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Interview with Xia Vue Yang

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Xia Vue Yang

14 July, 2006 – Sheboygan, WI

Interviewer/Transcriber/Editor – Paul Hillmer

Translator of Hmong comments in transcript – Lee Pao Xiong



Paul Hillmer interviews Mr. Xia Vue Yang under a large tent. The memorial is to be dedicated in Sheboygan, WI.

Vue Yang was born in Nong Het, Laos, though his family moved to Xieng Khouang province after the defeat of the French in 1954. He began school in 1958 in Long Tieng, but moved to study in Vientiane in 1961. He was later one of a small number of Lao students sent to study in Paris, where he eventually chose to study engineering. After 1973, Yang stayed in France, where he was offered—and turned down—an opportunity to earn a Ph.D. in Chemistry. After working in the United Arab Emirates, he finally came to Sheboygan, Wisconsin, where his parents had settled. He is the founder and producer of Hmong Sheboygan Radio, which he established in September 1983.

(0:00) **OK, here we are. It is—** [T'zianeng Vang wants to say something to Mr. Yang] **OK, go ahead.**

[Mr. Vang explains in Hmong that Hillmer doesn't speak Hmong, so if he can conduct the interview in English, it would be appreciated—unless he'd rather speak in French. All laugh]

Mr. Yang: When you get bored I speak French.

Then I'll be in trouble... Well, it's the day before the auspicious dedication of the Lao, Hmong, and US Veterans' memorial here in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and we'd like to spend some time talking with you about your own history. Let's just start with the basics.

OK.

(0:31) Your name, Sir...

My name is Vue Yang. It's been known in the community by Xia Vue Yang. That from when I became kind of important in the community, so I got the ordination name Xia Vue, but my name is Vue Yang.

And where were you born?

Laos, nearby the border of Vietnam, Nong Het.

Nong Het?

Yes, you know that?

Yes.

And then right at the end of the French war, so then we started—you know, we left that area, we came to the Xieng Khouang area, and then I started going to school in 1958. I was too young; I was almost like eight, nine years old, and so I started school back in 1958. And—

(1:25) Just for the record, what were your parents' names?

My parents—Yong Chou Yang, Colonel Yong Chou Yang. And then we went through the Secret War, and I was lucky, because of my father's start—he joined the Secret War; he was [in] the first team that went to training in Thailand, Hua Hin, and then while he was in Thailand, my mother and I and my brothers, we were in the jungles, so just kind of escaping, so we—

(2:03) So you didn't live in a village, you were sort of living as you could—

Yeah, we had to—we left our village. That was the time when Kong Le came to the PDJ.

So only from about '58 to '60 you were in school?

In school, and in '61, that's the time when—'61, that started the problem of Laos' government—you know, they couldn't get along [Chuckling]—typical. Then people were affected by the war. Then [in] 1961, mid-'61, then I went to Vientiane for school. My—pretty much I was controlled by my father who told me what to do, [Interviewer chuckles] so he put me to an English school—you know, I learned 'This is a cat.' 'This is a table.' [Interviewer laughs, Mr. Yang laughs] And the teacher was an Indian teacher, so—but it was a great, you know, I learn English for one month and then I didn't know what happened and he pulled me out, put me to a Lao elementary school. Then I was there, you know, and then I went there. And then, I was lucky that I passed my exam. Then I start that lycee in Vientiane. You know that one?

Yes.

Then I was in the boarding school for a good eight years until '71 when I got my baccalaureate and then I went to France.

(3:29) So, when you were in school in Vientiane, was your family also living there or were they still living in Long Tieng?

They lived in Long Tieng. They live in Long Tieng in the Long Tieng—Lima—it was Lima 22—LS 22—20?

Twenty.

Long Tieng. Yes.

Alternate.

So, while I was in school in Vientiane, in summertime, you know, holidays or vacations I went back to Long Tieng and then having fun with, you know, my father or his soldiers. Sneak into T-28, flying with them. [Interviewer guffaws]

So, your father had friends who were pilots.

My friends who were pilots.

Oh!

We went to school together and then we—they couldn't—they couldn't pursue higher [education], you know, because either family problem or financial or maybe, you know, they just couldn't do better in school, so they joined the army. And some of them just trained to be a pilot.

OK.

T-28 pilot and then they just let me right—free rides. [Laughs] It was crazy. Now that I'm thinking about it, it was crazy.

(4:42) I'll bet. Who were—what were the names of some of your friends who were T-28 pilots?

Wa Chou. Wa Chou who left Laos to France and he died in France. The first one I went with was Yang Xiong. I went with that one with Yang Xiong, Vang King, Vang Su and Vue Ger—Vue Ger. So, there were four T-28 and then Yang Xiong took me on his—on the back seat. They were dropping bombs. They were, you know, and then I was—I was doing sightseeing. [Chuckles]

So you were literally going on raids.

Raids, yes. It was typically—then we went to the Hmong [Tiena Phou King]. And then, they were dropping bombs. Anyway, that was the first time I experienced the g-factor. [Laughs]

OK!

Yeah, the g-factor, especially when that thing come—pick up. And I must weigh three, four times my weight and I couldn't—I couldn't get my hand out of the dashboard because there was a stick here that I should not touch. Luckily, I didn't touch.

Couldn't have. Your hands were too heavy. OK.

And then—so that was the first time I experienced the g-factor even though we, you know, we study physics. G—9.81—what does that mean? No idea. And then, I had a good idea after that.

You had a practical application of your learning. OK.

Right. So ...

(6:18) So, how often did you have contact with your family while you were in Vientiane?

Once a year or twice a year—at New Year time and at—when school is closing.

OK.

Yeah.

What are your memories of the Hmong New Year when you would go and celebrate? I mean, obviously, here in the States it's very different.

It was great. Oh, the Hmong New Years in Laos—we couldn't wait until the times come. But here, we couldn't wait—here is too fast. It looks like a year, so it's like a month. Over there, one year is too long. We always think about when New Year's is going to come, when New Year's will come. But here it is just ...

(7:03) What made the Hmong New Year in Laos so important?

I think the free time—the people that felt so free. And also, it is—the way how the life is. No pressure, no time that they had to comply to. It's natural, natural. And then, people [were] affected by the war, so there's not much time that they can get along together and then the spirit of people because New Year's is—was important. Now, New Year's here is almost like commercials, almost like obligations. And people come, people don't come. Or people celebrate, people don't celebrate. But over there, people had to celebrate to be somebody in the society, in the community. If you don't celebrate New Year's, if you don't have nothing, you are not—you don't feel like you belong to the community.

(8:14) And would it be fair to say that that was about the only time of year that the young people had to socialize with the opposite sex?

That's true. That's true. That's the only time that young people, they can choose their future mate or they can, you know, get time together. And of course, we didn't have telephone. We didn't have any other means of communications, so that's the only time that they can talk freely. There's a lot of activity that they can do, but that's the only time that the adults, the olders, the elders allow them to do. So, they enjoy it.

(8:52) So other than ball tossing and sort of socializing and dressing up, were there other important aspects of the New Year's celebration?

We—there are two aspects. One is the youth for ball tossing. The other one is the—we don't see much versus the obligation toward the elders. The first day of the New Year, you had to pay respect to them. You had to ask for their blessing. You had to ask for your ancestors through them to allow you to be healthy or wealthy, if not—in spirit, you know, and that's the other part of the New Year that we didn't show, we didn't talk too much. In Hmong, we called *Pe Tsiab*.

Pe Tsiab.

Pe Tsiab. That was not really talked about, but that was very important. Now, we don't see that here anymore because the younger generation, they don't see that as important because they get everything, right? They don't have to ask for a blessing. It just given, just coming, you know, and they don't see it's important, but over there, it was.

And I suppose, in a way, they have more power than their parents because they speak the language and they're tied into the culture and ...

Yes. So, all comes to—it's just a matter of—it's not too long. Thirty years, you know, 40 years. That's about a generation of people. And it—it's kind of lost. It's kind of lost to—because of the way how—life is here and daily life or school life or social life. And the type of, you know, easy things you can get and you don't depend on your elders, on your parents anymore. Kids—they can go anywhere. If they can't have food, they can steal. But over there, there's nothing to steal. Stealing is a crime. It is something—a shame—so much shame that people didn't do it. Here, nobody—losing face is normal. Over there, losing face is almost like losing life. That's—probably that was—we lost the value of typical Hmong honor.

(11:17) Before we go on in talking about school, you mentioned visiting Long Tieng on a regular basis. And now that the bulldozers have come in and so many parts of Long Tieng have been destroyed ...

Yes.

... what do you remember about that area, about the people who lived there, about the activities that you witnessed?

I remember the mountain—Long Tieng, [the Panau]. OK. That's—then I remember that the rocky hill behind our house. We live nearby the market. We lived nearby the market, so I remember that. And also, the landing strip.

The landing strip.

