

Narrator: Mai Xee Xiong
Interpreter: Sala Yang
Interviewer: Melissa A. Holmen
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Duration: 1:13:47; 1:00:04

HOLMEN: Can you tell me how old you were approximately when you left Laos, and can you tell me about that?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Talking about Laos to here right, how old she was?

HOLMEN: From Laos to the camps.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: When she moved from Laos to the camps in Thailand, she was around twenty-one to twenty two years old, and when she came from Thailand to the United States she was around forty-two years old.

HOLMEN: Can you tell me about your life in the camps?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Being at the camps, we were all poor. We just waited for the government and so, everybody was very poor.

HOLMEN: What was your daily life like?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: We just lived day after day.

HOLMEN: Did you have a garden every year?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: No, we didn't have any.

HOLMEN: What refugee camp were you at?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: In Thailand, I was in three to four camps. It will probably be a long story, but I'll make it short.

HOLMEN: I like long stories, so it would be okay.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

HOLMEN: Don't worry; go as slow as you want.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: First camp is Bokeh.

XIONG: In Thailand, between the Lao and Thai.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Yeah. She wants to say the first camp is Bokeh.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: The second camp is Ban Vinai.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: The third camp is Sa Kaeo.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: And the fourth one is Phanat Nikhom.

HOLMEN: Why did you go from one to another?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: It was because everybody was being moved closer and closer into one camp. They were closing down the camps.

HOLMEN: Why did you stay in the camps for so long?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I did not want to move because I still missed my country.

HOLMEN: Can you tell me about your sewing there?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: In Thailand?

HOLMEN: Yes.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: In Thailand I started sewing Hmong clothes. And then I started to work on Western clothes.

HOLMEN: Before you came to the Thai camps, did you sew cloths when you were in Laos?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I've known how to sew and make clothing in Laos, but the place where I started a little shop was in Thailand, and ever since then I've always been doing Hmong clothes and I've also done Laotian clothes.

HOLMEN: How did your sewing change from the time you moved from Laos to the Thai camps?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Everything is still the same. We are just designing it differently because of the new designs that come out.

HOLMEN: Can you tell me more about how the designs changed?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: We still have the original Hmong clothes. The only difference between the ones then and now is that there are different designs and it's been incorporated by Chinese fashion, by Thai fashion, by other fashions. So other fashions in other cultures have been incorporated, but there is still very, very traditional clothing around at the Hmong New Year's.

HOLMEN: When you moved to the U.S., how did your sewing change?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I have not changed anything to my sewing. I've only changed bits here and there if I have bought other people's clothing.

HOLMEN: So you adapt clothes that you buy from other people sometimes?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I don't try to adapt with others. I just want to keep my original. Other people might change theirs, but I keep mine original.

HOLMEN: Did you use different materials from Laos to Thailand to the United States, different kinds of threads or fabrics?

XIONG: Yes.

HOLMEN: Can you tell me about that?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: The only thing different now is the fabric, the silky fabric.

HOLMEN: Where did you get your thread when you were living in the camps?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: There are some shops nearby. And if they don't go to the shops or if we don't go to the shops, then Thai people would bring us the thread, the fabric.

HOLMEN: And then you would buy it from the Thai people?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Yes, we'd just buy the fabric and then we cut it up to make our clothes.

HOLMEN: Did you feel like the Thai fabric was different from what you'd always used since you were a child?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: There wasn't much difference. There was still a lot of the old fabric that we used to use, and there were also many new types of fabrics that we could use.

HOLMEN: I have heard about people starting to make pictures in their work, like the story cloth out front. Did you start to do that too?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Talking about sewing, I do everything.

HOLMEN: I think I understand that Hmong people started making symbols, like pictures in their sewing in the camps and didn't do it when they were in Laos. Is that what happened with you too, or did you do pictures earlier or later?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: It kind of started in the camps, but I'm going to explain how it started. In 1977, 1978 and 1979 that was when the war broke out and everybody... In 1977-1979 some people had already been making the drawings for the *paj ntaub*.

HOLMEN: People were making drawings on paper?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: The first person who made these drawings were residing in Phou Bia. And I still remember the drawings in my mind, but I just don't have an original drawing from the person. And that person brought the drawings to Thailand so that people can sew. And then the young people started to sew them and now we have a lot.

