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Interviewers: Christy Buckli, Megan Brick
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BUCKLI: Were you born in Eau Claire? If not, why did your family come here?

MOUA: No, I was not born in Eau Claire. We came here because my dad wanted his daughters to have an education. In Laos that was not an option for girls, and he was one of the boys that were very lucky and fortunate to be able to be educated in the Thai system, with the French Missionaries, and he knew that education was the key. And that is what he wanted for his girls.

BRICK: Would you like to talk about the Hmong fashion show that was last New Year's? Can you describe the show in your own words?

MOUA: The show was to show the community and the Hmong community as well, all the trends that have gone through since the first wave of Hmong had come to Eau Claire. I believe it was part of the 1970's, from when they were still living in Laos as well, and how each generation brought in their own changes, their own additions. And how a culture around their moves are there—kind of where they immigrate to—and it affects and changes how they can add more design or colors, or beads or what not to the outfits. It was pretty plain to see all the black and blue change into colors and beads, and coins, and how much more we can add on to it. I think that was a big display of different variety from the beginning to now, what materials that the families now have access to.

BRICK: What did the traditional Hmong scarves look like?

MOUA: Well the white outfit, that I am from, it is the traditional black and blue pants and top and sash of red and green, because those are the only colors that they can extract from nature and dye from. The strings were strings they got from trading things to the people in China, to the people from Thailand that were coming in. So those are the only natural colors that they could get. Other than that it was pretty plain. Not anything extravagant, and it was for every day wear. Then they would save the really nice new stuff, the coin bags, and any of the white beads, for the New Year celebration.

BRICK: Was that for men and women?

MOUA: Yes.

BRICK: Did you help develop the idea for the Fashion show?

MOUA: Yes, over the years I have seen fashion shows where it is you in of all sorts of clothes that adapt over the years, but there was not a consistent order to it. It was nice to see the different varieties that they have, but there was not an organization in which we can say this is what the change has caused, and what each year and generation brought to the outfits that we wear today.

BUCKLI: Can you tell us about why you have skirts there?

MOUA: Some of the skirts are a reminder for the parents of the good old days when that was the only way they met each other, or where they fell in love. So it is sort of a reminder for them. And the skirts are to entertain a little bit, to kind of bring not only the memories but kind of teach the younger generations that the outfits were not just worn for the New Year time, but they were also worn throughout the day. It is part of our everyday wear, and then to have the fancy stuff was, of course you meet your significant other at these New Year celebrations, so it could be a moment of surprise, a moment of falling in love, and that is what those skirts bring back. That initial moment that they remember.

BUCKLI: Was it you that came up with the different skirts, or was it the people who were actually doing the skirts. Did they have their say in it as well?

MOUA: It adapts over the years. Everybody changes up and they pick and choose depending on how comfortable the people that are dressed up are, and what they would like to do.

BRICK: Have you done the fashion show every New Year?

MOUA: No, last year was my first year. Then you kind of pass it on and hopefully, you just hope that they adapt and they change it. I think it is nice when you have a new one take over so you have a new show every year.

BRICK: How long has it been going on generally, do you know?

MOUA: Boy, as far as I can ever imagine, I think with the skirts, and the music and all the beautiful clothes, it has been in the last couple, ten, twelve years when resources became more available to HMAA and for them to show every aspect of what they have.

BUCKLI: How long does the fashion show run for?

MOUA: Usually, about a good twenty, thirty minutes. You want to cover mostly everything from the beginning to what is current and you have your little skirts in there, and then you also need to show the front and the back, and just describe the elements of each one. We have the White, and then the Green Hmong, now we are introducing the Hmong/Chinese into it, and with the new wave of Hmong that came from the refugee camps in Thailand, how that has changed the culture as well, and the type of clothing, so it is growing.

BRICK: And these are currently worn over there, worn here for festivals?

MOUA: Yes, it is a lot of what has been adapted and changed throughout, so every year you see new ones added into the culture show.

BUCKLI: How many people participate in the fashion show?

MOUA: Oh boy, depending on how many you can get, but usually you need at least a good set of fifteen or twenty couples. You want to show what the guys are wearing, plus what the females are wearing as well. I think last year we added little kids into it, because adults are not the only ones that are wearing stuff. The kids are also, their fashion is changing as well.

BRICK: What is the community reaction to the fashion show?

MOUA: I think it is very positive towards it, just because they get to see that, it's a reminder, a memorable reminder for them that oh, that is what I grew up with. And yes, I dress my daughters up in that, and then now this is what I'm wearing, and this is what they are wearing. So it's a good reminder, it's a positive thing.

BRICK: Did you ever have problems with negative reactions in the community?

MOUA: Not from last year. It is something we love to show. Kind of show off and it is what we put our hard work into. And I think that they are proud to let other people see how their styles are changing. When we come to the New Year, we wear what we are really proud of and we put so much work into it. Some moms spend a whole year working on it that by the time the New Year comes around, it is really a proud moment for them. So for them to see that, it's always going to be a positive thing.

BUCKLI: So who does the designing for, in creating the dresses for it?