Yeah, that was a very typical landing strip. I was there—the first trip when I went to—from Vientiane to Long Tieng, that was the old landing strip. And it was pretty short. So when the airplane coming in, get a dip, really dip to land it in right time and then get a stop. So that was really bumpy. After 1964, then they start creating—building that longer strip and it was better. And then so, I think life in Long Tieng, I do remember time where the, you know, the helicopter came back to the airport and they bring bodies, you know, bodies of soldiers killed. And you—if you happen to be there, the family came and either wife or mother just mourning and cry very loud.

(12:57) And so, they literally just took bodies of soldiers and kind of laid them along the airstrip?

Yeah, they lay around—they just lay around by the—where the airplane stopped, the helicopter stopped, they just pick it up in a green bag and then lay around there. And then, you know, family came, they go and open the bag, look if they are related, or their son or their husband. That is one of the pictures in my memory I could never, never forget. That's what—this has happened to me. They don't deserve to die. They don't deserve to be treated like that. They don't deserve to be in that green bag. You know, they don't have to be highly educated or highly ranking officers. Life is valuable to everybody. I always—I always had more respect to the young boy, 14- or 15 year-old boy that didn't know anything and start going to war and get killed. I think the memorial speaks for

itself. It's not to honor only the high-ranking officials or top officials. It has to be recognized they are the ones who die for. Without them, without them, there was no freedom, there was no people, no Hmong in America. Of course, there is—there were leaders, but then leaders, they were behind, they don't die. They always escape. They always, you know, come out on top. And I think—my philosophy is a bit **neat**. We had to recognize the people on the bottom who have nothing, who died for nothing, who didn't ask more than what the little freedom that they were fighting for.

Well, leaders are nothing without followers.

That's right. That's right. [Both laugh]

(15:01) Did you have a sense, as a schoolboy becoming a young man and going back to Long Tieng and, I would imagine, worrying, to some extent about your family when you were in school, about why you were fighting the war and what the stakes of the war really were?

You know, that never came to me. We were involved in the war. We were part of the war. And we always—what we thought about, what we had in mind is the communists. We need to [defeat] communism. That's what we had. And that's what we—I never think about what could happen. Things happen every day. My mother, for years, she was really scared. She could not sleep or she could not think about what could happen because she saw those bodies, too, and she always thought, 'Could be one day my husband or somebody in my family.' And that—after time and time goes on, you forget reality. You only see things that happen every day. And I was in school—when I was in school, my father said, 'You don't think about anything else, but your books, your school. That's what you have to do.' War, you cannot stop it. Misery, you cannot stop it. Communists, you cannot stop it. But you have a job to do: be good in school. So, I was one—many of the top schools that—you know, I survived, I went through. And Laos was in French. Educational systems are French. Either you pass or you fail. You study a whole year. You pass, doesn't matter **[already]**. So, I concentrate on that and then a year's by, back in 1971, when I pass my baccalaureate I was lucky to be in the top six. So—among one of the top six and then we were having French—the Lao scholarship to go abroad.

(17:21) Right. Well, let's talk about school in Vientiane.

OK.

You said it was a French sort of gymnasium style system.

Yes, Lycee de Vientiane is a French style school system. It was taught in French. And Lao was optional. It was not optional, but it was part of the curriculum. But French was the main language that we studied—geography, [pass], Shakespeare, English, you know, Racine, Jean-Jacques Rousseau—all those famous, you know ...

Philosophy.

Montaigne, you know, all those famous French—we didn't know—really didn't understand much. [Both laugh] We just learned! We just learned. Physics, geography, chemistry—is all this done in French.

(18:09) How do you think that experience shaped you? I mean, obviously, as a young Hmong boy, to receive this opportunity to be educated was special and important.

You know, you know, there's another issue that Hmong people in Laos [Pauses] for me is the fight to be recognized as Hmong because over there, we were called Miao. And it's not bad now. I look at—I look at the name, the definition of Miao, which is coming from China—Chinese. It didn't mean bad at all. But because, in Laos, there's another Lao name called Miao, which means cat, so kind of, you know, is unpleasant to be a cat. [Interviewer chuckles] So we, but because of that, a lot

of my friends, Lao friends, you know, they chat with us, they kind of joke and they also—sometime they make dirty jokes, you know, and I think that creates some kind of a willingness, a strength inside myself that I've got to be somebody. I've got to turn around these misunderstandings or these jokes and get—make sure that we have at least opportunity to be heard, to serve and to be in the government. So I study hard and being top student. So, I was lucky that my father allowed me to do that. Not once did he want to pull me to be a soldier.

(19:55) If a Hmong student who's in the American school system right now would ask you to compare their experience to your experience in the lycee in Vientiane, how would you say your experience was different?

My experience would be very much difference. I had very strong goals. I had very strong willing to learn. I really needed to change my life to be—to raise my studies. Here, students go to school, they don't have much of that willingness to learn. They—and also, the way how the education is designed in the U.S. that everybody succeeds. Everybody succeeds— unless you don't want to. Back then, they designed the education system to be everybody fail except those really good, those that, you know, special—special people. Because they, you know, the design was to fail people. And then, if you are good enough, then you pass. Here, I don't see that the government is doing something to fail people. George Bush says 'no child left behind.' To give you an example, when I first came here back in 1981, my social security card was typed by a blind person. I didn't know that. So I extended my paper to him and he extended his hand, but—toward me, but I didn't pay attention to his face. So I just hand his—my paper and his hand didn't come straight. And I—and suddenly I look at his eyes. He didn't—his eyes had, you know, no eyes and I give my—that's opportunity. Deaf, you know, children that [are] deaf, they have sign language. They can—they can have the degrees. They can have the PhD. There's no place else in the world than the U.S. that would give people the opportunity, no one fail unless you want to fail yourself. [Interviewer laughs] That's a freedom.

(22:17) So you were selected as one of six students in your class to go to Paris.

The six students that were Hmong—we were [Pauses] about 400 students that take the exam And the first test, the first section, only six of us pass and the remaining, they all fail. Then, in that time, they have another session where they allowed those failed student to pass test again—to take the test again. We took in June and they take in September. Then, if you pass, you know, maybe some of the borderline school students, so they allow them to take another test. So I was one of the lucky that—the six—top six that we passed and we were grant—we were granted right away a scholarship of our choice. We had to choose. My three choices were not too good, but would be a medical doctor, a pharmacist or an architect. OK? Among these three, if I choose those three, the first one I have to stay in Laos four more years before I could go to overseas. The second one, pharmacist, they only have that to either come to the U.S. or Germany, West Germany. And the architect, go to France, but they don't have—they don't have a scholarship available. So, I end up to choose something like physics, chemistry, math so I can go to France. OK? That's what I did. I choose physics, chemistry.

(24:12) Now, I would assume, to some degree you had—now, were these French teachers or French-speaking teachers or some of both in Vientiane?

French teachers. French teachers.

And they must have instilled a certain love of all things French in you, at least to some degree.

Oh, yes, yes, yes. [Both laugh] We were pretty much, you know, it was typical. In Laos, French—we saw the French professors. They were French, you know, tall and well-dressed and professors. We called them ‘Professor,’ we called them ‘Mister.’ We called them—and then when I went to France, I saw the first ordinary French man carrying bread, a big bread. That was—that struck me. I couldn't believe a French can be a worker [both laugh] because I always saw French with—high ranking in the society, you know, and when I saw a French with a bread walking, [Interviewer chuckles] that bring me to reality.

(25:12) What else was—I mean, I'm sure going to France was a bit of a culture shock. Do you remember other things like that that you found surprising or disorienting?

Yes. In Laos, you know, we walk slow—no time to hurry up. And then when we arrive in Paris, we were walking in the Champs-Elysees. We were pushed and bounced by all people. They look at us. They—“What kind of people? Hurry up, you know, stay out of the way.’ They were so, you know, rush, rush, rush. That was my experience. The second one was—I remember it. I tried to—had a tailor make me a suit because I couldn't fit in the French suit, you know. They're too tall. So I went to a tailor and then he said—I asked, ‘I need a navy blue.’ And he said, ‘Let me give you an advice. With the navy blue the color—don't ever, never, ever get close to a blonde.’ [Interviewer guffaws] I didn't—I didn't know what he means. But I remember he means—you know, I remember what he said. And years later on—then a couple years later on, I knew what he means.

Blonde hair on dark suit.

Yes, blonde hair will stay on your clothes and they will find the guilty one. [Interviewer laughs] So I knew—a couple years after that I knew. And we went to school—university. In Laos, our class is about 30, 40 students and very close. Always you sit in your class and the teacher comes to you. The professor comes to you. When I went to university, you sit in the big—you know, almost 400, 500 students. And then you go to a small class for practical things. And it's not all in the same place. You've got to move from here to that building. Then you got 10 minutes to go to that building. I did that. For the first year, it was so tough. I wonder if I'm going to make it or not. It was so tough. But then, I remember also when they start putting glasses—when, at the beginning of the year, I was sitting way back. Then I got closer, closer, closer and then pretty close to the first rank—the teacher right there. And I—oh, my God, I couldn't see the blackboard through them. Then I start having glasses. That's difficult. I remember that. And then, I passed the first year, second year and then things getting better. I caught the system, how, you know, college student need to behave, to do to—and then I—it went better.