HOLMEN: How did you first see those drawings? Did someone come to your shop or was it a neighbor?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: One of my nephews.

HOLMEN: What did he do? Did he bring it to your house?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: We lived together and I saw them.

HOLMEN: Did you like them right away?

XIONG: Yes, I really liked it. [Talking, laughing]

XIONG: Together in picture, you know.

HOLMEN: What is together in the picture?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: There's a lot of sadness in the pictures because there are people in the pictures fleeing and they're in the *paj ntaub*, they're in the story cloth.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

HOLMEN: So when you were in Thailand you did the pictures, the story cloth, and the traditional stitching, is that correct?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I have done many types of sewing. Picture sewing, story, traditional, elephant foot, a lot of them.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

HOLMEN: When you had your shop in the camps, did that support your family or did your family have other income that helped you?

XIONG: Helped my family, no income coming.

HOLMEN: Ok, so it helped your family and no income came in, ok, got it. Can you explain your trip to the United States? How that felt?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Our country is in war. We cannot live there anymore. And because our leader has left the country, we had to leave with him.

HOLMEN: How did you get over to Wisconsin?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Wisconsin – I think it's my place to live.

HOLMEN: Did you come by plane?

XIONG: Yes, by plane, airplane.

HOLMEN: Did you come straight to Wisconsin?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

XIONG: No, San Francisco. First Europe. Japanese, Thailand to Japanese. To Europe. To then San Francisco, St. Paul.

INTERPRETER: Thailand to Japan to Europe to San Francisco to Minnesota and then to here, Eau Claire.

HOLMEN: Did you live in California for a little while first?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Only changing at the airport.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

HOLMEN: It's a weird pattern to have to go from Japan to San Francisco... no, Japan to Europe to San Francisco but you were getting here so that's good.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: It's very hard when I came. I cannot read or write or speak. At that time, I had four children but they were all still small. I had two children that were still clinging onto me and two very small children.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

HOLMEN: I'd be interested approximately. The two were still clinging onto you, were they four? Like under four, is that what you mean by clinging onto you?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

XIONG: Eighteen months and the younger one, two months.

INTERPRETER: One was sixteen months and one was two month.

XIONG: Oh, eighteen month.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: So she had four small children. Two of the smaller one were eighteen months and two month.

HOLMEN: The other two children, how old were they?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

XIONG: Pa, ten years old and younger Pa, six years old.

HOLMEN: Did you have anyone else with you or was it you and your four kids?

XIONG: Me and my kids. Nobody. But together them people, too many people, my family only my children and me.

[Talking]

HOLMEN: Can you tell me about your sewing once... Well, how about we talk a little about your first experiences living in Eau Claire?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

XIONG: I came to Eau Claire in 1994, December 1st I come to Eau Claire. Too many, a lot of snow. But I don't know... I don't go I don't know way. Different, very different for me.

HOLMEN: Okay, you came and there was snow is that correct? And you didn't know what to do about that?

XIONG: Yeah.

HOLMEN: Okay, good. Did I miss anything?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: And then after living here for a while I started to like this place. There's no one screaming or being loud and I like it. That the same with you too?

HOLMEN: That is exactly what I like. How did you get around when you first got here, how did you get around to the places where you needed to go? Did you take a car or a bus or walk, or all three?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: That time or right now?

HOLMEN: That time.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: My eldest [brother], he lives on Barstow and he took care of us. Three months after we came here, I started to practice driving. Now I know how to drive, and back then I drove myself to work.

HOLMEN: Where did you work?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: My first job was at the library. My second job was at CDC. My third job, I was making pizza. But that place is closed now, and so I went back to CDC.

HOLMEN: You said you lived on Barstow Street. Do you remember the address?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Yes, I do remember.

HOLMEN: What was the address?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: It's been a long time I don't know the exact numbers but it's the third house on Barstow.

[Talking]

INTERPRETER: She doesn't remember the street.

HOLMEN: So, I heard Main Street. I heard Longfellow School.

INTERPRETER: She said it was somewhere between Longfellow and around here and then she said, I think it's 1515 Main Street, but I'm not sure.

