pathet Lao]. Because of the yellow rain, everything that
713 they ate, everything that they drank poisoned their body. So my aunt and three of her little kids
714 were all sick. So she asked my other uncle—we say my dad's cousin—to just leave them on the side
715 of the road at the house (there was a house that was just there, an empty house, an abandoned
716 house), to leave them there, and just go on, because she doesn't want to compromise their safety.
717 So his [Lee Pao Xiong's cousin's] three siblings and his mom all died at that house. And the reason
718 we know they died at that house is that other people came and they said that they saw dead people
719 lying at the house. So I'd like to give [them] a proper burial. And I told my older brother, 'That's
720 what you should do. Go back and give your mom and your brothers and your sisters proper burial.'
721 And of course I keep on bringing this up to my parents. And they say, 'Well, people probably don't
722 know where it is now, it's probably overgrown with jungle growth and all of that. It's impossible.'
723 But at the same time there's still—that's probably one of my missions in life one day is to go back
724 and give them proper burial. Of course, my brother is not talking to his step-dad at all, and his step-
725 dad often calls. And my aunt is the sister of Dr. Pao Ge Vang of the Lao Human Rights Council,
726 who just recently died. So it's that family; it's his sister. [Laughs] That's something that I want to
727 do. I will often tell my wife that I don't know why my older brother isn't concerned or why he
728 doesn't think about it. Maybe it's because it's not his training, or...
729

730 **(10:42) He may feel like it's too late and there's nothing he can do or—**

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

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

751
752 [Tape runs out]

753

754

755 **Part Two – 19 December, 2005**

756

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

775

776 **(3:17) Again?**

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

780

781 **(3:36) Now how did you get into trouble? Did you use it?**

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

800

801 **(5:59) What were their names?**

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

810

811 **(7:16) Let's go all the way back to elementary school at North. What do you remember**
812 **about that experience? What was that adjustment like?**

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

828

829 **(9:38) What were your parents doing? You said your father had worked as a janitor in the**
830 **school you attended in Morgantown. How did they—**

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

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

854

855 **(13:16) So have both of your parents learned English reasonably well? They both went to**
856 **school—**

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

865

866 **(14:26) Do you remember any particular instances in which things were going on in the**
867 **home that were still traditionally Hmong in nature, but here you are as a kid in the United**
868 **States, in Minnesota, being pulled toward the culture in which you find yourself?**

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

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

900
901 **(19:11) Oh my!**

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

903
904 **(19:17) Now was it primarily Hmong families living in McDonough Homes at that time, or**
905 **was it—**

906 No! At that time it was predominately African American

907 **OK.**

908 And kind of like the African Americans moved out and slowly Hmong moved in. And at one time,
909 about 70% of the people living there were Hmong. And I think now it's more Somalis and
910 Ethiopians. So now it's—sort of like a stepping stone for immigrants. And my parents (according to
911 them) they made too much money, so we had to leave, and we moved into Frogtown, Charles
912 Avenue. I think it's 4—something on Charles Avenue. And then also, the house was too small. We
913 had to rent a duplex. So all the kids lived upstairs and my parents lived downstairs—in different
914 apartments! I have seven brothers, no sisters. But when I was—throughout my junior high and
915 high school years we were living in McDonough—until 11th grade when they kicked us out because
916 of income restrictions. And so I transferred over to Como Park High School. That's why when
917 they—one day I received a phone call from Como Park High School, and they said,
918 'Congratulations, you've been nominated and we've accepted you into the Como Park Hall of
919 Fame.' And I said, 'Hmm...What's that? [Laughs] And for what?' and they said, 'Well, for your
920 contributions to society and for your work in the community.' And I thought about it and thought,
921 'You know, Johnson should have claimed me.' [Laughs] because I spent more time at Johnson—
922 9th, 10th, 11th, you know? And in 12th grade [I] transferred over to Como Park. But one of the
923 things that I remember about high school even at living at McDonough and even junior high and
924 high school is—I remember I bought myself a short wave radio. When I was in junior high I
925 worked in the CYET program—it's a summer youth employment program, basically, for low
926 income kids. And so we worked during the summer we worked at Afton State Park. A lot of the
927 trails there we built way back then! Afton State Park, Swede Hollow, we worked in there. A couple
928 of the bridges we built in there. And I remember how—[gasps] mosquito-infested swamp! But we
929 worked there during the summer to get money. I was working when I was in 7th grade, 8th grade, 9th
930 grade, 10th grade [Laughs] and I think 11th grade, too, because in my 11th grade year we worked at the
931 Minnesota Zoo. We put up the trails, we did most of the projects down there where they have the
932 ducks—the (***) area. We did some of the project down there. But yeah, one of the things that I
933 did, I bought a short wave radio in junior high, and then there was also the movie—the Chinese
934 movie theater, the World Theater. That's where I—I still have the programs. I collect those
935 programs [Laughs].

936
937 **(23:19) So what's now the Fitzgerald Theater...**

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

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

992

993 **(30:14) There's been this recurring theme, so I can see why you were ready to just take care**
994 **of business.**

995 So I did that, studied there, and when I left to go to study with the Chinese master, it was on the
996 West Side—Smith Avenue, across the bridge—and my Hmong master was kind of ticked off,
997 because when I went over there—a couple of my friends, we all went over there [Laughs]. So we
998 kind of betrayed him—you know, he viewed it as betraying him, but [pauses] he wasn't teaching us
999 fast enough [Laughs]. So then we went to that. I was studying that. In high school I was doing
1000 that. In college, I did that a little bit, studied at the University of Minnesota, did Tae Kwan Do, did
1001 Shoto-Kan karate, did some kung fu over there, too—did all of that. And it was more—people
1002 always say that when you don't know enough you want to beat people up and you want to kick every
1003 tree and you want to jump—you think that you're...[Pauses]. But once you know it, you kind of
1004 have compassion for people. You don't want to hurt people, you don't want to harm people—
1005 you're patient. And I think it's a combination of my experiences in Laos and the martial arts training
1006 that made me really patient. You don't make a big deal out of things, you just [Laughs] 'Yeah,
1007 whatever.' And when people—you know, a lot of people throw me racial slurs and I'm just like,
1008 'Forget it. I could kick your butt any time [Interviewer laughs], but this is not the day. I'm out of
1009 here.' You know what I mean? But that whole experience there is really fascinating, because we
1010 grew up in a time when there was a lot of tension—racial tension—and it was always African
1011 Americans and us, and the reason was these low-income neighborhoods were predominately
1012 Southeast Asians and African Americans [Laughs]. So in there it's inevitable. I suppose if you were
1013 integrated into the Hispanic neighborhoods you'd probably do the same thing; you'd probably fight
1014 among yourselves. You integrate into predominately white neighborhoods and you have a whole
1015 bunch of kids without means and without things to you, you're probably going to go after each
1016 other. I kind of classify that as racial tension, but there was racial tension. I think it carried over.
1017 And the perception about the community that you lived in really framed many of the thought
1018 processes of your parents—our parents. I mean, my mom's purse was snatched by an African
1019 American person and so each time she sees one she [clutches an imaginary purse close to himself],
1020 you know? It's based on experience [Laughs]. You cringe, you know. And when I worked as a
1021 director of Hmong Youth Association in North Minneapolis, same thing. It was predominately
1022 African American. And a lot of the kids harassed each other, intimidated each other. So yeah, when
1023 the University of Minnesota letter came, I looked at the financial aid package. After I paid off all my
1024 tuition I still had \$2000 left over. Coming from a family of limited means, I said, 'That's a lot of
1025 money.' [Laughs] So I transferred over there. Here, after I paid all of my tuition I still had to put in
1026 about \$500. So I looked at that \$2000 [I would have left over], the \$500 [I would have to pay]—
1027 2000! And some of my friends were over there at the University of Minnesota, so I went over there.
1028 The time over there was quite interesting in that—I mean, in the classes that I registered for. The
1029 intro classes were like huge. They were like in an auditorium [Laughs]. It was like in a movie
1030 theater—larger than that. You had to work really hard, and discipline was a major issue. Discipline
1031 was a major issue. And so the second year we decided—I think it was the third year—a couple
1032 friends and I just decided to rent a room at the University of Minnesota. And that didn't help either,
1033 because we were raising fish and [Laughs] playing video games, and chasing girls.

1034

1035 **(35:20) Of course!**

1036 So I moved back home during my senior year. But I changed my major. I wanted to continue to do
1037 my International Relations, and eventually also move into Business Administration at the University
1038 of Minnesota. And then I registered and I took the Macro- and Microeconomics courses. [I] didn't
1039 do too well {All laugh}. I had to re-take my Macroeconomics course [Laughs]. I had to do it twice.

1040 And then you have to also take Finite Math. And I went to the book store, opened up the book.
1041 It's a math course, but there's no numbers [All laugh]. All word problems! And I was terrible—I
1042 was not good at word problems, solving math word problems, even when I was in high school. I
1043 knew then, 'That's not for me!' And then—it's kind of interesting in that I had an opportunity to—
1044 I saw a posting. When I was over there I was always over in the Social Science Department,
1045 sometimes looking at postings and all that, and I saw a posting for an internship in Washington,
1046 D.C. And, of course, the three friends—one of the persons is *Kao Lee*, and the other person is *Jo Va*
1047 *Lee*—now he's still over at the University of Minnesota working at the Asian Pacific Cultural
1048 Resource Center. We all took Chinese and we were acing Chinese. We studied for four years. And
1049 during the third year we all decided, 'We're going to go to China to go study at Nankai University—
1050 Nankai (**), to improve our Chinese language skills, and so on and so forth. And then I saw this
1051 posting about working in Washington, D.C. I have no idea why I responded to that. I applied for
1052 it, I was accepted. I remember working for Rudy Boschwitz, 'cause at that time Rudy Boschwitz
1053 and—I think it was Dave Durenberger were the two Senators. And this was in 1988. I graduated in
1054 1985, this was 1988. So I decided to go to Washington, D.C. And when I got to Washington D.C.
1055 they placed me with Senator Carl Levin of Michigan. Now I see him on TV all of the time. I
1056 thought he was going to retire in 1988 [All laugh]. That's what he said; he was going to retire '88.
1057 He's still there as a ranking of the Armed Services Committee. I worked in there, and I remember
1058 drafting a lot of letters to the South African government to free Nelson Mandela. I did a lot of that,
1059 did a lot of responding to—and at that time, you think this is bad. At that time we still had
1060 typewriters. And we would write letters for the Senator. We would do all the research, write memos
1061 and write letters to the Senators or write letters to respond to constituents, and we had a signature
1062 machine. So next time when you receive a letter from a Senator congratulating you for graduating,
1063 most likely it's a machine, but I don't want to tell you that [Laughs]. It's a machine, it's a big
1064 machine, and it's signs [makes noise of machine writing]. But we were drafting letters, and so on
1065 and so forth. I was also in charge once in a while of bringing the Senator his lunch. And he always
1066 eats the same sandwich every day: a Reuben sandwich. He eats that every single day—never
1067 changes [Laughs]. And so I was the only Hmong in Washington, D.C. There were no Hmong
1068 there. And I missed Hmong people. I was there for three months and I missed Hmong people. I
1069 missed the food. So I decided—I went to Chinatown and brought me a little pan. I got sick and
1070 tired of Pizza Hut, because we stayed at the Catholic University of American in Washington, D.C.,
1071 right next to the train station—the Red Line station. And there's only so much pizza you can take.
1072 So I went to Chinatown, bought me some rice, bought me a pan, and sometimes I would just go and
1073 buy and cook in the dormitory and share with the people, because they don't have any fresh food.
1074 They don't know how to make anything [Laughs]! I remember the first time we were there, there
1075 was a group of [pauses to try to remember] I think it was about 16 of us as part of that program,
1076 from throughout the United States—from California, from all over the place—and I was from
1077 Minnesota [Laughs]. And one of my friends who's African American, from Los Angeles—Paul, his
1078 name is Paul. He's a musician, a very good musician. And then another friend of mine, from
1079 Oklahoma, he's a Choctaw Indian—first time I ever heard of it—the Choctaw tribe, Choctaw
1080 nation. The three of us kind of clicked, you know, always hanging around together. So we got
1081 there; the first time we got there we kind of hung together and started walking through the
1082 neighborhood. We were all excited—'Here we are in Washington, D.C., the nation's capital!' And
1083 then it was kind of dark, and a police officer in a squad car drove up and said, 'You guys must be
1084 new here, aren't you?' And we said, 'Yeah.' [And he said,] 'You don't walk in this neighborhood at
1085 night!' [Laughs] He was like, 'Get in the car! I'm driving you back. Where are you guys from?'
1086 'Catholic University.' 'You don't walk in this neighborhood at night!' That was our first
1087 introduction to Washington, D.C. So he drove us back to our dorm room and we stayed there. But

