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NELSON: Blia, thank you for being here today and doing this interview with us. The first question we have for you is, you gave the speech at the Chippewa Valley Museum about your early background. We are wondering if you would be willing to speak about that again?

VANG SCHWAHN: OK. Sure. I was born in Laos in 1975. When I was about 10 it was when we started to hear a lot about the Vietnam War and what was happening. We started to hear about soldiers that were coming to the villages and were burning Hmong villages and killing people. Or sometimes they would come to the village and take the fathers, the head of the households and the older males of the household and take them into re-education camps. And so a lot of the times we would not see those fathers or the older males any more.

And so I remember my parents talking about wow, here this is what happened when General Vang Pao and the Hmong people are fighting a war against the Vietnamese. The Pathet Lao which is like the Laotian people who live in Laos but then they also sided with the North Vietnamese. They are called Communists, the Pathet Lao. My parents are talking about the war, that because of the war many Hmong people could no longer live in Laos because the Americans left Laos. General Vang Pao left Laos. The Hmong people started to get persecuted by the Communists--the Pathet Lao--and by the North Vietnamese, and so my parents said that we had to decide whether we were going to leave Laos or if we should stay. We tried to stay.

I remember that year just being ten and just really unsure of what's going to happen. I remember my parents telling us never to wander too far away from home. You know, don't go anywhere by ourselves and we have to be close to them all the time because we just didn't know what was going to happen. That year we decided to go ahead and start planting our rice fields and our corn fields just like we were planning to be there. So later on I remember my dad just started packing all our stuff up and started taking them and hiding them in the caves. I was like why are we taking our stuff and hiding them in caves? And my dad said that we have to hide our things in case we could not escape. Then we have to come back. Then we would at least still have the things that we needed for cooking, like utensils and things that we could not take with us.

So finally my dad decided yes, we are going to try and escape Laos. What I meant by escaping Laos is not like you could just go to a travel agency and buy a ticket and say we want to go to Thailand. But you basically have to do everything secretive. Otherwise you just didn't know who you could trust and who you could not. Even people in the village, everybody had to be quiet about what they were planning to do just because you did not know. There's Hmong people that didn't want to leave. They're hoping that if the Hmong people just stop leaving that things would get better or they just kept thinking that eventually General Vang Pao would come back and we would be okay and we wouldn't have to leave Laos. So everybody had to be really quiet about what they wanted to do and what they were planning to do.

When my dad decided that we were going to try and leave our little village, we were living in a very small village called Naxou and that it's probably about fifteen families that lived there. It's pretty much people that you knew or that we were related to. In that village I had my two older sisters that were married that also lived in that village with us. Then I had some aunts and uncles who lived in that village with us. During that time my two older sisters who were married, their families were not ready to try and escape. They were going to stay behind a little bit and see what happened. So then my dad decided that we were going to try and leave our village and go into the city, which is probably about a couple of hours of walking distance, and then settle there for a couple of days. And then try to find ways to get to the capital city of Laos which is Vientiane. And that is where you would go and try to cross the Mekong River over to Thailand.

For a lot of other families, instead of going that route they decided to go through the jungle, because if you try to go through the cities you have to have connections with people who knew you. And you have to be able to have papers showing that you are so and so, and that you work here and there, and you have to kind of prove that you are related to somebody in the capital city before they even allow you into their capital city. Otherwise Hmong people were not allowed to go in there because they just know that once you're there you are just going to try to cross the Mekong River and leave.

And so during that time I remember packing up just a few things. We could not take very much with us at all. We did not have very much left. Life was very simple back there. Every day we did not need TV's. We didn't have toys. We didn't have all that. We just had food and your clothing and things like that. But we did have a watchdog that I was really close with, and we knew we couldn't take the dog with us. I remember us leaving the house with just a few pieces of clothing on and I remember a couple of little bricks of rice and some dried meat just to hold us off until we get to this city of Naxou. And I remember leaving, and my sister was coming there and she was waiting. She was just standing at the front doors as we were leaving, and we kind of just hide the dog by the door, too. And my sister was standing next to the dog and she wanted to come with us so bad, but because she was married then she had to stay behind with her husband. I remember just thinking we will never see this home again. What is life going to be like? And I remember leaving and we keep walking away and turning back and just seeing my sister just keep getting lower and lower and lower into the ground because she was crying so hard. Then the last time when I turned around she was on the ground, and I think it was probably one of the hardest parts of the whole journey. Everything else that I went through was not as hard as watching my sister and what she went through, and just wishing I could have taken her with us and not being here and able to do that.

So we then made it to Naxou, the city there. We stayed at this little house. My father was trying to find somebody who could get us into the capital city of Vientiane. So he found this guy who said yes he would pay me so much money I will get the proper papers saying that you are my family and I can get you across to Vientiane. And so my dad paid him with what little money that we had left. The guy said okay, be ready, I will come and get you at this time. The guy never showed up. We couldn't find him anywhere. So at that time we were out of food. We were out of money. We didn't really know what to do. So then we came back into our village and gathered some more food and take some more rice and some more corn and we went back to Naxou.

Then during that time the Hmong people were planning on having this huge march to the capital city of Vientiane which is almost kind of like the Trail of Tears. There was just like this huge road and you have to go past this bridge before you can get into Vientiane. I'm not sure, but I heard that there were probably close to 30,000 people that were marching. So we marched for days. We carried what little

things we had, and then there are some other people who had horses that they could use their horses to help them to carry their things. At that time I was really ill, too, so I was not very healthy. My father and my mother did not want anything to happen to me along the way, either. So they had to make a decision whether my mom and I should stay behind and my dad would take my older brother and sister, because they were more afraid for them because they were teenagers, and they would most likely be taken away from my parents and put in a reeducation camp. But then they decided that we were going to stick together as a family, and that if we made it then we all, you know, but if we don't then we won't.

So they decided to go on this long march, I just remember, with thousands and thousands of people. During the nights we were asleep on the side of the road. During the day you would march again. I just remember my dad and I, our family and probably five other families, would pause on the side of the road and we would stop there. We decided to rest for the night. It was really quiet. Everybody was sleeping because we were tired. We were hungry. We just didn't feel good. My dad was sitting on a rock and he was just kind of keeping an eye out to make sure if something strange happened, if somebody was coming that he could wake up everybody quickly and tell people to run into the jungle to hide. Dad and I were just sitting there I remember. I was just sitting next to him and all he had was a knife in his hand and suddenly we just heard the brushes move. We turned around and there were these three soldiers standing behind us. One of them pointed a gun at my dad's head. We were so scared. We thought they were going to start shooting at us. I remember my dad praying so hard. He just closed his eyes. He did not know what to do so he just prayed and prayed and prayed. The soldiers started talking to each other and then they took off. We didn't really know if they were going to get more people and then come back or if they just think we were not worth it. Whatever their decision was, but thank God that they didn't do what they were supposed to be doing.

As soon as they took off my dad woke up everybody and we fled into the jungle. We found this empty shack that we just went into there and we stayed there during that night. Then when morning came we decided to find out, so we went back on the road and followed the group of people again. Because during the day they won't really come out and just start shooting at you, but at night it's like they could just shoot at anybody and there's nothing that you can do. So we started marching and finally when people started getting close to Vientiane, or to the place called Hin Heup which is a huge bridge, and that is when we started hearing guns being fired. Pretty soon we just saw this huge wave of people that were running back. We were like, Ok, we have to turn around now. And we just remember that people were shot at and there were people that were killed. I had an aunt that was shot. But we were not that close so we were still further back.