HOLMEN: Okay, that's okay.

INTERPRETER: So I didn't want to –

HOLMEN: If she's not sure, that's okay. All the clues that she can give me in what she says, in her sentences are perfectly helpful.

INTERPRETER: Okay.

HOLMEN: Do you have any other memories that stick out from when you first started, when you first came here?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Yes, there's some.

HOLMEN: What are they?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: First one is my stress. I did not know how to read or write or speak English. I was very stressed and I would not forget that.

HOLMEN: You said your oldest son watched over you.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: But he has his own family.

HOLMEN: Did you mean that he watched over you when you first got here?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: My two brothers that are here.

HOLMEN: When did they first come?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: 1979.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

XIONG: '79, '88 recently. My sister, '80, my brother '79, '80, the first one, '79, '80 together.

HOLMEN: Did your parents come to the United States ever?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

XIONG: My mom too, my father died before, [when] we lived in Laos.

HOLMEN: He died when you lived in Laos.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

XIONG: Yes.

HOLMEN: You said that he was a governor.

XIONG: Yeah, really old, you know. Then my, my father, governor, not stopped me, delay me. He was Thai Government.

HOLMEN: Who was Thai Government?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: My dad was a governor for about ten years. When my dad was seventy to eighty years old, he retired from that.

HOLMEN: Was he a governor for Thailand or Laos?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

Mai Xiong: Laos.

HOLMEN: Okay.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

Mai Xiong: My dad Governor, Laos, he died Laos.

HOLMEN: And your mother came.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

Mai Xiong: My mother came to here, stay here and go to St. Paul. She died three, three years ago.

HOLMEN: Okay.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

Mai Xiong: My mother was 102 years old. My mother and my father, really old.

HOLMEN: Can you tell me more about when you got here and you had these four little kids? Did you keep sewing, or did you not sew for a while?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Yes, before I worked, before I came here and started working, I was sewing.

HOLMEN: When you came to Eau Claire, after you came, did you sew then, or was it too busy to be sewing when you first got to Eau Claire?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I could only sew when I did not start working yet. After I started working, I only tried to do bits here and there when the kids are asleep or when the kids are watching television, or when they are at school. I'm a very hard worker.

HOLMEN: When you got to Eau Claire and you were sewing, what kind of designs did you make?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Because I was working, I didn't do much. I just did cross-stitching and cut home clothes, all of the story cloth, I do not do story cloth anymore.

HOLMEN: Did you sell your clothes and did you sell your sewing or did you keep it in your family?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

XIONG: I sew a lot. Somebody I like, I sew. Nobody, I like, I keep for my family, my children.

HOLMEN: When you came here to Eau Claire and people didn't like your clothing to sell, did you try to sell it here?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

XIONG: Try to sell?

HOLMEN: Did you try to sell it when you were here?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Yes, I do try to sell them.

HOLMEN: Did you try when you first got here?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I made shirts and dresses. Anyone who likes them, they'll just bring me cloth and I'll just sew it for them.

HOLMEN: So, did you have to change anything in how you sewed because you were in America and you didn't have some of the materials you used to have?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Yes, we've changed a lot.

HOLMEN: Can you tell me about that, what you've changed since you came to the U.S.?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: It's just different type of fabric and different type of threads. Other than that, everything is still original.

HOLMEN: Do you use different colors?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: She said, I say some wrong words in there. Do you think it'll be funny if they make it into a story?

HOLMEN: We will make it into a story. [Laughter]

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

HOLMEN: The symbols that you use in your cross-stitching when you're making the hat that you showed me, there's different designs. Why do you use those designs? Do they have any meaning to you, or are they – or don't they?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Some of them do have meaning, but let me think of it. I don't know what it means, do you know?

HOLMEN: No.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: It means that it's a Hmong item.

HOLMEN: Sometimes people that I know who sew, they put a special little stitch, or they actually sign their name in thread. Do you do anything to the pieces you make to make it so that you know, or the people you give it to know, that it's from you, that you make it?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: No, I do not make any signature marks but from now on, I might.

HOLMEN: You don't have to, I was just curious.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Because you are going to take the item to be one of the Hmong history items, is that right?

