

STOCKTONSpeaks!

TENG LO

“If you work like a slave first—eventually, you'll get to eat and live like a leader. If you eat and live like a leader first—eventually, you'll have to eat and live like a slave.”

These are words of wisdom from which anyone can learn. They are words that Teng Lo has never forgotten. Now seventy years old, he has learned many things in life—but those words, spoken by his Hmong elders, are as meaningful today as when he first heard them as twelve-year boy, years ago and in a very different place.

Teng Lo was born in Ban Nyam Hoc, in the Xieng Khuong province of Laos. His parents were farmers who worked hard to raise their six sons and three daughters. Teng's memories of his childhood are happy ones. From his grandparents and other elders, he learned Hmong religion, traditions, and the beauty and strength of his native culture. Hmong literally means “free;” it is a culture made up of men and women who have fought to live free and self-sufficient for more than two thousand years.

As a youth he learned about Hmong legends, history and important Hmong leaders. Precisely where myths leaves off and history begins in Hmong stories is not clear. From family elders and school teachers he learned to respect fact and fiction, myth and history.

Their earliest stories extend back to 2700 B.C.E. and to clashes with the Chinese Emperor Hoang-ti. This emperor imposed harsh, unjust punishments upon the Hmong people, who in return rebelled against his authority again and again. Eventually, after generations of persecution and rebellion, the Hmong migrated to safer lands, but still within China.

Whether the Emperor Hoang-ti was a man or a myth, no one knows for sure. But the lessons of his story remain relevant today. Like in ages past,

Hmong identity continues to be defined by the people themselves, not by the land they occupy.

This lesson still serves the Hmong well. Decades of warfare following the Second World War threatened their way of life in Southeast Asia. Intense persecution by Communist regimes led later generations of Hmong to seek safe haven in America. Teng Lo and his family came to the U.S. in 1976. In 1981, with a wave of other Hmong immigrants, he moved to Stockton.

Teng did not arrive in the Central Valley with a great deal of money, but he did arrive with a wealth of cultural knowledge and wisdom. Among the many things he knew was that he didn't want to "eat and live like a slave," so he was willing to "work like a slave," instead.

The words of his elders have guided his path through his life. Teng is a man who values knowledge and advice, but knows that ultimately, his choices are his own responsibility. In his youth, some of his friends decided to become soldiers. Teng made the decision not to follow these friends, but to find his own path—to study, to work hard and then to find a wife and to start a family of his own. Taking this road has made all the difference.

The greatest source of happiness for him has been this marriage, and he remembers his wedding with great fondness. His marriage is truly defined him as a man. His relatives made very clear that they, too, recognized how his choice in marriage and his decision to raise a family made him an adult. Teng was very proud to become "the man of the house" and to honor his wife as "the woman of the house." Living by the practical wisdom he acquired from his elders, he and his wife could not help but lead good, productive lives.

Perhaps the real success of Teng's life has been in demonstrating how the cultural knowledge he has mastered knows no borders. It serves those who have the character to use it, no matter where a person makes their home. In fact, he has found that Hmong traditions often parallel American ones. As an example, he points to timeless Hmong and classically American saying—"Time is money!"

The stories of Teng's successes, in Laos and here, and the story of his journey to America are part of the rich history that he will pass on to his children and grandchildren. At age 70, he has finally taken on a role even more important than that of husband and father. Like those whose stories he loved as a youth, Teng is now an elder—a man worthy of the highest respect, one whose life enriches the lives of his family, of the Hmong community, and of all people who value hard work, courage, and self-sufficiency.

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Ethnic Group: Hmong

Generation: Elder