MOUA: We do actually just a collection. We draw and we pull from the community whoever has this White Hmong outfit, we draw from them. For the New Year that I did it, I have collections that I have collected over the years, that has been handed down. For marriage you get Hmong outfits as well. So I drew from that and from family and relatives that have it. There's not a set collection that has been passed on for the next fashion show. The next leader needs to draw from the community and ask their resources or the people that they know to help donate and dress up the couples for the fashion show.

BRICK: Has it always been traditional dress or has there been some Westernized dress as well?

MOUA: Oh yeah, there have been. I think the one thing they did take out was the Western outfits, just because they felt that it was not part of the traditional clothes. But once in a while you'll find that it gets introduced then as the Hmong American couple and they get to wear the prom dress and tuxedo. But other than that it's been kept very traditional and alterations and changes of the style.

BUCKLI: Did you include English interpretation in this show?

MOUA: Yes, we did. Our announcer did the Hmong and the English because our audience was a good mix of people from the community that speak Hmong and then friends from the community that don't speak or understand Hmong.

BRICK: Is there anything else you wanted to talk about the fashion show before we move on?

MOUA: No, it is a very positive and rewarding thing to do. I am twenty-seven, so to see what my parents grew up wearing to now, what my siblings would wear because they are all high school kids. You do see a big change and it is rewarding to see that and to learn the different changes throughout the years.

BUCKLI: Let's go into your schooling. Can you tell us about your decision to attend UW-Eau Claire, rather than other educational facilities?

MOUA: When I started thinking about what I wanted to do in college, I looked at Eau Claire as a potential program. They have a really good education program and that is why I decided to stay here. Another reason too, was girls don't leave your parents' home unless you're married, and my parents

really stuck to that tradition, so the best college would be in Eau Claire since my parents live in Eau Claire. [Laughter.]

BUCKLI: Did you work outside of school, being a student at that time?

MOUA: Yes.

BUCKLI: What was that like for you?

MOUA: It was tough. It was tough, carrying the traditional role. I am the second oldest of seven girls and one boy in the family, so I still carried a lot of traditional responsibilities at home. I was working part time and going to school full time. It was tough balancing the three roles, but it was also rewarding because now that I'm independent and working on my own, I can reflect back and draw from those experiences.

BRICK: Do you work with ESL students, English as a Second Language?

MOUA: I did. Well I am still currently, all the way through college I worked as a bi-lingual aid for the Eau Claire school district and I translated for parents and the students. I worked with kids from K [Kindergarten] through fifth grade. Now that I am a fourth grade teacher, I also have most of the ELL students in my classroom. I have been working with them for so long, and then having their relationship with the ELL teacher, it just makes sense that as a Hmong speaking teacher, it is easier to communicate with my Hmong students and their parents as well.

BRICK: How are the students now transitioning into American life?

MOUA: I think it's easier. The kids are now choosing to speak English, so it is not as difficult to teach them in the classroom setting. I think the hard part is communicating with the parents, and letting them know how important education is. They understand that education is important, and it is number one thing in their kid's life, but the support that they can supply, I think sometimes they forget that their presence means a lot to their child as they are going through school. Even if they do not understand the text books that they are bringing home, or the homework that they are bringing home, that their presence, just sitting there and nodding their head saying I understand even though they didn't, it lets the kids know their parents are there to support education. I think that is the hardest part.

BRICK: What was traditional Hmong education like?

MOUA: I guess the best way to relate it to is street smart. Do you have the skills to survive or not, especially for the girls because they weren't allowed to go to school. They were to take care of the family, to tend the gardens, to watch the younger siblings, while the boys were allowed to go to school, to learn arithmetic and how to read and write within the Thai system, the Laos system. If they are lucky like my father, then they got the education of other foreign languages, such as French, just because it is so close that the missionaries were coming to the villages to teach the young men there.

BUCKLI: And can you tell us a little bit more about your job where you teach?

MOUA: I am currently a fourth grade teacher at Meadowview Elementary School. Our demographic is a pretty big range. We have students that come from very well off families, and we do have a small

percentage of students that come from, what we call, under the poverty line. They get free and reduced lunch, so we have a big range. And we are starting to see a lot of diverse students in our classroom as well, from Hindi students, to Hispanic, to Hmong, African American, and also American students as well. So it's a pretty good mix right now.

BUCKLI: Why did you choose to be a teacher?

MOUA: The nurturing side of me kicked in more and more. Just growing up being the second oldest, knowing I can always teach and make a difference that way. I wanted a job where I know I can make a difference without having to be... I guess pushing things on to people. I wanted to educate people about the differences in our lives and make sure that we are working together as a community versus as an individual person striving for ourselves and hoarding to ourselves. We need to share all the things we have - our resources, our culture, our personal lives and experiences as well. I guess being a teacher was a way to express that passion of mine, to draw into social studies, to reading and writing, and even the way that we teach math. There are lots of ways to do it. Being able to share that and spread that out, not just to my peers or my colleagues, but to my students so they grow up knowing diversity is out there and it is part of our everyday life.

BRICK: Was your brother older, or was your sister?

MOUA: I have an older sister. My brother's kind of smacked right in the middle between four older sisters and three younger sisters.

BUCKLI: Is there any reason that you chose elementary education versus middle school or high school?