HOLMEN: We will take it, but I don't want you to change it.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I believe that it's just going to be an item that I will give to you stating that it's a Hmong item.

HOLMEN: Okay, that's good. I don't want you to change it at all. I want it to be Mai Xee Xiong, not Melissa in it, just you. And the museum will track it and we'll put all the information about it on a piece of paper, but you don't have to sign it. If you don't sign it, then don't sign it.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

XIONG: Don't sign.

HOLMEN: Right, okay.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: If you don't want me to sign it, I won't sign.

HOLMEN: Okay.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: But then if I do sign it, I don't want it back. I just want you to be clear on that.

HOLMEN: Okay, okay.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I'll just sign it to state that it's mine that I made it, but I will not want it back.

HOLMEN: The hat?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

Mai Xiong: Everything. I do not want it back.

HOLMEN: Okay, if I understand correctly...

INTERPRETER: She was just talking about the signature.

HOLMEN: The signature on the paper?

INTERPRETER: No, the signature on the story cloth. Because you were just telling her that some people do the signature and do you do that and so she said no I don't – I didn't but from now on maybe I can put like a signature on there, and then she asked do you want me to put a signature on the hat and I think you said no, just keep it original?

HOLMEN: Yes, that's what I would really like, please.

INTERPRETER: And then she said oh, even if I did put a signature on there, I won't take it back, it's yours, I won't do anything.

HOLMEN: Okay.

INTERPRETER: Yeah, so that's what she's getting at.

HOLMEN: Okay. What I'm hoping is that, I don't want you to change the way you do your art because I asked you a question.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

HOLMEN: Okay. No, I was just afraid that I messed up your stuff. Does your work show what clan you're from?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

HOLMEN: I think if I understand, White Hmong, and I think you're White Hmong, right?

XIONG: Yeah.

INTERPRETER: White Hmong had white pleated skirts and that's kind of a symbol to everyone, like I'm White Hmong.

XIONG: Yeah.

HOLMEN: So does a hat do anything? Does it say, like to all Hmong people, this is a White Hmong person, or not?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

XIONG: Yeah.

HOLMEN: Can you – What does?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Yes, the hat and the clothing is what tells us apart.

HOLMEN: How does the hat show – tell you apart?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: The hat that I'm going to make for you, it's saying that we are White Hmong. But then we are of a different state.

HOLMEN: Can you explain why – how it is that people know that you're White Hmong by looking at your hat?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Because that hat is only made by those people in that area.

HOLMEN: Is it a shape of hat or certain colors that you used to show people, other people, that it is a White Hmong hat?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: The shape and color both.

HOLMEN: What colors?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

XIONG: Black, and they are, white, red, blue and yellow and pink, together.

HOLMEN: I see those colors on other hats that I know aren't White Hmong, so is it something in the stitching that, so you said black and white and red and blue and pink, right?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

XIONG: Yeah, yeah.

HOLMEN: So, do you do it in a certain pattern to show people or is it mostly the shape of it?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

XIONG: Shape.

HOLMEN: Okay.

INTERPRETER: I think it's probably the shape of it, because you can have a pink hat or a black hat and if it's the same shape, then you know what it is.

HOLMEN: Yeah, okay.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Other people, they might put different colored designs, but the original is red.

HOLMEN: When I go to the Hmong New Year, I did not see very many hats that were this shape that you're making for us, because I think the side view looks like this with the tassel in the front.

XIONG: The back.

HOLMEN: The back, okay. The back, and then there's stripes across. I didn't see very many of these and when you're looking at the person from the front, it's like that. Is there more than one kind of shape of white Hmong hat?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: If you're from a different province, a different state, then the hat's going to be a little different.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

HOLMEN: A different state in Laos, right?

XIONG: Yeah.

HOLMEN: Not a different state in the United States.

XIONG: Yeah, Laos.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

HOLMEN: Okay.

INTERPRETER: Can I ask her a question?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: So like here, a lot of people wear these. You might have seen these. This is White Hmong, but then this is White Hmong from Luang Hai and these are also white Hmong, but these White Hmong are from Muang Phao. So like, if I lived in Wisconsin, this would be White Wisconsin, but here it's White Long Hai and here it's White California.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: The only thing different about this one is if they were black-dressed, then they're Black Hmong and if they're white-dressed, then they White Hmong.

