

Narrator: Charles Vue
Interviewers: Ken Warren, Boone Tollefson
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WARREN: We see that you came to the U.S. when you were twelve years old.

VUE: Thirteen.

WARREN: Thirteen. We would like to start by just asking you to talk about your memories of Laos and Thailand. We noticed that both were listed as previous countries so...

VUE: Yes.

WARREN: OK.

VUE: In Laos I remember times when we always had to be on the move. In fact, I recall going to school just about a few months and then we had to move. So in my mind I never really had any formal education even though I was at the age of eleven. So in my mind I only attended school for about two years, at the most three, because of all the constant moving. And then also in my memory I recall being chased by the Communists and hearing the sound of guns or hearing airplanes flying over my head and seeing refugees moving from place to place. So those were my strong memories.

WARREN: From what you are saying I take it that you were not personally involved in the combat, then.

VUE: I was not personally involved in the combat. However, to make a long story short, my homeland where I was born was one of the three sites that were identified by the CIA to station their radar. And my parents, my father particularly—my father has five siblings—they were soldiers to guard those radar stations. And those radar stations, the one that we guarded was number fifty-two, and it was situated right in the enemy boundary. In the border of North Vietnam and border of northeast, or west—I will have to double check—of Laos. So because we were situated right in the enemy boundary the enemy came to our village a lot. And vice versa. The soldiers from Laos and the government soldier from the Hmong also came through our village so we were in between. That is why I saw a lot of the fighting and soldiers and refugees constantly.

WARREN: Something I was reading last night talked about a mountain that was particularly defended by the Hmong because of the radar sites. This is where you would have been then?

VUE: One of the two. Phou Bia is one of them and Bouam Long is the second. So Bouam Long is the one I am talking about.

WARREN: OK. The other one was the one I was reading about.

VUE: OK.

WARREN: So you mentioned your family there. How many brothers did you have?

VUE: I have a total of seven siblings. Three sisters and then including me four brothers.

WARREN: You said you attended school off and on for just a couple of years.

VUE: A couple of months.

WARREN: Couple of months.

VUE: Months, yeah. Probably first and second grade. You know, you attend a couple of months here and couple of months there, and you never go up to the next level because of the constant moving.

WARREN: What was the name of your village?

VUE: Bouam Long.

WARREN: How is that spelled?

WARREN: OK. And how is that spelled or...?

VUE: B-O-U-A-M and Luam is L-U-A-M.

WARREN: OK.

VUE: I am sure you will find this information in your first book, the Chippewa Valley Museum book.

WARREN: OK.

VUE: It will be in there.

WARREN: OK.

WARREN: What do you remember about the foods in Laos?

VUE: Not much different from what we eat in this country. Mostly food consists of rice, vegetables, meats, which include poultry, beef or fish. The only difference was in Laos we had more abundant vegetables, and as I grew up I recall eating rice dropping from the sky. And canned goods that were transported to soldiers at first, but then so many people became refugees so then the food was shared with the refugees too.

WARREN: So you said I think I heard you say that you were in Laos until you were eleven.

VUE: Correct.

WARREN: And then you went to Thailand?

VUE: Then my family moved—escaped—to Thailand.

WARREN: Can you talk about that exit and that escape?

VUE: Right. In 1975 when the leaders of the Hmong elite group who were directly involved with the CIA operations, those Hmong leaders had to be evacuated. So once they were evacuated the word spread like fire among all the Hmong people. After that, the leaders are now gone. What choice do you have? You either stay and possibly face death consequences or capture and then be imprisoned in a camp or be re-educated through a seminar. My mother was very clear that her husband was a soldier, and her children would not be treated nicely by the communists. Before he died he passed on a message to his partner that my mom is to take good care of her children and make sure they have an education.

So in my mother's mind it was clear that everybody is moving to, escaping to Thailand, including the Hmong General. So she had to find ways to get us out of Laos to Thailand. She had no way of getting help. No one helped her do that. We had very little money. So we attempted to escape just like any other Hmong family. Some would walk. Some would get on a bus. Some would get a personal car. Some would bribe a driver to take their family out of their city. My mom paid a taxi driver along with other people in the same car. Not a small taxi driver but one of those big passenger trucks that has about fifteen, twenty-some people in it.

So we just gathered all of our belongings, and I remember leaving live chickens, garden fields, just leave everything behind. Pack a few clothes in our bag. Grab a few valuable personal belongings and then each carry a bag and then we got on a taxi. And normally you would need to have travel documents because the country was in a very shaky situation. So the Communists prevented anyone from traveling from here to there without the valid documents because they knew that families were trying to escape Laos, so they do everything they can to prevent that from happening. But my mom knew she did not have any of that so she bribed the taxi driver – “hey I do not have any document but I am willing to pay more and you do not tell the Communists.” And the driver kept his promise. So us children would pretend to be on the way to the destination, the border of – well, let me take you back.