When we saw what was happening we started running. I remember little kids being trampled over and old people because they were not as strong as the young people. People were wearing flip-flops and if somebody stepped on the back of your flip-flop you would trip over. I just remember seeing shoes flying everywhere and animals surrounding old people because people had horses with them. It was probably one of the scariest things that I have ever been through. A lot of those things I still try not to think about until recently. Before I was just trying to be like OK I made it here and I can make a new life for myself. But a lot of people ask me have you been back to Laos. Are you going to go visit? I just feel like why would I want to go back to a place that didn't want me there and tried so hard to kill me? I just didn't have the urge to really want to go back and visit Laos. Maybe someday, but...

PIEHL: How old were you when this all happened?

VANG SCHWAHN: I was ten years old.

NELSON: Ten years old.

VANG SCHWAHN: Yes I was really... It was a perfect age for me. I had a really good memory of things that happened in Laos and in the refugee camp and then here in America. And so I know a lot of times people say if you could change your life again would you do it differently? Or if you had a horrible experience and I just say yeah I did ,but in a way when you think about what I went through it was an amazing experience of what you learn during that time of your life between the age of ten and now. Now you are living in three different countries, and you have been through a war, and then the refugee experience, and then coming here and being a new immigrant and trying to start a new life too. It has just been an incredible journey.

But I was ten, and so we couldn't make it across to the capital city of Laos, so we sent back to Naxou and we stayed there. And then my dad finally found another guy who knew my brother or something and he got some papers together saying that we are his family, that we needed to get to the capital city of Laos. And so they put us in a truck, army truck. And we were able to just like... They said OK, if they asked you questions just don't say anything. Just say the simple things – yes. I just remember being so afraid because you could get into that truck and never make it to the capital city of Laos, either. You just didn't know who you trust, either. So basically you kind of put your life on the line and just say OK, I might die, I might not, but it is like 50-50. And so we were very fortunate. There were some stop points that we were stopped and they had to check our papers and stop. But when we got to Vientiane, then my brother knew one of his professors, because he was sent away to go to school there. So he quickly dropped us off. Then they took us up to the attic and we had to hide up in the attic because often times the patrols will come and search people's houses thinking they might be hiding people and things like that. And so we hid up in the attic. We couldn't come out.

And then at about when it starts to light up a little bit, that's when we heard a knock on the door and some Laotian people came in. They said they were going to take us down to the Mekong River and they made the connection for us to get to Thailand. And so we came out and they quickly rushed us into a taxi. And then we were told that because there were five of us that it was too obvious that we were trying to leave. So they had to separate our family. They had my older brother and sister walking with another guy. Then my parents and I were in the taxi with the guy and we were supposed to meet at this hotel. When we got to the hotel there was no sign of my brother and sister. And so my parents just panicked. This is one of the stories we heard before where they are going to find them dead on the Mekong River or some place. Or they are either robbed or raped or killed. They were just like why does this have to happen. But they didn't give up. They kept praying and praying. And then like an hour later they finally showed up. My brother and my sister – I think it was the happiest time in my parent's life. They were relieved.

And so finally they rushed us down to the Mekong River and there was a little fishing boat there waiting for us. They just told us quickly, quickly, quietly. They told us to lay down in the bottom of this boat and then they covered us with bags because there are always soldiers patrolling the Mekong River. If they see that they are trying to get people across they would start shooting at you. I just remember listening to see what was going to happen. This seems like forever before the boat got started. It seems like forever before we got to the other side. Since we got to the other side they were like, "We are here, you can come up." And even then you are like, "What is going to happen once get out of this boat? Are we really here in Thailand? Or are we still in Laos? Are we being turned into the Communists soldiers? Or

what is really going to happen?" Until we got out and we were like oh, yes! We really are on the other side of Mekong River. And we were lucky because there was a bus there waiting. I mean actually there was a bus waiting to pick up refugees to take them to a refugee camp. And that was the last bus that was ever sent to pick up people there.

So we were very, very fortunate because I had a lot of friends whose journeys were a lot different from mine, where they had to go through the jungles and it took them days and weeks before they get to the Mekong River. And then when they get there they have to swim across the Mekong River by themselves. So the Hmong people in Laos, we lived in the jungles and we lived way up in the mountains. We never felt like we had the need to learn how to swim. We didn't need to cross the rivers. We just kept these huge trees that haul us over the river or we walk over. Or we have small rivers that we can walk over that we didn't really need to swim like the Laotian people when they live in the lower land and they know how to swim and stuff. So many of the Hmong people had to swim across the Mekong River even though they didn't know how to swim. So a lot of time the dads would cut down bamboo and then tie them up. They would put the bamboo underneath their arm and then they would tie up their family to them and they would take their family as they would try to get across the Mekong River. A lot of time many of the Hmong families didn't make it because the current was just too strong. Sometimes the fathers made it to the other side and the mother and the kids died. Or sometime the parents died and the kids made it. And so it was a tragedy.

And I think when I tell my story, since it seems really bad, but when I compare it to what a lot of my friends I had when I was at the village where I grew up in.... We had probably about five girls that were born about the same time. Only two of us made it to this day. Three of them died. One girl and her whole family were killed when they were trying to cross a road and they were shot at. Their family did not even go get them to bury them, they just had to leave them there. And two other girls died trying to escape at different times. So we think about five and two of you made it. I mean that is huge. So every day we always think about that we made it but yet we are like you. Why are we the ones who made it? Why they didn't make it? So we often wonder if they were here what their lives would be like.

So with that I really feel fortunate for what I was able to do for myself and I felt sad for a lot of my families. There were a lot of other Hmong people that when they wanted to go through the jungle they could no longer go because they were too old or they were too weak. They just left them on the side of the road. They put their bag of rice or something and then who knows how long they lasted or whether the tigers came and dragged them away or what to think? Soldiers came and took them, or sometimes if they were too old already they probably just shot them and left them there. Then there are babies that I told you about that were dying in the back. They don't want them to cry so they give them opium and then they overdosed on opium. And so it took a lot of Hmong families. I don't think there is ever any one family that didn't have a tragedy in their family.

When we finally made it to Thailand they took us to this... Back then they didn't have a permanent refugee camp yet. They were only set up a temporary refugee camp which is odd tents. So they took us to the temporary refugee camp and I remember they put us in this tent that had probably fifty families. All you do is you have a little space where your family can sleep and have your whatever belongings you have which is not very much. And then we have to go this huge place where they serve food for us. We have to go there to get our food and bring it back and eat. So I think that we lived there only for a couple weeks and then they transported us to the permanent Ban Vinai refugee camp. There they had all these huge cubicles and there was one for each family. So you might get a ten-by-twenty or something like

that. I mean they would put a family in there so everybody had a bed to sleep in that area, and then they had these little huts away from that that you can go and do your cooking in and things like that.

And so we lived in Ban Vinai refugee camp for five years. I think that was probably the longest five years because every day was the same. There was nothing new. We couldn't go outside of the camp. Many Hmong people who tried to go outside usually got robbed or killed or put in prison. Our family, we are the rule followers. We never had many problems. We just did the same thing: Go to bed, wake up, the same things. If you really want to see something different you can try to climb up one of the hills and then just be able to look around a little bit. Then you know every day there were people that were sick. Sanitizing wasn't the best. We didn't have the best medical care. It was very limited on what we could have. Food was limited. United Nations would come and bring us toiletries and food and things like that so we would try to make it the best we could, but it was definitely not abundance like what we have.

NELSON: Did people get along in the camp?