HOLMEN: Okay.

INTERPRETER: So I guess you would have to look at both the hat and the clothes.

HOLMEN: Why do you continue to sew?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Because it is a piece of the Hmong, and I will keep that tradition and I will continue to make a piece of Hmong.

HOLMEN: Do you teach any others how to sew?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Anybody who needs it, I am willing to teach them.

HOLMEN: How many people have you taught to sew?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: There are a lot of students. Probably around twenty or so.

XIONG: Twenty people.

HOLMEN: Is that over the course of time?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Ever since I knew how to sew. When I was sewing and I wasn't so good yet, I didn't teach anyone.

HOLMEN: Are you teaching anyone to sew now?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Yes, now I have a sister-in-law and I have some have some cousins and sisters that are practicing from me.

HOLMEN: When you say that you teach them to sew, is it how to put together clothes, or how to do embroidery and craft-stitching?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Right now they don't want to do embroidery anymore, so right now she's just teaching them how to cut the fabric and make the clothes.

HOLMEN: How many people have you taught to do the embroidery?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: For embroidery, I have taught one of my older daughters and three daughters-in-law that are in the Cities.

HOLMEN: How many people do you know of in Eau Claire who do embroidery?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: There are many. There's some a little bit younger than me that used to be from overseas and all of them should know how to. But some of them only know how to do the embroidery. They don't know how to put the pieces together to make the outfit.

HOLMEN: How many people do you know in Eau Claire who know how to put the clothes together and do the embroidery and actually do it? I mean, they practice the art. Not that they make it every single day, but how many people that know how to put the garment together and do the embroidery and actually do it, not just that they know how?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Those who know how to do the embroidery and put all the clothes together, I would probably guess that there's probably 70 to 80, but then there is only one person that I know that can do everything.

HOLMEN: Like you do?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Yes, like me.

HOLMEN: Okay, in all of Eau Claire?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Yes, in all of Eau Claire, and I believe that she's a little bit smarter than me too.

HOLMEN: That is just fantastic, that is great. I think that's all I have for today.

[Xiong speaking Hmong].

HOLMEN: Next time, on Monday, October 28th at 9:00 is when we're planning the next one. And that one we'll do at the museum.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Is that when you want her to start making --?

HOLMEN: What I'd like, first of all, I'd like it if you could have some of it done and then bring other pieces so that you can show us how you did what you've already completed.

INTERPRETER: Okay, so probably like do two, I mean of, have like one partially done and one from scratch so you can see.

HOLMEN: So that we can see her sewing. Like, I'm just going to – you don't have to do it this way. Like can you tell her that? She doesn't have to do it this way.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

HOLMEN: So, say you have cut out the fabric and you sewed it together and then you flipped it out and now, and then you have some of your embroidery done, something like that, then can you bring that piece and set it aside and then bring me pieces of the fabric not sewed together yet and then when I'm here, then we will record you making it, sewing it, to show us how you do it and what's important and how long your needle should be. Then you can explain that to me there, but we'll know what it looks like because it'll be partially done. Don't make two hats, but just, I would like you to have some done, but also show me how you made that, how you did it. So some prepared samples and some –

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: She's just explain to me what you said to see if it's correct.

HOLMEN: Okay, perfect. And I'll ask you more questions then, too. And there's going to be a video camera crew and lights on both of us.

XIONG: Scary.

HOLMEN: I think that's it.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: She said she's scared. She's scared to be in front of the camera.

HOLMEN: Are you okay, or are you joking? We will just ignore them. You'll just talk to me and we'll be able to not worry.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

HOLMEN: And they'll look at your hands, you know. They'll just go like this, and they'll have their little camera and you can be sewing and talking to me and just completely forget about them.

XIONG: Don't worry about the other people.

HOLMEN: Right, exactly. Well, thank you. I'll turn this off now.

Second Interview:

HOLMEN: Do you make new outfits every year?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Every time, whenever it gets close to Christmas I sew them new clothes if they don't have any.

HOLMEN: Why do you wear hats?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Wearing hats makes people look pretty and it also represents you as a Hmong person.