1088 I came back and changed my major to Political Science after that. And I said, ‘Here we are, in the
1089 most powerful place in the world, the nation’s capital; there’s no Hmong people here. And at that
1090 time, in 1988, I approached Senator Carl Levin at the time—and I delivered a lot of secret
1091 documents to the Pentagon on behalf of the Senator [Laughs]. Seems like I’m one of the persons
1092 that delivers that. So the Pentagon is highly secure—holy smokes, talk about that...And it’s quite an
1093 experience being in the Pentagon. Levels to level. And they always had to call the Senator’s office
1094 to confirm with the Senator’s office that I was legit. That was in 1988 [Laughs]. High, top security.
1095 I was delivering to the Secretary of Defense. But one time—I always took the cab down, carrying
1096 this confidential envelope [Laughs], riding a cab! One time the cab’s wheel had a flat on the way
1097 down there. So I said, ‘I’ll just walk; it’s just right over there.’ [Gasps] It wasn’t like that at all!
1098 [Laughs] Yeah, it wasn’t like that at all, and I had to walk really far before I could get to the
1099 pentagon. And of course, you can just see it right there, but you can’t get across. But that was quite
1100 an experience. And at that time, it was before Campaign Finance Reform. So every night there’s
1101 always receptions for staff and for Senators. But Senators don’t go, they just send staffers. We’d get
1102 free meals, elaborate food, everything, every night, every night—almost every night. Lunch—and
1103 we’d have all these lobbyists always throwing parties. But once you’re involved in lobbying work,
1104 it’s the staff that you need to build a relationship with, it’s not the Senators themselves, because the
1105 staff does all the work. And so they knew it well—but that was my first learning experience. So I
1106 came back and I said, ‘I want to change my major.’ So I changed my major to Political Science.
1107 And I also said I want to know more about the Minnesota system, so I wrote letters to all of the
1108 Minnesota State Senators and Representatives. And Representative Andy Dawkins was the only one
1109 that responded. Andy Dawkins used to represent the Frogtown area. He held the position that Cy
1110 [Thao] is holding now. He said, ‘We probably don’t have a job for you, but I’d like to have your
1111 help. So we were door-knocking in Frogtown, 1988, and trying to canvass the community—we
1112 asked the community for support. And that was when I realized the number of Hmong people in
1113 Frogtown. Like per block you’re probably looking at at least two thirds or half of the people on
1114 each block are Hmong, happen to be Hmong. So we were doing the Homestead program and
1115 trying to get the support of his constituents. And then [I] found a job with State Senator Joe
1116 Bertram, from Paynesville, and Scott Magnuson, who is still at the Senate right now, at the Senate
1117 information office. Each time I go there he still recognizes me [Laughs]. [He] still remembers who
1118 I am, you know? And I worked for Senator Joe Bertram. Joe Bertram was from the Paynesville
1119 area. And I did a lot of similar things like I did in Washington, D.C.—draft letters for the Senator,
1120 do reports, research. He was doing a lot of work on POW-MIA. And that’s when I hooked him up
1121 with General Vang Pao—at that time. And we were working with an organization called ‘Minnesota
1122 Won’t Forget,’ which is a POW-MIA organization based here.

1123
1124 **(46:25) Now when did you first meet General Vang Pao?**

1125 I met General Vang Pao when I was...[Pauses]...I think I was in high school, providing security
1126 [Laughs]. General Vang Pao came and had dinner at Dr. Yang Dao’s house on the east side (Dr.
1127 Yang Dao used to live in the Payne-Phalen area). And they were having dinner over there, and they
1128 asked my kung fu master, a Hmong person (Yang Long. He lives in Appleton now) to bring all of
1129 us over there for security detail. So we were providing security. I was in charge of making sure that
1130 no one touched the food [Laughs]. I could look at it, but I couldn’t eat it. And then after that I was
1131 moved into the back yard just to provide security detail back there. I’m thinking I was at that time,
1132 you know? I mean, think about it. You think you can live forever, and someone can just come in
1133 and knock us off [Laughs]. So that’s when I met Dr. Yang Dao officially, in that capacity, and also
1134 General Vang Pao. That was the first time I met General Vang Pao. And Dr. Yang Dao—we kind
1135 of met before because he came to some of our king fu events, but this was all in high school. But

1136 that was how—but yeah, when I worked for Senator Joe Bertram, we worked with General Vang
1137 Pao. And here’s what I told General Vang Pao: I said, ‘The POW-MIAs—you know which plane
1138 goes down where, and your men know which ones you were able to save and which ones you
1139 weren’t able to rescue, okay? So here’s an opportunity to, as a good gesture, as a partnership, as
1140 friends, here’s a good way for you to help ‘Minnesota Won’t Forget’ identify where these sites are.’
1141 And he said, ‘Well, it’s a long time ago, we don’t know,’ and all that stuff, but we were working with
1142 him, and then I quit my job and went to work (this is after I graduated. And then I went to work)
1143 for Hmong Youth Association of Minnesota as a youth counselor, because I felt that now that I had
1144 legislative experiences and knew how to break down barriers, that I would be much more efficient
1145 and effective helping my community by working in the community. So that’s why I decided to take
1146 that youth counselor position, working with serious juvenile offenders. And then after a year the
1147 director left, and I became the executive director, and moved the agency from a \$25,000 budget to
1148 half a million dollars a year.

1149
1150 **(49:50) What kinds of things are involved in that institution? What were you trying to**
1151 **accomplish?**

1152 Well, there’s a couple of things. One is to keep the kids away from—well, career exploration was a
1153 key thing, and really helping young people explore various options that they have in life. The second
1154 piece was to keep kids away from criminal activities. At the time, gang activity was on the rise,
1155 particularly ‘smash and grab’ activities where the kids would drive into gun shops and then scoop all
1156 the guns into the car and drive off [Laughs]. And then home invasion. They would go into the
1157 houses and tie people up, then rob them and then leave. And so to create a program, a diversion
1158 program for them. And then mentorship. I probably started the first program for young girls,
1159 young women, because I was concerned that some of the young women that we worked with were
1160 getting married while they were in junior high and high school. At that time it was pretty acceptable,
1161 because the community was still very traditional. And I was concerned, because here you have these
1162 young girls, and then next week comes, and ‘Where is the other one?’ Well, ‘She got married’
1163 [Laughs]. And then I would hear the other one say, ‘Well I’m getting married because all of my
1164 friends are getting married.’ And I was saying, ‘No, you don’t have to get married because all of
1165 your friends are getting married.’ So I created a mentorship program, basically identifying mentors
1166 out there, working mentors out there, where the mentors would have lunch with the mentees once a
1167 month so they could have a conversation, explore various career options. We would take them out
1168 to the various work sites so they knew what their options were. We would take them to college—
1169 this was like 1990 I was doing this [Laughs], 1991. I think that was part of—again, being in the
1170 Capitol, being in Washington D.C., seeing how important education was in really helping some of
1171 the young girls already, and then creating a program working with serious juvenile offenders. I
1172 remember one agency that will remain nameless came to me and said, ‘Lee Pao, what are you
1173 wasting all this money for working with all these lost kids?’ And I said, well, these are our kids.
1174 Whenever they commit a crime—front page news—they didn’t say ‘This is another person’s kid,’
1175 they said, ‘This is a Hmong kid’ [Laughs]. I mean, these kids, they say, ‘Well, they don’t care about
1176 the Hmong people, but these kids, they feel strongly about the Hmong, their Hmongness. I mean
1177 they have great and strong self-identity and cultural identity. They just happen to hang around the
1178 wrong crowd. So I was doing that and...[Pauses]...Bob Fletcher, who is now Sheriff Bob Fletcher,
1179 was a good partner of mine. And that’s where Bill Snyder [a sergeant in the St. Paul Police Force’s
1180 Asian Gang Strike Force and creator of the Mike Force] to Joe (***)—all of these guys were all my
1181 partners [Laughs], and we crafted many programs together, and one year we had a double suicide—I
1182 mean murder, on West Seventh. There’s two gas stations before you approach the airport—there’s
1183 two gas stations on the right, one on the left. The—(I can’t think of the name of that gang)—one

1184 night they robbed the two gas stations simultaneously and executed the owners in there [Laughs],
1185 and executed in cold blood. I mean, they were lying down and BOOM. And one of them was a
1186 customer. And so two people died in two, two (I think—it's been a while). And there was great
1187 negative media. And they caught all the kids [Laughs]. And that gang was the first time ever that
1188 the Cambodian, the Hmong, and the Vietnamese gangs came together. That was the first time that
1189 all the gangs kind of joined in together. And after they arrested those guys that gang kind of
1190 dismantled, which is great [Laughs]. Otherwise it would have been really bad. And I credit United
1191 Cambodian Association for being able to work with the Cambodian Creepers [Cripps?] (that was the
1192 name of the gang back then). And at that time White Tigers and Cobras were very much famous
1193 back then. So we worked with all of those. And then Sheriff Bob Fletcher and I, and Joe (***), we
1194 decided, 'Let's pull all of these organizations together.' I mean, it's ridiculous that everyone's
1195 fighting among themselves for funding. And so I told Sheriff Fletcher that what you need to do is,
1196 you need to take the initiative, because if Lee Pao takes the initiative as director of the Hmong
1197 Youth Association, the other MAAs—Hmong American Partnership, Lao Family, Association for
1198 the Advancement of Hmong Women, Women's Association of Hmong and Lao will think that Lee
1199 Pao has an agenda. I have no agenda. My agenda is the kids, [Laughs] is to be able to help the kids.
1200 So you take the initiative. And he did, and we went to the State Legislature and we called it the
1201 Southeast Asian Gang Prevention Program. (I think that's what it was called.) And we went to
1202 Randy Kelly, and Randy Kelly introduced the first legislation to appropriate money for this initiative.
1203 Give Randy Kelly credit: \$500,000 a year for this initiative. And then the state heard about it, the
1204 (***) office heard about it and said, 'We have an opportunity to apply for some federal money.
1205 Would you be interested?' And so, of course, we all said, 'Let's do it. Let's leverage this money.'
1206 But they brought in the Vietnamese, they brought in the Lao and the Cambodians. It was more
1207 beyond than just Hmong now. And so we called ourselves the Southeast Asian Community
1208 Coalition for Youth and Families. And we went to the Fed and we got a million dollars, divvied up
1209 the money, and we kind of coordinated the services—basically, 'You take care of this gang group, I
1210 take care of that gang group,' and 'You take care of this age group, we'll take care of the parent over
1211 here.' We all divided up. That was very coordinated, very innovative. Because then we were also
1212 able to share case files. So we know for sure that you're not going to be served to death and that
1213 this person is not going to receive any services—you know, to make sure that you receive the
1214 services that you need, but at the same time that person receive the services that they need, but at
1215 the same time, be able to tap into other services; sort of like an all-inclusive, in-house package.
1216 That's what we were doing—very innovative at that time. And then Hmong American Partnership
1217 was very controversial. Because when Hmong American Partnership was founded, it was founded
1218 by Christopher Thao, the first Hmong attorney in the world. And Dr. Yang Dao was a part of it—
1219 Neal Thao, former school board member, and now a social worker in Ramsey [County] and also
1220 teaches at Metro State. He was also one of the founders. They founded that organization—very
1221 controversial. Lao Family, General Vang Pao and all these groups called the organization a
1222 communist organization, lots of death threats and all of that, and yeah, it was really amazing just to
1223 see all of this happen in the community. And here I was, a naïve young person [Laughs]

1224
1225 **(58:24) Was there something apart from this organization being founded outside the**
1226 **auspices of Lao Family and other organizations that alarmed people, or was there**
1227 **something else going on?**

1228 Well, I think it was more—they'd say Dr. Yang Dao is a communist. They labeled Dr. Yang Dao as
1229 a communist back then, and Dr. Yang Dao was involved in it, so they accused the organization of
1230 channeling funding to the communist Lao government, to buy helicopters to kill people, you know?
1231 But Hmong American partnership initially talked about a program to send nurses and doctors and

1232 medical supplies to villages in Laos, and also to build a school in Laos, and they say that by doing
1233 that you are indirectly financing the Lao government and supporting the Lao government's
1234 oppression of Hmong people. So that's their argument [Laughs]. And it was a \$25,000 project—I
1235 mean, holy smokes. The executive director, who was a Caucasian—he resigned. He retired, more
1236 or less, and then they searched for an executive director. And so we were meeting at the Capitol,
1237 and one of the staff persons at Hmong American Partnership—we were talking about the position
1238 and the development director over there said, 'Lee Pao, you don't have the guts to apply for this
1239 position' [Interviewer guffaws]. Wrong move [Laughs]. I was really happy where I was.

1240

1241 **(59:59) May as well have tried to beat you up!**

1242 Yeah, I was really happy where I was over at Hmong Youth Association, I was building the
1243 organization, we had half a million dollars, twelve staff, and over ten programs, and she said, 'You
1244 don't have the guts to apply for this. You're too afraid of controversies.' And so at 4 o'clock
1245 [Interviewer laughs] the day the application was due, I dropped [off] my resume. And [the rest is]
1246 history [Laughs]. And then they did all the interviews, and I became the executive director of
1247 Hmong American Partnership. And I started a lot of the self-sufficiency programs, I brought many
1248 of the—[Pauses] serviced juveniles, I created the first after-care program to work with serious
1249 juvenile offenders that were Southeast Asians in Minnesota. And it was a combination of hiring a
1250 social worker who would be housed at the probation office and working closely with families.
1251 'Cause many of the kids that came out of corrections—they came out corrected, reformed, but they
1252 came back to the same environment that got them into trouble in the first place. So we wanted to
1253 change the family environment. We knew we couldn't change society, but we could change the
1254 family environment. Our first test was—we received a \$50,000 grant from the state to work with 50
1255 kids. And of that, 47 became crime-free; only three went back to the system [Laughs]. And that was
1256 probably my proudest program. And before that, they were repeat offenders, going back and forth.
1257 But what we did was we brought the family into the system, educated the family about what the kid
1258 is receiving, and let the kid interact with the parents to understand what the parental expectations
1259 were. So you basically opened up clear communications so you don't assume, you don't make
1260 assumptions.