VANG SCHWAHN: Yeah. Fortunately because we talked about how back in Laos Hmong people were spreading all over up in the mountains of Laos and small villages or like some bigger cities. But in the Ban Vinai refugee camp, it was shoulder to shoulder, you know. I don't know, maybe just because I was younger that I didn't notice that. I never remember, like we didn't have gangs. We didn't have thieves and things like that. And nobody ever asked that question before, so I never thought about it. I think we were overwhelmed by the war and what we had to go through that for us we had to do whatever to maintain that safety and that harmony. We had to learn to get along. I did remember there was one shooting with somebody that my dad knew but that was the only thing that I remember. Other than that we had the structure of like the clan system, and we have the elders. So whenever there is conflict they would try to resolve through the clans or the Hmong leaders. And then they also divided the refugee camp into different, like area one, area two, area three, and so each area has a representative that kind of takes care of that area, too. So a lot of the issues were solved through that, too.

But I do not remember too much. My family, we interacted with the camp. We were really involved in the Hmong Church and we built a Hmong Church. That really kind of helped us a lot. Taking care of the church, and participating and helping with the gardening around the church, and things like that. So there was one of the things that we looked forward to every Sunday was the service, and help planting the flowers. And I remember that we would get Christmas cards during Christmas from the U.S. Each kid would get a Christmas card and I remember my first Christmas card had like the snowflakes and the white glitter on it. And I was just thinking gosh, this is magic. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

NELSON: The card came from what part of the United States? The schools?

VANG SCHWAHN: We were not sure. They did not tell us exactly what it came from. They were just at Christmas and they made sure every kid got one, which is wonderful. I just remember that being the best thing from the refugee camp. It was saying there is hope, and someday I will be out of this place. I also remember they sent us a lot cheese and we didn't like cheese at all. It was just like instead of saying what do these people like to eat? Instead they sent whatever. It was like OK we didn't like this. We didn't like that. We didn't like butter. We didn't eat cheese. We didn't have any use for it.

NELSON: So did it go to waste or did people just not eat it?

VANG SCHWAHN: I'm sure the cheese was wasted. [Laughter]

NELSON: Really? OK.

VANG SCHWAHN: Because we didn't eat it and the butter because we had no use for those. So maybe we could've used vegetable oil instead of butter, and things like that. But it was quite interesting. I'm sure they had their own people that they consult with too, but I'm just thinking how funny some of the things that we got were. I remember in the refugee camp and the Americans would come. I remember just following them around and I would say, "Oh my gosh, these people are so big! They are so tall! They are so white!" Usually they were missionaries. I would say, "Their nose looks so big!" I would just follow them around. My mother told me about the missionaries that first came into Laos and my Grandfather was converted into Christian way back in the early '60's. And my mom was saying when the missionaries came to Laos she always said we fed them our best food. We gave them our best horse. I remember that but I just heard stories. I had never seen what they looked like until I got to that refugee camp.

And so once we got to that refugee camp then we had to apply to be accepted to go to a different country. During that time Canada and Australia and the U.S. and France and South America were accepting Hmong refugees. But we really wanted to come to the U.S. because one of my mother's younger brothers already came to Colorado. We didn't know anybody else in other countries, so my mom thought it would be good if we could come to America. At least then my uncle was already here. So we applied.

Usually, what I talked about earlier, if you have papers proving that you are directly involved with the military or with the CIA than you would be the first group to leave. But my dad was a farmer so he was involved with the war but he did not have any proof. It was more like, you are the elder of this village, this is what you need to do. You need to keep your eyes and ears open when you go into the jungle. You need to track and find out all the activities that are going on and if you see something strange you need to report to an officer. If you see Vietnam soldiers trying to move things around or trying to get to the South or whatever you need to let us know. You need to report it to us. That type of job that my dad was assigned to. That was just basically what this was, what you are going to do and that's it. You don't have any paper or anything at all.

And so we didn't have any paper to prove that we were directly involved with the wars. We had to wait until somebody was willing to sponsor our family. And so we had to take a family picture, and then we had to get our information and send it to all these different organizations. I think that Lutheran Social Services and the Catholic Charities were the two big organizations that really helped a lot of Hmong families get placed in different parts of the United States. Like I said, we're kind of out of hope because after five years we just really thought nobody in America wanted us. We might as well start trying to apply to go to other countries. So we applied to Australia because we heard that there were Hmong people there, too. When Australia called us to go to an interview, then our name came up to go for an interview to come to the U.S., too. And so then we decided we're going to come to the U.S. We went through...

NELSON: Where were your families – you know your family all got to America. You and everybody...

VANG SCHWAHN: We didn't know what to think. We didn't have TV's. Imagine when we came. We came from a place like in the 1920's. No electricity, no communication. You are never seeing what America is like. We used to think America must be in heaven where you get on this plane and you get up

in the high clouds and then you get to America. So America must be in heaven you know. So it is like it is unknown. But all we heard is that is the place where they would take care of us and they would help us and we would be safe. And so to us that was good enough for us.

I know there were Hmong people working against Hmong people because they didn't want Hmong people to leave. They wanted Hmong people to stay so if they were actually able to go back to Laos it would be stronger, too. So there were a lot of rumors going around like, "Oh, you shouldn't go to America. In America they eat people," and things like that. There were horrible rumors and stories like that. Because the can they sent to us, somebody opened it and there was a finger in it (which there probably was). And we kept seeing the accidents. Or they would say they will treat you like dogs, or they don't care about you. Or they would subtly say they just get you there and they just want your wives. They would say they eat people. Being a little kid, of course, you would get a little scared. We also had a lot of people we knew that came first in the 70's, because Hmong people started coming to America in 1975-76 already, and we were in the refugee camp even back in the 1980's. So then also there were people who were saying no that's not true, we are here in America and it is wonderful. We have so many opportunities. Come. You will be OK.

So our family, they were only too scared more than anything else of the unknown, you know what I am saying? Are we going to be able to speak the language, and how hard is it going to be? So that was really hard - just that aspect and just to get out of the refugee camp. It was more than worth it. We came. We went to the interview and within a couple weeks they called our names and we got on the bus and went to Bangkok. Then there you have to stay there for--I can't remember exactly--two weeks or something, where you have to go through a whole series of tests to make sure you are healthy. If they find out that you are not healthy you have to stay there until you get clear of whatever you have before you could come to America. There were a few Hmong people that I know that were addicted to opium because they were there during the war and they had to stay there for months. They struggled with that. If they don't, they ran out of money and...

NELSON: The whole family had to stay with them?

VANG SCHWAHN: Yeah. They had to stay.

NELSON: Or did they have to separate?

VANG SCHWAHN: No they cannot just take one without the other. And I think one of the biggest parts is that they test for TB and all that, because many of the Hmong people are exposed to so much during the war and everything else. The Hmong people were afraid that they are going to be tested and be positive for one thing or another, so our family was very fortunate. We were clean and so we were able to get on a plane and came and were sponsored through a church in Kankakee, Illinois, a very small white community. And so I remember landing. The riding in the plane was quite an experience. I remember my mother ate one of the... You know how they have those really nice warm towels that you wipe your hands? She didn't know that that wasn't food. So she ate a little. Don't eat that. It was just those little things. It was just like OK, what do I do? How do I use the bathroom? They didn't have interpreters, either, so they just drag you. And we didn't fly straight to Chicago, and we had to stop. They had to drag us to the hotels and find us a place and the next morning come knock on the door and drag us again.

I remember landing at O'Hare airport. This is like November and it was colder but I was looking out and seeing all the lights and the glass and the snow and just thinking, whoa it is like a postcard. I'm really

here. It must be the cloud. It must be the sky, this is what America is. This is it. I just remember that it was freezing cold and we just had little sweaters and flip flops. So then the sponsors came and they got us winter coats and took us into our apartment. And it was just really hard because I was looking at all these people with blonde hair and blue eyes. Here were these blue eyes and blah, blah, blah, and blah, blah, blah. I was thinking oh, my gosh, this is worse than the refugee camp. I can't understand what they are saying. What am I going to learn? Is it possible to really learn how to speak these people's language and to say their names? It was amazing. I remember they took me to school when I was dressed different. I looked different. The kids were all very different from me. I just remember not being able to communicate with people.