HOLMEN: Is this a flower hat? Does it have any special meaning?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I haven't studied what they represent.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

HOLMEN: Why do you keep on sewing? Especially when there's so much...

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Because I know how to and I like to.

HOLMEN: Has your technique changed since you came to the U.S.? Do you do something different now than you did in Thailand or in the camps?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Some are different some are not.

HOLMEN: What's different about this hat?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: The hat is still the same. The only thing different is the items on the hat, maybe the beads, maybe the designs, but the form is still original.

HOLMEN: Did you use these neon colors when you were sewing earlier, or is this a new idea?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: We've always used these colors.

HOLMEN: Okay, and I think we might've asked this, but who taught you to sew?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: My mother.

HOLMEN: Okay, then the next few questions are about when you first came here and not really about sewing.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

HOLMEN: Can you tell me what it was like to have four kids coming over on a plane to a new country? How did it feel?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Because we had no country and there was no place to live, we had no choice but to come to the U.S. because our leader was here and we had to follow the leader's orders. And because we helped in the war, we were getting help back from the United States, so that's why we came to the United States.

HOLMEN: Can you tell me what it was like to have, to be a mother on the plane with four little kids? Was that hard or pretty easy?

XIONG: Hard.

HOLMEN: Can you tell me more about that?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: There was one on my back. There was one in my front and then two were walking.

HOLMEN: Did they sit still?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Yes, they listened very well. They all sat.

HOLMEN: Wow. Can you tell me about your first night in Eau Claire, how that felt?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: When I came to the United States and when I landed in Eau Claire, it was very different. It was weird, it was very weird. We got to Eau Claire December 1st and everything was white and I wondered, how do we live on this white land? There's no land.

HOLMEN: Can you tell me what it was like when you got to the place you were going to stay for the night?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Come to talk about my first night I would say that's pretty funny at the same time. We used to walk and be on dirt and cement floors only, and when we came to the U.S. the floors had carpet and it felt like a bed. And when we got here, my mom and my sisters, they were gonna put some sheets down for us to sleep on the ground in the living room and I told them, oh the floor's already soft, we can just sleep right on the carpet.

[Talking]

HOLMEN: Another specific question is can you tell me about your early experiences shopping in Eau Claire like grocery shopping or clothes or something else?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: First time that I went to a store in Eau Claire, my sister in law took me to a Kmart here in Eau Claire. Kmart, Chippewa Falls. When we went inside the store everything was very bright and it looked sunny and we didn't know that it was gonna get dark outside. [Hmong] We didn't know if it was night or day out cause there was always bright inside the store and when we came home, when we got outside it was already dark. [Hmong] For me to wear very casual clothes, I don't like to wear very casual clothes. I like to wear mediocre clothes. [Hmong] I wondered how I was going to get used to these type of clothing.

HOLMEN: So did you buy clothing at Kmart?

XIONG: Yes.

HOLMEN: Okay and it seemed like it was very casual?

INTERPRETER: Yes, they felt too big for me. They looked and felt too big for me.

HOLMEN: Okay. So did you meet anyone while you were there? What was your experience going to the cash register and talking with people at the store? Did your sister help you?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: When I got to the cash register with my clothes it was kinda funny because they asked me if I wanted paper or plastic and I just shook my head, and they just looked at each other and just kinda smiled at each other, and then they just decided to give me a plastic bag.

HOLMEN: Okay. Why didn't you want a bag?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I didn't understand what they were asking me.

HOLMEN: Do you remember getting lost in Eau Claire?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Yes, I have once.

HOLMEN: Can you tell me about that?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Yes, I got lost once. I live on Runway and I took the small route to get to Hallie and when I was in Hallie, I got lost in that area and I crossed over Business 53. But I felt and I thought that I was in a different country or a different land so I turned back. [Hmong] It took me about 3 to 4 hours to find my way back. I had to go back one step at a time until I found my route back.

HOLMEN: Did you know how to speak English at that point? Did you ask anyone?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I was scared and even when white folks talked to me, I was scared.

HOLMEN: Where were you trying to go?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I just got my license to drive and because I just got my license to drive, I tried to drive around and practice and that's why I got lost.