1261

1262 **(1:02:09) I assume a lot of these parents are maybe working two jobs and very busy, and**
1263 **so—**

1264 Yeah, but when their kids are—[Laughs]

1265 **Oh, yeah, but I assume that's how many of them got into trouble to begin with...**

1266 Yeah, yeah. That's what it is. But once the kid understood the parental expectations, that all
1267 changed. To this day I still dread—and City, Inc. We were working with City, Inc. in Minneapolis,
1268 and at that time City, Inc. was very controversial, too—working with gang members. But I saw that
1269 that program was a good model program for us. In order to address crime, gang issues, you had to
1270 have somebody that's involved in that activity to participate, to work with you, so they can talk from
1271 experience instead of an educator or somebody that has no experience and is telling you, 'That's not
1272 good.' [Laughs]

1273

1274 **(1:03:00) What year did Hmong American Partnership—**

1275 Hmong American Partnership was founded in 1990—I think it was like '89, '90, around there.

1276

1277 [Interviewer switches tape over, but digital recorder is still running]

1278

1279 1:03:29

1280 But yeah, Hmong American Partnership was very much—and the other thing that I did at Hmong
1281 American Partnership which I was really proud of was I brought structure to the organization. I
1282 changed my management team, reorganized my management team. J. Kou Vang, who is with JB
1283 Realty, was my director of finance and operations—which was really fascinating. When he applied
1284 for the job, I said, ‘Why would you want to work here?’ Well, [he answered], ‘I heard a lot of good
1285 things about you and I want to work for you.’ Cool [Laughs]! What a good way to boost my ego!
1286 But he was very good, too. He was very good. Now he’s running the 12th-largest real estate
1287 company in Minnesota. So he’s doing all right [Laughs]. And then while I was doing work at
1288 Hmong American Partnership [I] received—it’s kind of interesting. The first week I was there I
1289 received a death threat, with a bullet mailed.

1290
1291 **(1:04:37) Oh, very nice!**

1292 Yeah, they mailed the bullet and the death threat, and said, ‘We know what kind of car you drive:
1293 you drive this car and the license plate is like this and if you don’t have a life insurance policy for
1294 you, then go and get a life insurance policy, because this bullet is going to lodge between your neck
1295 and your ear.’

1296 **Nice.**

1297 [Laughs] ‘And we know that you come to work at this time...’ [Voice rises] They did all of that!
1298 They did their research! And so what I did is I turned around—and I won’t name that person—but
1299 I turned around and wrote a letter to that particular person, because I knew who that person was.

1300
1301 **(1:05:16) How?**

1302 I kind of had a hunch I knew who that person was...And this is how I knew: when I was at Hmong
1303 Youth Association, after all these controversies between Hmong American Partnership, Lao Family,
1304 General Vang Pao, Dr. Yang Dao—all this infighting in the Hmong community, I talked to William
1305 Yang, who is now executive director of Hmong American Partnership, and I said, ‘Let’s cut the crap.
1306 Somebody’s going to get hurt, because a lot of death threats are flying around.’ And I said, ‘William,
1307 why don’t you talk to the Mayor. Let’s have the Mayor pull all of the groups together?’ (I was
1308 working secretly behind the scenes, [Laughs] working on both sides.) Because people respected
1309 people in positions of authority in our community. And so let the Mayor take the lead. So the
1310 Mayor—we concocted a plan to bring them all together and to say, ‘Stop this stuff.’ In this room,
1311 going to the heads and telling them to do this. And then, of course, one party member decided not
1312 to participate, because he said, ‘I don’t view that person as a leader of the community, so I’m not
1313 going to show up.’ And so we had to go to Plan B, and Plan B was that then the Mayor would sit
1314 down separately with each of the groups, and one of the groups came and said, ‘Would you help us
1315 draft a message?’ because they didn’t know that I was behind the whole thing. So I helped them
1316 draft the note [Laughs]. That’s how I knew: the handwriting, the style, the speaking tone, all of that.
1317 And so when I got the letter threatening letter I wrote back to them and said, ‘Don’t think that by
1318 eliminating me you eliminate a whole bunch of people with my mindset. There’s a lot of people like
1319 me out there. So you’re going to go and kill off everybody that thinks like me [Laughs]? I know
1320 that you’re committed to the Hmong community, and you know that I’m committed to the Hmong
1321 community, so let’s just work together and let’s move the community forward. And the guy wrote
1322 back and he demanded that I send two elders to his house and apologize. And I said, ‘No, I’m not
1323 going to do that [Laughs]. And then later on my Xiong clan basically confronted this man, too,
1324 (‘cause they’re part of the same political parties) and said, ‘Did you write the letter?’ And he never
1325 answered. So he did [Laughs]. But that’s how I—and one thing I learned from that experience:
1326 you learn by mistakes. What I learned from that experience is, next time when you know it’s that
1327 person who’s threatening you or doing something, you don’t write to him and challenge him, but

1328 you basically go ask him and say, ‘Hey, I received this letter. What should I do?’ Ask him to be part
1329 of the solution [Laughs]. Ask that person to be part of the solution, even though you know it’s that
1330 person, to see their reaction. That’s something I learned.

1331
1332 **(1:08:38) Sounds like it was effective. For someone who is outside of the Hmong**
1333 **community, could you talk for just a moment about how that process of bringing something**
1334 **to your clan’s attention works and how they decide to act on your behalf?**

1335 There are key leaders within each clan, and they’re sort of like designated as a spokesperson. And so
1336 sometimes when you have conflict between individuals, and you can’t resolve the conflict between
1337 the individuals, sometimes the clan will intervene—if it’s a major issue, they will intervene. And in
1338 this particular case I didn’t bring it to their attention, but I cc’d it to them. I wrote the letter and
1339 cc’d to them [Laughs]. So they kind of intervened on my behalf, in that sense, because then when
1340 he saw that I cc’d to all these clan leaders, what he did was that he wrote, and then he wrote the
1341 letter and cc’d all these people, too. And so they said, ‘What’s up? [Laughs] What’s between the
1342 two of you?’ And so they kind of questioned him, and he couldn’t answer. So usually you would
1343 approach—because I was a young person I didn’t know the clan structure. I didn’t know the power
1344 structure within the community. I always joked that, for Pete’s sake, my degree was in Political
1345 Science, and we’re supposed to challenge [Laughs] the actions of people, right? So here I was
1346 challenging people. And I was very controversial. Even to this day I think I am still very
1347 controversial, because the people always say, ‘You speak your mind, and you always say what’s the
1348 truth. You always tell the truth, so that’s what we respect about you.’ And I don’t think I want to
1349 be any different than that. I mean, say what needs to be said? Why beat around the bush and [snaps
1350 his fingers, as if to say, ‘Let’s get it done’]. So that’s the thing about me. So when I was there, death
1351 threats, death threats, people even—this is the pre-Caller ID days [All laugh]. People call and leave
1352 messages threatening your life. People call and you pick up the phone and they threaten your life
1353 and they hang up. There was nothing you could do back then! Now there’s Caller ID and you don’t
1354 get that anymore. I just received two letters over that, too. You just continue to—it’s like Dr. Holst
1355 says. There’s a Korean saying: the tallest tree gets the most wind. It comes with the territory, you
1356 know? So you just accept it. When I was there—at that time, at the Asian-Pacific Council, there
1357 was great controversy at the Asian-Pacific Council. I mean, holy smoke, people were suing each
1358 other left and right. The State Council of Asian Pacific Minnesotans is a state agency established by
1359 the State Legislature to advise the Governor on issues affecting the Asian-Pacific community and so
1360 on. And we had another great controversy there and members of the Vietnamese community and
1361 others came to me and said, ‘Lee Pao, why don’t you apply for that position and bring us out of this
1362 chaos?’ And I thought—you know, wherever I go I like to build things. You know, when I was at
1363 Hmong Youth I built Hmong Youth Association from the ground up. Hmong American
1364 Partnership—I built Hmong American Partnership from the ground up. Asian-Pacific Council the
1365 same thing. So I found my calling. I like to build things [Laughs]. And I feel like I’m getting pretty
1366 good at building things. So at Asian-Pacific Council, every year—every two years the Council would
1367 have to worry about the State Legislature coming down and closing down the Asian-Pacific Council.
1368 So when I got there I did a strategic planning session, went to all my other colleagues, other
1369 foreign/minority councils and said. ‘Why do we need to justify our existence every two years? Then
1370 we just focus on survival instead of doing good work for the community?’ So when I accepted that
1371 calling I went over there and introduced legislation to re-vamp the Asian-Pacific Council—not just
1372 the Asian-Pacific, the four minority councils—and to exempt councils of color from being sunsetted.
1373 And [I] participated in education reform—welfare reform was a major issue. I still feel good about
1374 the fact that I introduced up a provision into the welfare legislation which made it immigrant-
1375 friendly. So these are little things people don’t know, but [Chuckles] we contribute bits and pieces.

1376 The education reform, I was part of the whole debate about school vouchers, the debate about
1377 charter schools, land [?] schools—it came out of the Carlson administration. I worked closely with
1378 Governor Arnie Carlson on that. So we were able to inject some ideas into the legislation. I feel
1379 good about that. We got some gambling, compulsive gaming treatment programs going for the
1380 community, moved welfare reform beyond just the Southeast Asian population. I mean, I've had to
1381 tell Chinese—the Chinese and the Koreans and the Japanese communities, the Filipino communities
1382 that were established, 'This bill goes into effect, your grandma and your grandma or your mother
1383 and your father who are non-citizens in a nursing home, will be denied benefits. This is your fight as
1384 much as it is a Southeast Asian fight. So don't make it into a Southeast Asian issue [Laughs]. So
1385 Chinese, you have mom and dad in the nursing home or mom and dad at home, they're not United
1386 States citizens. Their benefits' gonna be denied, so this is your fight.' That's what I was saying. So I
1387 was able to unite the more than 40 Asian ethnic groups in Minnesota into one group, [an] effective
1388 voice. People said it couldn't be done. I said, 'Yes it can—right issues.'

1389
1390 **(1:15:21) Find the common interests.**

1391 Absolutely. If you don't find the right issues and common interests, it's not gonna work. And so
1392 we exempted the councils of color from being sunsetted, we also prevented the governor from
1393 arbitrarily removing board members. Board members were appointed by the governor. And so I
1394 introduced legislation in there, language in there to say that the governor cannot remove officers,
1395 board members, without notice and hearings, and without cause [Laughs]. So de-politicize it.
1396 Before the governor could come in and pick you up and pick you up and push you out and put in
1397 whoever he wants to. So it was a political thing and I said, 'No, let's keep it away. Keep it neutral.'
1398 That language, I put that in there and I said, 'You can't do that. Let's change that.' So that's why
1399 the councils—they're not sunsetting and they have a good structure in place and development and—
1400 I figure that development can, to some extent—at Concordia, there was a meeting that [Vice
1401 President] Mike Flynn organized and Pastor Kou Seying organized to talk about training DAs and
1402 TAs for licensure—the SEAT [Southeast Asian Teacher] program. At that time it was not the SEAT
1403 program [Laughs]. And I was part of the advisory group and I went to Mike and I said to Mike,
1404 'Why don't you go to the State Legislature and ask for some money?' And Mike kind of whispered
1405 and said, 'We have this position; would you be interested?' And I said, 'Send it to me.' And so he
1406 sent it to me, and I said, 'OK, fine, I'll put my name in there.' So I put my name in there and then
1407 BFI International, the trash company, also—the director of community relations position was
1408 available, and they were offering me that position, too. And so Concordia was delaying offering
1409 their position, so I almost took the BFO job. And BFI flew me down to Texas and I met with the
1410 CEO. I met with the management team and everything, and they were putting a package together,
1411 and I said, 'Am I going to get this position or am I going to go over there?' The package over there
1412 was great [Laughs]!

1413
1414 **(1:17:52) Oh, I have no doubt!**

1415 It was really, really, really good.

1416 **Corporate America versus Concordia?**

1417 Yeah, it was very, very good, but you know what? What changed my mind was in my conversation
1418 with the CEO (I think he was ****), he said, 'If we're going to put a landfill here, your job would be
1419 to go and convince the community that it's safe to put it there. And that kind of got to my
1420 conscience. You know, I'm not going to lie [Laughs]! I'm not going to go tell them that their
1421 landfill's going to be bad environmentally—not environmentally sound, and that it's going to have
1422 all kinds of health effects on people there! I'm not going to go and lie to them! So that was the
1423 turning point for me. The money was good, the travel, the perks, everything was great, but the

1424 conscience—I mean, I just couldn't do that. I just couldn't do that. So I kind of waited to see what
1425 Concordia would offer. And they were offering—when I came here from the Asian-Pacific Council
1426 to Concordia, I took a pay cut.

