

## STOCKTONSpeaks!

### **SHOUA LO**

For Shoua Lo, a cheerful man who laughs easily, coming-of-age began at nineteen, when he married and started a family of his own. Americans of all ethnicities view starting a family as a rite of passage that opens the doors of adulthood. When you have children of your own, it's harder to think of yourself as a child anymore. Shoua, born the second oldest in a family of seven sons and three daughters, knew very well what sort of responsibilities he was taking on. And yet—starting his own family still didn't give Shoua the feeling that he was viewed by his loved ones as fully adult.

If his family had remained in Laos, his status would have been clear. Hmong culture has its own special ways of marking the move from boy to man and from girl to woman. Weddings are very special, happy occasions, and not just for the bride and groom. Families re-affirm their ties in busy communal ceremonies where rituals, such as offering toasts to the new couple, let everyone see the roles men or women plays within the family. They reveal whether or not individuals has made the "leap" into adulthood.

Like many Hmong, however, Shoua's family made a difficult transition to life in the United States and was forced by circumstances to leave many of their defining traditions behind. In Laos, he would have learned from daily activities what behaviors were appropriate. In the U.S. he has struggled with the expectations of relatives who've had the benefit of living in Laos. Without meaning to be critical, they assume he has learned traditions which had in fact been disrupted by the transition to America. His good humor, however, has helped him deal with the frustration of "being thrown into the middle" of situations where he could only do his best to meet the expectations of Hmong tradition.

Originally, most Hmong thought their time in the United States was temporary. They didn't leave their homeland by choice. Before 1975, no Hmong had applied for residency status. They were allies of the Americans during the Vietnam War, and reprisals by the Communist government against "American sympathizers" were harsh. Most of those who came in the aftermath of the withdrawal from Vietnam believed that, someday, they'd be able to return to their homes. However, on-going difficulties, both political and economic, as well as new opportunities and new roots that developed in the United States have kept families here.

Now 31, Shoua was too young when he immigrated to remember anything but vague images of life before his family arrived in the United States during 1978. They settled briefly in Denver and then, in 1981, moved to Stockton. What he does remember vividly is the pleasure of life as an American teenager—of growing up with friends in Central California and feeling real freedom. His identity as Hmong, however, remained solid. While Shoua speaks English with his brothers and sisters, he speaks Hmong with his parents. His family maintains their ties with fellow Hmong immigrants, and Shoua fondly remembers attending community meetings with his father when he was growing up. As a lawyer, his father, Chue Lo, was an important member of the community, knowledgeable and above all, respected.

Respect is what every child wants from their father—and Shoua is no exception. Chue Lo had high hopes for his son, wanting to see him distinguish himself, perhaps as a lawyer, a doctor, or other professional. Shoua has felt the inevitable weight of these expectations.

Pressure didn't just come from his father's ambitions for his son. It also came from the inevitable comparison community members make between Hmong raised in Laos and those raised in the Central Valley of California. By the age of 10, his father had already taken an active role in cultural events. He was also performing farm work and hunting. In Laos, at an early age his father was considered a man and expected to serve as the head of his family at an age

when many American teenagers don't yet know how to drive—or even balance a checkbook.

With such high standards, Shoua has needed to prove himself continually. Committing to a career, as well as a family, have become critical steps in winning family and community recognition.

By age 18, he had already received a good high school education and learned the most important lessons in life from his family. Hard work, discipline, knowing right from wrong, goal orientation—these were all values his family impressed upon their son. They taught him even his friendships would shape the kind of man he would become: “If you hang around with gang members, you'll end up becoming a gang member. If you hang around with business men, you'll end up becoming a business man.” They always stressed the importance of planning for the future and of having the strength to make something of himself.

But strength alone is not enough—using that strength to accomplish goals is what turns plans into actions, dreams into reality. He worked for a number of years after high school, but employers never gave him the opportunities he knew he could handle. Earning his degree in Chemical Engineering from San Jose State has changed all that: “A whole lot of doors open when you get a college degree!”

For Shoua, coming of age has been a process, not a single event. He began the process when he started his own family. But his engineering degree has been—so far—the most important step he's taken in his coming of age. His accomplishment helped him earn the full respect of his father, his family, his many loved ones, and his community. He could see and feel the difference in their attitudes towards him after he met his educational goals. They had always treated him well, but now they treat him like a man.

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Ethnic Group: Hmong American  
Generation: Middle