We had a destination from our village to the capital of Laos. And from Laos we would cross the Mekong River to Thailand. So from our village to the capital of Laos there were so many gates in between that had to be checked. And the distance must be about five or six hours along. So our job as children was to be very innocent and not know what was going on. At each checkpoint we would get out of the bus and take a long pee or walk around and wondering what to do. Mom would pretend to be very ill. So she would just mellow out on a chair like a drunk woman. We were able to pass almost every gate until we came to one of the gates where there was a near-by shooting. And to make a long story short, the Communists prevented people from going, escaping to Thailand, so they blocked the road that tens of thousands of Hmong were walking by on foot. Hmong kept moving to pass that gate and then they were shot at by the Communists. So we got to the gate and then we could not get through because so many people were shot. And the gate was completely closed. So we came back home. That was the first attempt.

And then a couple of days later, everybody is moving right back to the same road trying to escape again. Then mom could not stand the thought of not moving again, so she packed the whole thing and took the whole family and attempted the second time. And we made it through from our home to the capital of Laos. And then we stayed in Vientiane for a couple of nights. And then from there we were reunited with three or four other Hmong families that are close family members. Then we paid a Laotian boat man. They used something in between like a boat and a canoe to transport our families. We had about

four or five families total of about twenty to thirty people. The late hour, like three or four in the morning, we would sneak out to the Mekong River and then put out our boat, and I remember the boat was so full that it almost drown. And we arrived at the high land about five or six in the morning.

WARREN: We would like to go back a moment because there was something I missed. Your father at this time had already passed away.

VUE: Correct.

WARREN: Was he a casualty of the war or...?

VUE: He was a farmer. He was a shaman, but then he was drafted to be a civilian soldier. Everybody had to fight including him. So he was a civilian soldier and in 1973, no 1972, we were attacked. Our homeland was attacked heavily by the Communists. That night they burned the whole village, and they bombed the village Bouam Long quite heavily. My father was guarding a station and he was hit by a grenade. So yes, he passed away in 1972. And in 1975 that was when we fled Laos to Thailand. But by 1975 we were no longer at Bouam Long. Right after my father was killed, Bouam Long was burned to ash. We moved from Bouam Long to Long Tieng. Long Tieng is the base for the CIA headquarters. Then from Long Tieng we moved to Muang Souy. Muang Souy is another nearby city. So it was from Muang Souy that we moved to Vientiane where we stayed for a few days and then moved to Thailand.

TOLLEFSON: Thank you. Do remember having a pretty good understanding of everything that was going on at that time, or your older and younger siblings at that time?

VUE: We knew pretty clear that we were trying to run away from the Communists and Vietnamese. I did not know why they were attacking us and who was supporting them and why the United States is supporting us, or what kind of help that United States, what kind of funds – nothing about a policy or agenda. But I knew clearly that we were running away from the Communists.

TOLLEFSON: And then you made it to Thailand. Which refugee camps where you in, and can you talk about what you remember about that time there?

VUE: We stayed at the Nong Khai refugee camp which is on the border of Thailand and Laos. I would say about five miles from the Mekong River is the Nong Khai refugee camp. We stayed in that camp during our first few days. We did not have any place to live in because there were only two big existing army shelters and the earlier refugees occupied the two main lodges already. So we had to get what we could—plastic tarp, tar paper and use the little money that we have left. Silver coin, cash that into Thai Baht. And then we bought bamboo sticks so we could make a small shelter where we could sleep. We stayed like that for couple of months until people moved out of the two main lodges. And then we would move into that place.

WARREN: I think I read somewhere about the huge building that was divided up into very small compartments.

VUE: You got it. In the main lodge you have about twenty, thirty or so families. Sleeping right next to each other. And they would be divided by a mosquito net or plastic tarp. So each family may have a section about five by ten, ten by ten. Probably ten by twenty to be more accurate.

WARREN: And so after that camp where did you go then?

VUE: We were so crowded in that camp so another camp about seven miles away was established. Completely new, so buildings were built and a bigger lodge. And this time there were more, I would say about twenty or thirty some. We would be moved from the old camp to the new camp. The new camp then was divided into two sections. One section for the ethnic Lao and then the Vietnamese Chinese and other lowland refugees. But the second camp was primarily for the Hmong and Miao tribe. So we stayed in that new camp for about two years, I would say, until 1978. From '75 to '78 we stayed in the Nong Khai area.