(27:57) Were you able, from France, to go home over break and visit your family and friends?

I went back, I think, after a year I went back to see my parents—no, the second, I think. Second year, I went back to Laos once during summer school—summertime—for a month. And then, that was 1973 ...

'73.

I went back one time.

Had things changed significantly in those two years? Did you notice any significant ...

Not much because the country is still at war even though they had—they start—you know, they start the ...

The provisional government?

The coalition, see, the provisional government. I saw—I went back to Long Tieng. Long Tieng, the market was all burned out and then people were moving out. They start releasing the soldiers to be

civilians. I saw many, many houses blown out because of the people, they were mad about being released without compensation, so they kind of blow—in Hmong we call men ko yi.

Men ko yi?

Men ko yi—the land mine that, you know, and they just—they just blow people out ...

Oh, sure. Blew it up in their house and left.

Yeah, in their house. So, that's what I saw, a few. And then, I left. When I left Laos, I had good memories. Street people, countryside, still, you know, I saw, still green, I would say, you know, and since then, I never went back.

(29:45) OK. So of the Lao students who went to France, were there any other Hmong students or were you ...

Two of them—two of us went together. And then there were some Laos—then they stick with me. They were my friends. They actually been the one who stick with them, but they stick with me because for year, for the eight, nine years in Laos, they always stick with me. And I taught them how to ride a bike, how to ride a motorcycle. They always borrow my motorcycles. Then, my good friend, I was mad. I say, 'Why don't you borrow his? You always borrow mine.' And he said, 'Because I know that he's not going to let me borrow, but you—you will let me.' [Interview laughs] And I was wrong again. OK. Then I always share my pocket money with him. You know, we were good friends.

(30:41) So, if my math is correct, and maybe it's not—you were sent to graduate in spring of 1975?

Not yet, because I went—my contract went—1979, I [was] supposed to have my PhD to be a professor. So ...

But did you go to start your bachelor's program in '71?

'71, '72, I start that, and then I lost one year because I changed the school to a French Engineering school. So, I lost one year. Then I switched to a third-year French Engineering school, which is the—was either a third or fourth top school in INSAL—[Institut National des Sciences Appliquees Lyon]. The first one would be polytechnique and it goes [some trial].

(31:38) OK. Now, where were these schools?

Lyon—the one I went, it was Lyon. So, I went to Lyon. But then I switched to a French engineering school and then I graduate in 1977. I had now—my scholarship was cut already in 1970s by '76. Then I have to take a loan from the French government—guaranteed loan from the French government. And then, when I had my degrees in chemistry, in French educational system, when you go to Engineering school for five years, they say, OK, why don't you a Master's degree. Then you only need two years to get to your PhD. OK? So, '77, I—now, my parents already came here—'76. OK.

To Wisconsin.

To Wisconsin, to Sheboygan. So, '77, when I graduate, the French Research Center—they give me a scholarship to do a polymerization ...

A what?

Polymerization of chemistry.

Oh, polymerization.

Polymerization. They gave me a scholarship, but then I said, 'What am I going to do with a doctor degree? [Interviewer chuckles] I have no country. I [am] going to be over-qualified. I cannot work here.' I, you know, so I dropped that. I dropped the opportunity. The director was mad because he—I already had my six month's internship with him. I already got the formula. All what I need to

do is to go deeper and then write the thesis. And I—you know, 1977, I said, 'I'm not going to be—I'm not going to be able to find work with a doctor degree. [Interviewer chuckles] I cannot go home. France—I don't want to stay. My parents are here.' So, I decided, OK, I'm not going to take it. And he was—he was really mad to me. He said, 'You can live in France. We'll have a job for you.' I said, 'Well, polymerization—that's a very narrow—very narrow, you know, matters. I won't find jobs here.' So, I —OK. I left him. And then, I was trying to come to Sheboygan. I did go through the process of, you know, through the embassy and they said, 'No, you are too old. You can't go to America. They don't take you anymore.' You know, Song, my brother—he was 16, so he could come, but not me. And then, OK, what I'm going to do is I saw an ad looking for engineers to go overseas. You know, I say, 'Oh, OK, let me apply for it.' And the next day they call me—you know, be here, 8:00. We want you.' 'Oh, OK. I'll be there.' We took the whole day [to] interview and at the end of the interview I realized that if you say yes to three things, you are hired. Any time, anywhere and no choice. And that's pretty good. I was a bachelor, I had no family, I had no commitment, I had nothing to do. Everything I say, 'Yes, anytime, anywhere, yes. No choice—you want to start tomorrow? I'm ready.' So, at they end, they say, 'You are hired.' They ship me to Middle East—United Arab Emirates.

(35:19) If you don't mind, before we go to the UAR, let's take a step back and talk about 1975.

OK.

You're at school. You get news that Long Tieng has fallen, that the Hmong people are starting to run all over the place. [To Steve Schofield:] Thanks very much. Good to see you.

OK. See you, Steve.

Steve: I think we're all done.

OK.

Hallelujah. So, you're in—you're in Lyon at this point.

Yes, I was in Lyon.

And the news is making its way to you and I would assume this is an anxious time. You're wondering what's happening with your family.

The news—the news come to us that General Vang Pao left, that my family also left on the May 14, 15. One of the two days.

Air lift.

Without—my mother and my brothers left first and my father is still in [the] front. And then, he came back.

He was in France?

No, in front—in the battlefield.

Oh, on the front. Sorry.

The front. So, the next day, when he came back to Long Tieng, he was able to take the last flight to Thailand. So the news reach us with pretty scary—because we didn't know that if they—people were killed and my family was safe—but I heard—I heard that my mother and my brother was in Thailand. So that was a—kind of relief to me. Then we, being student in France, we thought we could do something for politics, you know. So, we kind of getting organized, talked to the French government and talking back to the Hmong and they come to the first camp—Namphong. So we thought we—you know, they—the words came—come to us that they would allow only 2,000 people to go to [a] third country—either the U.S. or France. And we said, 'No, that is not right.' That was not only those 2,000 people that fought the war. They had to allow more people, so we had quite a few, you know, communication with that. We thought we could affect it, but we didn't do anything. We just make things worse.

(37:32) Was this an effort that took place with Hmong and maybe even some regular Lao students from across France?

Mostly Hmong—mostly Hmong because the Hmong—they flew straight from Long Tieng to Namphong and mostly Hmong.

But I just mean in terms of—you said you tried to do some protesting in France.

Oh, yes. With some Lao, too. With some Lao and with some French politicians, you know, they—yeah. They kind of—they—[at] the time Laos and France were—had agreement that you can go live [in] either country being a permanent residence, like that. Then the news reach us and we didn't really—then, not too long after that, the ambassador quit and then our scholarship was cut off. And they say, 'If you want to continue to have [a] scholarship, then you had to become a member of the new—the Communist, you know, government party.' So that was tough choice. Then OK. For the sake of having scholarship, 'All right. We are. We are all your members.' Then, two months after they say, 'Now the country is in peace. We need people to build the country. You don't need [a] diploma. You don't need [a] degree. You don't need any. Everybody go home.' OK, so everybody go home. We were about—over 1200 Hmong and Lao student in France. Some are in the middle of their PhD status. Some just start with freshmen, you know, and then more than half decide to go back. We were about 37 Hmong students. None of them—we didn't go back. We said, 'It's crazy. Our parents are in transit to Thailand and we have to go to Laos?' And so none of us decide to go back.

(39:40) Were there any of those 37 that you know of who applied for French citizenship?

At that time?

Yeah.

No, at that time, we were all permanent residents. We were not—nobody thought to be a French citizen. What we going to do? You know, we all want to go back home. Because when you have high—you have good education, you have some place in France, you go back to Laos, you become somebody. You had a good job or maybe—not a government job, but you have something. Like I told my kids here, in Laos we learned to become somebody. *Hmoob yug muaj kab, tuag muaj kev* [Hmong were born with a purpose, so when we die, we shall leave on the path that brought us here] OK? But here, we learn to be a slave. The top you go, the more job you learn. So, the goal is different. Here, we don't put enough goal to our kids and you learn, you become good and you have top degrees. Then you become somebody—[Na]. That means—what do you say—Na.

Tzianeng Vang: Official.

Official. You know, here, it's not easy to be an official. You had to go to election. Over there, you can become Na easily because it's been appointed. It's been—you know, so, everybody has a good goal of having—being the best in education. So people strive for it. Here, what do you do when you get a degree? You come back, you go work in a factory. You get an engineering job. Or you get a social workers in place and there's no subsidy for having that child to, you know, to really strive to do the best he can. Because here, failing is...

Almost impossible.