1427
1428 **(1:18:59) Oh, I have no doubt!**

1429 [Laughs] I took a \$20,000 pay cut. But it's like doing the work that you want to do and that you like
1430 and that you see value in. I mean, that's for me; that's the most important thing. And so I came
1431 here. Brenda Legred was probably the best boss I ever had. She was the best. She was always
1432 encouraging me, always commenting positively on my work, and she was the greatest. Every day
1433 she was, 'Have a great day, Lee Pao!'

1434
1435 **(1:19:38) I never saw her angry or cross at all about anything.**

1436 Yeah! She was wonderful. That's the best boss that you could ask for. So I did that, and then I had
1437 a chance to go work on my doctorate. I won a Bush Fellowship to work on my doctorate. But I
1438 didn't finish it—two more classes to go.

1439
1440 **(1:20:00) [Hillmer turned to Mai Neng Vang and Youa Vang to see if they had any questions**
1441 **to ask] Youa: About the mentorship program—how successful was it? Did the parents**
1442 **allow their daughters to participate in it?**

1443 Yeah, it was very successful, because what we did was we—the person that coordinated that was not
1444 a Hmong person, but an American young lady. And so she—if you put a Hmong person there, it
1445 might not be successful [Laughs]. And also we needed somebody that would be able to connect
1446 with mainstream—I mean, these are some top women leaders out there. And just to give them, just
1447 to say, 'Wow, I'd like to be like you,' but just to have these people give the time of day once a month
1448 to have lunch with young ladies, young Hmong ladies, that was just amazing, too. So it was a good
1449 program. And when we did the Career Connection program at Hmong American Partnership—that
1450 was also to—that was a college program. And they're not doing it now, which is too bad. This is
1451 the time when students need it the most. Even when I was at Hmong Youth, what we also did that
1452 I forgot to mention was that we created a Hmong Higher Education Encouragement Program to
1453 work with—we knew that the ACT test determined the amount of scholarship you're going to
1454 receive, the school you're going to go to, if you're going to be accepted so we worked with—and
1455 this is where I worked with Dr. Yang Dao, too. We want the student to prepare for the ACT test.
1456 We worked with 11th graders. And we would bring the 11th graders to our center for tutoring. We
1457 would also bring [them] to the center for math, science, and comprehension—reading
1458 comprehension. And we contracted with Stanley Kaplan Test Center to do that. So they were
1459 doing that. And then we also contracted with Dr. Yang Dao to teach them Hmong history, because
1460 we wanted them to be grounded in Hmongness [Laughs] as well, because once you know who you
1461 are, then you feel proud and you want to work harder. And so we kind of built all of that. Some of
1462 our students went on to Harvard, went on to some of the best schools—Harvard, Princeton—so it
1463 was a very good, successful program as well. But the other program I was talking about—
1464 Mentorship and Correct Connection at Hmong American Partnership—what we found was that
1465 students, college students, during their second year and third year is when they drop out. Because
1466 during their third year they realize, 'I don't want to go into Accounting [Laughs]. This is the wrong
1467 field for me.' You know what I'm saying? Or second year, 'This is terrible! I don't want to do this!'
1468 And then by that time it's too late. It's too late. And so some time the option is you either go to
1469 school more or you drop out. So we didn't want to see that happen. So we created a Career
1470 Connection program, so that when you're in your first or second year, you say you're going to
1471 declare an Accounting major or Economics or Finance major. We will find somebody in the

1472 Finance field to pair with you. And so you will have ongoing mentorship with that particular
1473 person. So then you will know everything, so by the time you get to that point you already know
1474 what you want to do. And if you don't know what you want to do in the beginning, and you learn
1475 that that's not the field where you want to go, then you change, or you can say, 'I want to go.' So
1476 the Career Connection—that's where Mai Neng Moua and (there are other people, but it's been so
1477 long...) many other people who are active in the community now—they were my students back
1478 then! That's just to show how old I am [Laughs]! That's like when Professor *Houa Ka Lia* [??] was
1479 saying, 'Yeah, I read so much about you when I was in high school, and when I told my dad I was
1480 coming to see you, I was so excited,' and I said, 'Boy, that makes me feel old [Laughs]. But those
1481 are some innovative programs that I created—no, that many of us created back then, I would say. I
1482 don't want to take all the credit, but many of us created, because we didn't have those programs in
1483 place. We were the first generation of college-educated in America. And we did everything
1484 ourselves. We had to tumble and stumble through darkness to get to where we are. So we were
1485 like, 'Here's an opportunity to do something for the next generation.' And right now I see it's hard
1486 for an old geezer like me who's been around for so long to see no innovation emerging out of many
1487 of these organizations. I mean, it just bugs the heck out of me. It just bugs the heck out of me, but
1488 that's the social justice in me, just to say, 'I don't see nay innovation. I see complacency.' You don't
1489 see leadership emerging, you just see management—you know, people who are just managers—
1490 same old, same old, same old stuff. I mean, you would think that after almost 20 years now you
1491 would see innovation coming out of these organizations. It's a job, it's not a passion. Back then it
1492 was my passion. I felt passionately about it, and so I was doing things because I wanted to do, and I
1493 wanted to see it happen. And that's a big difference nowadays. People are just too relaxed and—I
1494 was in Florida this past week and there was this speaker there, and one of the takeaways from that
1495 speaker was, 'Somewhere along the way we've lost our moral anger, and it is up to us to find that
1496 moral anger back.

1497
1498 **(1:26:24) Outrage.**

1499 Yeah. Because we're always so complacent, you know, and we always say, 'This is good enough,'
1500 and we leave it at that. We don't say there's more. Maybe that's why I'm starting to read all these
1501 self-help books [Laughs]—just to tell myself, 'Lee Pao, this is not your battle anymore. This is other
1502 people's battles. That's why when the Hmong American Partnership does things or the Asian-
1503 Pacific Council does things, or other community [agencies] do things, I don't try to go, because I
1504 don't want to want to go there just to vent my anger.

1505
1506 **(1:27:04) You get all worked up?**

1507 Yeah, to get all worked up and I'm just like, 'It's their turn. Let's see how they're going to do it.'
1508 And so the mentorship is very, very important. I think our mentorship program is very important.
1509 And I think we should think about—that's why for me, to see all of you guys, the seniors [at
1510 Concordia], the seniors and the juniors mentoring some of the younger freshman students. That
1511 was my passion back then, to see that happen. I think that's wonderful, that's what they need,
1512 because when you—you remember the first time you go to school, you're lost, you don't know—
1513 and that's why I fought so hard to get the [President's] house [now the home of the Center for
1514 Hmong Studies]. Come over and get—develop your identity, secure your base first, and then we
1515 can be integrated, but don't be too comfortable in one area. Because you continue to be isolated,
1516 and you don't want to be isolated, and you need to continue to be integrated into the larger campus
1517 community. Because if you don't so that, the larger campus community is very comfortable; they've
1518 been here for over 100 years [Laughs]. They've been doing the same thing all the time! So let's look
1519 at how we can (I call it) introduce Hmongness—that's what I always say—in terms of classes. Let's

1520 see how we can introduce Hmongness into the Political Science course or into International
1521 Relations—it's there, you know? Make it relevant for the population that's here, as well as for the
1522 population around us, so that you can have a perspective, because it's not that you can't so it—yes
1523 you can. It can be incorporated. And that's the same thing with people, with students. You can
1524 incorporate students into the life of the community. When I went to the University of Minnesota, I
1525 had no affinity to the university. I didn't even go to my graduation [Laughs]. I didn't go to my
1526 Bachelor's degree graduation, my Master's degree graduation. My excuse is, 'I'm not done' [Laughs].
1527 Wait until I'm done and I'll come and get the degree. You can send it to me [Laughs]. But I think
1528 it's the loyalty to the institution. And the reason I don't have the loyalty to the institution is it's the
1529 tool to help us get to where we want to go. It's not an end-all for all. And I think for mainstream
1530 America, for European students, it's different. Sometimes it's, 'Oh, this is mine. I'm here, part of
1531 here.' But I think for Asians it's like, 'This is a tool to help us get to where we want to go' [Laughs].
1532 So there's no ownership, to some extent. So with me knowing that, how do we create that kind of
1533 ownership here with a new generation of students, so that when you leave this institution you feel
1534 proud: 'This is my institution. I graduated from there.'

1535
1536 **(1:30:11) Well, speaking of something you must be proud of, how did President Clinton**
1537 **appoint you to the Presidential Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and**
1538 **what was that experience like?**

1539 I had always been an activist, active not only locally, but nationally as well. I knew a lot of friends in
1540 Washington, D.C., too, and I guess one day—I was here at Concordia. I went on vacation to Gull
1541 Lake, and Mary Voyda, who was the secretary here, called me up and said, 'Lee Pao! The White
1542 House is looking for you!' And I said, 'Yeah, right.' 'Yeah, somebody called from the White House
1543 and said they're looking for you. Here's the phone number. You need to call them right away.
1544 They want to talk to you right away!' So I saw [area code] 202—that's Washington, D.C.! So I
1545 called and it was the White House! [Laughs]. And **Laura Efert** (??) was the person I was supposed
1546 to call. So I called and said, 'This is Lee Pao. I understand you're looking for me.' And she said,
1547 'Yeah! The President would like to meet with you.' 'About what?' 'Anything that you want to talk
1548 about.' That was pretty broad, you know? It made me nervous [Laughs]! 'Anything you want to
1549 talk about—community issues.' And I said, 'Yeah, that's fine, but when would the President like to
1550 meet with me?' Now this was a Tuesday and they said Thursday. 'Can you fly out here on Thursday
1551 to meet with the President?' And I said, 'OK.' So I called back [to Mary Voyda] and said, 'Make the
1552 flight arrangement' [Laughs]. And so I flew out there and when I got to the White House I was
1553 sitting in the lobby area and saw some people I knew, and met with the President. And what I
1554 brought to talk to the President about was, one, issues of mental health. And I told the president—
1555 and I brought the issue [of] that Hmong [1:32:22 - speaks in Hmong for a second or two], that
1556 Hmong Her family or Kong family that killed six of her children at McDonough [Laughs]. She
1557 killed them all. And I said, 'President Clinton, you've done a great job of Americanizing, you've
1558 done a great job of settling the Hmong people and the Southeast Asian population after the Vietnam
1559 War, so I thank you for that, but one thing that you're missing: you forgot that we came from a
1560 war-torn country with war trauma [Laughs]. And I said, right now what you have, what you see
1561 within the community, the murder, suicide rate within the community has gone up. And at that time
1562 it was once, twice every year we see something like that. And I said, 'This is a mental health issue, in
1563 that now people have a roof over their heads, food on the table, and now they start thinking about
1564 all the losses in their lives. Why can't my father be here to share this wealth with me? Why can't my
1565 mother be here? My understanding is' (and I did my research) 'there is no dollars available to
1566 address mental health issues within the Southeast Asian population. That is very broad.' So I said,
1567 'There are no resources, and if you would consider allocating resources to address mental health

1568 issues within the Southeast Asian population, that would be wonderful.’ The second piece was the
1569 Bruce Vento bill, the Hmong Naturalization Act. And I told President Clinton, ‘You know, for the
1570 sake of honoring Bruce Vento, Congressman Bruce Vento.’ This is something that he’s been
1571 pushing since 1990. I heard about it in 1988, when I was in Washington, D.C. There was a
1572 conversation about it—I think it was introduced later on. And I said, ‘The Naturalization Act will
1573 not provide for citizenship. It only provides an interpreter in the room. So I think you should
1574 support that bill.’ And he said, ‘What is that bill?’ So I had the bill number and I had the author and
1575 I said, ‘Here’s the bill number’ (I forget the number now) ‘and here’s the author, I appreciate it if
1576 you support it. It passed the House already.’ So he wrote it down—he was taking notes! I was
1577 pleased! He was really good, because the minute you walk in, he stood up—he’s such a charismatic
1578 leader, it’s amazing. He stood right up, shook hands, calls you right by the name, and pronounced
1579 my name correctly [Laughs]. I was surprised—I went ‘Ooo!’ But what I talked to him also was the
1580 issue of juvenile delinquency, because that’s an issue I feel passionately about, because I’ve been
1581 working on that issue. So I brought all of the issues I feel passionately about. I don’t care what the
1582 community said [Laughs], but I knew that was an issue that the community cared about! So juvenile
1583 delinquency—and I said, ‘The last time the community received support from the federal
1584 government was the million dollars we received from the Administration for Children, Youth, and
1585 Families, part of the Department of Health and Human Services. And so what you see here now,
1586 the murder/suicide, the juvenile delinquency—they’re all tied in together. And so we’d love to have
1587 your support on that as well. And if you can allocate some resources through the Department of
1588 Justice of the Department of Health and Human Services, that would be wonderful. So those were
1589 three things that I talked to him about. And I talked to him about the fact that—and when I
1590 mentioned to him the cases of the six children, he read that story. He said, ‘Oh yeah, I heard about
1591 that! That was a tragedy.’ So to have the President be— [Laughs]. And then I also told him, ‘You
1592 know there’s ten million Hmong worldwide and eight million in China,’ and he said, ‘How many? I
1593 didn’t know that!’ I said, ‘Yeah. There’s only 300,000 Hmong in the United States, but there’s eight
1594 million in China. And then we started talking about China. And he said there were a lot of people
1595 in Congress that wanted to make China the enemy of the United States of America. And he said,
1596 ‘That is just plain wrong.’ So it was a fascinating kind of—I said I had my 15—I don’t know. I
1597 must have been 15 minutes or 20 minutes of fame with him [All laugh]. And that’s—the picture you
1598 have there [He has a picture in the Center for Hmong Studies of himself shaking President Clinton’s
1599 hand] is a picture of when I first entered the room. And he came in and shook my hand. That’s the
1600 picture. The press photographer took that picture—the White House press photographer. And that
1601 was a fascinating time. During his first term, I worked on his campaign. And, in fact, there’s a
1602 picture that was printed in the *Star Tribune* where I was standing behind him [Laughs]. I don’t know
1603 where that picture is. I’ve moved so many times! But I want to get that picture. I was standing
1604 right behind him! He was standing right here, and my friend and I were standing behind him. But
1605 after that I was so—lost touch, and then afterward—I think that meeting was his way of
1606 interviewing for the commission. There were going to be 16 of us seated on the commission—the
1607 President’s Advisory Commission on Asian American Affairs, and we were going to advise him
1608 on—and we produced a really thick report [Laughs]. We were going to advise him on issues—
1609 health disparities to looking at ways we can integrate Asian/Pacific Islanders into government
1610 programs, and vice versa. And Norman Mineta was there chair. So I sat on that Commission with
1611 the inventor of the Pentium chip, the inventor of the AIDS drugs to suppress the—he was Dr.
1612 David Ho. There were just all these people, and I felt like I was—here I was the youngest around,
1613 the youngest, and the person with the least experience, and you have all these people with wealth.
1614 And we had a lady in there that, everywhere we go, she would bring her own wine bottle. They were
1615 expensive! And she would drink the wine and say, ‘Oh, this is terrible!’ And so everywhere we go,