TOLLEFSON: And then from that camp you came to the United States here?

VUE: Yup. In 1978 from the second camp that we stayed, we left Thailand.

WARREN: While you were in the refugee camps did you have any classes or any preparation for coming to the United States?

VUE: In our time, there were not any classes of preparation for the United States and they were not equipped for that. So no training occurred.

WARREN: From that I make an assumption anyway that neither you nor any of the other of your family members could speak any English at that point.

VUE: No. The most I knew was a book, a chair, hello, goodbye. How I knew them? In the camp you had nothing to do but run around, play soccer, hang out with other kids your age. There were a few fortunate individuals who would teach or were able to pay for a Laotian teacher to come to the refugee camp and teach children math or English or French or Laotian. So I tagged along. And I was able to learn a few English words. I was in a class like that for let's say three, four months. So I knew a few words. A book, a chair, and hello, good-bye before I came to the United States.

TOLLEFSON: Probably at this point we will move into your memories about the trip to the United States and your arrival. Whatever you can start and we will try to interject some questions.

VUE: Well, the one thing that stuck in my memory the most at the time was the time when we get on the bus. Well before we got on the bus. Every day you were in that refugee camp you – it is all déjà vu again. Like when we were in Laos, every day everybody is moving, planning ways to escape. And one day you heard that a family is gone. The next day you heard that family was ambushed or had a tragedy on the way to Thailand. So people vanished every day one by one. And the feeling was so chaotic, so lonely, so out of place, so temporary. Just like a dream that someday you will wake up and then things will be normal again. So you had that feeling all the time.

That was the feeling when we were in Laos, but in the refugee camp, the same déjà vu happened again. Because family were constantly a) going out to a third country, or b) a few would go back to Laos because they could not stand the living conditions in the refugee camp. Or c) some family would move out of the refugee camp and hide out in Thailand with the understanding that they would someday become Thai citizens. So every day you would just keep living in that dream that people were going

every day, and you want to know the people that are next to you really well because you will have to say good-bye when the time comes. So when it was our turn to come to the United States I had a strong memory of saying good-bye to my friends about my age. We would record songs. We would record conversations. And the thought in my mind was that we would leave Thailand and go to a foreign country and we may never see another Hmong's face again. And we may not speak a single Hmong word again with anyone else but our own family, and they might forget all our history, our language, our values, so do what you can to record that.

So we did that, and then as we left the camp, another strong memory was people would be packing and getting on the bus, saying good-bye, not just good-bye but really saying have a good life. We may never see you again. We viewed the people who were departing like they are dying. They may never come back again. Once you are gone you are gone. Once you are dead you are dead. You may never be united again. So the feeling was very, very sad. Say good-bye for the moment, we may never see you again. People cry a lot when they depart. The refugees who were going to be going to a third country really have to cry. And the people who are left behind did the same thing. The people who are still in the camp cried a lot. So that memory really hits me.

And why people cry so much? A) because we did not know what the United States was like, b) we heard rumors, there were tape recordings, audio recordings from the people that were in the United States already saying things like oh, in the United States there were giants that would eat people. In the United States women would be in power and they would take advantage of the man. In the United States the white people do not know the Hmong people so they do not get along. In the United States you would have to start all over again. That is probably the biggest story that we heard. You have to start like the baby again. Like a bird. You have to depend on the mom and dad to feed you by the mouth until you grow up and you have wings and you can fly on your own. We knew those very well before we came. But there was no option. Either you stayed in the camp and had no life, or you went back and risked the chance of being killed, or you went to a third country and started all over. And again for my mom it was pretty clear: Go to a place where your children could get some education. So it was sad departing the refugee camp. And when we got to the United States--of course I skipped the long plane ride, I skipped that part--but when we got to Eau Claire, the thing that hit my memory the hardest was the cold, the weather. We arrived right at the Eau Claire airport.

TOLLEFSON: Eau Claire airport. At what time of year?

VUE: April 21st. So we still had some snow. The snow was not completely gone. It was still cold. The temperature must be about twenty or thirty around that time. So the first memory was very, very cold. The second memory was the land was all white in some parts. And the third memory was the people were tall and big. And Eau Claire is not like what I anticipated. In my mind, when I was in a refugee camp, the United States is full of white people. The United States is full of big cities like Chicago. Skyscrapers everywhere you go. Concrete all over, and homes were connected like the airport tunnels. So when I came to Eau Claire – are we in a farm? That was my first question. How come there were lots of trees? Lots of open land?