Failing's almost impossible. And here, failing is not big deal. OK? Over there, failing is a big deal because you lose face, you lose your money, you lose your life. There's no job, there's no place to go. Over there, if you're left in the jungle, you had no food. You had—you are not safe. You have tiger, you have bear. You have all those diseases. Here, you know, all—most of those things impossible happen to you. So it is different. It is different then, but, you know, if I talk this to a young kid, they said, 'We were not there. Why you talk all this to us?' [Both laugh]

You might learn something. You might gain some perspective. Oh, yes. It's—I teach history, so I know exactly what you're talking about.

Right.

(42:33) So how long were your parents—I assume they went from Namphong to Ban Vinai.

Ban Vinai and then they came to here. '76—my father came here August, 1976.

And I assume he was one of those who probably was selected by the CIA and he had to ...

Yeah, he was a Hmong—he was—I think he was—because being a colonel in the army. I think he was within the 2,000 selected to go first—to be first abroad picked. You know, and even though we were not happy, I was doing something against my family, which, you know, we tried to be fair to everybody and knowing that my father was among the 2,000, which doesn't really play much on what we think, it should be fair to everybody. And I think after, you know, when time goes by, those 2,000, 10,000, 100,000 did have the opportunity to go anywhere, you know, where the sponsors were available.

(43:40) So what brought them to Sheboygan, of all places?

That's a good question. [Laughs] I think more than 10 people ask me that. They came here—you know, we never heard about Sheboygan, even Wisconsin. America—we knew America by Chicago, New York, San Francisco. OK? And Wisconsin, never heard of that. The reason they came here was because of the sponsorship. The family that sponsored my father, they live here. My brother-in-law and my sister—they were the very first ones that came to Sheboygan. Their name is in the memorial. And then, the—you can—if you're going to be here, you will meet the pastor that—Don Leonard—that sponsored my parents.

OK.

You know, he was a young pastor, came out of school and then he was preaching and he say, 'The good Lord God say we want to do something. This is the time. We need to bring boat people to Sheboygan,' you know, 'a family. Just one.' So, he talked to his congregations, everybody say, 'You crazy. You know, we don't know them. We don't know them.' And he say, 'Well, the good Lord say we don't need to know them,' you know.

Welcome strangers in your midst.

Yeah. So, that's what he used. Tomorrow you're going to meet him. And then, he brought my father here. And then, after that, then the people started coming because they were soldiers of my father, so they came to see him and they say, 'Oh, good place in Sheboygan.' So, they all come. And then, you come nearby me and then he come nearby you and they all got together. And then, people are asking, 'You know, how—where did they come from? How do they know where you are in Sheboygan?' We told them, 'We Hmong are clan people. We are all related. We are all related. He's a Vang. I'm a Yang. But if we go deeper, the relationship gets closer.' Then we start to know which social rank we are. How we do—how we are related. Then, we become a family. That's why in Hmong we always say *Kxv Tij* and *Neej Tsa*. We don't have friends. We only have *Kxv Tij* [family] when we have—we belong to the same clan. *Neej Tsa* [in-laws] when we have different clan. That's it. So, in Hmong society, we have *Kxv Tij* and *Neej Tsa*.

(46:17) So *Kxv Tij* is basically a family member.

Kxv Tij is a family member with the same clan--paternally the same clan name. Then, if we don't have that then we become *Neej Tsa*. In Hmong we have that.

I love learning the language.

Well, being a historian professor, you know, it's interesting.

Well, that's why I love talking to people. I always learn something.

Oh, yes.

Always learn something.

I got to talk about Pastor Leonard.

OK.

So ...

Don Leonard?

Don Leonard. Yeah. He—before my family came, he didn't know—so, he thought boat people would be Vietnamese.

Yeah, sure. Sure.

So, OK. The family comes. All right. We take one family in New York. The [L-return] immigration service called. 'Yeah, you're family is here and they'll be in Milwaukee.' You know, 'oh, good.' 'But, you know, they are not boat people. They are Hmong.' 'Hmong? What is it? Never heard of about Hmong.' So, he look in the dictionaries by Hmong. No Hmong in there because it was Miao.

Right.

So, he want to find out what kind of food, what kind of lifestyle. He couldn't find it. He go to—then he couldn't find it and then he said, 'Well, Asian people. OK.' [Interviewer laughs] He start looking in Asian. 'OK. Asian. What do they eat? OK. Asian—they eat rice and fish sauce.' So he drove from here to Milwaukee. He bought a five-pound rice and a bottle of fish sauce. And when my parents arrived, he was proudly, 'Here is your food.' [Interviewer laughs] 'Rice and fish sauce!' [Laughs] Then, he was with them about two years, three years, I remember. Then he left. He went to the Philippines. He went to missionary in the Philippines. So, then he was—he walked to the remote area. He stay with the Kankanaey in the—Kankanaey. That's the tribe.

Oh, the tribe. Right. OK.

Tribe by the Philippines. And being American pastor, you know, messenger with God, he was very important, more than the president of America. So the people consider him almost like a god to them, you know, from America. Had a lot of money and also has got to do a lot of things. Then, what they do—special people—they butcher a dog for him. [Laughs]

[Laughs] He must have been so pleased.

Yeah, he come back. He said, 'You know, Yong Chu,'—he talked to my dad. He came back to the U.S. He said, 'Yong Chu, do you have 15 minutes? I need to talk to you.' He stayed four hours talking about eating dog. [Both laugh] He said—now, remember this. He said—he said, 'Vu, you can translate for me. Now, I understand your Hmong people. I was there and they look pretty much like you. They thought I am a god. I am pastor. I have money. I got to do a little bit. And he's so special that they don't do anybody else but me. They butcher a dog for me.' And my wife, my kids, we were there. Two things we had in mind. If we eat dog, we gonna—our names going to be all down the range that Pastor Don Leonard eat dog. But if you don't eat that dog, my mission is down the drain. Just patch and go back home. He said, 'Lord, what should I do?' Then he said—the Lord said, 'Eat. That's meat.'

Lowered the sheet from the heavens with the unclean animal and said, 'Eat.' That's right.

So he ate and not bad. You know, they taste a little bit. Not bad. So he told his wife, 'Not bad. Eat. Just meat, you know.' His kids. So, they all eat dog. They keep eating dog on special occasions. Then he come back, he said, 'Now, I understand you Hmong people.' And say—my father said, 'Pastor Don.' We call Pastor Don. 'No, you don't know the Hmong people. We don't eat dog.' [Laughs] 'We don't eat dog.' And he say, 'Oh, OK.' Four hours. That's why he keep coming because he wouldn't see it. He was—he was the very first one that sponsored Hmong to Sheboygan area.

(50:40) Wonderful. Well, let's go back and jump back to the United Arab Emirates then. Or was it UAR?

UAE.

UAE.

United Emirates.

OK. It was the Emirates.

The company that hire me was [Schlumberger Overseas]. They do service logging in the oil drilling industries.

Can I get you to spell that company name for me?

Schlumberger. S-c-h-l-u-m-b-e-r-g-e-r. Schlumberger. Yes, Schlumberger. That was an international company created from in France but also in the U.S. They do mostly drilling service company like logging—we call logging, which is a—has special tool, like go down—measure the resistivity, the quantity, the capacity of the oil contained in—down hole. That was—I went there. I never—I never been in that country. That was hot.

I'll bet.

My first day, I remember I went there being young engineers, you know. We had to dress nicely. You know, you just get a job. I get out—I get out—I got out of the airplane, I felt like my suit was burning because that smell, it's so hot. It's 102. It's 102 and I felt like I was burning. Oh! OK, so, I end up to stay there for four years on the platform.

Oh, my.

I went to Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen. I didn't go to Iran because that was 1979. That was a big problem. And that was the time also Iraq and Iran were fighting. We had one engineer Iraqi, one Iranian, so we had to put them in each end of the building because never send them to the job at the same time.

(52:35) So, I mean, this is—this would be culture shock for an American who at least has some sense of—or at least a greater sense of living in the developed world, so to speak.

Yes.

And obviously, you'd spent time in France and you were—you had become a man of the world, but still, living in the Middle East for four years must have been ...

Yeah, I—you know, we were treated like expatriate. We never socialize or we never mingle with the local people. My first experience, I saw four ladies walking. I was at my apartment about fourth floor and then I saw four ladies walking with black veils, you know. I saw that in France. That's when their husband died.

Oh, yes. Sure.

In France, you wear black, you have veil, you know, that means your husband dies. I saw four ladies walking and I said, 'Oh, they must—their husband must be dead,' you know. And later on, I found that that was not their husband dead. That's the way how they're dressed. When they go out, they should cover their face, you know. Mask their faces or put veil so nobody—no temptation for men, you know. And I learn it. [Laughs] And we never had social contact with local people, except mainly men. You go to the market, they call the souq. But the market here you only see men.

(53:59) That's a long time to be away from home and family and anything that's familiar...

Like I said, I took my vow anytime, anywhere, no choice. So, I made my—I got to keep that. And then, I—the other one, they say you had to be—you had to remain a bachelor for 15 months. OK?

Well, once they stick you there for four years, there's not much choice, is there?

Yeah. So, 15 months and then you—but the good thing is, every three months, they give you two weeks off, pay ticket. You want to go Bangkok? You want to go to Chicago? You—so, they gave

you that. And then every year, they give you two-and-a-half months vacation pay with ticket. You can go home.