PIEHL: Did you go to school pretty much right when you got here?

VANG SCHWAHN: Yeah. I think that there was a good two weeks because we got so sick from the airplane ride, and also the time difference, too. When we were in Thailand during the day time, in the U.S. it was night time. So I would be sleeping during the day. And then at night I'd be up all night. But the place had a huge glass window so I was moving back and forth. I think I had to wait for two weeks in order for us to get our shots and everything else, too. Then going to school was just so, so different. It was just like falling through the hole and saying you are not in Kansas anymore. And it was really, really scary. I remember just crying three or four times before the day is over because I was so frustrated because I couldn't understand anybody and nobody understood me. I didn't like the food. I ate Suzy Q's for about three months straight. I remember going back home and just telling my mother that I will be her slave forever if she just didn't make me go back to school. She would say, "No this is America. This is what people do. You are a kid. You go to school. If you want to have a good life you have to learn because your dad and I are too old already. We can't learn." So it was like a big thing on my shoulder. I was like OK, now we are in America and you are the one that has to be responsible now because we've done what we can. We gave up the life that we knew to bring you here. We have done our job and now it is your turn and your job is to take care of us and to learn everything that you can, because you are young and you still have the opportunity to learn. So I just kept going and kept crying and kept going and kept crying. I just remember they kept taking me to the doctor's to get my ear test just to make sure that I could hear OK. They wondered if I could understand what they were asking. I just kept telling them a random yes and no.

Then it got too hard and so my uncle was moving to Eau Claire to run a small Hmong church here because there were probably 10 or 15 Hmong families then that lived in Eau Claire. So they sent us to Eau Claire. We came to Eau Claire. It was wonderful just to be surrounded by other Hmong youths like me. We went to Central Junior High which is where the Eau Claire School Board office is right now. There were probably seven or eight Hmong students. So we were a group and we had a teacher, Mrs. Gratz, who worked with us with our English every day. I had no formal education before, so I had to start learning from ABC's all over. It was almost like you were being born to a different culture and a different time. You learn how to walk. You learn how to talk like everybody. You learn how to dress like them. And you learn how to speak their language, and you learn how to read and write eventually. But there was pretty hard at first.

NELSON: Now when you were saying that you know it was very scary when you didn't want to be here?

VANG SCHWAHN: Uh huh.

NELSON: Were you missing the camp? Were you missing Laos?

VANG SCHWAHN: In a way I did miss Laos. I didn't miss the refugee camp very much. I missed Laos because there I knew what I was capable of. I knew what I could do and couldn't do. I couldn't understand my peers. I couldn't understand the people who surrounded me. And so I missed that. I didn't miss the part about the unknown, about who was going to come to my village and take my dad away or my brother or my sister. Or who is going to come and kill our family or take our food and burn our village. So I think even though it was a struggle for me with the language and the cultural barrier, it was still better than what I had to live through over there in Laos with the unknown. The fear of what would have happened was more surpassing. The fear of the unknown here, even here, I knew that I couldn't understand them, but I knew that they wouldn't hurt me, either. And so they really – I mean that was a relief because I knew that they tried to help me. I mean, I had these couple kids that just dragged me around school all day and I would cry and they would cry. They would cry and I would cry. I knew they were frustrated, too. All day they had the best intentions but I'm sure that I frustrated the heck out of them.

PIEHL: Were there people in the school that could translate a little bit that could help out or were the Hmong students on their own?

VANG SCHWAHN: When I relocated to Eau Claire, we went to Central Junior High and we were on our own. We did not have an interpreter or a bilingual specialist like we do now. So we were like helping ourselves. There were a couple of other kids that were here when I came that were in Eau Claire that probably came a little bit earlier than I did. So they were a big help to me versus I was to them because I was new. I was like coat, boots, sox, mittens. And they probably were able to say "Hi, how are you?" that type of thing. I would just latch onto them and don't leave me this way. And the funniest part I kept telling my kids, and they laughed even though I didn't speak English very well, I was in the choirs. I remember singing Winter Wonderland perfectly. I didn't know what it meant but, I remember just being excited to have my parents watch the concert so that was kind of interesting.

NELSON: Now you were 15 when you came to America?

VANG SCHWAHN: Yup.

NELSON: Now where were you placed in the school? With 15 year olds or with a lower period or?

VANG SCHWAHN: In Kankakee, Illinois, because I was 15 but because I didn't speak the language then, she put me in 6th grade. Because she thought with the younger kids I could learn faster I'm sure. But then when we moved to Eau Claire, then they jumped me right to 9th grade. So I went to 6th and skipped 7th and 8th and went to 9th. Then I went to high school and I didn't graduate until I was 19 because I needed so much extra time and extra credit. Even though I graduated from high school, I felt like I was not ready. I was not able to go to college because I could use like the basic language with you and I could communicate with you about the weather and how is you day but if you opened a text book for me I couldn't read it or I couldn't really understand fully because it really takes about seven years to acquire academic language for a second language learner of English. So I only really had about three and a half years to really just learn basic language skills. So I was lucky that they gave me the diploma. I'm sure that all those grades were based on effort rather than actually the grade. I'm just so fortunate that they gave me that high school diploma because I was able to use that to open doors later.

My oldest sister who is married, she already had kids and she did have a couple of years of high school but she couldn't graduate. So even today, we have been here for twenty seven years and she is still working on her GED on-line because she is determined to get her GED, which I am really proud of her because her kids are all grown up now. But I was a little bit younger so it was fortunate that I got my high school diploma, and I actually really wanted to go to college. I tried it right after I graduated. I came to UW-Eau Claire for one quarter and I just knew that I was in way above my head. So I decided to stop. Then I went to work as an interpreter at a couple of different clinics in Eau Claire and just really tried to work on my English, and practice a lot of reading and writing. Then I got a job at the Menomonie school district as a bilingual aid over there. Then that is when I really almost can learn along with the kids as I grow. And I just really improved my English language.

I went back to college in the 1990's here in Eau Claire for elementary education. But then I got to the point where I only took other classes that were available during that time because I was working during the day. Then I transferred to Stout because they had more of a flexible schedule. You could do a weekend. You could do your evening. You could do your summer. All that. So I graduated. I did that part time, and working full time, at the same time trying to raise a family. So I graduated from Stout in 2000 in Early Childhood Education, but my background has always been in ESL or working with Hmong students who are learning English. After I graduated, then Eau Claire had created a position for somebody like me and they called me for an interview. I went in to interview and I was offered a job. I am really glad that I got a job because I would have loved teaching, too, but I love what I do now and just how many more people I can touch – a lot more. All across levels and in different areas. So it has been so wonderful to have the opportunity to share my experience and my history and culture with people, and kids, and teachers.

PIEHL: Is that primarily your duties then with the school district, is to teach about Hmong culture?

VANG SCHWAHN: No.

PIEHL: Or is it about the language?

VANG SCHWAHN: It's more of – if there is anything that the district is not familiar with, that falls on me.

NELSON: OK.

VANG SCHWAHN: So it could be anything from if a school is having a hard time finding a proper placement for a Hmong child because they are not really sure what their needs are, then they will call me. I will do observations and consult with the teachers and the families, and try to come back and meet with the team and try to find out what is the best help for the child. Sometimes I have Hmong students who don't want to go see their regular counselors for issues and they would rather come and talk to me. Then my goal is to really not to handle all their problems, but it's also to really train the staff to work with Hmong students, too. So I do a lot of presentations and workshops on that. I also do workshops and presentations to Hmong parents about the school system and how to get help or what to do if you have a concern about your child in school. Things like that. I go into the classroom and I talk about Hmong history and culture and just pretty much everything that is related to Hmong, or anything that is out of the ordinary, then they call me and then I pretty much go in there and do my best. And if it is something that I don't know, then I will try to find out what other people might know so that we can then help out the situation.