WARREN: I have made an assumption that you made the trip with your mother and all of your brothers and sisters then?

VUE: Yes.

WARREN: So it would have been a total family of eight?

VUE: Correct. With my mother. Actually I take that back. My oldest sister who was already married, she traveled with her husband, but from Laos to Thailand we traveled together. Take it back. From the journey from our village to the capital of Laos, my mom made the journey by herself. But then we were reunited with my sister and her family in the capital of Laos. And from Laos to Thailand, my sister and her family and my mother and her family traveled together. And then from Thailand into the United States my sister and her family were among the first group to be sponsored by the United States. So her family came two years earlier.

WARREN: So it was that family – your sister and her family that you joined here in Eau Claire then?

VUE: Correct. That is how we knew that Eau Claire would be our place because her family and her church co-sponsored my family.

WARREN: Which church was that?

VUE: Trinity Lutheran Church.

WARREN: In Eau Claire?

VUE: Yes.

WARREN: I have seen that before.

VUE: OK.

WARREN: So who did you live with at first when you arrived?

VUE: My sister and her church already found a duplex. My sister lived on one side and my family lived on the second side. They rented the duplex for about one to two months, waiting for us to arrive. So as soon as we got to the airport they would transport us. They came with a big church bus and a few Caucasian family members took our whole family to the new house right in Eau Claire.

TOLLEFSON: Was your sister's family one of the only families here at that time, or was there other large group of immigrants that had come?

VUE: During that time in 1978, Eau Claire had about four or five families. My sister was among one of the first or second families that came to Eau Claire. So when we arrived there were only about five Hmong families total.

WARREN: Which family had your sister married into?

VUE: Moua.

WARREN: Moua?

VUE: Yes.

WARREN: Is your sister Houa Moua?

VUE: Yes.

WARREN: Other than the cold do you have any other vivid memories of arriving in Eau Claire? I guess while you talked about it did not look like the city you expected. Is there anything you really still remember that is so much different than what you expected?

VUE: A few things that I remember most. I did not have many expectations then, but the one expectation was that I had the impression that when I was in Thailand that all the American people were very intelligent people. Their skin was white and yellow and hair was blond and white. So in my mind they eat completely different. They have a completely different way of viewing things and feeling. I almost thought they did not have feelings. So when I came to the United States some of that was confirmed. The food they ate had no rice. They ate potatoes and bread, and very little meat, and the vegetables they ate were not that much compared to what we eat. So in my mind, my thoughts were correct. And I also thought that maybe they did not have feelings. So when I went to school and I played with my classmates, I saw a kid fall down to the ground and the rest of the kids stood up watching the kid who was on the ground. And that shocked me a lot. In my mind you would attend to that person who got injured and ask him or her to see what is going on and how you can help. But kids in this country stay away and do not touch the person. So it confirmed that the people do not have feelings. So those are mostly my new feelings.

WARREN: That kind of moves us into where we wanted to go next, which is your adjustments to life in the United States which had to have been just tremendous. Talk about what you found the most difficult of those adjustments.

VUE: I would say language, the English language, American values, Western communications now, and then existing institutions or policies that were not designed with refugees in mind, particularly the Hmong or Southeast Asian refugee. So getting used to those things like I said language, Western values, Western policies or institutions that were created just for them but now we are here and we use them.

WARREN: You also said something about western communication styles.

VUE: Sure.

WARREN: Elaborate a little bit on that, what you mean by that.

VUE: Starting with that particularly small experience when I saw a kid fall on the ground, my first reaction was to go rush and touch that individual and check him out to see what is broken. It was many years later that I discovered that kids were discouraged to go near that person because it might cause more injury to that individual. They did not say hi to him; they did not attend to him. Made me feel like they were not caring for each other. Another example would be there was a time when you were having a potluck at our church and I was finishing off my plate. But then our sponsor, a Caucasian friend asked me, "Charles do you want more food?" I said no. Then the individual would say "no"? Then I would say yes. A yes to a no. But then I would get more food on my plate. And in our culture, when someone offers

you food it is impolite to refuse, so I kept eating. I was quite full, but I kept eating until my plate was clean.

Another example would be when you meet with a Caucasian person a) they say hello and they shake hands and they hug. b) When they meet with you they will look at you straight in the eyes and talk to you, and each time when that occurred I felt sweat all over. Sweat dripping from my arm pits, my face, and still to an extent now a days. Because none of that were things that we are used to. So the double communication, the eye contact, the physical contact, the assertiveness, all those were new types of communication.

WARREN: Thank you.