MOUA: It is kind of a silly reason, because of my height. [Laughs] I first thought that I wanted to teach first to third grade because I did not want my students to be taller than I am. But when I started my student teaching, I found that my passion was actually for older kids. The maturity level that they bring to school, and plus their youthful childhood is still there. I kind of fell in love with that. I knew then that is where the fit is, then it wasn't so much my height anymore, it was where my passion best fit.

BRICK: What type of training did you have other than college?

MOUA: I guess beyond college is personal experience. I worked with our church ever since sixth grade. I started in the nursery, taking care of the other people's kids, then worked from teaching that to working with the kindergarten and pre-school group and then expanding onto working with what we call the Children's Church which is all of them, K all the way to fifth grade, putting them into a group and working with them. Then of course helping my mom raise all my siblings and taking care of them, and making sure they get their school work done. Always tapping in with their teachers, going to conferences with them as well.

BRICK: Are you part of a union at your job?

MOUA: Yes.

BRICK: Can you tell me about that and your involvement with the union?

MOUA: Right now, this is my second year teaching, being aware that I am part of a union, giving them my support and with all the issues going on right now, it is tough to say what we are doing and what we are not doing. Such a big political battle right now, but I do give my union my every support.

BUCKLI: What are your favorite parts of your job?

MOUA: Oh boy. Every day it is a new adventure, it is a new story to come home and tell my husband, or bore him with. [Laughter.] My favorite part is knowing that at the end of the day when they walk out, they are walking out with more knowledge, or they are enriched—and not just the text materials or whatnot that the district wants them to grow in—but they are walking away a little bit more mature, and they are walking away with culture, not just with being a mathematician, and adding science and social studies. My favorite part is at the end of the day when they walk out they choose to say goodbye to me in Hmong, or in Spanish, or in Hindi or in Japanese—whatever they choose. That is my favorite part of the day.

BUCKLI: Is there any other specific things that you do to try help them incorporate diversity?

MOUA: Yes, our building is a responsive classroom. It is a management system that Eau Claire is adapting to. We have what we call Morning Meeting, and at that time the kids get to share a greeting, or they get to share an event from part of their day, or something that has happened to them. That allows my kids, my students, to really share a cultural event that has happened in their life. One of my students just had a huge Hindi celebration within her culture. She was so excited to come back and share that. Weddings are such a big thing. One of my students went out to Colorado for a wedding, and he came back and was able to share that, while at the same time another student from a different culture had a wedding down in Georgia, and they both came back and shared similarities and differences. It was good for them to see that here in America, we are a melting pot, we do draw from one another, but we still keep our little special tidbits that are part of our culture.

BRICK: When did you start your education here?

MOUA: I graduated in 2002, from high school, then started college right away that fall.

BRICK: When did you come over, when did you start...

MOUA: I think it was 1986 by the time we got to Eau Claire, and that fall my oldest sister and I both started school together. I started at the Head Start program that was through the university, and I think the school is still there but the program is different. I started in the Head Start school program there, and then went to Randall Elementary School, and actually had to be retained in kindergarten for two years because of my English and my ability to read and write was slower. It took a while, but it was beneficial.

BUCKLI: When did you start your current job?

MOUA: Just last fall. This is my second year, so last fall was the big scramble for a job and interviews, and I was very lucky. I am very fortunate and blessed to have a job here in Eau Claire, where my family is rooted.

BUCKLI: What is your work environment like at your job?

MOUA: It's very respectful. Very peaceful. I think the staff there is very supportive and I give a lot of props to my principal, taking risks on different ethnicities, and plus being a fresh grad. She could have chosen anybody, but she chose a lot of us young ones to fill in the vacant positions and I think they are very supportive and they think that we are bringing to the building. We're the next generation so we bring in technology, fresh new ideas from college and they are very open minded. That makes first year teaching very comforting.

BUCKLI: Is there anything you don't like about your job?

MOUA: I guess there are some things that can get pretty tough and rocky, political issues and other things. [Laughter.] I think the one thing that could be difficult is the forms of discipline. Each family has their own way of disciplining, so when the kids come to school, they bring their attitudes or their brattiness to school, and some kids come very shy and quiet because that is how they are taught. When you are around elders you don't talk back, so it is difficult to find a universal growing spot for all our students, and that sometimes you have to come down on some of the kids a little more hard than some because the discipline at home is a lot different, and the parents' support I think also makes a big difference. Knowing that nowadays we have a lot of single parents, they are not able to give that full support that two parents can give, and that makes it really tough on homework and having assignment notebooks signed and things being brought back.

BUCKLI: Do you stay connected with friends and family in Laos?

MOUA: Yes, because my mom still has a younger sister there. My husband and I were really fortunate to go back eight years ago to visit, to see what it is like, how things have changed. We met a couple of Laos friends of my parents and relatives that are extended family. The main person we kept in contact with is my mom's sister, and my dad's best buddy that he grew up with. They were the greatest hosts, and being able to talk with them and hear how their kids are going through school. It is amazing for what they are providing for their kids as well. They are the only two we have been keeping up with.

BUCKLI: Do they have plans to, or want to come over to the U.S. at all?