1616 she would bring her own wine [Laughs]. That's the world, that's the life that all the others have
1617 lived! But that was really fascinating. Clinton was amazing. We had several interactions with him,
1618 and it was a good time. I learned a lot. We did a lot of traveling throughout the country listening to
1619 people. And I was telling my colleagues that the report that we provided to Clinton was probably
1620 the most comprehensive report that's ever been done on the needs of the API community—
1621 Asian/Pacific Islander community—in the United States. And that was the first time ever. That
1622 was all from all regions of the United States. We even had a hearing here in Minnesota to get input
1623 from the API community. So that was a highlight. I think that was a highlight. And then the other
1624 piece was getting appointed by [Minnesota Governor Jesse] Ventura—Jesse Ventura. I worked for
1625 two of the most controversial people [Laughs]. Jesse Ventura—and he appointed me to represent
1626 the City of St. Paul, Falcon Heights, and Lauderdale on the Met[ropolitan] Council. So the Met
1627 Council basically—the bus systems, Como Regional—the Regional Park system, sewage treatment
1628 plants, money for affordable housing, all of that—that's under the Met Council. Regional
1629 planning—a city cannot grow without the authorization of the Met Council. That's how powerful
1630 the Met Council is. They govern the seven county metro area; and that's why cities sue the Met
1631 Council [Laughs], because they say, 'You know, we don't believe that we're going to grow this
1632 much,' but the Met Council said, 'Yes, you will.' Or they said, 'No, we're not going to build enough
1633 housing.' Met Council says, 'Yes, you will, to accommodate the growth in population. You can't
1634 keep people out. We want you to build the infrastructure so you can accommodate the growth in
1635 the population.' And I was the chair of one of the two most powerful committees: the Livable
1636 Communities Committee, which is the community development committee, and provides money for
1637 [brown ?] clean-up, parks, housing and that. And then the other powerful committee would be the
1638 transportation committee. And we built the light rail line [Laughs]. If it weren't for Ventura the
1639 light rail line would not have gone up. If it weren't for our term, it wouldn't have happened. So
1640 when they asked me to run—I chaired the Audit Committee (and that's basically to make sure that
1641 all the money gets spent appropriately). I also chaired the Livable Communities Committee. And
1642 it's great to be sitting in there with mayors—you got former mayors, former senators, former city
1643 council members, and here I was, this activist [Laughs], herding cows and making decisions,
1644 spending millions of dollars. That was also just amazing. It was a good time, it was a lot of learning,
1645 but it was a learning time. It was a fascinating time. You get to see how government really works.
1646 When I worked with [Governor] Arnie Carlson at the Capitol—it's fascinating. And all of my
1647 experience has always been like that. So when the Mayor and my good friend at the City of
1648 Minneapolis called and said, 'Would you come and run—we're consolidating departments here at
1649 the city and we're merging development with planning. Would you come and put the Housing
1650 Department together?' And I was in charge of 40 staff—over 40 staff and over \$44 million—
1651 housing dollars and development dollars. And my first interaction with the union...[Sighs]. If
1652 you're unionized, it's great for you. If you're a leader or a manager, and a political appointee, it's not
1653 too good [Laughs]. 'Cause you can't move things as fast as you would like to. And many people
1654 who are in the system are complacent. They're in the system and they're comfortable, they'll give
1655 you the minimum; they won't give you their maximum. They've lost their zest for innovation.
1656 That's what my view is. And they're just counting their time until they're retired. Some of them are
1657 like that. But before they came in, they weren't like that. When they decided to work for
1658 government, they were passionate, gung-ho, and then [slaps his hands together, as if they hit a brick
1659 wall]. And they say, 'Oh, gotta back up' [Laughs]. And then they became the system, which is very
1660 unfortunate. That's the unfortunate thing. You have a lot of people who are passionate, but then
1661 later on they got tired of fighting the system, and then they became the system. And then they
1662 became part of that. And that's what I always told them. Public service is not about self-service; it's
1663 about the public. Keep the 'public' in the public service. So I was doing that, and it was a difficult

1664 time when we were consolidating all the housing policies. Housing policies were like all over the
1665 place, and we eliminated all of the duplicated ones, we eliminated all of the old ones, put it all
1666 together, pushed it forward. That's probably our biggest accomplishment [Laughs], consolidate that,
1667 consolidate some of the funding, secure additional resources. It's great to be within an agency
1668 where you don't have to go and fight for more money, but you're always in a position to always
1669 defend your money [Laughs]. And it's great that—here's what the Mayor [R.T. Ryback] said: 'My
1670 [re-]election hinges upon whether you succeed in this job or not.' Because housing was his number
1671 one priority during the election. So talk about the pressure [Laughs]! And here I was going in there,
1672 learning all the terminology, learning all the programming services and so on and so forth, trying to
1673 get a better understanding while at the same time creating new initiatives—I started the North Side
1674 Partnership, which is a \$40 million initiative. So if you add up \$40 million dollars to my 44, you go,
1675 '80 million dollars' [Laughs]! But basically to really address issues in North Minneapolis in a long-
1676 term way—in economic development, housing, jobs, education, and entrepreneurship. So I crafted
1677 that plan 'til two o'clock in the morning overnight and gave it into the Mayor next day, and it
1678 became policy [Laughs]. And it was based on all my experiences throughout all of my career, pulling
1679 all of those pieces together and saying, 'In order for this to work, we've got to do this.' I went out
1680 and raised all the money, raised \$40 million. So we were doing way more—we were doing like, for
1681 housing issues, [St. Paul Mayor Randy] Kelly wanted to build 5,000 houses in four years. We were
1682 doing 5,000 housing units per year in Minneapolis. But we were frustrated because we had a
1683 Communication Department, we didn't have a PR Department. There's a big difference between
1684 PR and Communications. Communications can put nice things together in report format and give it
1685 to everybody. But a PR department knows how to work the media, knows how to sell the story and
1686 have relationships with reporters. And we didn't have that; we were frustrated, because we were
1687 getting kicked [Laughs] by At. Paul left and right, and we were doing way more than the City of St.
1688 Paul, and yet they were getting all of the credit and that was something that, from the inside, that
1689 was the hard part. That was the hard part for us.

1690
1691 [Mr. Xiong had a staff meeting and needed to conclude, but then had a few last comments for the
1692 students present regarding working in a political environment]

1693
1694 (0:00) When you're working in an environment like that (this is particularly for the younger folks
1695 [Laughs] who are about to enter the real world of work [Laughs])—once you're in an environment
1696 like that [it's] highly competitive. And people will—that's when you know who's your friend and
1697 who's not your friend—who's a real friend and who's not your friend. There was a lot of back-
1698 stabbing around there. The reason that some people got to where they are now is that they did
1699 something to other people to get there. And that was just probably one of the biggest reasons why I
1700 decided, 'You know what? I don't know if I can take that much. I don't know if I can stand that.'
1701 And it goes up against my moral values, my ethics. And when Dr. Holst came calling [for the
1702 position of Director of the Center for Hmong Studies], I had two other offers on the table [Laughs]
1703 to go to the private sector. One of them was to work for an international company; and this would
1704 be the first foray into the housing market in the United States (this company's based in Malaysia).
1705 And I was going to be their person. And then there was another development company here that
1706 was trying to attract me as well. But again, I looked at the leader. You look at the leader. And you
1707 say, 'The money's good. The prestige is great. But do you really want to wake up every morning
1708 doing that?' And with the city job, most of the people who are working for the city—let me back
1709 up. Political appointees usually last between two to three years. They never last beyond that
1710 because of the environment. Because of the environment. So there's a lot of that stuff, and
1711 sometime people will take credit for what you do [Laughs] at the expense of losing a friend. And I

1712 saw some of that in the city, and I thought, 'I don't want to do that. I don't want to be in that
1713 environment.' It was sort of like the BFI case. I don't want to be lying to people that that pile of
1714 trash is not going to hurt you when I know it's going to cause cancer. I don't want to do that! And
1715 at the city, the same thing. Don't get me wrong. There's some really good people and ethical people
1716 out there, particularly my boss, who was wonderful. He was really good. But I just didn't feel
1717 comfortable with some people that I worked with, to that extent. So when Dr. Holst came, he said,
1718 'How much do you need, anyway? [Laughs] What does it take to bring you here to Concordia?' I
1719 thought, 'You don't have to go there. Who's your highest employee? Who's your lowest employee?'
1720 And I don't want to be way down, there, either. People always say the more you make, the more
1721 you spend, and the more you get yourself into debt [Laughs]. That was the thing. When I was at
1722 the city my salary was way up there, over \$100,000 [tries to remember how much his salary was by
1723 the time he left]. When I came here I took a \$40,000 pay cut, plus all the perks and benefits and
1724 everything, but I told my wife, 'I don't want to have to die on the job or have a stroke on the job.' I
1725 mean, that's what it is [Laughs]. So you choose—you think, you choose. You want to be happy.
1726 You want to feel like you're doing something and being able to do it in such a way that you get to
1727 spend time with your families. I have young kids. You've got to have time to spend your money,
1728 and doing something for the community. So this was the place. And [we] can continue there...

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Part 3 – Interview conducted by Mai Neng Vang

1734

9 February, 2006

1735

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

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

1759 over 60 staff that I was supervising [Laughs]. So coming here, and I'm the only one, and my budget
1760 is like \$240,000 a year, you know [Laughs]. And here, you don't get a lot of help. Over there I had
1761 secretaries, I had people there to help do all the work, and so—but it's something that I like, and
1762 something that—I think it's doing work for the right purpose, and for the right reasons. I mean,
1763 I'm at that point in my life where it's not about making money anymore, as long as I fulfill all my
1764 debt obligations [Laughs] and have a little left over to play around with, I'm OK with that, you
1765 know? So it's always been—I mean, I guess at this point in my life, I'm kind of looking for that:
1766 just to say I've got to do something that's going to bring meaning into my life, that's going to have a
1767 lasting legacy, and lasting impact, and be able to help my community at the same time. So even
1768 coming here, reading, I've had the opportunity to read books about the history and meet people
1769 who have done research work on the community and I think that was my...[trails off].
1770

1771 **(4:28) Can you say your—I think you mentioned some of the stuff that you did, but can you**
1772 **maybe go into detail about what specific things you do as the director here at the center?**