OK. So, did you make it to Sheboygan during that time?

I came—yes, I came to Sheboygan a couple times before I decide to come permanently.

(54:52) So, what were your impressions of Sheboygan on your first couple of visits?

That was 1978 when I first came. And the lake—Lake Michigan. I thought a truck was rolling on the lake. [Laughs] That was frightening. I couldn't believe what happened. And then my wife and I were trying—see that point? We were driving at that point over there, the tree—and the truck was riding right there. And I said, 'What's happen here, you know?' And that was a really icy, very thick ice, you know. The lake was frozen. And the impression I first—when I drop out of Chicago, I felt like my clothes gets stiffen—you know, straight like chopstick. And that was 17 below. That was

...

Talk about the total opposite.

Yeah, opposite of when I first drop in, in Dubai. In Chicago, I got that feeling. I didn't know how cold it was.

Oh, yes.

And I had no sense of how cold it was. In Laos, our thermometer always have zero up. We had no sense of zero down. [Interviewer laughs]

Yeah, zero Fahrenheit, to say nothing of zero Celsius.

Yeah, you always had—over there is Celsius, but we never had any—no idea of what does it mean below zero. We had ice. You know, sometime in the high mountains, we put water in—onto the bucket and the next morning ice, we thought, well, great, what does that mean? We really didn't know what is—the chemistry of what become ice, you know? We thought that was magic. We took that ice. We kind of rub our ears just to—so, that was great.

(56:50) So after your four-year tour—do we need to take care of some business?

No, that's fine.

OK. After your four-year tour in the Middle East, where did you go next?

Four years and I came straight to Sheboygan. After a couple [3:00 p.m.], my father came here and then he kind of twist my thinking, say he needs me here. A lot of things to be done because he—a lot of thing that, you know, the Hmong start coming here and if I can be here, that would be useful. He started the Hmong Association already. So, we thought, you know, he needs somebody that can speak English. I hardly could speak English.

There we go. OK.

Yeah, I thought I could speak, but when I came, I realized I couldn't speak at all. So during my vacation time I came here and then I decided to stay—1981. Then, I saw an ad in the *Sheboygan Press*. They're looking for a specific job, you know. So, again, I do like I did in Paris. 'All right, just write,' you know? And the GM—general manager—call me tomorrow, the last day and then say, 'You—we have a job and you, you know, you qualify for it. Do you want to do it?' I said, 'Well, but then I still have my job over there. I'm'... 'That's OK. You are refugees. You're a Hmong,' and so he hired me. And years back he told me, 'You know why I hired you? Because of my wife.' And they went to Grace Episcopal Church and the Hmong start—came to Sheboygan. And his wife say, 'John, if you want to help the Hmong refugees, hire him.' [Both laugh] That's what he told me.

OK.

[Recorder turned off, new track begins]

(0:00) All right. So, you're hired for this new job. You said it was with what company?

It was—that was [Armatech]. OK? They were looking for a lab technician to build a lab so they can test the water filters. And I said, 'I got a chemical engineering degree.' I don't care for pay, you know. I had enough pay over there, but I could not spend that money. [Chuckles] So then I said, 'OK.' You got a job, but I'm not going to pay you much. I said, 'Well, I don't need money. Just hire me.' You know, I do. So, I started. Then I—when I start, I started to build a lab so we can test the product that they built. Then, after the year, there was a project that come out and they say, 'OK. Nobody got a lab. You know, if you want to take over the project, we'll be willing to promote you to be a project engineer, you know.' 'Sure. No problem. So, I took it and I was a carbon block. A carbon block is made of activated charcoal.

Oh, carbon block.

Carbon block. So, I design. It took about a year to do research and then I develop and I get it on—get a patent. And then I get five patents of that. And then, that turn out to be one of the best products that we made and half of the business in that company was as a result of the new product development from the carbon block.

Outstanding.

So then my father was employed in different place. He was laid off and I said, 'Do you want to come to Armatech,' you know? I talk to John and...' 'That's your dad?' 'Yes.' 'Well sure, bring him.' So, then I start bringing close relative and then friend—not friend, but *Neej Tsa*. So, now, when I left—I retire from that company after 24 years. There were about 40, 45 Hmong employees working in there.

Roughly how many Hmong live in the Sheboygan area?

Our number is about 6,000, but the census came to about 4,000. Many didn't—and many didn't fill out the form. [Chuckles]

(2:25) Of course. And the population of Sheboygan is roughly what?

51,000—50,000.

So, more than 10% of the population.

Right. Right. We knew that because Wisconsin—we always compare Wisconsin, Fresno and Twin Cities. And in Wisconsin, they spread people to 11, 12 major cities. They try to maintain about 3% to the population total. Fresno and Twin Cities—they dump everybody to that part, you know? For us—I knew it because I knew—I know that we became the experimental—what do you call it? The little animal.

Oh, the lab rat? [Both laugh]

The lab rat. We were the lab rat for the U.S.—the settlement office. They just want to know which kind of resettlement would be the most successful. When you dump everybody to one place and you spread across. And Wisconsin was one of the highest—most successful resettlement.

Interesting.

Yeah. There are good and bad. You know, bad for us because we can't—being too small, we cannot do much things together. You don't have enough force or you don't promote your business. You don't have to, you know. On the other hand, you don't have problem with communities. People like you. They have job. They give—you know, they let you do it. As compared to Fresno, everybody there—you become a political mass. You have strength, you have force. But then you have—on the other hand, you always stay like you're in nut shells. You don't integrate. You don't assimilate. You don't, you know, so, because you think you can do everything. I think that's what the ...

And I suppose you become a target for disgruntled people of the community as well.

Right. Right. So, good and bad. But if you look at long-term and you look at, in the future, I think, the way how they did for the Hmong refugee in Wisconsin was the best model, too, to do. And we found that because when the Bosnia came to Wisconsin—or to America ...

When the Bosnians?

The Bosnians—they didn't put them to one place. They spread them all across. So they follow the Wisconsin resettlement, you know, system.

(4:51) Interesting. You say your father had already started a Hmong Association here in Sheboygan.

Yes.

Can you tell me something about that?

'79—'78, '79—most of the Hmong leader, they came to Wisconsin, spread across Wausau, Ripon, Madison, Eau Claire. So, they were always trying to get together and we had to be Hmong. We had to do something to help our people, try to get those who can speak English because back home those—they were, you know, flight navigator or they were control tower people. You know, they spoke English, but here they—oh, their English is not good because over there they spoke the military code. You know, alpha, bravo, [Laughs] lima, tango, but here they had to speak English. They couldn't speak, so they tried to form a Hmong Mutual Assistance—Hmong Mutual Assistance Association of Wisconsin. OK. I remember when I came here, my father—he was the president—and it's here we have association, we have the people we need to serve. Let's write a grant. OK? So we wrote a grant of 400,000. And we send that straight to Washington, D.C. [Chuckles]

Who was responsible for writing this grant? Were you part of it?

We came all the idea. We had—somebody—a lawyer or somebody in Appleton area that supposed to help us write the grant. So we didn't know anything about resettlement. So, we thought we should write to Washington, D.C., the Office of Resettlement, and then they would send us money. And that would provide service across Wisconsin—you know, employment, outreach, and also education. So that's what we do. So we send out application order. They send back. They say, 'No, you have to go to Madison.' [Laughs] That's what you are. You know, OK. Who is it? So, we call and then we found Sue Levy. She was the director for the refugees resettlement office.

Sue Levy?

Sue Levy.

OK.

And then, so we asked for 400,000 and then she came. She met with us. She asked, 'Do you ever run association? Did you have an association?' 'No.' 'Did you ever run association?' 'No.' 'Did you know how to keep bookkeeping?' 'No.' [Chuckles] OK. OK. Then she said, 'Well, let's do this. We don't speak Hmong. You speak Hmong, but you never run a nonprofit organization. Let's do this. How about if—we gave you \$34,000 and you start a pilot project here. You hire an executive director. You hire a secretary. And let's see how you—let's how you're doing,' you know. So, OK. Everybody was—we were not happy because we want \$400,000 and they give \$34,000. Nothing. So, OK. We'll take it. We set up an office. We hire one person and then one outreach worker. And then we get our bookkeeping donated from somebody—a CPA. We hire a retired lady that—she has good heart, so she help us to do the bookkeeper and secretary. So we start with that. And after the year, things went well because we get volunteers all the time—volunteers—car pools, you know, volunteers all the time. They knew—we're new to all this. They—no—they never saw so much spirit or voluntarism communities. 'OK. That's good and great.' So, they, 'OK, now what else you want to do?' OK. Green Bay, Appleton, Eau Claire, Wausau, each one wants money. So, they—so we start going like that in Wisconsin. Rather than some other place, they start with one and they grow—they expand it. OK? Then, in Wisconsin, each one, we say, 'No, we are called

Hmong Mutual Assistance Association. But you call your name different else. Don't call, like, Lao Family. Lao Family all over the place in Wisconsin. But no, don't call it that because if I go down, you go down with me. So, call it something else.' [Both laugh] So that's what the original leadership—you know, they said call you a different name, you know. And if I go down, you still exist and then we can always come back. So that was the mentality of the Wisconsin leaders. So, we had different name and we also had—Lao Family, we also had different Hmong association that called a different name.