MOUA: Sometimes they speak of wanting to be here, because family is all here. But I think they are very comfortable where they are at, especially my dad's buddy. He is kind of the radio DJ man in Laos, and he gets top pay which is thirty bucks a month, equivalent to what we make here. But that to them is about thirty thousand dollars, so they are living very comfortably. And her boys are phenomenal in school, and they have to pass exams in order to move on to the next grade level, and they are doing really well. They are actually currently in China right now, studying abroad. I think with opportunities beginning to open there, I think the Hmong community there is able to find other ways of living and not just doing the old traditional gardening and doing market stuff, but they are finding other ways to survive and putting their roots down in Laos.

BRICK: Are girls being formally educated yet?

MOUA: Yes, girls are now able to come to school, and it is pretty half and half now. I think where you do not see girls go to school is when you travel up north of Laos, which everything is still very, very traditional. Just how it used to be in the old times with no running water, no bathrooms and whatnot, so

there you will still find a couple of girls that don't have the opportunity to come down and be educated. But both of the Vientiane area and the surrounding cities, it is pretty much half and half now.

BRICK: How do you keep in contact? Do you email, or call, or ?

MOUA: It has to be calls. It is funny because sometimes you have to play phone tag for a couple of days before you realize that it is because of the time difference. It is about twenty four hours of time difference, so usually it is early in the morning for us, or late at night for us, to keep in contact.

BUCKLI: What have you told them about life in Eau Claire?

MOUA: It is a lot of checking up on what we are up to, what we are doing, and when we talk we do a lot of updating on the farmers' market. My parents are part of that so we are letting them know how that is going, and how schools are here as well. Especially my dad's buddy, his sons really want to come and study abroad here in a couple of years. They are still in the middle school range, they are not at high school range yet, so when we do talk we talk about high school, and how they can get involved with study abroad and bringing their boys here to be able to study here.

BUCKLI: Have any of them come over to visit here?

MOUA: They have, both of those families have been here to visit, but again they are always on a strict visa, since it's a communist country. They go through a big huge interview process. It is not like us, we can just go and purchase a ticket. They go through interviews, everything gets looked at. Their income gets assessed and everything before they can come. And it is not that the whole family can come, it is only if both spouses are coming the kids do not get to come. It is a tedious procedure for them to come and visit, but they have been here, at least my aunt has been here twice. She is very, very lucky to be able to do that. My dad's friend has been here once, him and his wife. They have seen life here and they got a chance to visit their relatives as well.

BUCKLI: Is it your plan to visit Laos again?

MOUA: Oh yes, definitely. I was born there, and being able to visit there in my early twenties to see how life really has been, and how it has changed. My husband and I, we talk about going back all the time, and what we can do there. We talk about establishing schools, or an orphanage, so hopefully one day that dream will come true for us. Just to be able to make a difference with the money conversion, it is phenomenal and we know our money can go a long ways there. Hopefully one day we can establish one or the other to support them.

BRICK: When you were at UW-Eau Claire did you live in the dorms?

MOUA: No, I did not. I stayed at home. The dorms was, to my parents, was not a traditional home and a traditional girl stayed home with their parents. So as much as I wanted to experience that part of life, I also wanted to stay true to my parents' wishes. I stayed home with them and it did save a lot of money though!

BRICK: Is there anything about your college experience that you want to talk about?

MOUA: I think the one thing that I would love to share is how open minded and supportive UW-Eau Claire is towards not only Hmong students, but nontraditional students. My advisor was phenomenal, and her support towards me and getting me involved in research is that I don't think I will ever get a chance to if I went to school there twenty years before. I think the staff now has really opened up and they truly live up to their change of wanting diversity there. I think mainly my experience was very positive and I would not trade it for anything else. It was great.

BRICK: Do you do many outdoor activities?

MOUA: Sports wise before the baby, we played a lot of volleyball and tennis, but getting involved on campus teams was very tough, and it wasn't a traditional thing for girls to get involved with. You study, you come back home and help out. It was tough, but my husband is a very athletic guy. Fortunately he grew up with being in travelling sports throughout Eau Claire, so he encouraged me to do other things than just school, work, and home.

BRICK: Have you ever gone hunting or fishing with your dad?

MOUA: Fishing. My dad has been a fisherman since he was a young man in Laos. He chartered the boats and carried the fish to the markets, so it has been part of his passion, and he loves to hunt all the time in Laos. Here, I think I asked once to go hunting, and he woke me up at three in the morning. I thought, "Oh dad, are you crazy, I'm not going out at three in the morning in this weather," and I think that was the last of it. We did fish a lot with my dad when we were growing up.

BRICK: What does your dad do here now?

MOUA: He is a supervisor for Minnesota Wiring Company. Before that he worked for PC Technology and they did a lot with computers for the Eau Claire area, plus the airport. He is a very hands-on type of guy.

BUCKLI: Are there any certain places you used to go fishing with your dad?

MOUA: Yes, right at Carson Park, and the Chippewa River. I think those are the best memories because we got to sit and throw bread into the river. I was afraid of worms, so my dad would always have to hook that on for me, but definitely the place that was the safest, I guess a very family friendly place, was Carson Park. We went there a lot.

BRICK: What do you do in your spare time now?