1773 Yeah. Well, I think—there's a couple of things that I do here. There's too many for one person,
1774 but I think it's—if you're heart's in the right place, and you prioritize, which I think—you know, I
1775 think my management training (I've been in management for more than ten years, and also my—
1776 because of that work, I came across a lot of people in similar positions, and so we all learned from
1777 each other) allows me to prioritize, and allows me to segregate many of the tasks, which allows me
1778 to put time frame and deadlines and guidelines in place so that I can accomplish many things at one
1779 time [Laughs], or accomplish many things and get it all done. But my work here at the Center for
1780 Hmong Studies—basically the first and most important part is creating organization, creating a
1781 structure. Concordia University has this concept, and so it's my job to move from concept into
1782 something that's tangible, so that people can say, 'Oh, yeah, I know what research and publication
1783 means,' you know? [Laughs] 'I know what curriculum and teaching means; that means you're going
1784 to offer a class, you're going to have degree programs in place, so on and so forth—you know,
1785 conference and convening—'Yeah, I know that you're going to do organized conferences and have
1786 lectures and all that.' So the program aspect of it—creating the program and putting things into
1787 categories so that people can understand. I would call it speaking the—using the language (stealing
1788 from John McKnight, who's a great community organizing person, who writes a lot about
1789 community development issues, he says) 'speaking the language of community.' You know, the
1790 language of institutions are often very difficult to understand. And so trying to articulate what
1791 Concordia wants to do, of cultivating the past, interpreting the past, enriching the future—and
1792 learning about the past, learning about now, how to prepare the community for the future, the way
1793 to do it is through research and publication. You've got to be able to find out what [are] the latest
1794 trends within the community, and how can you be—I call it being much more anticipatory, thinking
1795 ahead, as when I was executive director of Hmong American Partnership I was telling my staff, 'You
1796 have to always be way ahead of the community, because you have to anticipate the trends, you've
1797 got to understand where will the community end up. And in order to do that you need to
1798 understand—you need to learn more about—from other cultures and other groups. When you pass
1799 this gate, what's coming up next? What's coming up next? As a refugee community, when you
1800 come to America, you are dependent on other people to help you, because you're still establishing
1801 your life. And then moving from dependency to preparatory—you know, you're preparing your life,
1802 you're going to school, you're learning a new skill set for your job; and then from there you move
1803 towards contributions, and that's giving back to the community. So looking at that and saying, 'OK,
1804 where are we as a community, and how can we anticipate—where can we get that? Where can we
1805 add values and help the community move towards what ultimately we want to do?' And so being
1806 able to articulate all of that, I think my experience in management kind of helped me frame those

1807 into those kinds of things. And, of course, for institutions like this, you have—you can't just offer
1808 courses for no reason. You have to provide incentives for people to take your courses. So the
1809 minor [Laughs], you need credits to graduate, but if you're going to take all of these courses that
1810 you're interested in, we might as well give you a minor. So you graduate with a business or
1811 anthropology degree and you focused on or minored in Hmong Studies. Your chances of being
1812 successful out there, it's much better, and it gives you a greater appreciation of the people and their
1813 experiences. So the program aspect of it—my job is to develop the program—you know, put
1814 programs in place; the other piece is to build an infrastructure, a financial infrastructure, so that we
1815 won't have to continue to raise money all the time—there's a couple of things, there's raising money
1816 for the operation to keep the program going, to keep the organization—the work of the
1817 organization going, and then you raise money for programs, to continue to have programs and
1818 maintain the programs that you have. And then overall, what we also wanted to do was to
1819 basically—is to establish an endowment, a \$5 million endowment, which would generate about
1820 \$250-300,000 in interest payments per year. So that will sort of sustain the Center and make sure
1821 that the Center will be here indefinitely and moving forward. So I do a combination of things: fund
1822 raising, program development, organizational development, to public relations—I mean, getting the
1823 word out there to people that we exist, and that this is what we do—so interaction with—and that's
1824 what I put in even the brochures: that the Center for Hmong Studies will be the place where
1825 scholars and media and government people with interests in learning more about the Hmong people
1826 [can come]. So we [are] the one source, and that hopefully as we become much more stable and
1827 acquire more funds we will then have a research director that will continue to do research on the
1828 Hmong community, so that other people can rely on that research to make informed decisions.
1829 [Laughs] So those are—I would say those are the three, four things—you know, program
1830 development, organizational development, fundraising and public relations. So four things.
1831 [Laughs]

1832
1833 **(11:24) Wow! That's a lot!**

1834 It is! And you can easily—you know, the program development, you can easily have a
1835 programming—at the City of Minneapolis I [had] a director of multi-housing, so she manages all of
1836 the multi-housing projects—you know, multi-housing meaning ten units, ten rooms and up—you
1837 know, ten units and up, and I [had] a single family program manager that focuses—he's got his own
1838 team that focuses on the single family aspect of building a house versus an apartment complex. Or
1839 when I was at Hmong American Partnership we had somebody that focuses on economic self-
1840 sufficiency. He's a program manager of that, and then I [had] a director of youth programs and a
1841 director of family programs. So all of the family-related activities kind of fall into that and he's got
1842 his own team. And so here at the Center for Hmong Studies we have four functions, core
1843 functions, and I'm the only one. [Laughs] So it's kind of—you know, it's a lot of things happening
1844 at one time, but I think that the better we can articulate the work that we do here, I think that we'll
1845 get the support from the foundation community and hopefully from Concordia University as
1846 Concordia thinks about 'how do we integrate the Center for Hmong Studies as an integral part of
1847 Concordia University program offerings?' So those are challenges and opportunities for us here at
1848 the Center. We start out small, and of course, you can grow. When I was director of Hmong Youth
1849 Association of Minnesota, which was way back in 1990, we started out with—I was the executive
1850 director, and I was the youth counselor and all that. Eventually we grew and I hired somebody to
1851 manage the finances, somebody to raise money, somebody to also manage the programs, so you
1852 have people in those places, and they can build their own team from there. And that's how you can
1853 become very efficient and effective in the work that you do. Because in the end, if you don't have
1854 people to help you in those areas, you may take on too many things and in the end, you can't do

1855 anything well—you know, you do a lot of things, but you can't do anything well. Busyness doesn't
1856 contribute to success and accomplishment. Just because you're busy, it doesn't mean you're
1857 accomplishing things, [Laughs] or that you're successful. You've got to be very strategic and say,
1858 'OK, I'm going to rise up today and I'm going to focus on this issue today, and I'm going to make
1859 sure I get that done.' And then the next thing is getting that done—so prioritizing is really good,
1860 being able to lay out time frames is also very good. And my training over the years, I think, has
1861 helped me in that light. Working in direct services and working at the management level when I was
1862 at the Urban Coalition, I had a director of research—you know, a director of development, a
1863 director of finance helping me, [Laughs] and we had a staff of about ten people. So specializing,
1864 getting people to think, 'I'm going to rise up today, [and] I'm going to just only think about that, and
1865 I'm going to be thinking about that,' the quality of the work will be there. You know, we're much
1866 greater than one person doing four things. [Laughs]

1867
1868 **(15:13) So how do you think the work you're doing here will affect the Concordia campus**
1869 **and the Concordia community in the long run? What do you see?**

1870 Well, I think that one of the things Dr. Holst talked about is, 'As you look at the future graduation
1871 rates, of who's graduating from high school and who's going to college, I think Concordia will be—
1872 if they're not thinking about it. I wish I knew Dr. Holst was thinking about it [Laughs]. If you're
1873 not paying attention to the trends, Concordia University in the future could close. Because if you're
1874 relying on high school graduates and you're looking at the state of Minnesota—this is the state of
1875 Minnesota! You will find that the white population has declined, the minority population has
1876 increased dramatically, and that the number of people graduating from high school—you have more
1877 Asians graduating from high school—well, you have more minority people graduating from high
1878 school, but the people that are going to college are Asians. And when you're in Minnesota and
1879 you're talking about Asians you're talking about Hmong, because the Hmong are the majority. And
1880 the other thing is, as you look at—I think the impact would be that Concordia University and all its
1881 faculty and staff here would see that the Hmong community can be an asset to Concordia, and that
1882 [in] learning about the Hmong people that they will learn about themselves—you know, I think
1883 that's for one. And the other piece is, I think, that by elevating the teaching of the Hmong—the
1884 Hmongness—you know, Hmong history, Hmong culture, Hmong language, Hmong arts, and so on
1885 and so forth, we are, in essence, giving Hmong people, young Hmong people the permission and
1886 the authority to feel proud to be Hmong. They can say, 'Yeah, I'm Hmong,' you know? [Laughs]
1887 And that it's OK to learn, it's OK to not know how to speak Hmong, because—or it's OK—it's not
1888 OK that you don't know how to speak Hmong. I think it's OK that you come to Concordia
1889 University and you're struggling, because we're going to work together. You're going to be able to
1890 do that—be able to communicate. You can say, 'Yeah, it's much more important.' It's OK to say,
1891 'Yeah, I saw them playing the qeej and I really want to learn. And it's OK for me to learn it.'
1892 Hopefully we can teach that here in the Music Department, you know? And so I think giving
1893 Hmong students the permission to become Hmong, and allowing the non-Hmong students on this
1894 campus the opportunity to enjoy and appreciate a group of people that's been around—I mean, 10
1895 million people, I mean the Hmong—to appreciate a people that [have] been around for 4,000 years.
1896 We're an old and rich culture and by doing that hopefully that will help them not only—again, to
1897 understand themselves, and to understand themselves and to appreciate their rich cultural heritage,
1898 and to: one, take advantage of the opportunity to be much more employable—I mean, if you have a
1899 degree in education here at Concordia University and you're going to go and be a teacher in the
1900 Midwest, if you have—let's say, for example, I minor in Hmong Studies. Your chances of being
1901 employed by the school district is going to be higher than somebody without any understanding of
1902 the culture or the social structure within the Hmong community—because we're everywhere.

1903 [Laughs] So I think it's come from that respect, so I think that the impact—I think it will change.
1904 I hope that the work of the Center for Hmong Studies through our course offerings, through our
1905 research, through our lectures and conferences, would somehow help enhance and strengthen
1906 Concordia's appreciation of the enormous diversity that exists in the community, and appreciating
1907 the rich cultural heritage of the Hmong people.
1908

1909 **(19:56) So going back to what you were saying about the community's changing,**
1910 **population's changing, what do you see as some changes now in the Hmong community**
1911 **that are here [from when] you first came? How is that different and how has that**
1912 **affected...the general population and the Hmong community and yourself?**

1913 I think that—first of all, my perception [was]—I mean, back then I was very active. I was an activist
1914 and [a] radical person. And one of the biggest things I've noticed that's changed within the
1915 community is [Pauses] people are moving away from the “familyness,” (I don't know if that's a
1916 word) [Laughs] that sense of family, that sense of community, you know? Because people are
1917 becoming much more individualistic, versus being collective and working together. I think that's
1918 one. And you can't blame them for that, because they're struggling to survive. You know, I
1919 remember having this conversation with President Bill Clinton. I said, ‘You guys have done, the
1920 United States of America—I want to thank the United States of America for your work in helping
1921 us become an integral part of the American experience’ (this is the American experience, you know?)
1922 And an American experiment, because we're still experimenting [with] a variety of things, right?) by
1923 helping us put food on the table, a roof over our heads, and clothes on our body, but the thing that
1924 you forgot about is we came from a war-torn country, and many of us have war traumas and so the
1925 next phase of the community will be moving away from that—from the need to survive—you
1926 know, food, clothing and shelter to really dealing with the physical aspect of, the health nature of,
1927 the psychological aspect of the community. And once you deal with health, we have a lot of people
1928 with high blood pressure, diabetes, and all of that now—and heart diseases. That's something that's
1929 unheard of within the Hmong community way back then. Now we have that. So that's one thing:
1930 the physical well-being and the psychological well-being of the community is a major issue. I said
1931 this in 1997 also when I left Hmong American Partnership—that's what I told the staff and I told
1932 the board—that we've done a really good job in helping people find jobs, but the next need would
1933 be different. So I think that's one piece, and again, in order to address that you need the
1934 collectiveness, so I don't see the leadership emerging within the community, and I think the people
1935 are—people have grown very dependent on other people to really address some of these issues. I
1936 remember when Community Action Against Racism—CAAR—when they protested against KQRS
1937 for making derogatory comments about the Hmong people. Many of the young people—and at
1938 that time I think I was at Concordia. I think it was probably 1998, '99 or so, and they said, ‘Lee Pao,
1939 we need you out there. We need you to be our spokesperson.’ I said, ‘You know, I'm the usual
1940 suspect. Because each time something happens, you call me, and each time you call me, I'm always
1941 there. So you grow dependent on me. And that means there's no growth anymore. So what you
1942 need to do is, we need to step aside and let the next group of people emerge.’ I just don't see that. I
1943 don't see that within the community. I don't see the passion or, when I was in Florida, a speaker
1944 said, ‘the moral anger,’ because ‘you need to rise up because what they're doing to you, or what
1945 they're doing to whoever it is, is morally wrong. And therefore you should stand up and fight.’
1946 Now people are so politically correct, they're talking about their reputation and all that stuff, and so
1947 there's nothing like that. Or people rise up and scream, yeah, but they're not base don informed
1948 decisions—based on informed conversations or facts. It's more emotion than anything. And when
1949 I talk to some of the advocates—I won't name names—I say, ‘It's great that you're using your heart,
1950 but you've got to use your head sometime [Laughs] as—you've got to use, both, you know? So

