

STOCKTONSpeaks!

WILLIAM YANG

"You always need to work for what you want to accomplish in life."

Seeing San Francisco for the first time after emigrating from Laos in 1991 is a special memory for William Yang, now sixteen. To the young Hmong child, then only three, the skyscrapers of San Francisco were a great contrast to the jungles he had just left. In Laos, he lived with his mother, father, and grandfather in a rural Hmong village, where the houses were made of bamboo, with thatched roofs and dirt floors. The villagers work in their fields to gather food, which they cooked over an open fire on the ground. In the evenings villagers passed the time playing music on reed pipes.

Traveling across the broad ocean, leaving his parents behind and accompanied only by his grandfather, was a great adventure. William Yang's family is one of many who were victimized by the Vietnam War, after American forces recruited Hmong to help in the fight against the Communists. When the Americans pulled out of Southeast Asia, the Hmong who fought at their side were hunted down, imprisoned or executed. Family members became separated; some were captured and many fled their native land to escape reprisals. Between the late 1970s and early 1990s, thousands of Hmong families came to America as refugees from camps in Thailand.

William's uncle, Toubee Yang, was one of the first Hmong refugees to land in the United States. Between 1976 and 1991, his uncle worked hard to complete his education and graduate from college. Uncle Toubee Yang then sent for his father and his young nephew to join him in America. It was a proud and happy moment for the family when father, son and nephew were united. Young William quickly became integrated into his extended family. Not only

did the uncle raise his young nephew, but he also made the boy his son legally, through adoption.

Coming from a place where, according to the CIA World Fact Book, the infant mortality rate is 89%, the birth of a healthy child is a celebrated treasure for every Hmong family. The birth of a baby brother was especially meaningful for big brother William Yang, then just entering his teens. As the eldest child, William is expected to help care for his brother. Being given this responsibility, William feels more mature. As William has grown older, his parents have raised their expectations and increased their trust. For William, the birth of his little brother was an important step in his transition from boyhood to adulthood.

As a Hmong American, William Yang is united with his family and all Hmong through religion. Hmong people are very spiritual. They believe that contact with the spirits of their ancestors, the spirits of their dwelling, and the spirits of nature are critical to the good life. Contact with spirits is a way to heal and to promote good fortune.

From his grandfather, William has learned that if you respect others, they will respect you. William's grandfather is a traditional healer who, through the force of his spirituality and experience, is able to treat illness and injuries. When William Yang broke his arm, his grandfather performed a ritual to help it heal. His role is similar to that of a doctor, but instead of alleviating the symptoms as an American doctor does, a Hmong healer seeks the cause of the disease by looking at the person's spirit. Only after the spirit is contacted will the decision be made which kind of ritual and touch is necessary.

According to William, other rituals are observed when something important happens. Hmong people celebrate a birth, death, or a marriage by gathering the entire community. The Hmong are oriented closely with their community, and it is common for them to live in large extended families. William Yang is part of the Yang clan, one of the largest in California. Being part of a large clan and supportive family has helped William avoid joining a gang. According to Lillian Faderman and Ghia Xiong who have studied Hmong youth,

many join gangs for support when it becomes difficult to communicate with their parents. Since they live in two worlds, Hmong and American, it can be a challenge to balance such divergent cultures.

Currently, William Yang is completing high school. Attaining a good education is important to him, and studying gives him a sense of accomplishment. With more homework and responsibility, he feels that his education is helping him transition from childhood to adulthood. When he graduates from high school, William believes he will have become adult.

As William nears adulthood he notices that his parents treat him differently. Their attitude is more serious; they joke with him less. Family members treat him with more respect. Now that he is older and stronger, William participates in "killing cows and chopping them up." Cows are central to the Hmong religion. One is usually slaughtered for the feast which follows such ceremonial events as a wedding or a funeral. Youths who are deemed mature are taught how to butcher the animal properly and cut the meat for cooking.

In sum, both traditional Hmong ceremonies and rituals and attending an American high school, are providing William his transition from childhood to adulthood. While his education continues at a public school, his family teaches him Hmong culture. His family provides a foundation in the Hmong language, its rules, and its laws. Only within the last fifty years has the Hmong language been written, so many Hmong traditions and customs continue to be passed down orally from one generation to the next.

For many Hmong adults who grew up in Laos, the transition to the U.S. has been difficult. America's pace of life and customs are very different from the lives they formerly led. Many older Hmong never used a phone or experienced plumbing before they came to the United States. Learning to adjust in an entirely different universe often makes it difficult for Hmong Americans to keep a job.

Though the Hmong have not been as least economically successful as some other refugee groups, William Yang's parents have overcome the

obstacles of language and culture. His father works as an anti-drug counselor, and his mother works at Delta Health Care. His parents tell William to go through life without an expected outcome—in life, it's best to "go with the flow." They do hope that his future will be happy, and that he will have an opportunity to travel. As for William, he hopes that he will not be either "too rich or too poor."

Interviewer: Adio Mangrum

Author: Christina Conrardy

Ethnic Group: Hmong

Generation: Youth