TOLLEFSON: Could we step back a second and talk about the beginnings of your schooling? Your education? When did that begin and where?

VUE: My siblings arrived in Eau Claire in April so that is two months before school was out. Well, I will take you back. My youngest sibling was probably first grade, and then my oldest sibling was probably seventeen. So the Eau Claire Public School hired a University professor to give us lessons for a few hours a day because we were not ready for the mainstream, and yet the district has the obligation to teach us. So we would be taught separately in a separate room a few hours a day for the month of April until May when school was out. So we learned very basic things – a pen, a pencil, a book, and basic conversation. I still remember when our university professor came to my classroom with a phonograph that has a strip, a code on the strip and you slide in the strip and it would read a sentence for you. And you would see the picture. And then I still remember the professor came with a workbook that has writing and you would trace them. We had to start all over from the very beginning, A-B-C. Actually I do not remember studying A-B-C. I did not get a chance to learn A-B-C. I started learning how read sentences and use words right away. And then the year after – the following fall when school started, I was placed in seventh grade immediately. It was a hard decision for the district whether to put us in first grade or put us in the age appropriate classroom. And the decision was that we would be put in an age appropriate classroom and then supplied with an English-as-second-language teacher on the side. They would pull us out to be taught on the side strictly for English, and then they would mainstream us into physical education class or a class like math that we would be able to do well.

WARREN: In your class, for example the math classes, your English was at this point very limited. Was there someone in the classroom there with you that would help to translate or?

VUE: We did not have that luxury, so the answer was no. I remember trying very hard to be friends with Caucasians who were in my class so that person could walk me to class in between class. Or I could ask them more questions about what went on in the class during that day. So it was up to me to get help for myself.

WARREN: Thank you. That is interesting. Your mother also came here with no knowledge of the culture or the language. Did she go through any form of education here?

VUE: She did go to an adult class for couple months through church. The sponsor from our church would have a class at the church for other adults like my mother, and they learned basic conversation until she knew enough to secure a job at the Eau Claire Recycle Center and then the *Leader-Telegram* stuffing paper. She worked for a little bit.

TOLLEFSON: Is your mother still living?

VUE: No. She passed away.

WARREN: Your brothers and sisters. How many of them are still in the area?

VUE: I have one sister in Eau Claire and then one brother. The oldest brother is still in Eau Claire. The second brother is in Milwaukee. The third younger brother who is next to me is in the Twin Cities,, St. Paul, and then the youngest sister is in Hudson. And the second sister is in St. Paul.

WARREN: Still all in the Midwest anyway.

VUE: Yes.

TOLLEFSON: You have spoken a lot about your education in your family once you arrived in Eau Claire. You are learning all of this new stuff, being immersed in this new culture trying to take everything in. How did your family go about retaining some of your traditions, your Hmong traditions that you brought with you?

VUE: To make a long story short, we did not retain all of it. First of all we became Christian because it was a decision to become Christian or to stay with our traditional belief and risk the chance of not having someone to guide us for when the time comes to follow the tradition and we do not know how. Because there was no teaching. So what I am trying to say is, as a person in the Hmong culture you had to know how to perform rituals when someone dies, when someone gets married, when you have a birth of a child. And we knew clear then that we would not have that chance, that time to learn, our opportunity to learn. And at the time we did not know how many Hmong would be joining us. So we felt that our family, our friend of the friend of the sponsor from Trinity Lutheran Church, and it was practical to go to church and be baptized so that we do not follow a tradition that we do not know how to do. Going to church, it is a matter of following a pattern.

So because of that decision and because of the need for us to go to school every day, and because of the limited number of Hmong in Eau Claire, and because I did not have a chance to be taught by anyone else, I did not know how to do all those Hmong rituals. And because now I am a Christian person I do not need to do all those traditional old rituals. So back to your question, I may know what is going on, but I would not know how to perform. So I lose a lot of that tradition. The one thing I retain is the language and the values, like respecting the elderly, taking care of guests when they come to the house, treating a person with proper respect and calling them by not their first name but by relation like Uncle John or sister-in-law. We call by relation. Be kind to other Hmong, and this is how you treat them. Those values. I still maintain them.

WARREN: Do you have any regrets about that practical decision to leave the Hmong spiritually behind?

VUE: No. I learned not to regret, so the answer is no.

WARREN: I probably could go on for quite a while on that comment alone. It is interesting. You said you learned not, you have learned not to regret.

VUE: Correct.

WARREN: Always looking, then the idea is to always look forward.

VUE: Yes. Yes.

WARREN: Talk a little bit about foods. Has it been difficult to maintain the Hmong foods here in the United States?