MOUA: I sew a lot, not traditional Hmong sewing, but since I'm such a petite lady I do have to mend my own pants, and skirts and what not, so I do a lot of that. I sew handbags. My husband and I are youth directors as well, so we're constantly getting calls from our youth, which range from sixth grade all the way to college and career, and we just hang out with them, do activities with them. Sometimes my husband and I like to kick back, watch a movie, and read books to each other.

BUCKLI: Do you watch Hmong videos?

MOUA: Once in a while. [Laughs.] I grew out of that phase. Once in a while we will watch a translated video, or a "soapy" that is Thai or Korean. Now with internet, and us being able to order the originals

with subtitles, we prefer that. We are kind of backing away from watching the Hmong videos, but once in a while if my mom recommends a Hmong actor/actress, we will pop it in and give her a hoot for it.

BRICK: What are your personal traditions, or your family's traditions?

MOUA: You mean like holidays or..?

BRICK: Anything.

MOUA: Before we came here, birthdays weren't celebrated. You do not acknowledge birthdays, it is just a marker for another year. Our family has made that a big huge family tradition. We gather, we celebrate birthdays, and I think that is one thing that with such a big family, it is a good time for us to come and celebrate. Even though my parents are aging, they have had their birthday celebrated. We have been celebrating for them for the last ten/twelve years and every year they say, "We are getting too old for this," but you see that twinkle in their eye, and a little joy. That is one thing that we are keeping in our family as a tradition, plus Thanksgiving has been a phenomenal get together for our families. Not so much of roasting a turkey and gathering around the table, but we cook a turkey and we bring traditional food, and it is a time for family to come and be together. We have family that travel from the Cities, and different cities that come into town for dinner. I think that is one thing we are really growing into.

Other than that, the traditional Hmong New Year that we get together. We talk about what we are going to wear, if we are gonna have lunch together later or not. But mainly I think the two big things that are really added to our family culture and our traditions is the birthdays and Thanksgiving. Of course Christmas, you cannot leave out Christmas, but there are so many of us that our siblings now are doing a Christmas exchange versus when it used to be my parents getting us presents. We are reversing the other way, we are giving them presents instead.

BRICK: Is New Year's celebrated on January 1st?

MOUA: Yes... well, *xjoo tshiab* means eating and feasting for thirty days. So November is pretty much the harvest month. You harvest, you get everything ready, you set everything for what they call is their winter, but it's more of a frost that kills all their crops. They harvest, you work, work, work, and then December rolls around and you party and feast for thirty days. You travel city to city, town to town, village to village, and you visit families and you have fun. You meet new friends, new boyfriends and what not, and it is an opportunity for the young teenagers to get a chance to let out some energy and to meet new people and friends and to go see family and relatives. Even with my family, my grandma, back in Laos, my grandparents lived in a different village, while my dad and my mom and my other set of grandparents would live in a different village. So to travel you just, you don't make time during the day, so during that New Year's celebration it is a really good time for you to travel and see family.

BRICK: What about wedding celebrations? Have they stayed the same, changed a bit?

MOUA: It has changed a lot, depending on religion. Even then I think most of the nitpicky little details have been kind of left out now. Even with my husband and me, in our wedding, since we are Christians, we left out the bowing, the other drinking traditions that has been part of it. So I think, as the generations change, the younger generations are taking what they feel is best. I guess the more important roles, the negotiating of the bridal price, and which side takes what, and who is responsible if

the bride and groom should ever have conflicts or issues, those things are still very strong. It does not matter what religion you have, at the background those are still negotiated on the proposal night. Other than that I think other aspects, little things are changing. Especially like ours, we had the traditional where the family, my husband's side, came and did the proposal and asked for my hand in marriage, but before that we also did the ring engagement where my husband proposed on one knee. And we had the whole church wedding as well, and we finished it off with the traditional sending of the bride where my mom dressed me up and gave me my last lecture as a daughter in how to be a good daughter-in-law and how to be a good sister and what not to my husband's side of the family. Then they send me off and we come back to my husband's house, his side of the family, and they do their welcoming of the bride party. So those are things we kept, but we added little tidbits of the American wedding in there as well.

BUCKLI: Does the older generation have problems with dropping off little bits, or adding American things as well?

MOUA: I think there not so much anymore because it saves a lot of their time and energy and including every little tidbit and detail means that you need more people to be at the wedding, to run and to know those traditions. I think that as each generation grows into it, they are starting to forget those details, and even with my grandfather who is in his seventies, when we got married he was there. He was proud and happy that we got married, and it was not so much about all those things anymore.

BRICK: Do you know any of the written Hmong alphabets?

MOUA: Yes. We grew up with it a lot around my parents and my dad would teach us the songs and what not. But the younger generation, they could probably read it, but they can't write it, or they'll be able to understand it but they can't read or write it anymore.

BUCKLI: What is it used for? How common is it?

MOUA: It was the main way of communication, but with legend having it that it went into a big huge battle with China and all the men were killed, so the Chinese men would marry the Hmong women and the language was lost. The written language was lost, the woman actually, the *paj ntaub* that they have on their coin bags with the sashes, those were the language, the written language. Over time they have forgotten to teach their kids the written language so when the time came where they rebelled and left China for the Hmong of Laos, they were able to speak it as a secret code language but they weren't able to write it any more. It wasn't until the French missionaries came and gave the alphabetic written form, then generations like my father eventually then got to learn how to read or write. So it's a real recent written form for the Hmong community.