1951 heart is the emotion, using your head is the logic, and then it's the strategy that you've got to put in
1952 place to address that. So I think that that's one thing but the other piece is that I think the
1953 mainstream community is less tolerant of the Hmong community, because each time they see
1954 something in the news, it's always something negative. And I think that that kind of—let me say it
1955 like this: when the Hmong people came to the United States, we were this tribal group of primitive
1956 people—it's like a little child, a first-born, you know? [Laughs] Everybody loved that child, no
1957 matter what race—like, [In a syrupy voice] 'Oh, he's so cute! Oh, he's so nice!' And then that
1958 person became a teenager. And we became a teenager, and we started going our own paths, started
1959 challenging this and challenging that, and then we—we've grown up! It's been 30 years, we're a 30-
1960 year-old child now [Laughs] and the community's saying, 'Well, you're no longer that tiny little
1961 person that we liked so much. You've become something else.' So that kind of dominates some
1962 people's thought process about the Hmong people. And it sometimes is a negative thing. So, to
1963 see, like in the summer, to see Chai Soua Vang's trial, to see the General Vang Pao Foundation
1964 things, to see the corruption in City Hall, to see the gang rape issue, and now there's the
1965 methamphetamine issue—to see all these things in the news all the time, I think people kind of grew
1966 tired of that. But more or less, that's a time when the Hmong community [has] got to come
1967 together, and I'm not seeing the Hmong community coming together. And at times I thought about
1968 just jumping into it and start having conversations, and pulling some key people together and start
1969 addressing it, from a federal level, from a state level, from a city level to a non-profit level. 'Cause it
1970 has to—each of those individuals and entities has a role to play in helping the Hmong community
1971 move forward, and to—even the Hmong community themselves. And how do you get that going?
1972 And so the lack of leadership within the community—that's very discouraging for me, from that
1973 respect. And so the tolerance level and the lack of connectiveness. The other piece is the loss of
1974 culture within the Hmong community and over losing it really fast. [Laughs] That's also something
1975 that I've noticed. But that's what I always tell people, that—you know, I've given speeches
1976 throughout the country, and even just when I was in Sacramento I was just asked to go and speak to
1977 a whole bunch of people, and I told them, I said, 'For any community to be strong, and for any
1978 people to be strong, and to live on, they need to be politically strong. That means they have to
1979 participate actively in the life of the community where they live in. You know, run for city council,
1980 run for school board, run for district council chair, get to serve on the planning commission, you
1981 know, get people—and if they have ambition, run for mayor, because if you have something to
1982 contribute, you ought to do that, because you are part of the American experiment. And America is
1983 a very young country; it's only—less than 300 years old. And so we've been around longer. We've
1984 been around 4000 years! They're still experimenting—you know, what is an American? And what is
1985 America? And that's a debate that I think people are having. So politically we need to be strong.
1986 Economically we've got to be strong—you know, economically [Pauses] we need to participate
1987 because we need to be entrepreneurs, continue to be entrepreneurs. I think we have a lot of people
1988 who are very, highly entrepreneurial. I'm very pleased to see that there is a lot of wealth in the
1989 community now. I mean, I know people who live in million-dollar mansions, half-a-million-dollar
1990 mansions, you know, there are people who live in a \$100,000 home, a \$200,000 home, or homes that
1991 they bought for 50,000 back then, so I know people from all walks of life. And it pleases me to see
1992 that there are people with a lot of enormous wealth. That thing that I'm discouraged the most about
1993 is somet time people have forgotten who they are and where they came from. And so it's like, 'Well,
1994 I make enough money. I'm going to go and fly down to Arizona to play golf, I'm going to fly down
1995 to Florida to play golf, I'm going to fly over to Thailand or China to go golfing—just for golfing—
1996 you know, just this individual consumption. And yet there's no collective thoughts about the need
1997 to help people who just came from [Wat] Thamkrabok, who are living in Mary's Place, [a homeless
1998 shelter] or who are struggling to find a place to live or who are struggling to make ends meet, or

1999 children who are involved in activities, illiterate kids. Why don't you—just like I told one of the
2000 advocates who met with me the other day, I said, 'Take up things that are manageable. In China it
2001 only costs \$300 a year to send somebody to high school, because the Chinese government will pay
2002 for elementary school, but beyond that parents have to come up with money. Well, they're so poor,
2003 they don't have money to send their children to school and so the children end up working as slave
2004 labor somewhere, you know? [Laughs] So if you want to make a big difference, sponsor five kids
2005 and send them to high school in China—you know, the Hmong Chinese. Send them to a high
2006 school. That's manageable, that's concrete, that's tangible. That's not a lot of money! [Laughs] And
2007 so we need to get people to come back and think about those things and this is where I talked about
2008 the moral anger, that there are things out there that morally you should do as a human being. And
2009 as Eleanor Roosevelt said, 'Service is the debt you pay for your existence.' [Laughs] So you should
2010 serve! I mean, serve the community! You got to where you are because of the community, so come
2011 back and help the community! Many people who are wealthy, they got wealthy because the Hmong
2012 people supported their business, and yet now they're living in a million dollar mansion, half-a-
2013 million dollar mansions in the suburbs, and they don't participate anymore. And that is just (***)
2014 wrong, you know?! So I think that the moral anger aspect of it kind of gets me—but you can't
2015 blame them. The reason I say you can't blame them is that lack of leadership within the community,
2016 lack of collectiveness within the community, and a lack of Hmong consciousness within the
2017 community, because we don't have any institutions or places where you can develop a
2018 consciousness. When we live in an individualistic society like America, it's going to be very difficult,
2019 too, because everything is always 'Me, me, me,' you know? [Laughs] It's not 'us' anymore, it's 'me,
2020 me, me,' so the work of the Center for Hmong Studies—I'd say, what it all boils down to is not only
2021 to elevate the Hmong people to being the people, and not just a tribal, exotic group of people that
2022 came from the mountains of Laos or the mountains of Thailand, but to view—for the mainstream
2023 community to view people as a people with cultures, with history, a 4000-year-old history and
2024 culture—but the other piece for the Hmong community is to say, 'We are here to develop the
2025 Hmong consciousness,' to say, 'Yeah, it's OK for you to speak Hmong. It's OK for you to feel
2026 proud that you're Hmong,' [Laughs] and it's OK for you [34:21 – in Hmong] xxxxx if you want to
2027 xxxxx. It's OK for you to do that! It's OK for you to do—you wear things. In was wearing a
2028 Hmong bracelet; I just took it off yesterday, but it's OK for you to wear Hmong bracelets—because
2029 you're Hmong! [Laughs] It's OK for you to hang a *Pa Ndan* [Hmong embroidery] in your office,
2030 because you're Hmong, you know? You shouldn't be shy about it—it's OK for you to come here
2031 and eat Hmong food. It's OK, you don't have to be ashamed about it. So developing that Hmong
2032 consciousness is going to help us be strong economically, to be stronger politically. If you don't
2033 have that Hmong consciousness, people can be in positions of power, be in office, but if they don't
2034 have that Hmong consciousness, they're going to focus on themselves, and they're going to be a
2035 liability for the community more than helping the community. And if the businessman is making all
2036 the money and so on and so forth, and he's not giving back to the community, then he's more of a
2037 liability, because he takes money from the community. He doesn't replenish the supply. [Laughs]
2038 He sucks the money out. So you've got to give it back, help the community, help those who are less
2039 fortunate and pull them up. I think that's just my thought process; that's how I see it within the
2040 community. And when you think about it, it makes you angry. When you think about it, you think,
2041 'Dang, I should just do something.' And that's why I tell people, 'Stop talking—just do it. And do
2042 what you can.' It's just like the story about the starfish from the shore. There's two individuals
2043 walking on the beach and all these starfish were washed up on the shore. And this other person
2044 said, 'Let's save these.' And the other individual said, 'How can—there's too many of them. We
2045 can't save them all! There's no way we can make a big difference.' And the other one picked up a
2046 starfish and threw it out there and said, 'It made a difference for this one.' [Laughs] So that's why I

2047 say, 'Do it one piece at a time, small thing at a time, something that's tangible, something you can do
2048 so that you won't be so overwhelmed that you don't lose hope.' But you can do little things like
2049 that. I think we've just lost that as a community. The tolerance level within the community, among
2050 the mainstream community of the Hmong people, I think it's going down. The dismantling of the
2051 sense of community has gone down, the loss of culture is—you know, we're losing that, and—I
2052 don't know where else to go. I tell this to [Pauses] people like General Vang Pao and Dr. Yang Dao
2053 and some other people—I said, 'We're a community—I think right now we are a community with
2054 lots of chiefs and no Indians. All the Indians are gone. [Laughs] Everybody wants to be the chief,
2055 and we need to just come down [Laughs] a little bit and work with people. So it's just a passion. I
2056 think for me this is not a job, it's a passion. And that's something that I notice about many of the
2057 people nowadays in positions of influence and positions of authority. Once they're there, they only
2058 think about themselves, and they only think about their job. It's not the passion anymore. And so
2059 when it's you're job, you do the minimum. You show up at 8 o'clock, you leave at 4 o'clock or 5
2060 o'clock—that's it! You don't put in anything beyond that, you don't participate in anything. So
2061 that's—I think that's—we need the passion back! [Laughs] We need people to do things because it's
2062 their passion, and we need people to do things because that's what they value and that's what they
2063 like. So for me, bringing that to this job, I think is really critical. And bringing all of my experience,
2064 my ten-plus years of experience with fund-raising and management to this position, and dealing with
2065 multiple groups of people with different personalities, and putting my conflict resolution training
2066 into play—hopefully just mt being here would have contributed to the improvement of Concordia
2067 University. [Laughs] 'Cause I—just like I told [Executive Vice President and Dean of Diversity]
2068 Dr. [Cheryl] Chatman the other day, I'm an advocate at heart so when I see something that's—if I
2069 see mistreatment, if I see disparity in treatment, I'm going to point that out! I'm not going to sit
2070 back and just because of the fact that the perception by the mainstream community is that Asians
2071 are passive, they're not going to complain, and they avoid conflict, doesn't apply to this generation.
2072 [Laughs] It's like what applies to this previous generation doesn't apply to this generation, so we're
2073 going to do what we say! We're going to do what we can, and we just want equal treatment, just like
2074 I told people here. I said, 'I don't want special treatment, I want equal treatment. And if you treat
2075 everybody the same, then I'm OK! But if you treat me differently than everybody else, then I have a
2076 problem with that. So I don't want any special treatment. And if you treat me in a special way
2077 above and beyond, that's great for me, too' [Laughs] 'but don't treat me lower than you treat your
2078 peers and other people. Then I have a problem with that.' [Pauses] I could go on! [Chuckles]

2079
2080 **(40:21) Yeah! That's a lot. With everything changing and where you are right now, what**
2081 **are some goals that you have for yourself and for the community, or maybe suggestions for**
2082 **the younger generation? What do you see yourself [doing] a few years from now or maybe**
2083 **ten or twenty years...**

2084 Yeah, I went through a lot of those [Pauses] 'recovering CEO' kind of retreats. [Laughs] And
2085 people always ask, 'How would you like to be remembered?' or 'If someone was giving your eulogy,
2086 what would you like them to say?' And I think that—I hope one day people will view me and mt
2087 work as—first of all, me being a fair and passionate person—you know, that I treated everybody
2088 fairly and that I did things because I cared about [them], and that I [gave] above and beyond what
2089 [was] asked of me. So I think that's one thing. The other thing is that I hope people can say, 'Yeah,
2090 it is because of Lee Pao that the elders are able and the non-citizens are able to receive welfare—
2091 because I did that, you know? [Laughs] It is because that—Lee Pao had something to do with the
2092 Hmong Naturalization Act, and that's the reason why President Clinton signed that bill, because
2093 they called me, and said, 'Should the President sign this thing?' But some of those things I don't say
2094 out there, so people don't know, [Laughs] but the ones that are close—hopefully the people that

2095 know me, when they give the eulogy, they will be able to say, ‘Yeah, he did things, not to be
2096 recognized, but he did things because they were right, and because they needed to be done. He did
2097 it.’ And that, ‘Yeah, he helped establish and solidify the Center for Hmong Studies! [Laughs] That
2098 would be something that I think that they would do, but I hope that in the future the Hmong people
2099 would—first of all we would not lose our Hmongness. And I truly believe that it’s the language
2100 that’s gonna define who you are as a people. That’s why Dr. Holst is so passionate about Hmong
2101 language. I don’t know if you guys know this, but he said, ‘The Hmong language is the [Pauses]
2102 basically the soul of the Hmong people. if you lose your language, then you lose who you are.
2103 [Laughs] And so you can be Hmong—I mean, [43:26 – in Hmong] if you look at many of the
2104 people who have lost their identity—I mean, you can tell them that they’re Asians, but they can’t
2105 explain anything about themselves to you, what makes them who they are, you know? [Laughs]
2106 And I think that we [Pauses] I hope we can be like the Jewish community...They were a very
2107 oppressed group of people, Hitler wanted to wipe them out, and now people continue to
2108 discriminate against them, but what they did was that they focused on education. I mean, they sent
2109 their children to school and now the Senator is a member of the Jewish community, the mayor, the
2110 governor, all of these—I mean, you’ve got people in positions of power, people with influence, with
2111 wealth, you have the community there. But you know what? They didn’t stop there. They created a
2112 Jewish Federation fund. And all the rich Jewish members contributed money towards that, and they
2113 fund all of the Jewish Community Centers and the Jewish Action Center—you know, all of these
2114 entities, which advocated for more opportunities for the community, and which also helped the
2115 people that are the least advantaged. And so I hope we use that model. I’ve been using this model
2116 for five years. I say, ‘Look at that community! The reason that the Russian Jews kept coming from
2117 Russia, the reason that we didn’t hear much about them—I mean, they’re like you and me. They’re
2118 like your parents and my parents who came here with nothing—the clothes on their back—but ‘we
2119 don’t rely on government.’ The Jewish community embraced them, took them in, the Jewish Action
2120 Funds—I mean the Jewish Federation funds, the Jewish Community Center and all of these here in
2121 the Highland Park area took them in and helped them, and [they] became an integral part of the
2122 community. Did we do that with the Wat Tham Krabok people? No! Think about that. [Laughs]
2123 You see headline news about the Hmong living in a homeless shelter over there. I mean, just think,
2124 if we were able to come together and say, ‘OK, let’s pull our funds together, let’s see if we can help
2125 the people from Tham Krabok. Buy ‘em a bed, buy ‘em a mattress, give them clothes to wear, or
2126 help them subsidize some of their housing, help them navigate the system.’ That would be
2127 wonderful! One day I hope that people—the younger generation [46:15] in Hmong] [Laughs],
2128 ‘cause I’m at the age where—we’ve been fighting for so long , and we just need to step aside a little
2129 bit, step aside so that the younger generation can assume that influence, that leadership role, and
2130 gain that experience to do that. And I often—for me, my management style is [a] more
2131 collaborative management style, getting everybody to be involved and the whole purpose for that is
2132 to allow people to grow. You can be a dictator and say, ‘This is how it’s going to be,’ [Laughs] or
2133 you can say, ‘You know what? This is not how it’s going to be all the time.’ I was watching “Power
2134 Rangers.” We do that every morning, my kids and I, we watch “Power Rangers” at 7:30, and I feed
2135 them while they watch, and then after that it’s “Dora.” [Laughs] But I think yesterday morning it
2136 was the “Power Rangers” episode about how their leaders [were] always there to save them. And
2137 they talked about, ‘Oh yeah, he’s always there. We can rely on him.’ So the leader decided not to
2138 intervene at all, and decided no to help them when they were losing and all that. He said, ‘You can
2139 do it yourself.’ And in the end, they did, they were able to do it themselves, and they were able to
2140 beat the negative forces. And he had a lecture with them. He said, ‘When I overheard you guys
2141 talking about me, how you guys were totally relying on me, I decided to back out and let you take
2142 the lead. And look! You accomplished it!’ And they said, ‘Oh, yeah! OK.’ So it’s something like