(9:58) What would you list as some of the most important services that the Hmong-American Mutual Assistance Association provides to Hmong people in Sheboygan and now in other parts of Wisconsin?

The first one was language. We asked for volunteer, family sponsor to teach English. The second things is trying to find job. Job, you know, is English and job is related. That's the most immediate need. So English, you need to speak so you can get job and then job, so you can do things. We knew that's two things that got to go first. The basic things. I remember that—and then, we had people working without pay. We just—they just volunteered to get—because they ask, 'Have you ever had experience?' 'No.' 'We can't hire you if you don't have experience.' So what we did, see, we get people volunteer to work without pay, but just to have experience, whatever it is. Janitors, cooking, cleaning the street, just to have something you can put in your application. Yeah, you can put in your application that you have an experience. That was a great thing to do. And then once we got that and people start having job, we knew that after you get a job, then you have stable job. The second thing you're going to do is you're going to buy a car or buy the house. My father was the very first one to buy the house in Sheboygan in 1978 for \$28,800. Now, the house ...

Those were the days.

Yeah. Now, the house is valuable about over \$100,000. That was great. So—and then another thing was the education for the kids. So, we start having a Title VII, which got the three years and four years old Hmong kid that was born in Hmong family to go to a school. And parents volunteer to take the kid, twice a day, twice a day—volunteer a whole year. Now, we could not find those volunteers anymore because the liability, because the time busy. Nobody want to volunteer anymore, but that time was a great—my uncle took his van, you know, those station wagons—put seven kids, eight kids in there and just go to school and then picking up. The spirit of volunteerism was of very great value. But now it's gone.

It's kind of been killed.

Yeah, it's been killed. The Good Samaritan is no longer there.

Yeah, it's too expensive to be a Good Samaritan.

Yeah, yes, yeah.

(12:54) Well, tell me about this radio program that you have.

That's—oh, that's—[Chuckles] OK. 1982, WKTS said, 'Well, there was a Hmong here and then, do you want ...' I think a fellow here, name of **Soua Dao Yang**. He—somebody relate to him in sponsorship, say, 'If you want to have a—to talk on the radio here, we have five minutes for you: 7:55 to 8:00 on Sunday. [Interviewer laughs] So, he ...

Well, you have to start somewhere.

So, he went there. He, you know, and then a couple times he said, 'I don't read—I don't speak good English and Hmong.' Then he said, 'Do you want to do it?' I say, 'Oh, well, what should I do, you know, in five minutes?' 'You just say introduction. Then you play one song and then you put a few clips of news.' That's what I did. 1982. So I did that for a good six months, I think. Five minutes, Sunday, and we asked people, 'Did you listen to me?' 'No, when?' [Interviewer laughs] 'Sunday

morning.’ ‘I was still asleep or I already went to church.’ Nobody listen the five minutes. OK, we had somebody who donated \$920 to pay another 10 minutes. So, we have five minutes free—7:55 to 8:10. OK? So we did that for \$920 and when that money's gone, we can't do anymore. And then, somebody—a teacher or somebody suggest, ‘Why don't you go to that North High School radio? It's a public—it's a school station and they don't do anything else after school.’ So—well, that was September 1983. I went and talked to a fellow who work with us on the Title VII school, about three, four year-old kids and I say, ‘John, can you talk to somebody in North High that—if we can use that radio, you know? Because in Hmong culture, reading—we don't read much. Plus, we don't know how to read much. So, but we listen. Grandma, she is washing dishes, but she can listen, too. My uncle, he is driving a car, but he can listen, too. But you know, we have only five minutes. In fifteen minutes, nobody listen, nobody hear. You know, we want longer time.’ So, he come back and say, ‘Yes. You can do—and free.’ So that was the beginning of Hmong radio. I start with Monday night. He say, ‘How long you want?’ I say, ‘One hour.’ ‘OK. 4:30 to 5:30.’ You know, so every day from Monday, 4:30 and then not too long and then people say, ‘No, one hour, I miss it. Can you go an hour-and-a-half? You know, can you go more?’ and then—and up to 4:30 to 10:00. Ten o'clock because they're closing the school. And then, OK, so five hours on the radio. And since then, 1983 up to now, still going. I got to go, it's 4:00 now, so... [Chuckles]

(16:29) So what does an average day of programming on your show consist of?

The radio that I run is—we don't do a lot of politics or a lot of talk show. Mainly is culture. I think radio for me, especially—we have quite a few radios, but my goal is to promote people to listen to culture and then you insert specific information pieces to them. If you talk for half an hour news, then they would forget and then you create—for me is additional news that you're just frustrating people. Whether you know or not Fidel Castro is dead doesn't add anything to your daily life. [Interviewer laughs] Is it just for educate or people that—business people that, ‘Oh, you know, yesterday Fidel Castro was dead?’ But that doesn't change the Hmong—ordinary Hmong family that he has to take his kids to school. But if I play a song, that is a *kwv txhiaj*, really sad or really meaningful to her and she listen to it and she's, ‘Wow. That's something. That was my life. And my life was suddenly in that *kwv txhiaj*.’ Look at what will happen. At the end, either bad or good, right? At the end mostly is good then, not bad. So, that changes a person's thinking to, you know, here in America, how you should carry your daily life to get—to change your thinking. So that's what my—and then, the young—the youth, also. I keep saying things new, like create the Hmong words. He is zero mostly because [su]. Su is Lao. We don't really know why you say su. But su—we say, over there, so [18:42 - Speaking Hmong]. OK? It's like I say four, five, seven, nine, eight, two—then you don't know what is it anymore, you know? What is that things? So, we came out with a survey of 12 to 14 names about zero. It's like, some people said, ‘It looks like an eggshell. It's called egg. You know, ‘I cannot say four, five, eight, three, seven, zero, egg.’ [Interviewer laughs] ‘I cannot say that. Let's do something else.’ And then, we come to a [vo], which means a round shape is a lasso. It is a—but the shape can be like this—oval, round, but vo means you have some meaning about that zero. So, we try to create that. So, here, the zero we call vo. So, we [19:31 - Speaking Hmong]. Then people listen, listen and people start talking. They don't talk su anymore. [19:40 - Speaking Hmong]. So, we are creating something, but it takes time. People are not going to say it tomorrow. It has some meaning. It has to have some consistency and it has—it's got to make sense to people. And also, it has to be persistent. OK? And the people who create it need to be diligent. Need to follow—I cannot change my, you know, if I do, then people change. So, that's what we start in the radio. On the other hand, there was some—we, because the radio and the public frequencies of people go through and then ‘blah blah blah’—they hear, what is that, you know? And oh, they look at—’That was 91.7 FM. What is that language?’ People call, ‘Hey, what

are you doing there?' 'You know, I am a Hmong DJ and we're talking Hmong here.' 'Get off that radio. You know, talk English. Everybody speak English.' So—and then sometime they call nasty question. I say, 'Well, I am just a, kind of a little DJ here. Do you—if you like to say something, can you call my public relations department? They would be able to answer you.' 'OK. What's their phone number? 459-3333.' 'OK.' And that was the police number. [Both laugh] So, I—you know, there's no need to make them mad. You know, just ...

(21:20) How frequently would you say you get an unfriendly call like that?

Now is getting much better, because everybody—I will tell you why much better. Ten years ago, 15 years ago, not too many people knew the Hmong. It's not their fault. It's just education. They were in the generation that grow up. They didn't hear about Secret War, the Vietnam War. So, they didn't know anything. I don't blame them, you know. Even in Hmong side also, Hmong lady call me and say, 'Wow, you play a song so sad. I'm going to—I'm going to throw myself over the window,' you know. The song is so sad. It's a *lus taum*. So sad that, in the end, and the person in that song commit suicide and kill herself. And she said, 'Your song so sad. Exactly my life is. I think I'm going to throw myself over the window.' I say, 'Well, Grandma, what floor are you?' 'Well, I live on the first floor.' And I say, 'OK, you can throw—we can—you can jump over the window because the most you can, you can break an ankle and then you would look stupid and the people say, 'What did you do?' 'I try to kill myself when you jump that first floor.' And then, she was laughing. She say, 'OK. Now, I'm not going to jump. I will look stupid.' [Interviewer laughs] So all kind of call. But now, what we do is—I can see why people start upsetting the Hmong is—July fourth, we do it part ways, Memorial Day. And we talk to school. We talk to school—back in the early '80s, there was a 60 Minutes CBS about the Hmong, the Secret War. We talked to all schools kids. 1980—'82, '83. You know how old they are now? About mid-25, 30 years old. So, what we did kind of comeback now, that make people understand why the reason we are here. This is not going to good—this is not going to work for today. But it would be another 30 years. OK? Which we come back.

(23:41) I'll just say for the recording. When he says this, he was pointing to the memorial.

The memorial. OK. So I see that. And now, we don't really see people that make those calls to my radio. They call, they even say, 'Oh, yesterday, I heard you on the radio.' See? That's the difference. 'I heard you on the radio.' And they point out that. And they even say, 'That's really nice you can so that. You can maintain, you can keep your culture. It's very important. I lost mine.' And I say, 'Where you from?' 'Germany.' 'I lost all my culture.' Look at my kids. And I say, 'Yeah. That's why we try not to repeat your mistake, you know.' So we have communication. And for Hmong, we always compare to a tree. A tree without roots will be quickly overcome by wind. But a tree with strong roots, no matter how strong the wind is, after the wind, the trees always stand up. So that's what I tried to put in the people's—and radio is good for people listening to. But you cannot always tell them to do. You have to give them something else, like play their culture, telling them what was—and then you can insert what needs to be done. So, it is very well—we—there are—some of the radio station that they like to do talk show get excited, get different parties to come aboard and then, you know, talk in what they want to say. And then, after they are not—I am responsible what I put out. I am responsible what people are listening to me. And I got to be careful, because you are not doing your daily radio broadcasting for fun, you know. You are creating history. You are changing your community. You are creating the future and that's not going to happen tomorrow. It takes time—a long time to go through.

(26:00) I'm just curious, since you're broadcasting for free, do you this totally commercial free or do you have commercials?

Well, public radio, we don't really do commercials, but we accept donation, contribution. Most people contribute—I—if I can tell you. In my basement, I had almost something like 2,000 cassettes. The four wall is a full, full. I bought those little slots, I put in there and CD, you know, I must have over 800 CDs. And all those are Hmong culture. All those—I use a lot of my—I think half of that from my pocket. And then the other half from people donate 10, 15, 20 bucks. They just say, 'Well, I like what you do and here is my 20 bucks.' And once in a while, if I had to do something that I throw on air saying that I need some money to pay for a tape recorder. And then people just, 'OK. Here.' So, they give freely and they just—they see the need, you know, to give the money. It's not for my pay and I said I don't pay myself. I've got a good job. The good Lord gave me the stability and this is what I do for—if you go, I will go with you. [Interviewer laughs] If we stay, we stay together. So ...

(27:38) The Chai Soua Vang incident in eastern Wisconsin. Did that had much of an impact here?

It had quite an impact in this community, too. They thought—they thought that what happen over there could happen here because there's a lot of minor friction between hunters here, too. And within the Hmong community, too, we also have all kind of debates. You know, we hear a lot of Hmong counter, saying, 'Well, they deserve to die because we also had the same thing. We went that—in the forest and we were harassed. We were—you know, that happened to us, too. And I—we had that.' But I tried to minimize the conversation by just telling, you know, we are to be careful. When you go to hunt, you are not by yourself. What you do, you affect our community. It's like Chai Soua Vang affect all our—the Hmong people in the U.S. So, it did affect a lot. People call me, say, 'Tell your people, you know, to respect private property.' So, I say, 'Yes, sir. I tell it, but I'm not hunting, so I can't control them.' 'Yeah, just tell those people.' 'And OK, I will say it. And I tell it out.' Hmong—some of the Hmong hunters also came to—you know, 'maybe we should announce that they should respect us. They should not treat us like that. They should not make fingers to us, you know.' 'Well, will you ...' I told them, 'You know, I told them life is like mirror. If you smile to them, they will smile to you. If you yell at them, they will yell at you.' You know, and but that's easy to say, but it's not—it's difficult to do until what happened in Chai Soua Vang's case. And it's unfortunate, you know, and I think loss of life will shape the future. It's like, during the war, many people died. That will change the course of society. But unfortunately, life has to be lost and nobody wants that.

(30:07) Well, here we are—about 25, 30 feet from this memorial that's going to be dedicated tomorrow. Can you tell me what it means to you to have participated in getting this built and in being this close to seeing it dedicated?

Yeah. Yeah, the memorial. This—I just want to clarify the title. Lao, Hmong and Americans. OK? This is not a Hmong memorial. This is not a Lao memorial. This is not a Lao-Hmong memorial. It is a Lao and Hmong and American memorial because there were people die over there. There was about 700 Americans died in Laos. They were pilots, they were officers, they were service airmen. There was a lot of people killed. The memorials, I think, in the early '85—1985—there were some local veterans here—Vietnam veteran—that they recognized the Hmong contribution to the U.S. war. So, University of Wisconsin is putting together a display of—for a weekend—for weeklong program talking about veterans. And one of the topics was the Hmong Secret War—the Secret War in Laos. So, we built a Plexiglas wall. It's a three—four by eight—four feet by eight feet Plexiglas where we inscribe all the Hmong veteran name in there. So, that was the beginning—1985. And

then, because nobody was really own it, we just pull name. 'How many people you know?' 'OK. I know 30.' We just engrave it. 'How many you know?' So, we engrave almost like 500—over 500 names. And then after a week, nobody took care of the three wall. You know, it just get dirty, dusty. And then that was the beginning of memorial type for the people that die in Laos. Then, the Hmong Association keep thinking about a memorial to honor those people who died and who served. That idea keep coming year after year until the right time where Steve Schofield—he was very much involved. So, we were saying, 'OK. Let's collect all those names before it's too late. You know, nobody's going to remember.' So, we start culling the names. Nothing happen and then later on, years after, then somebody's serving in the Hmong. I say, 'OK, Steve, let's do something, you know. It's getting late. Those people that—they are dying. They are gone. You know, let's build a memorial, you know.' So, OK. So, we start talking to city people that we came with a design of two Hmong soldiers carry a U.S. pilot crashed. OK. And then, we present that. We had an artist draw it down and we present it to the city council. And there were some people right away. They didn't like it. They were anti. They said, 'Why should we build a memorial for the Hmong?' Then we have to build for the Philippino, the Koreans, the—you know, all those people. What are we going to end up to, you know?' And so, we were voted down. You know, totally down. No memorial. And then we—I felt a little bit bad. I say, 'What is this?' You know, city council people, they didn't even—we have been here long enough. They didn't—that's the year 2000. So, that's already, what ...

Six years ago.

No. Yeah, but since 1976, '75. That was ...

Twenty-four years ago.

Twenty-four years ago. And they still don't accept us. Let's do something else. So we had some friends. OK. Let's work on the politics. Election is going to start soon, so let's work on those people that they don't—they voted us down. Let's get people onto the new council. So we work on the—they were classic type of things and we talking people, 'OK, can you run for office?' You know, and then we all support you. So he—then we work that way. And it happened that way. The people that were elected were in favor of a memorial. OK? So, even if people votes down, **which is by the table, done, you know.** Then, we vote for people comfortable and they were in favor of the memorial. And then, suddenly, they resuscitate the project. 'Let's start your memorial,' you know. So, we went back. I almost lost face, but we went back. You know, what time is it? Tzianeng Vang: It's almost three.

OK. We went back to the council and then we get Dr. Ray Hernandez. He's the dean of the University.

Ray Hand?

Ray Hernandez—Hernandez.

Oh, Ray Hernandez.

Hernandez. So, we put key people on the committee. OK? The dean of University. We had an architect. Steve Yaeger, he's an architect. Steve Schofield—he's a retired major Special Forces. We have a professor who teach geography at the University. His wife is a columnist at *Sheboygan Press*. We had [Mike Berg], who is an owner of a workshop—you know, tool shops. And then, we had—who else? Ten people, OK? So, we put that committee together and we—and then we went back to the city council and said, 'We're going to build a memorial. Good you support us now.' And then they proposed that to the city council and they vote—12 over four people—12, yes, four, no. OK. Good. Now, we're going to build a memorial. We talk. And they say, 'Where you want to build is not good,' because we want in Fountain Park, which is downtown. OK. We want there.' And then, 'But that is not good place.' 'What about Deland Park?' We talk about—we want that memorial to be educational and also to honor the people and to be safe. To be out of sabotage or

vandalism. And somebody on the committee—on the city council, ‘How about Deland Park, you know?’ ‘OK. You say Deland Park. We go look at Deland Park, you know.’ And it happened to be the best place.

Oh, it's beautiful.

Every year, almost a million people come through. We have Lakefest, we have Coho Derby, we have all kind of—July Fourth—July Fourth—50,000 people.

What was the one before July Fourth? What was the event?

Lakefest. Lakefest.

And then, after that?

Lakefest? Coho Derby. Coho Derby was a festival that ...

Coho Derby?

Coho Derby. That they going all fishing.

Oh, Coho.

Coho Derby. OK? So, then we—OK. That's a great place. And they say, ‘Where you going to ...’ I say, ‘Where are you going to be?’ So, we came around. We look at all the shape here. If you look at all the shape, it's almost round. The flagpole is round. The playground's round and all those structures over there are round. And Dr. Ray Hernandez said, ‘OK, let's do something round.’ So, he came up with the current design of the memorial—round. OK.’ Then, we say, ‘Well, that round's good, but then we need—because our mind still set for the soldiers and airplane, you know. We need to change.’ And I talked to one of my neighbor who was adamant. I said, XXXX His name was—don't mention his name.

OK.

‘I've been—we've been neighbor for 24, 25 years. We share egg roll. We share things. Then why did you vote no, you know, for the memorial?’ And he said, ‘You know, tell you the truth. That memorial you're going to build is too much memorial for war because, you know, two soldiers carry a pilot that shot down. It's too much memory for war. Many of us—all folks on this council, we didn't like it. But if you come up with something that's more like social, educational to the people, that—yes, we'll pass it.’ And that's why we—OK. Let's do something different. And that's what it came out. Now, one thing we did emphasize is the memorial is not to glorify war. It's to explain and educate, to let people know what happened. That freedom was not free. People die for it. And not only Hmong die. Lao and American die over there. OK? So, that was the trial that pushed up the memorial to be built. And then, mosaic. We need something cultural. When you look at this, you know, oh, that's Hmong, you know. So, but Dr. [Orahand] and they say, OK. Let's do some mosaic outside, OK? How are we going to happen? Well, let's get the people involved. So, we sign up for the Sheboygan School area students—900 student do all those design. They submit all the pile of paperwork like this. Then we—the John Michael Kohler Art Center—the—it's a very—it's an art center in downtown here. They stepped in. ‘We're going to help. We know the artists, so we're going to help you.’ So, they call somebody—an art teacher in Oshkosh. And she's volunteered her time to put all these design together. She put the design and then we get about 350 volunteers to come and put all those pieces together. The drawings were put in decal. We sent to Iowa. Somebody there has all those decal. They put into stone face. brought it back here. We sent to Kohler Company. They put into a kiln, harden it and then bring it back and we get all volunteer come and put together. And then they do caulking and gluing, caulking, all that. And it turned out to be very nice.

Yeah, absolutely.

So, not only one student, but 900 student. If you go to—the student will come and say, ‘That's one mine. That's mine. That's mine.’ Everybody. Not only one person.

(41:40) Wonderful.

Yeah.

[To Tzianeng Vang:] **Well, do you have any questions?**

Tzianeng Vang: Oh, I think, get away from the memorial. I know you've been involved with RPA. I just want to know a little bit of history about how ...

OK. In the Hmong RPA?

TV: Yeah, RPA.

Hmong RPA is Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet. Father Bertrais, Dr. Smalley and Pastor Bernie Smith. They were the pioneer, back in the early '50s, that they create Hmong alphabet. My part, I was—I came late after, but I was very heavily involved. 1997, that is—after 45 years, those three people that they create the Hmong alphabet, after they create it, Dr. Smalley and Bernie Smith, they went off their way and they never use that again. But Father Bertrais—as soon as they create the alphabet, he started teaching. He started teaching the Hmong. So, he—then he spent his whole life to use the RPA for second—first thing, he's a priest. He has a missionary—you know, a mission to do, which evangelization of those Hmong people. But on the other hand, he respected the Hmong that still have the traditional belief. Because all sorts of culture beliefs from those people. So he started gathering, collecting, documenting all those traditional ideas. And weddings, funerals, stories, *kwv txhiaj*s, all—he did all that. OK? I was involved because when I—back in 1997, they were pretty old and we had an idea—I didn't say I had an idea. We had an idea to bring those three people together. So, we—at least, as educated Hmong persons, we can officially say thank you to them for creating something that they never thought was going to come that far. They never thought that Hmong RPA is going to be able to go into the computer without any modifications. You can do anything. You can type English and you can type Hmong. You don't have to change anything at all. And so we called them together and we created—we called—make dinner and there was a movie—I don't know, do you have that tape?

TV: Yeah, we do.

And we invite them all together and view it—about 300 and something. We select people to come just for that. We didn't do an open door, which a lot of people still blame me, saying that I was too—what do you call ...

TV: Exclusive.

Exclusive. OK. And it's always that way. Even the memorials. OK? So, we call them and then we told them what we feel. We express our feelings. We give them the way how we should—we owe them something. And then, six months later Smalley died. OK? OK, then a year later, Bernie died. If we didn't do that, we still owe—in our heartfelt feeling, we should owe something. OK? But we did that. We did—then, I was involved in that because I do—because I want to do radio. And in radio, you need to be consistent. You have to adhere to something. You don't change things. You don't change things on your mood. You have to go—first of all, you have to go by the linguistic rules, phonetic rules. And then, those three guys, they already created—they already make a challenge not to change. And I start seeing a lot of youngsters—they do a lot of change. OK? And there's going to be chaotic. There's going to be a mess. So I was heavily involved. And then, Father Bertrais was getting old and then he is looking for a home for his documents. Fifty years of archives. There was a doctor called Gao Lee. She got here from France and she came to California. And then we were teaching the RPA in the University of Madison. OK? So, she heard about that and she came in—she applied for a grant to get Father Bertrais' archive to Madison. OK? And then, Father Bertrais was my wife's godfather. So—and she is the one that helped him to translate the Hmong Catholic Bible. And I was the one who put together—I type, do all the things and I get involved. And then, on the process of bringing his archive to Madison, we went to Thailand, so we

get all that. And now he is sick. He's gone back to France. And we are only halfway from getting everything to Madison.

TV: So the majority is still in Chiang Mai.

All is still in Chiang Mai. Yeah, we only scan probably one-third.

Are you in contact with Father Bertrais at all?

Yeah, he has prostate cancer. They did the operation. It went well. But now, he is starting having Alzheimer disease and he doesn't remember. He doesn't remember now, but 50 years back. So, we are—but lately, he—physically, he's back to his normal. But then, his memory is fading. And then I feel good because in 1997, we did do that. We did pay our debt to—and somebody say [48:03 - Speaking Hmong] and then, Father Bertrais, you know, you're lucky. You are lucky to be born in France—to be a French. And then you come to the Hmong. You create the Hmong RPA. But if you were born in the Hmong and you create that—the RPA, Hmong people would have killed you already. They make the analogy to the Pahawh, that Shong Lue Yang. And you know, it's pretty much—I think sometimes that has certain truth in there. Look at the Pa Chay. 1921—he stand up against the French, because the French tortured and oppressed the Hmong people, so he stand up. But who killed Patai? It is a Hmong. OK? And Shong Lue stand up, has a writing now in St. Paul. Everybody wonder why we (***) , because it has some meaning or some sense to it. They kill him. And that's why the Hmong might say, 'You were lucky to be born French.' And I asked Father Bertrais, 'Do you want to be a Hmong?' 'Yes. But I question whether the Hmong are going to accept me or not.' And he said, 'When I pass away, I would like to have a Hmong-Catholic ritual.' Which—in the Hmong-Catholic faith, we do develop a ritual. The way, how in 1962, that they have Vatican II that they allow people should use their culture to worship God rather than using the Roman's or the Italian or the Latin or the English. You can use your culture the way you like to worship God. You know, that's what you should do. And ...

(50:07) There's going to be a Hmong Catholic service on Sunday morning, isn't there? The people here will be invited to attend?

Yes. In—what is it? Wausau or ...

Oh, I thought it was here.

It was here?

Steve Schofield mentioned it earlier. Maybe I didn't understand what he saying.

Probably not in Sheboygan.

OK.

Yeah. Not Sheboygan. In Hmong culture, we say when you are born, you are born with—need ritual. You don't just born like an egg—broken out. You are born—Hmong—you *peb kawm ntawv los mus ua qhev* [we went to school so we could have important political positions (can lead). Here (in America) we go to school so we can learn to be slaves (can serve)]. When you die, you die with dignity. OK? You have to have a certain way of getting your—these two—because in Hmong's life, there are three important moments—when you are born, when you are buried, when you die. These are the three important moments. Now, you have to perform your culture accordingly, no matter how faith—what kind of faith you have. You have to have something that—you cannot just bury the person or you just cannot, 'Well, he's dead. Let's put in a coffin and then bury.' You know, you have to go through a ritual. And that is important for Hmong people. Very important. Even—either we change our faith or we believe it differently. We say it have to have Hmong culture within our part because I am different than you. OK? I tell Hmong on the radio—we are short, flat nose and wide cheeks, black hair. What's wrong with that? Nothing wrong. We cannot change. We have to be Hmong. We are Hmong and we are engineers, we are doctors. We can do things. We are—you know, that is even much better. More than that—because I small, that mean you are

big—you are tall. If I have black hair, that means you have blonde hair. That is the diversity. That's the different of—we can, you know, people can appreciate. Think about, if you have 100 people look alike, how boring it is. It's boring. OK. Try to look—if you watch eggs on the shelf. Those—a dozen eggs. They look alike. Just one glance and you don't want to watch anymore. You know, there's no difference. But if you put 12 colored eggs in there, you would appreciate each one. This is bad. This is good. You like that one.

[Mr. Yang answers a phone call and has to leave. Interviewer thanks him for his time, interview concludes.]

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