PIEHL: Are there a lot of people that do what you do?

VANG SCHWAHN: No, I am the only one.

NELSON: So you handle everything. Wow. That is pretty overwhelming.

VANG SCHWAHN: Yeah.

NELSON: You are hired through the school district, right?

VANG SCHWAHN: Yes, I am hired through the school district. They created the position because we have a large number of Hmong students in our district. About ten percent of our students are Hmong. We only have about five professional Hmong people in our district. That is part of my job, too, is to hopefully make it where we can have more Hmong professionals, role models in our school district for our Hmong students, too. Because I remember when I did my student teaching and I was placed in the Menomonie School District with a kindergarten class in which the ratio of Hmong students and Caucasians was even. I walked in there and this little Hmong boy said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I am here to learn to be a teacher." He said, "Hmong people cannot be teachers. Only white people can be teachers." I looked at him.

NELSON: This was kindergarten?

VANG SCHWAHN: Yeah, kindergarten. A little boy. And I said, "You know this is America. You can be anything you want to be if you work hard." He said, "Oh, really?" You could just see the sparkle in his eyes. And from there he just latched onto me. Those types of things that always give me the energy to do what I do every day, just knowing that if I can instill one belief in a child, or one hope, or if I can change one person's opinion about the Hmong people, or one positive thing, that I've done something. That's why I love what I do.

PIEHL: Do you see more Hmong people getting into the profession of teaching and working in the schools?

VANG SCHWAHN: You know we do have more people that are going into education. Still, when you are in a district like Eau Claire it is very hard to get into. We are hoping that through some program or something eventually in the future that we could possibly... Well, right now we are meeting between the Eau Claire School District and the University, and it is really kind of like a pre-Hmong teacher program and all it goes to really help Hmong students earlier on so that they can be successful getting to the University. To stay successful and be able to pass all the tests, graduate, get into our district, and then have the support to stay here in our district for the long term, not just for a couple years. I've been on that committee for about a year and a half. I think we've gone on for two years now. We are moving very slowly. But we are hoping that if we could change one policy or open one door, that eventually... We're not looking for a big rush of five Hmong teachers every year because with the budget crunch and everything we have to be realistic. But if we could get one every other year or something, especially at the schools that have a big number of Hmong students, how much of an impact that can have on the students. And the role models piece, where if students see more people of their own color in the areas of professionals that they go to, they are more likely to think, wow, I can be like that, too. I have a Hmong student who told me that he can only be a construction worker. I said if that is what you truly enjoy doing, that is good for you, but you are far more capable than that. You could be a nurse or a

doctor because the student is really smart. I said you could also be a, he loves cars and he loves to fix them up, so I said I could see you someday working for a race car company fixing their cars because you are so talented. But to just to say yea, I am going to graduate from high school and then go work as a construction worker for the rest of my life. Those are some of the things that I come in contact with on a daily basis. Helping students believe in themselves.

PIEHL: You seem to have a great handle on--number one you are working with these kids every day, and you have children that are growing up here--what do you notice is the biggest difference between first generation and second generation Hmong in the United States?

VANG SCHWAHN: I would say one of the big differences is that the first generation probably still worked a little bit harder. Plus they go to school. And they still have a better understanding about their culture and history and what they came from, rather than the second generation almost kind of like not really. Some of them, I wouldn't say all of them, but a small percentage of them are struggling with really who they are. Why they are here, where did they come from, because they don't have a good sense of the war or the Hmong people's involvement and what their parents had to go through to be here in America. Why do they not have professional jobs like other parents who were born here? To them they are ashamed of their parents because they work at the turkey store and these other people are working for companies and those types of things, and being able to make a connection that yes, they may work at the turkey store, but they are working as hard as they can. They are working to the best of their ability because of what they came from and how they got here. That is one of the things that we are touching on.

Our struggle is trying to get the school systems to try or allow implementing at least a part of the Hmong history and culture into the curriculum. And it is for the Hmong students or even all students so they have a better understanding of why the Hmong people came here and what are some of the challenges that they are facing. So that we can kind of understand ourselves better and others can understand us better. I think with that we could do so much good with these kids if they really, truly understand who they are. Because if you don't know, you are constantly searching for who you are, and if you don't know who you are, you're going to be lost. They're seeing things in the media but they don't have a good understanding of a normal culture. So they think that everything they read and everything they watch is true. That is totally opposite. They're just media. For example, somebody like me, I am able to step into the right culture and understand what is normal. I understand what is normal in the Hmong culture, but with a lot of our second generations, they don't really have this strong belonging, or I would say they are not belonging in either culture. So if you have one foot on one bridge and one on the other eventually you will always be wobbly or you will fall down. And so it is good to have a good strong foundation and then build up from there. That is one of my goals is to hopefully eventually to be able to actually have a Hmong culture language and history class as an elective at one of the bigger high schools because a lot of kids would benefit from that. It is kind of strong right now.

We also have a language, too, where the second generation kids are speaking more what we call "Hmong-lish," where they mix the two languages together, and then their parents do not use a little bit of Hmong-lish but they understand more Hmong. So sometimes it is hard for them to communicate because the Hmong kids have a hard time finding the words they want to use. The parents have a hard time not just finding the words to use, but then understanding the words that the parents are trying to tell them, too. So a lot of what they hear is blah, blah, blah. I don't know what you are talking about, mom. They end up just getting frustrated and yell at each other and you hear the doors slam and you hear the music go on... And then a lot with the parents, they are not really sure how to discipline their

kids just because of the cultural differences. Back in Laos, the teachers have every right to discipline the students. If your fingernails are long, you're going to get it. If your hands are dirty. If you can't memorize something, then you are going to be up on the board standing on one leg and holding two rocks on your head. The parent's job is to make sure you have your food and your clothing and send you off to school and the teacher's and the school's job is to make sure that you are there and you learn, and you are not only learning how to be smart but you are also learning how to be a good person. Except that concept is really hard for the Hmong parents because here in America, I would say, we are partners. And therefore you have to do your part and you have to tell us how to help your kids. The Hmong parents say no, you are going to help my kids learn how to be great kids and I'll make sure that they have a place to study, that they have food to eat and clothing and that I will drop them off at school and I pick them up. So it has been very, very interesting experience seeing the differences.

NELSON: Now going back when you were in Laos, did you get an education there?

VANG SCHWAHN: No, I never went to school there. Because back then in the Hmong culture there was a more of a male dominant culture, and so if a family is rich and they can afford to, they would send their boys to a school. Because we didn't have schools in the villages so you had to send them away into a city that is further away. I remember my brother was sent away to school and we were lucky to see him maybe three times a year or something.

But it was most likely believed that the girls were supposed to learn how to cook and how to work around the house, and eventually they were just going to be a good wife to somebody. But the sons were the ones who were going to take care of the family name, they are going to be in charge. They should be the one that is educated. I only have one brother, so he had education since he was pretty young. And my older sister, though, did have some education. She was sent away not as far as my brother, but she actually had a couple of years of school where she walked with my brother. He was surprised. This must be on the elementary level. They were walking. They would take about two or three hours to walk to school. And I remember her coming home and my dad wanted her to say the alphabet in Laos. And she couldn't say it because she had only been there a couple of days. And he was hitting her and I was so scared. I was so glad I wasn't going to school! My sister still remembers that day. I don't think she ever forgave my dad for that. Then she got older and I think she stopped going. I can't remember why. She did until we left, or maybe she stopped along the way. I have to ask her again. But then I never did [go to school]. When I came to America, that was when I really started to have a formal education.