VUE: No. now-a-days it is wonderful. We are doing great with getting the food we want. Back then in 1978, between 1978 and '80, it was hard to get Asian food that we were used to. Back then there was no rice. If you were to go to a grocery store you would see a five pound bag of rice. Uncle Ben rice in a box. Now a day when you go to a Asian store or a Mega Food Coop you see bags of rice of five pounds, of 100 pounds. Then you have Asian goods in Asian stores all over. The goods follow the refugees to the United States.

WARREN: Our capitalist society.

VUE: Yes, yes.

WARREN: This is something I have no idea about at all. Are there particular Hmong holidays with traditions associated with them?

VUE: The biggest tradition of Hmong holiday is the New Year. We still celebrate New Year even though it was hard to do that. New Year in Laos was the ending of the old year and then celebrating when the New Year began. In the United States we still celebrate but we changed the dates of the celebration according to the location where you are--California or Wisconsin--because of what is different. But we still celebrate New Year in every Hmong community.

WARREN: So when do you celebrate here in Eau Claire?

VUE: In November because November is equivalent to that of Laos time.

WARREN: So basically at the end of the harvest season then?

VUE: Yeah. Yeah. The New Year was the time to rest because you work hard all year long and you save up money and you raise good pigs, and once a year you slaughter your best pig and invite guests to come join you. You save up your best coat and you wear it during that particular time. For those that still follow the old traditions, it is a time to let go of all your bad spirits, to cast out all the bad luck and welcome the new spirits. Feed them.

WARREN: I think also my reading I saw that it was often times were courtship games and this type of thing at...

VUE: For the younger people it is courtship time. For the older people it is like I said a celebration. The young people look forward, too. I was young at one time. At the age of eleven and twelve I looked

forward to it. I could not sleep the night before. Just like in the United States you wait for Christmas day to come. You could not sleep the night. You wonder what is under that tree. You are going to get up early and open the presents. Same thing in the Hmong culture for the New Year. You could not wait until the New Year comes so you could up and get dressed and eat the best food, like chicken and white rice, and rice cake. And then go out to the field and see lots of people tossing ball, playing the Hmong ball game. Watch cow fights and see lots of vendors.

TOLLEFSON: As you progress through school moving from the seventh grade on up, you get into high school. When did you decide maybe the path you wanted to take, career, college those types of things? When did you start to think about that, and when did you have a good idea of what that path would be?

VUE: Well, the one goal that was clear in my mind when I was in seventh grade was to master the English language. Nothing about career came through my mind at that age. By the time I was in twelfth grade it was very clear that college was my next education. I did not know about what major yet for sure, but in high school I took some business courses and I then decided that I would go into business. So I took all the college prep that I could to be ready for college. Right after high school, even though my ACT and class rank were not anything near the university requirement, I was very determined to go to college. And fortunately there were college access programs for poor people, for people who were disadvantaged like I was. So I was able to attend UW-Eau Claire through one of those access programs. My English then was probably at a fifth grade level when I was in twelfth grade.

WARREN: Then you entered Eau Claire and took a business major?

VUE: The intent was to become a major in business administration. I took a few business courses like accounting and math and I said, "Ohh, maybe not." [Laughter] So during my junior year I made a switch to social work.

WARREN: So that is what your degree is in?

VUE: Yup. I got my degree in social work and then I went back to get my second, my master degree in social work.

WARREN: Also from Eau Claire or?

VUE: UW-Madison.

WARREN: UW-Madison.

VUE: Yes. Nine years apart.

WARREN: We know that you work for UW-Eau Claire in the Multicultural Department. Can you talk about what your career is and what your duties are?

VUE: My duties are probably threefold. The biggest thing is to assist the city in recruiting Southeast Asian students to the campus. The second duty was to help the university retain the students once they are here. The third duty is to promote and support cultural diversity activities both for students and

people who are different and Caucasian students who wants to know more about the culture of my own people or other ethnicity.

WARREN: How long have you been working for the university?

VUE: Ten years. It seems like only two or three years ago, though.

WARREN: And what about your current family? I think in our little bit of research we see that you are married?

VUE: Yes sir, I am married. And have a one month old girl at home.

WARREN: Congratulations.

VUE: Thank you. And one eleven year old boy. And then the oldest is fifteen, another boy. And my wife.

WARREN: And your wife is I think a principal?

VUE: Yup. She is a principal at Locust Lane Elementary school in Eau Claire.

WARREN: And also from the Hmong community.