BRICK: What are the major religions?

MOUA: Shaman, dipping into the spiritual realm, and Christianity. The shaman has been the rooted religion for a long time until the French missionaries came and brought Christianity and introduced that to the Hmong villages. My grandfather, my dad's dad, was the first one in his family to accept Christ as his Lord and Savior, and was pretty much ostracized because that was not okay. To his brothers there was no way for him to be able to communicate with his ancestors anymore. And I think that's the one thing that scared a lot of families that are still practicing the shaman religion - they feel they will lose that connection with their ancestors. When your spirit dies, the shamans believe you need to be sent back to your ancestral land and without that relationship, or that connection today you won't be able to

go to the afterlife to connect with them. So a lot of them still believe in that shaman religion because they still want to be able to be tied back to their ancestors, versus a lot of us that have changed or converted to Christianity. Who knows that beyond death, and we want a different view in a life.

BRICK: Just curious, what kind of Christianity did the French bring, was it Catholicism?

MOUA: I am not quite sure, but it was a lot of bringing the name of Jesus and teaching what God has done, and that you are saved from your sins, and that we are free from our bondage from the spirit worlds. And I guess it's just a different way of thinking for the families that first heard it, because I think they saw shaman as a medicine and a way to heal their sickness and to help their spirits. When the French missionaries came, they taught us that those spirits are actually binding us, and holding us back and making us pay sacrifices for them in order to keep us in our healthy form. I think, I'm not sure if it was Catholic root or a Lutheran root, but it was pretty much bringing the good news to us.

BUCKLI: For people who have immigrated to the United States, what percentage would you say practice Christianity?

MOUA: Wow, it is kind of tough because in Eau Claire alone, you have a pretty good mix of half and half right now. Even in our family we still have half, I mean siblings that are Christians and siblings that still practice the shaman. My husband, his uncles are literally half, two brothers are Christians and two brothers are shamans and my parents side of the family, my mom is Christian and all her brothers still practice shaman. So you still see half and half, but I think with the younger generations growing now I think they are starting to realize, with the American culture being tied around Christianity and different forms of Christianity, I think they are starting to realize that they are not understanding the shaman religion anymore, not understanding what that practice means to them. In Christianity, we have young Christian men and women that now question their religion and say is there really Christ out there, and are becoming atheist. So it is just a rotation, but I think Christianity for the young couples, they are starting to look for that different way to raise their families. But right now I would say half and half, but majority are practicing shaman religion just because the elders are still practicing that, and they want to honor the elders.

BRICK: Do you think with your family being Christians that it helped in coming over here, being that was the majority religion?

MOUA: My grandfather being one of the first in his family to accept that he wanted change, and I think that was the biggest key, is that he wanted a positive change for his family, though it was not an easy and acceptable change. But it built foundation, it built morals for my dad and his siblings and that imparted into us, teaching us what is right from wrong. It is the way my parents raised us. In Christian families you have kids that rebel, and shaman families that have kids that are very supportive and family oriented, but I do believe with that change, that first step that my grandfather did, really opened up opportunities and for my dad to see that if my grandfather can make that big sacrifice and change, he too could make big sacrifices and changes for his family.

BRICK: What are your experiences with non-Hmong people in the area?

MOUA: Once in a while you meet that outlier who has not really embraced the diversity that's growing in Eau Claire, but most of the time it is very accepting, and I think Eau Claire has from day one, when the first Hmong people stepped off the plane, they had already been accepted into the community. My

husbands' aunt and uncle are Yang and Her and they are the first Hmong immigrants to Eau Claire. They were sponsored by Trinity Lutheran church, so they were very well accepted already, very supportive from the beginning. I think that that was key for other Hmong families to know that they have that support in the community, and that this is a community where they can grow, raise their kids, and be accepted for the traditions that they still kept.

BUCKLI: Can you describe some of the difference or similarities between now and when you first came?

MOUA: Similarities I think—when we first came I was so young, but I still see that the community is very supportive and always have resources to help the families, and that support and that knit community is still there. The differences are, you know, the grocery stores here. Walking into Mega and finding an Asian aisle and you are in awe because you can buy rice and you don't have to walk into an oriental store, you can get it there, or at Gordy's. You can find that the community is adapting to us and the grocery needs that we need as well. The other thing is signs, and the Hmong language is being written up in signs on campus. As a teacher, the letters are being sent home are not just in Spanish or in English, but they do it in Hmong. Not just in Hmong, they do it in White and in Green Hmong, and there is so much support and respect. Those are some real good changes that I feel that the community is really reaching out to the Hmong community and letting them know we are a community that is going to be working together.

BUCKLI: What's the difference between White and Green Hmong?

MOUA: It is a tonal difference. It is kind of like a northern accent, or a southern accent. There is nothing big of a difference, it is a tone of how you say certain words like we will say – in White we would say mom as “nea” and the Green would say “nea” as “naah” so it's just a tonal difference.

BRICK: Have you had any negative experiences since 9/11?