2143 that, and I think that good leaders are people that know when to step aside and let other people lead.
2144 [Laughs] The leaders that don't want to step aside are dictators, and they're not great leaders. They
2145 are not, because they don't know how to mold and how to train other people. And therefore they
2146 won't have a lasting legacy. They'll die a lonely person, [Laughs] because they've not developed
2147 anybody. So that's sort of like my vision for the future. I hope that people would, one, not lose their
2148 identity; secondly, be much more collaborative; and thirdly, have this moral anger and continue to
2149 say, 'You know, we're going to do something to help people who are at a disadvantage.' Just like
2150 this morning—I was very much inspired by the service this morning, by the memorial for Coretta
2151 Scott King, and—yeah, I want that speech. I want to get a copy of that speech. But that's what it's
2152 all about. You know, that's what it's all about. Sometimes we need doses of that, just to continue to
2153 motivate us—you know, for those of us who have been active in the community for so long. I was
2154 very—I was active in the community on issues when I was only 20 or 21 years old—no, I was
2155 younger than that, because I became executive director of Hmong Youth Association (the youngest
2156 executive director—'cause I'd go to meetings with all the mainstream organizations, I'm the young
2157 guy—I'm like the kid in the room) when I was only 21 years old. So I've been active [since] I was
2158 [Pauses] oh, I would say I was about 19—18, 19. And then over the years people always challenged
2159 me and I just met the challenge. Just like I said last time, when the Hmong American Partnership
2160 position came up, people said, 'Well, Lee Pao, you don't have the guts to apply.' I said, 'I'll show
2161 you.' [Laughs] Got the position. But I hope young people—we have young people with passion
2162 like that, and really say, 'I want to do something.' And I have hope for young people, but I—one of
2163 the things that discourages me the most is the 'Hmongness' aspect of it, that we've lost that
2164 Hmongness—and we've got to bring that, because if you don't have that Hmongness, one day when
2165 you become very—I will call, I will use the word—I will say influential, then you forget where you
2166 came from, and you kind of wear your own hat. And that's when we get in trouble and that's when
2167 the community gets in trouble. There are a lot of people now in positions of authority and positions
2168 of influence [who are] extremely critical of the Hmong people. [Laughs] And we're like, 'Wait a
2169 minute! The reason that you're critical is because you don't understand the community and the
2170 reason that you don't understand the community is because you don't interact with the community.
2171 And you've got to understand that the reason you have that position is because of the community.
2172 If it weren't for the community you wouldn't be in that position. Because there are plenty of other
2173 people whose skin and whose hair color's different, and their eyes are probably much different than
2174 yours. They can do a better job than you can. But you got that position because of who you are,
2175 and because of your community. Remember that. [Laughs] You know, I've had a conversation
2176 with people who were critical before, so I just call 'em up and hold them to it. And that's why I
2177 think I'm always an advocate at heart. I'm an advocate first. But the other thing is that I hope my
2178 children will say, 'Yeah, my dad did some important things.' [Laughs] 'I'm proud of my dad.' Or
2179 after I'm gone, you know, they'll say, 'Oh yeah, I didn't know my dad was doing this' and 'I didn't
2180 know my dad did that.' So I need to do a better job of just writing things down. [Laughs] A lot of
2181 people came to me and asked me to write my memoir, and I don't have the time. Too busy building
2182 things. You know, I've been building things. When I was at Hmong Youth I was building Hmong
2183 Youth Association. Within two years we grew from a \$25,000 a year budget to a half a million
2184 dollars with 12 staff. At Hmong American Partnership, the same thing: about a million-plus to
2185 when I left, we had over two million dollar annual operating budget with over with over 25—no, 42
2186 staff. And to the Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans there, the organization was going to be
2187 dismantled and abolished by the governor. I introduced a couple—language into the legislation to
2188 keep the councils open, and to change the makeup of the Council and to protect the Council from
2189 politics—you know, from the governor just coming in and picking people up and removing them. I
2190 said, 'No, you can't do that.' So those are language that I put in there that they're using right now

2191 that's keeping the four Councils of Color at the state—it's a state agency—that kept them alive to
2192 this day. [Laughs] Even the Urban Coalition—I said, 'You can't just do research for the sake of
2193 doing research. Research has to lead to something. And if you don't advocate for positions based
2194 on your research findings, who's going to do it? If you don't take ownership of it, who's going to do
2195 it? If you don't develop the capacity of the community to be able to move forward with your
2196 recommendations, who's gonna do it? It's your report! [Laughs] You think some else is going to
2197 pick up your report and start advocating [for it]? No, they're going to start cutting and pasting,
2198 taking from your report to enhance the work that they do—which is fine, but if you want major
2199 changes, you've got to go beyond that.' When I was with the city, I built the whole housing
2200 department of the housing division—over \$80,000,000 and over 60 staff. Different divisions—I
2201 built that. So I'm always in a building mode. And here I am—I'm building this organization into
2202 the Center for Hmong Studies, so that may be my skill set. Maybe that's the other thing [I'd like to
2203 be remembered for] is that Lee Pao was always great at building things, and bringing order [from]
2204 chaos. And probably that is my skill set, is really building things.
2205

2206 **(55:38) Well thank you. Aside from that I don't have any other questions. [Mai Neng asks**
2207 **Youa Vang if she has any questions. She says no] I think that covers everything. If you**
2208 **want to add any last comments...**

2209 Well, I think that—I appreciate you two interviewing me [Laughs]

2210 **Oh, no problem**

2211 ...and also Dr. Paul Hillmer for even launching the whole project. I mean, he took this and just ran
2212 with it.

2213 **[Yes]**

2214 And I think that one day our children will look at this and say, 'Wow!' [Laughs]

2215 **Yeah, this in itself is already helping the Hmong community. It's preserving a lot of**
2216 **things—**

2217 Absolutely

2218 **—that we're losing today.**

2219 Yeah, and I think that it's so unfortunate that it takes somebody from outside to do this. And I
2220 think that when I was in California and I told the story about the golden house—and I think you
2221 may have heard this, but—there was a young man who worked on a farm and he worked day and
2222 night, and in the morning he would see out on the horizon a house that—very bright and shiny. It
2223 looked like it was silver. And he said, 'Wow, that's [56:55 – Hmong],' you know, like, 'Wow, that's a
2224 money house over there! Unbelievable! How can they be so rich?' And so one day he—it was his
2225 day off, and so he told his dad, 'Dad, I'm going to go and visit that house of money and gold over
2226 there.' And he walked and walked and walked, and got there—it was just an ordinary house. And
2227 he said, 'Wow, it's just an ordinary house.' And he turned, and looked at his own house, and by that
2228 time the sun already set. And so the evening sun is golden, right? So it reflected off his building and
2229 his window, and I was gold! And he said, 'Wow! That's my house over there!' [Mai Neng laughs]
2230 'All along I've lived in a golden house and I didn't even know it!' And so the moral of the story is,
2231 sometimes we value other people's things more than our own. [Laughs] And hopefully, again, by
2232 building this consciousness, we will see that we have been living in a golden house all along, and that
2233 the house over there is just silver, and that we live in a gold house. [Laughs] So that's something
2234 that I hope that one day we will come to realize that—I mean, certainly I realize that; that's why I
2235 took this position. And I said, 'This is enormous. The elders that are right now in our community,
2236 if we have the institutions of teaching and learning, or institutions of higher education, they would
2237 be our professors. Your mom and dad and everybody else would be our professors, our historians,
2238 because of the fact that we don't have a country that we can call our own, that we don't have a

2239 structure in place to teach our knowledge and to pass the knowledge on, we're in the position where
2240 we are. And so as an institution, as a Center fro Hmong Studies, we have a unique opportunity to
2241 develop that—with resources from the outside, so I'm very impressed, and I'm impressed with the
2242 work of Dr. Paul Hillmer, and hopefully one day we'll have someone who will say, 'Yeah, we'll do it
2243 ourselves.' [Laughs] And Dr. Paul Hillmer can just support it. [Laughs] So it should be, but it's
2244 people like that, it's people like Marlin [Heise of the Hmong Archives], who's extremely generous,
2245 who saw that we are actually—that the Hmong people are actually living in the golden house, and
2246 they took—and made an effort to preserve it. That's wonderful. So I hope the younger generation,
2247 as they listen to this one day, or as they read about this one day, will go, 'Oh yeah! I never thought
2248 [about] it from that perspective.' Just like when person when *Hmong Today*—their on-line edition,
2249 when they read about—after you read the article, there's a comment area down underneath that, and
2250 people were commenting about the \$50,000 gift, and one person in there said, 'Well, not too long
2251 ago there was a foundation where \$500,000 was missing and all of a sudden the Hmong Center got
2252 \$20,000 and all of a sudden somebody gave \$50,000 to the Center for Hmong Studies. Hmm, that's
2253 really interesting.' You know, I had to write back and respond and say, 'Shame on you for not
2254 believing in the potential of your people. And shame on you for not seeing the capacity within your
2255 own community. Drive around. There's a lot of people out there who've worked really hard to
2256 achieve the American dream, and they're making it. And they're exceeding the American dream.
2257 And so you need to believe in your people.' And it's just sad—see, what's really sad for me was that
2258 that person had to grow up in an era when they had to see those type of things happen, and that
2259 they don't make—that it impacted them so much that they didn't believe that their people could do
2260 such a thing. They didn't believe that somebody could actually be able to give \$50,000 without
2261 strings attached, or that somebody would be willing to forego \$20,000 without strings attached, and
2262 that there are people out there who are Hmong who are millionaires. So it's kind of sad, and that's
2263 why I'm saying that [Laughs] if people don't develop the consciousness and that appreciation for
2264 their own people, then they will only see the [Hmong word?? 1:01:36] things. And they only—I call
2265 it colonialism mentality. And that is, [1:01:45 – Hmong phrase], and that you're the stupid one, and
2266 that you're the uneducated one, and that you're the poor one, [Laughs] you know? And everybody
2267 else is better than you. And not really turning back and saying, 'Yeah, we're the smart ones. We
2268 survived 4,000 years of oppression, we survived the war, we came here with just the clothes on our
2269 back, and look where we are! [Laughs] Other immigrants that came before us, they came with
2270 wealth, they came with money! They came here so that they could forget the past. We didn't have a
2271 choice. The other night my aunt and uncle came from Wat Tham Krabok. You know what they
2272 brought with them? Just the clothes on their back and a little bag. I don't know what's in that bag,
2273 but that's all they came with. Your parents came here like that, my parents came here like that, and
2274 look where we are! That's the capacity and potential of a people. I could go on, but I think I'd like
2275 to end with that and just say that there's so much more for our people, and so much more that we
2276 can do as a Center, and so much more that we can do as individuals to continue to say, 'Do you
2277 know what?' People always ask me, 'Do you think the Hmong culture will just die?' And I say,
2278 'There's still ten million world-wide,' [Laughs] 'only 300,000 here in the United States. If the
2279 300,000 people here in the United States decided to let it all go, we'd still have over 9,000,000 people
2280 in other parts of the world that are ready to keep it going [Laughs] and are ready to come here and
2281 educate the 300,000 people who've lost their heritage and their self-identity.' So we're ready for that.
2282 I'm an optimist. Let's conclude with that.