VUE: Yes, she is Hmong. She came to this state when she was five. Her family is of the traditional belief. They have lots of Xiong in town. So her Hmong value is still very strong. And her Hmong language is very strong, but she has the upper hand of the English language and she went through school all the way to her doctoral degree. From the time she was married to me and she was working, she did all that together. Having kids, going through school, being promoted.

WARREN: Lots of ambition.

VUE: Yes.

WARREN: I think Boone had noticed something about her. She had served on or does serve on a governor's task force?

VUE: She did.

WARREN: And what was that about?

VUE: In 2004-2005 the United States agreed to take the last batch of Hmong refugees from Thailand so the refugee camp in Thailand could be closed. The United States was panicking on how to make that transition successful and smooth. So the governor appointed her to be a chair of an eleven – no fifteen – members. People that have been working with Hmong community or refugees would meet together and she was the chair of that committee. So their job was to evaluate how to best help the newcomers. So they came up with a number of recommendations after several months of meetings. They submitted that recommendations to the governor and he then implemented them.

WARREN: The other day over at the museum they had various things laid out on the back tables about the Hmong culture. Things that we could look at. One of the things that was laying there among the other things was Charles Vue for School Board, one of the yard signs.

VUE: Who provided that?

WARREN: I do not know.

VUE: Probably the museum I think.

WARREN: Yeah, it was at the museum. Yes.

VUE: Yeah.

WARREN: And that we already had our assignment of who we would be interviewing with so we said ah, there is something. So you apparently did run for school board?

VUE: Yes.

WARREN: I have been told that that was unsuccessful?

VUE: Did you say unsuccessful or successful?

WARREN: Unsuccessful.

VUE: Well, I think it was successful.

WARREN: OK. Well, maybe I will rephrase that. You were not elected.

VUE: Correct.

WARREN: But I guess that is where I was going with the question. What did you see as the positives or negatives of that?

VUE: Well, to make a long story short, I opened the door. I inspired other Hmong officials to pursue their dream and made it possible. Let me back up. It was in 1991-92 that I ran for school board. During that time we did not have a person in Eau Claire that is Hmong and doing those sorts of things. In my mind I wanted to integrate Hmong and Caucasian, and one way to do that is to run for office because then I will have the back support from Hmong and I will send a strong message to the Caucasians and other Hmong in our community. How I knew that I did not know, but I always grew up wanting to be a middle person so I can bridge the two cultures, Caucasian community and Hmong community. That is why I went into social work to begin with. So I had about 5,000 votes behind me, but there were incumbents who were in the school board that were well liked, so they won the seat.

But other Hmong in the Eau Claire community saw that Charles can do it, we will do it. Charles can run for office, we will try, too. So they followed in my footsteps. And then Caucasian friends saw that hey, Hmong people like politics, let us get involved with them. So they asked me to join their democrat

group. They asked me to be a part of their campaign committee. And I joined them. And then I invited other Hmong members to join with me, so the next Hmong person who ran for office, we had a white person being the campaign manager. So since my time until now, every year we have a Hmong person being a city council member. And then since we had that experience, other cities in Minnesota and California followed the same path. They ran for office, and they secured seats in education and city government. So I may not get the seat but I inspire others. So to me I got what I want. It would have been bad if I got the seat. But it was good that I did not get the seat so that other people will say that Charles did not get it, I am going to do it, and I get it.

WARREN: Did you say that it would have been bad if you would have gotten the seat?

VUE: Because people might be satisfied with that.

WARREN: OK.

VUE: Because I did not get the seat, someone else was challenged to do better.

WARREN: Which brings out my next question. Have you tried or have you considered running again?

VUE: I could easily get that seat if I run again. But to make a long story short, my wife is in education so it would be a conflict.

WARREN: Conflict of interest.

VUE: I did not go for city council seat because I knew I already have it.

TOLLEFSON: You mentioned some committees asking you to join their committees. As a result of that what community committees or events do you belong to or serve on boards?

VUE: I have a long list that I serve on boards. A few committees that I am still doing a lot. HMAA board, Hmong Mutual Association. That has always been a non-profit organization that I have always been helping since 1982. I have been to several places like the United Way, University Foundation, Social Work Association, coalition for all the Hmong Mutual Association in Wisconsin, and then there is one more committee that I have been on for a long, long time, and that is the Democrat Committee Party.

WARREN: It is time again for an open question again toward the end. What do you see as the greatest challenges for the Hmong American community now or in the future?

VUE: I think the greatest challenge is themselves, the way we limit ourselves. We limit mentally that we will not be able to fulfill that dream, that people before us were able to do. And we cannot fulfill that dream because we are not Caucasian or that we are not born in the United States or that we have the handicap of the English language. And to read may not be well received by the non-Hmong community. So it is that thinking that limits us from getting what we want. I see that as the two biggest challenge.