MOUA: Not really. I think what everybody is going through, when you travel you get patted down and what not. Not anything negative as if eyes are staring at you or confused puzzled looks. We do not get that at all, and I think the community here is very aware of what is going on.

BRICK: Do you eat traditional Hmong food on a daily basis?

MOUA: Yes, we do. Once in a while I will have a hamburger and McDonalds and whatnot, but on a daily basis my husband and I we still eat traditional food. We still have our pot of rice always ready every day, we grew up with those flavors and those tastes, so pretty much of our palate that we desire every day.

BUCKLI: Are there any common ones that you eat, or any spices that you use generally?

MOUA: Of course we eat the Thai chili pepper and we always had to have it with a meal. And we always have to have rice and meats and vegetables, but we cook it in different forms and ways, but you always had to have those components. [Laughter.]

BRICK: How does special occasion food differ from daily food?

MOUA: Daily food is more of a broth meal where you boil chicken and then throw in some herbs then have that with rice, or we are adapting to stir frying and eating that with rice. But big holiday foods you

really work on those egg rolls cause those are not traditional things that you can just whip up in ten minutes. Heavy *laab*, which is a meal that usually men only make and around the holidays. Those are the harder foods, or the ones that need to be produced in a massive form, those are the ones that come up for the holidays and when you have lots of family gathering because they require preparation and herbs and spices and special people who know how to make the best ones. You always ask them to make it during the holidays. Kind of like having your grandma's special pumpkin pie during Thanksgiving, for us, it is having dad make his *laab*. Or my aunt always makes papaya salad, so around the holidays you always have to have her papaya salad.

BUCKLI: Are special foods still prepared for women who have just given birth?

MOUA: Yes. We still do, even for me, with my due date being in December, I'm still going to stick to the boiled chicken and herb and steamed rice and warm water for the full thirty days. That is a tradition that is still an option, but it is an option that we really want you to do that instead. We do have some young ladies who will say they don't believe in that, they'll throw in their spaghetti or their other meals until it's...

BUCKLI: Where did that tradition come from?

MOUA: I think it came from ... it is such a tradition that has been kept forever because chicken was a meat that did not require refrigerators, and it is a small poultry that they could butcher in the morning and it is fresh, it has proteins, they can mix herbs in it to restore or replenish blood for the woman. That was just the healthiest form of a nutritious meal that a woman could have after giving birth. I think most of the time they will eat vegetables, pumpkins and what not, and not a lot of meat, so having that is kind of an honor and respect to the woman. You have given us a child in our family and this is our appreciation and love and token for you. I think it is something that has been passed down and it has been practiced for I don't know, I can't even remember when, but even before my great grandparents time as well.

BRICK: And is it eaten before and after giving birth.

MOUA: Just after.

BRICK: Oh, ok.

MOUA: Just after, for thirty days.

BRICK: How do you feel about the current debates on immigration issues?

MOUA: It is tough because if we don't put a cap on it, what happens to all our resources? But I also feel that we also have such amazing dreams and hopes for not only our children, but for our families, what would we not risk for our families? It saddens me that every country cannot have the same opportunities and the same resources to help enrich their families and their education, and to supply the basic human needs for them. If it was my way there would be open doors, but I also understand without restrictions we would not have the resources that we need to help the families that we already have here.

BUCKLI: Is the number of Hmong who plan to return to Laos increasing?

MOUA: Nowadays it is more of a vacation travel, it is not a desire to go back and live there anymore. I think they are very comfortable with their style of life here. I know once in a while you will hear my parents sigh and hum and say "Maybe when we retire we'll go back, and build a house and live there and have our resting ground be back in Laos," but I think a lot of them do not desire to go back to live. It is so hard to go back and get used to that way of life again there. I think it is a really great place for them to visit and build memories, go back and recall their youthful days, but other than that it is more of a vacation place, instead of a building your life again.

BRICK: Are Hmong people still moving around the country, like from when they first came?

MOUA: Yeah, even with the economy right now a lot of families are moving for jobs. Usually they move because of family. I have an aunt and uncle that is part of our family name, which is our last name, and they are my dad's brothers, or some very close families, that's why you move. Now families are moving because of jobs, and opportunities and families are leaving other families. Even in my family, we just talk about that, how precious it is and how lucky we are to be able to find jobs where we can stay together, because that is what it was, a village was a family. Your five sons and their families live in one village together you do not leave that village. But now they are moving about and every state that you go to you hear of, you can always stop and find a Hmong family there.

BRICK: What's your family's stance on marriage?

MOUA: I love my parents for that. They are not pushing us to get married, that by sixteen you should be married and have kids. My dad's dream was for us to have an education and that is always his dream and that is still his goal today. My family is very supportive of when we choose when we want to get married. My relatives, at the age of twenty-one they said I was an old maid and there must be something wrong with me, and that is why I have not been proposed to. But my parents said she wanted her education so we honor that. We have been married for seven years before we have our first kid, and my parents, they were not the ones to force us and say, "Ok now you are married, you got to start pushing out babies because we want grandkids." They are very supportive about what we want as well. They really stuck to their dreams and really opened up the opportunity for us that whatever dreams and hopes that we have for our lives and for our children and our family, they want that to be first as well.

BUCKLI: Were you twenty one when you got married then?

MOUA: Yes.