NELSON: Now you mentioned that you help parents, Hmong parents to cope with the change of culture. How do you balance culture in your family?

VANG SCHWAHN: I think one of the things is that I have been so fortunate. Like I said I have been so welcome in both cultures, so I am able to take what is good from each culture and try to live my life based on that. When you look at culture there is all these negative things that goes with it. So I think for me I just would say OK that is something that I would like to have within my family. You have to have something from the Hmong culture and I would like to have it in my family, so just take those. And almost kind of like create my own culture so you have a subculture underneath these two big cultures. You just try to balance between that.

PIEHL: Does that mean making sure that your kids know both languages and do you do American celebrations and Hmong celebrations?

VANG SCHWAHN: Yes we do Christmas. We do the Hmong New Year. We go to the Hmong New Year every year. It is a big thing. The girls get dressed up. If there is some Hmong event going on I always take them there and explain to them the reason why it is and something good about it so that they can understand what it is. I wish I had the opportunity to do this with our kids. They can have only so much time to do that. We also do a lot of the American things as a family, too. Celebrate 4th of July and Christmas and Father's Day and Mother's Day and Easter. Because I was brought up as a Christian, too, so Easter and Christmas were normal for me because I was born as a Christian back in Laos. Easter and Christmas are very different from here. On Christmas back in Laos, the whole village goes into the church, and they kill a couple of pigs and have this huge feast, and then they just do the Christmas. They do the play, and Jesus is born, and everybody sings songs, and then after that you have this big feast together. And then you go home. And that is it for Christmas, that is the true purpose of Christmas. And then for Easter you go to church and then you celebrate and burn incense, pray for the dead and things like that. There is no Easter bunny or Easter eggs or anything like that. So those are some of the things that... moving towards more of the American Easter and the American Christmas with the gifts, and the eggs, and the Easter bunnies, and things like that.

It is almost like you are adapting. You assimilate but then you start trying to make sure... I think one of the things that is good about me is I know who I am and I know where I came from, so I never felt like I have to be anybody else. And I always felt that nobody else could tell me that I need to be different. If I think being different is something that's good, than I am willing to bring that about. I feel pretty tough and about who I am and where I came from. And I think that is something that many of Hmong individuals have a hard time with. They know they're Hmong, but they really don't know if they want to be Hmong. Because being Hmong is almost like a negative thing. You lost the war and you ran away from war, your whole history from China to Laos and then from there to America. And you depend on other people for your survival.

There are so many of the people I knew that when they became citizens they changed their names to American names. For example I had a family – the registrar lady came to me and said "OK, I got this family and all these kids have the same address but they have different names. But the mom and the dad have different names from some of these kids." Then I looked and I was just like what is going on here? Then I finally realized that some of the kids still have the parent's Hmong name, and for some of the kids the parents put down their American name. So this poor lady, her name is Blia also like mine, but her husband changed her name to Brenda. And so I called her and said I just wanted to confirm that you are Brenda. She said "No, I'm not Brenda." When she was speaking to me she said in Hmong and she was laughing and she said, "I know when we became citizens my husband just picked the name from the list. I didn't even like it. And when I go to the doctor's office, and when they call Brenda I don't answer because that is not who I am." Then the husband changed his name. We have a lot of people who changed their name or who added an American name to it. People always said how come you don't change your name? And I was just like why would I change my name? That's who I am. If I changed my name then who would I be? A lot of people are shocked.

I'm probably one of the really few people who are not a citizen yet. And I have not because I find that it is who I am. And I didn't feel like I need to really say OK, now I am a citizen. I am a permanent residential alien. I am permanent here, but I have not gotten my citizenship yet. I thinking I'm at the stage now that I should because my children are getting older and I don't want that to have a negative effect on them. Like my daughter, my oldest daughter would really like to go to work for the government, and so I didn't want them to use that against her, to say your mother is not a citizen, she an alien.

NELSON: How does that affect them?

VANG SCHWAHN: Kids who are born here are citizens.

NELSON: Yeah, but if your parents are not from here, can it make a difference or not?

VANG SCHWAHN: Oh, definitely.

NELSON: Because I battle, I struggle with that.

VANG SCHWAHN: OK, yeah.

NELSON: They became naturalized. It was hard to say yes, I am going to be Americanized because I felt that...

VANG SCHWAHN: Because you were already are. Yeah.

NELSON: ...it cuts my heritage away from me.

VANG SCHWAHN: Exactly.

NELSON: It was really hard.

VANG SCHWAHN: Yeah it is, and that is how I felt too. This can be another whole other conversation. It felt like if you are here and no matter how successful you are, if you don't have a white person--oh, I'm sorry you're a white person -- not you, definitely you are wonderful [laughter]--affirming and saying yes, you are normal, or you are good, then you are never good enough. I am a good citizen. I'm doing good things. Why do I have to give up my citizenship to say yes, now I am an American because I am a good citizen already? You are doing wonderful things, but I truly feel like now I have to give that up, because that is the one thing that I had, my name and my citizenship. But now, I feel if I don't then that will be used against my children's opportunities. So I felt like I was holding up this for so long, and now it is time to finally give up for their sake so that they didn't have to fight unnecessary battles. People say "Oh, you're not a citizen?" A lot of people say, "Oh, we thought that you were born here," which is a compliment. When I came to talk to you guys I had a two day, it is called "Beyond Diversity Training," and that was the whole issue. They are talking about race and looking at how race has impacted education. They are looking at studies of black kids whose parent's income levels are as far as some of the white kids who are performing better in school but the black kids are still not performing as well, even though they have the same income level and are in the same class. The training is to really look at getting individuals to look at their teaching styles and see how the things that we are internalizing in kids of our own values and beliefs about certain kids. Like oh, yeah it's not going to as well because he's black, or he is not doing as well because he is learning English as a second language. But to look at kids differently and have different expectations for our kids. But it was very, very interesting.

NELSON: Now you are married, correct?

VANG SCHWAHN: Yes.

NELSON: Now, is your husband Hmong or ...

VANG SCHWAHN: My husband is actually white.

NELSON: When you got married, and him being not Hmong, what did your parents think?

VANG SCHWAHN: At first when my parents found out that I was dating my husband they were really, really angry. In fact they threatened to kill me. My mother actually brought out the rope and she was saying you might as well hang yourself if you are going to marry outside our ranks. My dad was mad. He would say, "I brought you to this country and I did this and did that for you. And here you are you are going to marry a white person. Why can't you marry your own people? Because you know white people what they are like." I didn't blame them because their view of white people is through television. They did not have the opportunity that I had to integrate into the community and to know that being white in the Eau Claire community is different than being white on TV where they leave their wives and they have affairs and they're drunk all the time. And things like that. That was their version, that they would dump you and leave you and divorce you. Then nobody else would want you and that was going to happen. They were very, very disappointed. But then I just slowly introduced my husband to them. He is really handy with electronic things. If the stove is not working, I will call him. He will come fix it for them. A light bulb not working and then they were like, "Oh, he is such a really nice white person! Maybe we will like him." So then they got to know him as person and not just say wait a minute, he's white. It took a while and then eventually they came to accept him into our family. His parents are the same way, too. I think it is easier to accept a woman from a race than it is to accept a man from a race. I think that they look at them more as a threat to them. You know what I mean?

So it was just like for me, but it was more like wow she's exotic. She's Asian. She's beautiful. Even though I don't consider myself that. It was just like she is this amazing person. I think it was also easier for me to be accepted by his mother than his father, too, because I think it was harder for his father to say that his son was dating somebody who came as a refugee. My family was poor and we were not high class. But no one said anything. They just accepted me into their family. They supported us. We both had some very positive experiences on both our sides of the family. But I think we are probably one of the differences. I've noticed a lot of other mixed couples have had a lot of hardships and have a hard time. I think sometimes people still look at you and say why did you decide to marry a white person? I had some Hmong people who would say why didn't you decide to marry an Asian person, or things like that. It is sometimes where we have to work twice as hard for our marriage to work because you feel like people always are looking down on us and saying now when are they going to break up? When is this going to happen? Things like that. But I think that it definitely makes you work harder. It makes you think about everything that you do. I can't just look stupid for anything, I always have to think about it before I do something. It's definitely a little bit more pressure.

NELSON: What does your husband think about your culture?

VANG SCHWAHN: In the beginning he had a really hard time understanding why we do things the way we do. But I think now he is finally just like OK, that's the Hmong way. That's Hmong time. I forgot that's the way they do it. And so it is like anything else. I think once you have the opportunity to experience it and to understand it, you don't have to accept it but you come to respect it for what it is. And I think that is what he did which is like he didn't agree with it but he respected why we did the thing. Both of my parents passed away. My mother passed away in 2003 and my dad passed away in 2005, and he had such a hard time with the whole thing because we found out with my mom, she was terminally ill, and

she had just like about six weeks with us. During the whole time just the expectation that the kids drop everything and you go and care for your family. I would leave my youngest daughter home when I'm over there. My husband had a hard time with that, but yet he understood that was something that I needed to do.

The whole funeral things were... We had to wait for relatives to come from all over the states and my uncle to come from France, so we couldn't have the funeral right away. We had to wait for like ten days before we could have the funeral. The funeral was four days long. All these relatives and it was twenty four hours a day from Friday night until Monday morning. You were expected to be at the funeral greeting people and your relatives would be there. All those things which is overwhelming. You understood it. They were respected and you may complain but it just needed to be done. When Hmong people get together they don't send out notices or invitations. Usually they will call the morning and say "Oh, well, we're doing this at 5:00 today. Show up." And things like that. And you just like – ohhh. We're not like Americans. We don't have everything planned up until next year. Things like that. But it is taking time and adjusting to it and I'm getting more to be Americanized, but I still fall back a lot on my Hmong time, my Hmong things, too. Oh, I've got these relatives coming, I've got to do this. It's been really interesting.

PIEHL: Does he speak Hmong?

VANG SCHWAHN: No. He's one of those people who has a really hard time learning a second language. And just because Hmong language is such a tonal language, you either can pick it up really good or you can't pick it up at all. And part of it is my fault, too. I get home and I usually don't speak Hmong to him. So my kids can understand a lot more than they can speak. He always said I needed to speak more Hmong to the kids so that they can stay fluent in the Hmong language, but it is just so much easier to say things in English than to try to explain in Hmong three times. I really need to focus on that and especially with the kids. I need to work with them on the Hmong language. The history and culture part they hear about it all the time. But definitely the Hmong language would be interesting to teach them how to speak it and then how to read it and write it too.

NELSON: Do they accept your culture?

VANG SCHWAHN: Oh, yes. They are so fortunate. We had a speaker a little while back. The university had a Hmong Culture Friends Day. They had a speaker from California come and talk about the Hmong people who are still in Laos that are being hunted down even today, because when we left many of the Hmong people didn't want to leave because they are hoping that eventually we will all come back. And so these people are now hiding in caves in the jungle and are basically living in the jungle and they are being hunted down by these communist Laotian soldiers. This guy came and he did a talk about it and my oldest daughter was so sweet. She was like, "I'm going there to support you, mom." And she cried harder than I did. When they showed the video about the tortures and what the Hmong people had to go through and they were asking people for help. When are you going to come back and save us or allow the United Nations to come so that we could come out freely. Because in Laos, even though they claim that they don't, tortures the Hmong people, and they're still doing it. They do not allow a third party to come and monitor the situation. Just come out, we won't hurt you. Hmong people knew because they've been hunted down for so long that they refused to come out. I'm really fortunate. I have to say I have two of the best kids in the world. They've really been a wonderful part of my life. I don't know what my life would have been like without them, but I think they really just make life worth...everything that you do, you do for them.

NELSON: I have a question for you. What makes someone to be an American?

VANG SCHWAHN: [Laughter] Now what is an American? I don't know! To me an American is somebody who lives here in America who is following the rules and the laws and they are trying the best they can to make a better life for themselves. That to me is an American. Yet these words inside my head keeps telling me that to be an American you have to have blond hair, blue eyes and you have to - I would say you have to have blond hair and blue eyes to be considered a true American.

PIEHL: Do you know where that idea comes from? Is it just something that's been ingrained over time or...

VANG SCHWAHN: I think, I just even experienced, going back to what I was telling you earlier, sometimes no matter how good you are until a white person informs it for you. You can never be that good. Maybe I can be super, super good and doing a great job but if I'm just telling people I'm doing a great job, it is not the same as you would say yeah Blia did a great a great job. Then everybody's oh, you're right, she did a great job. To me it just seems like the white is just more powerful. I don't know if I would have ever said I wanted to be a white person. I love my skin for who I am. White is beautiful too, but I am not at the point where I... It makes me more comfortable with who I am, but there are some Hmong people who I think if they could they would rather be white.

PIEHL: Really.

VANG SCHWAHN: Than being Hmong. But I think that just like all the messages that we hear and everything else is to be American, you got to be white. You better be European. You got to be the one who discovered America even though Native Americans were already here. I think it is just a message and an image.

PIEHL: Does that come from people or television; maybe both?

VANG SCHWAHN: Yeah, I think probably both. Yeah, definitely. Books, TV, magazines, newspapers. If you are a true American you are white and you are more powerful. That is just the message that I think especially people of different colors always get. I think if you are Swedish or Norwegian where you are still white or blond hair, if you don't talk and don't have an accent you are fine. I had a friend that I work with us, and she's from Sweden. She got married and came to the States. And she's just out and about and they just think she is white. But when she talks people are just like, "Oh, you're not white?" She is white but still... And so it is like maybe you have to be fluent in English, too, certain kind of dialects that you have, you have to be at a certain level. But definitely I think you have to be white to be considered an American. I don't know. What do you think?

NELSON: It's the perspective you have, it is just different. Everybody sees it different.

VANG SCHWAHN: Exactly.

NELSON: But not a lot of times even here you ask an American, they kind of look at you like OK why that question.

VANG SCHWAHN: I know.

NELSON: You know what I mean.

VANG SCHWAHN: Yeah.

NELSON: There is not really a specific...

VANG SCHWAHN: I remember one time a lady approached me and we started talking. She asked me what I am, and I explained the whole thing about who I am and why I came here. I said what about you? She said "Oh, I'm just an American girl." I was just like oh, OK. I didn't go into detail. What does that mean? What makes you an American? What makes me not? I guess I think also citizenship, too. So I think that is one of the things that if I want to be a real American that I have to give up my citizenship, and I think that is, I don't know. I just don't think that's right. If you live in this country and you work hard and you are striving to be the best you can, and you follow the rules, and you pay your taxes and everything like everybody else, then you are an American.

NELSON: Now how have you Americanized?

VANG SCHWAHN: How have I Americanized? Gosh. How am I Americanized? That is a tough question. You know when you think about Americanize, the first thing that came to my mind was people who go shopping, sit in a bar drinking, go to softball games, and sports, and I am not into that kind of stuff. So I don't even know if I am Americanized or not.

NELSON: So the things that you have kind of stopped doing from your culture I think if you stop doing things from your culture and you are starting to do things the American way then I think that will be Americanized.

VANG SCHWAHN: Like clothing and that sort of thing?

NELSON: Whatever you think. How you think you are similar to the people here in the United States or what is different, you know.

PIEHL: Do you feel like you have Americanized?

VANG SCHWAHN: Yeah.

NELSON: That sense of – when you said what you thought Americanized meant.

VANG SCHWAHN: I think I feel like I live the life that it is here now. So if that is Americanized than I am. But I don't purposely try to just get myself Americanized. But I do like the daily routine they do. I go to work.

NELSON: Do you eat American food or do you eat more Hmong?

VANG SCHWAHN: Half and half.

NELSON: Half and half. OK. So you kind of have kept your Hmong traditions and the American way?

VANG SCHWAHN: Yeah. But I don't do that as more tradition. I just do it. So that is why it is hard to think, if I feel like eating Hmong food, I will eat Hmong food. I don't purposely say all this week we are going to have three Hmong meals and three American meals. It is so weird. You just go for balance. You just say what you feel like today. Pho which is a really popular Hmong food, and that is what we have. Or we say maybe tacos or pizza or burgers or ...

NELSON: So you have Americanized to assimilate to the United States. But you still have some things that you keep from your culture around...

VANG SCHWAHN: I'm definitely not into shopping, or going out drinking, or going to all the football games or all those things. I don't know. It could just be because it is a lifestyle. I guess to me Americanize means that you do all those types of things and so... But I definitely do my school things, my job, I drive my kids to their activities every day. And then it's hard because back in Laos, we don't have that kind of lifestyle. Our lifestyle back in Laos, which is farming, so you wake up in the morning and you go with your family to the field and everybody works side by side until the sun goes down. Then you go back home. You take care of your animals. You eat dinner and then you go to sleep. And then the next morning your day starts all over again. So there are differences. Your way is so limited. Your lifestyle compared to here in America where you have so many choices and options. It is almost like wow, how do I compare them? Can I say I am really Americanized? Trying to be an American woman. We do just a lot of things that a lot of the same mothers do with their kids. We take them to the library and try to take classes in the summer to improve our education and things like that.

PIEHL: I would think that you're both very Americanized. But not so much so where you don't, I know you both very much appreciate your cultures.

VANG SCHWAHN: Yeah. Definitely.

PIEHL: So it is kind of that nice medium in between. Like you were saying about that, about the balance.

VANG SCHWAHN: Yeah. I think that we are in a way where we flow naturally. And I think for a lot of people they're like you said, they constantly have to make a mental note, saying am I balancing everything? I think with us, we just do it, and it sort of becomes a natural part of our life.

NELSON: I agree with you.

VANG SCHWAHN: Yeah. I have to say it's an interesting life.

NELSON: Now what is your specific title? I mean are you considered a teacher or are you...

VANG SCHWAHN: I'm hired as a teacher. My title is called the School Community Liaison, and I think they did that for funding purpose. I think my position is paid out of community funding which is not directly from the state, at least that is what I was once told. But I'm not really sure. And so they put me under Community Liaison so that I could work in the school but go out into the community, too. And work with the Hmong community, but the larger community, too, to provide whatever resources and create programs that would be beneficial to Hmong students and their families. So that I was not just stuck in one place but I actually work...

PIEHL: Broad base

VANG SCHWAHN: Exactly, which has been the best. I'm able to work with the Chippewa Valley Museum in creating curriculum for the third graders, and I am able to work with Human Services and do the Working Parent Program that would benefit all the Hmong parents. And so that's allowed me the flexibility. But if I were to give myself a title I probably would call myself the Student Services Specialist.

NELSON: So you were hired as a teacher without a classroom.

VANG SCHWAHN: Yeah. But I am working underneath Student Services Department. I am grouping with the counselors, the school psych and the social workers. So I work most closely with those individuals, and then teachers, and then administrators, then communities and parents. You know not every day is the same. It is like every day is a different thing. I look forward to the next day because you don't know. Either you already know what's going to happen, but it just makes your job a lot more interesting to be able to work with all these different individuals.

PIEHL: I have one more question that we'll ask. It deals with American policy. Are classes dealing with immigrants coming in? You worked with a bunch of different groups. I was just wondering what is your take on American immigration policy? I know it is kind of controversial right now, and I was just wondering what you think about it.

VANG SCHWAHN: I'm not much of a policy or politician so I won't be able to answer that question very much. I will be honest. It is school related and I should get myself more educated about the bigger policy of the world but it is always a challenge. I truly believe that we should allow immigrants to come into our country. But I think that we need to have a good policy in place where once they are here then we can help them be successful. America is the place that people want to be. I am so lucky to be here today. I wouldn't – I could not imagine being anywhere else in the world or raising my kids in any other parts of the world. I am so fortunate to be here. And then my kids are born here. I think other people should have the same opportunity, but I think at the same time it should be something that they come to legally and that everything is done legally so that we know who we have and we know what their needs are so that we can help them to be truly successful as immigrants here in America.

I know a lot of the Hmong people – we came – it was very, very difficult because suddenly you have this huge influx of Asian people that people didn't even know what the word Hmong is. Saying what's Hmong? Is it a disease? Is it something people used to think of. That's because our involvement in the war was such a secret that you heard stories about Cambodia, about Vietnam and all those things, but you never heard about the Hmong and how they were involved with the Vietnam War, and why they now came into the United States in the hundreds and thousands. People are saying wait a minute, these are just Vietnamese people. They just want to come here and take opportunities from us and take our resources and those types of things. With that it was quite different from the Hmong immigrants than it was from ...

I think every immigrant that came to this country has a different experience. The Asians have a different, the Hmong definitely have a different one. Even the Vietnamese had a different one because suddenly oh, you're Vietnamese, are you bad Vietnamese or the good Vietnamese? Those types of things. Oh, you're Hmong, and you're dark and you must be like the Vietnamese and you just take advantage of the situation. And then we have the Chinese and the Koreans and the Japanese who came and were very successful, and then you have all the other earlier immigrants. Then you have the immigrants that we have today the Hispanics and the Mexicans that are trying to come here for a better life. And that is

probably one of the hardest parts about how do we allow that to happen? But that there is a balance for everything.

PIEHL: Sounds like you have a pretty good grasp of policy.

VANG SCHWAHN: Yeah. I know, unfortunately, like I was trying to tell my Hmong kids, I know policies aren't always right but sometimes they are there for a reason. To protect us. But it is never easy, because everybody wants to be here.

NELSON: Is there anything else that you would like to share with us about your story?

VANG SCHWAHN: I can't really think of any more. I guess I'm just glad that my family was able to make it here. When you really look back and just think about all the people who didn't make it, it just makes you appreciate life a lot more and your family a lot more. So we are really fortunate. After my parents passed away, I think it was very difficult for me because I felt like they brought me here and now suddenly they're gone, and I felt like I had to rediscover myself again. You just felt like this tree that was just being uprooted. It was suddenly you have no connection. My parents are my connection into this country and now they are gone. I went through a time where I really had to say you're a mother, you're an educator, you're all this, this is who you are now. You are a wife. You are a friend. This is your life. These are all things that you developed and that happened with your life. You just have to kind of ground yourself again. I think it's hard for the people of my generation because a lot of our older generation who brought us here are passing away very quickly. I think it's a wonderful project that you are doing now, but I think it is even more important to capture the experience of people like my parents' generation who are probably in their 80's and 90's right now. Because they will be the ones that had the experience easily quickly disappear and we won't be able to get those back ever again. I'm really happy that I could share my experience with you. I hope that you learn something from it. I'm looking forward to telling more about it in the future to whoever is willing to listen to it. Thank you.

PIEHL: We would like to thank you, too. We really enjoyed it.

VANG SCHWAHN: It's been fun.