The next challenge, maybe it has always been and will continue to be the same, is the institutional limitations like existing home or existing bank policy or government rules that were not designed to include us. An example of that would be when we first came we had big families. A family size is typically

of eight family members and there were not big enough homes for us to live in the same household. We were having a tough time with the city housing. But over time we were able to impact some of those changes, and we bought homes so we can accommodate our own needs. And you can apply that same idea to hospitals, schools, grocery stores, shopping centers. Things were not sensitive. Things were not inclusive, inviting, because we are only a small group of consumers that the policy needs to be understanding.

WARREN: From our studies from last year one of the things I remember is that a lot of first generation immigrants who came became very concerned that later generations of immigrant families who were born here would forget the traditions. Do you see that as a problem or not?

VUE: The answer is yes. But then it depends on the individual. It depends on the community but more so on the individual. Nothing will stay the same forever. We prove that when we came to the United States. We left everything behind. We made a new life in this country and expect things to be the same? No. You have to decide that nothing will stay the same. It is how you will react to the new environment. How you will make use of the new environment. So, yes things will be changing but you can change along with them or you can alternate things with what subject to with what you do not have, or you can chose to retain something that you truly value and no one would be opposed to it. Like for example that would be when they first came to this country the divorce rate was very low. I am talking about in a community like Eau Claire where we had about, back in the '80's, we had about fifty Hmong families, maybe one family was divorced. And now we have about two – three hundred families. You can say a quarter of them were divorced. I think we choose to do that. We are in an environment that does support divorce but the environment did not say you get a divorce. It is the individual who gravitates toward the idea that yes, you can divorce. Yeah, you can enjoy freedom by yourself. Yeah, you can commit adultery. Yes, you can move away from your spouse. It is you choosing that. You are being exposed to the environment, yes, that no one can prevent it. MTV, freedom, money, computers. You are exposed to that. You are vulnerable. But it is up to you.

WARREN: That brings us to the conclusion of the many questions that we had. But before we stop I would like to know if there is anything else that you feel that you would really like to say?

VUE: I would say the one message that I would get across to readers of learning is that we are very aware that when we came to this country that things would be different. We tried our best to adapt to the new environment to make the change. But as much as we tried to do that, there are things that are beyond our control and we cannot change. An example of that would be the way we look. We will never be able to change the way we look. We will never be able to change the way other people already preconceive us. We will never be able to change the way things have already been put in place for us. So Hmong people need to be aware of that. Caucasians who are here need to be aware of that so that they can be sensitive to one another's needs.

An example of that would be if educators were sensitive to our needs, they would help us to incorporate curriculum that would meet the needs of our children. I was saying earlier that to survive in this country I chose the path to go to church because it was practical. But I went to school every day. I did not learn anything about Hmong language. I did not learn anything about Hmong history or Vietnam history. Now we are thirty years later and we have some information that could be incorporated into regular public curriculum or at the university level. If that could be done it would help both Hmong and non-Hmong to live in peace because as a person you need to know who you are. And if you have not provided that with information it is harder for you to do the extra, meaning we have to do it after school. We have to do

some summer programs in order for Hmong people to catch up with what he or she does not learn in a public school.

You also note, too, that the government does not really encourage financially to make that happen so it is harder for us if people are not being sensitive. But if we all see the same thing then we might be able to live in peace. In other words, we might get along being in the same community. We might have better respect for each other's property and life. I cannot help but think back to incidents like the Hayward incident. Incidents like that happened because people are impatient with one another's way of doing things. But assuming we know each other well and you might see each other as individuals and might see each other as Charles and Mark then we might have that level of tolerance.

WARREN: So that jumps my mind a glaring omission that I did not think to ask but that did you in your years here have you experienced overt discrimination?

VUE: The answer is yes. But not the way that most people would want to see or hear. Let me be very candid. For me to say no to your question, I would need to see evidence that no one is burning my house, or painting my yard, or throwing eggs at my house. I did not get that. But there were small things like raising a middle finger, or "Chink go back to your country," or people took away my sign when I ran for school board, or called me on the phone and harassed me. Those were minor. Those were individual things. I do not consider that racism, but the bigger racism is where I was saying earlier, the institutional racism and the people who are in positions are not doing anything about it. That is the biggest racism which is hard to pinpoint.

TOLLEFSON: Anything else to go on.

VUE: I do not have anything else.

WARREN: OK. Thank you so much for your time.

TOLLEFSON: We appreciate it. We really do.

VUE: You had some very good questions.