HOLMEN: Okay. And then the last question is, when did you sew when you had all your little kids? Like what time of day? Did you do it when they were awake?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I'm guessing she's referring back to Thailand or Laos, this is back in Thailand. Back in Thailand, there was no jobs. There was no farming to do and therefore we just sewed, and my husband watched the kids while I sewed, so it was during the day time that we sewed.

HOLMEN: And then when you got here?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: When I was here, I used the weekend. [Hmong] Because I was working. [Hmong] And so I didn't sew that much and I lost some of it. [Hmong] So because I didn't have that much time, the only reason why I made these sewing is for my children and for myself, and for the selling, I don't do anymore. [Hmong] But if people do ask for a pair of clothing, I can still make it for them. I only sew to give away now. I don't really sell.

Third Interview:

HOLMEN: Can you tell us about who you are?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: My name is Mai Xee Xiong. My dad's name is Zha Tan Kao. My mom's name is Mai Palipao. I got married in 1971. I married my husband. His name is Pa Neng, his last name is Vang. Ever

since I married, I have four daughters and three sons. Right now I have two daughters-in-law and two sons-in-law. There is three but they're not married yet.

Talking about my life, ever since I grew up, my parents have always told us to be a good person and to have a good attitude. You have to help out with the leaders and the community. My dad is a high status person. I've always been a good person. Even though I'm still a good person and I will always remain a good person. If there's any help needed, I'm willing to open up and help the community and our leaders. I'm just afraid that I don't know how and I don't know what to do. But I feel that whatever I can do I want to help everybody and do whatever I can. And I want this to be a role model for the children to follow. My way of working and making a living, back when I was in my old country I only did farming and a little business. So coming to the U.S., I don't know any letters so I just work a little bit. Right now I'm retired. I am home and I am bored so that's why I do these sewings.

But I want everyone to know that I've been sewing these ever since I was seven. Ever since I was seven. And these sewings I know how to do a lot of them and if I can make them, I'll make them. These are for hats. I'm going to talk about how I worked in the past and now I'm going to talk about the sewings. Making these hats we've always done it as our parents have taught us. It is our Hmong identity. We have to keep it as a reminder. I'm making this so that the young ones who don't know how to make these will see. I'm going to make it so that those behind can practice. Not only these hats, but all the children should be able to make the shirts and the outfit. Anybody who wants to make these clothes they can practice and they can do it.

HOLMEN: Can you tell us, can you pick up your fabric and tell us about the meaning of the different colors? Or you could use your yarn too, your yarn maybe?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I don't know all the meanings of the colors, I only know these three. You have to practice these. The white is for freedom. It's when government loves the people. Red means anger, fighting. And yellow means the Hmong people coming together and being one. I only know these three to teach everybody. The blue and the green I do not know what they represent, but I'm pretty sure that there are elders out there who are willing to share with the young people so they do know. I only know how to make these, and I don't know what all of them represent.

HOLMEN: It's okay, that's okay. Do the shapes and symbols have any... ?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I don't know about these hats, but about the tag in the back. Back when we were in China, it became a story... when we were in China, the Chinese were killing us off so we put our writings on our backs. And then also, the dresses that the Green Hmong people wear, it's where they write all of the writings on the dresses. We don't know why they put it on the dresses, but the dresses used to be our writing paper. There are still Hmong people who write our alphabet and it's based off of these dresses.

HOLMEN: Why do you wear hats for the Hmong New Year?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: There's a lot of hats now but then back then where we lived there were only two kinds of hats. It's only to go with the outfit and with the face to make it look pretty.

HOLMEN: Why are the different clans have different hats now?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: The province that you were from, you have to wear whatever hat represents your province.

HOLMEN: When did you go from the two different kinds of hats to all and lots and lots of different hats; is that when you came to the U.S.?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: The hats in China they're still, they're different from how ours look like in Sing Thao. Back then whether you're a man or a woman you would wear a hat.

HOLMEN: Is the stitching on your hat considered *paj ntaub*?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Yes it is panned out but it's a hat *paj ntaub*.

HOLMEN: A what?

INTERPRETER: Hat *paj ntaub*.

HOLMEN: Where did you buy the brightly colored thread and fabric?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I bought them from the Hmong store.

HOLMEN: Which Hmong store?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I bought it from the Lee store in St. Paul, