

STOCKTONSpeaks!

TOUBEE YANG

The Hmong came to the United States between the late 1970's and early 1990's after the devastating Vietnam War. Until then, the Hmong in Laos lived an agricultural and a nomadic life. They lived in one-bedroom, thatched roofed homes with their families cooking over open fires on dirt floors. They had no written language, and few were formally educated.

Toubee Yang, now thirty-eight, moved from his birthplace in Laos to find a new home and culture in America. His is a story of travel. His family was broken up in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. As a young man, he grew up first in a nation (Laos) that did not respect his heritage and later, in a totally foreign environment (the United States).

Until age nine, Toubee attended private school in his homeland. Education is an opportunity that Toubee cherished. It was only available for the wealthy in Laos. However, in the 3rd and 4th grade, he was not allowed to speak Hmong, only Lao.

As the Vietnam War ended and the North Vietnamese government came into Laos, Toubee's parents were taken by the Communist regime, leaving the youngster without a mother or father. In the turmoil that followed, his education was disrupted. An uncle and aunt took responsibility for him, taking him along when they fled to Thailand in 1975. Even though Toubee had no schooling during this chaotic time, he felt fortunate to have escaped Communism. After living in a Thai refugee camp for six months, the family was allowed to come to the United States. When they arrived in 1976, they were sent to Kansas.

Most Hmong, upon their arrival in the U.S., were placed in cities like Minneapolis, Chicago, Milwaukee, Detroit, Hartford, and Providence. In Kansas, Toubee was isolated from other Hmong communities in the United States. Toubee and the adults in his family did have extended family nearby however. Other Hmong, placed by refugee settlement authorities in isolated rural communities,

were without extended their families and suffered anxiety, depression, and paranoia. It was not uncommon for Hmong, in the face of such a loss of identity, to succumb to suicide.

Toubee and his family weathered the difficulties of a foreign environment and began a long period of adjusting to American life. The young boy, with a gift for languages, learned to speak English easily, mastering the rudiments in about a month. Within a year of arriving in Kansas, Toubee was comfortably speaking English.

Ultimately, Toubee's family left Kansas for a place with an agricultural economy more like to one they had known in their own homeland. Reuniting with members of their clan, the Yang, was also a goal. In 1981 their quest brought them to Stockton, where Toubee finished his adolescence.

While enrolled at Stagg High School, he set many goals for himself. One was to be accepted into a university and pursue a business degree. His family has always wanted to see him succeed. They expected him to be a role model for his younger siblings, two sisters and a brother. He himself aspired to be a leader in his community, a goal of particularly importance to his aunt and uncle.

Toubee lived on a farm in Stockton, where his uncle worked hard to provide for the family. It was difficult work. His wise uncle asked him, "Do you want to work this way or go to college?" Toubee did not want to work on the farm; the threat of a life as a farm laborer motivated him to finish his education.

After graduating from Stagg, Toubee attended Mt. Olive College in North Carolina. He worked his way through Mt. Olive in four years, earning a Bachelor's degree in accounting. After this separation from his family, he returned to Stockton which he still considered home.

Once he had earned his college degree, Toubee felt his family treated him as an adult. Toubee soon become involved with issues affecting the Hmong community. In particular, he began to help those with drug and alcohol problems. His aunt and uncle had stressed that drugs and alcohol are unhealthy. Although Toubee himself was never involved with such substances, he wanted to help others

who were struggling with them. Soon he enrolled at the University of the Pacific to become a certified counselor.

During this period, his family pressured him to marry so he would have ample energy to raise his children. They feared that if he waited a gap might develop between himself and his children such as they had observed within the Hmong community. Viewing elders as powerless, and being unable to communicate with them, some Hmong children do not pay their elders the deference and respect that is expected in Hmong culture. Thus, Toubee's family wanted him to marry and begin his family before he could be seen as a "powerless" old person.

But Toubee highest priority was for his father to come to the United States. Since Toubee was raised in the United States by his aunt and uncle, he had lost touch with his biological father. His father had finally been released by the North Vietnamese and was living with Toubee's brother's family in Laos. In 1991, Toubee sponsored his father's immigration to the United States. He also sponsored his brother's three-year-old son. The arrival of his father and his brother's son was the occasion of a "cultural celebration." It was, says Toubee, "like a birthday."

Religion has played a major role in Toubee's life. His father is a person who is deeply spiritual. Although Toubee has been a Christian for years and believes in Jesus as the Savior, Toubee respects his father's different beliefs.

After years of growing up in the United States and becoming successful within the American economic system, Toubee is proud to be Hmong. He speaks three languages; Hmong, Lao, and English. Although he is fluent in English, at home with his family he speaks Hmong, because he considers it very important to continue the customs and traditions from the homeland he has never forgotten.

He believes that Hmong people in the United States today and future generations need to realize many aspects about their ethnicity and culture, since they have never experienced the Hmong culture first hand. First and foremost, people who are Hmong are Hmong, regardless of whether their ancestors came from China, which had and still has a large Hmong population, or whether they came from Laos, another Hmong enclave, or from other parts of Southeast Asia.

Second is that the Hmong culture needs to continue its customs and traditions in order to survive in the world, wherever Hmong are living. As written language was nonexistent for most of known Hmong history, traditions are necessarily transmitted orally.

He is firm in saying, "I would tell the young Hmong to keep and respect their own culture. Never forget your own background."

Toubee, now a naturalized citizen, is proud to be living in the U.S.. The Hmong are one of many cultures in Stockton, but this story of a Hmong, struggling and maturing in the U.S. in the absence of his biological father, succeeding academically and professionally, becoming a community-minded individual—this story is impressive. Toubee is a special person and his story is worth remembering and retelling, for Hmong and other Americans, alike.

Interviewer: Diane Gini

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Ethnic Group: Hmong American

Generation: Middle