BUCKLI: What is the average age for marriage?

MOUA: Nowadays, or...

BUCKLI: Now, yes.

MOUA: Nowadays about twenty-five to thirty. You still have girls that are in their mid-thirties and they are just finally starting their lives and its very acceptable now, versus then it is thirteen, fourteen. Before you hit eighteen you have to be married, and you have to have kids, that is what proper girls are supposed to do.

BRICK: Is it important to your family that you marry someone who is Hmong?

MOUA: At first my parents were because they did not speak English, so they were really afraid that having a son-in-law that did not speak Hmong or understand the culture of Hmong, how could they communicate with them? I think that is the part they were mostly afraid of, but once in a while when we would bring an American guy home, my parents are very open minded to it. They are not close minded anymore. It is very accepted to them knowing how much the community is accepting of them, that they are accepting. My parents always say, doesn't matter as long as he loves you and is willing to stick with you and follow flaws and love you for who you are, that is fine".

BRICK: Do your parents speak English now?

MOUA: Yes, the funny thing is my parents have the basic English where they can communicate their thoughts, their frustrations and what not, but to communicate fully with my younger siblings.... My baby sister is a freshman at Memorial, and once in a while it is like we still have to translate for the two of them because there's places where my sister does not understand Hmong, and my mom does not know how to say it in English to her. And so they have their basics down for survival and what not, but to carry on a long conversation, I know my mom would rather choose "Ah honey you say it instead of me." [Laughs.]

BRICK: Do you plan to impart you Hmong heritage on to your baby?

MOUA: Yes. My husband and I talk about that a lot, knowing some tradition and culture is very important to us. They are what mold us and make us who we are today. And there are some aspects that do not agree with that, we always say gosh we would never stress our kids over that. Like going off to college. We want our kids to be able to pick any college in the world if they want to study at, to provide that opportunity for them, versus my parents who say, "No, you are a girl, you stay home and you stay under our watchful eyes," but for us to provide different opportunity for our kids. But at the same time for them to know where their parents have come from and to not forget they are Hmong and that it is their root. And that no matter where they look in the mirror, their dad's Hmong, their mom's Hmong, so they will be one hundred percent Hmong, that they know a little bit about where they come from and where their grandparents came from, and what stories we grew up with, and what traditional food we grew up with as well. We want to give them the positive part of that.

BUCKLI: And how do you feel about older people who have not learned English?

MOUA: I'm not frustrated at them. English is such a hard and difficult language to learn. I do wish that they were a little open minded to learn at least the basics of greetings, and asking for help when they need help, but other than that, at their age of some of them, it is such a difficult language to pick up that I would not blame them for not being able to. I would love for them to try [to] learn the basics. If your first graders can learn it, you can learn the basics as well. But I am not mad at them, I do not get frustrated at them. I understand where they are coming from. It is difficult.

BUCKLI: So do people older, out of high school, that come over to learn English, is there a place that they are able to go to learn it, or is it just taught through family members?

MOUA: I believe the tech has a really good ESL program there for them. A lot of them took advantage of that. Knowing that in order to survive, in order to get a job, they need to learn English and it does not

matter what country you go to, you want to know the language in order to be able to communicate. I think the most frustrating thing is not being able to tell anybody that you are ok, or that you need help. I think the Chippewa Valley Technical College does a really good job of providing that, and so does the HMAA. They provide classes for those families in support for them as well.

BRICK: Do you plan to teach your kids Hmong?

MOUA: Yes. Depending on how much he or she wants to take up, but we do want to teach both languages. We grew up knowing both languages, knowing the advantage of knowing both languages, being able to communicate. It is phenomenal how much that is an asset to us as a working individual in the community.

BRICK: Is there a fear of the Hmong language kind of disappearing do you think?

MOUA: Yes. Especially for the older generation, not knowing, I think their biggest fear is not being able to communicate with their children. Like I said earlier, with my younger sister, we have to be there to basically translate. She is going to the mall mom, that's all she wants to tell you, she is going to the mall to hang out with friends and she will be back later. The fear is they won't be able to communicate and if they are not able to communicate, they are not able to tell the generations the history, or their wishes, or their last goodbyes; they would not be able to tell that to their grandkids, and that is the biggest fear for the older generation.

BRICK: Is there anything else you'd like to say about anything?

MOUA: I don't know, I think I'm doing a lot of talking? [Laughs.]

BUCKLI: Do you have any photos we might actually be able to borrow for the exhibit?

MOUA: Yeah, and if I don't have anything I can definitely go to my parents' house and grab whatever you guys need. I also have the clothing artifacts from the culture show from last year that I have kept because I do present a lot to the building that I work with for the kids there. I know the younger students, the second graders, they study different communities in the Eau Claire community, and so Hmong is one of them and I am so blessed to be able to present to them dressed up, and give them my story. Pictures, artifacts—I have all that stuff.

BRICK: Do you know of anyone else that would be good to interview?

MOUA: Definitely, my husband's aunt and uncle being the first ones here, and they have a lot of things and stories to share. Also my aunt Bliia whose been the one who does a lot of the research for the fashion shows, and my aunt Choua as well, and there are a lot of people that I also draw from that I know would be really great for you to interview them and get their insights on things as well.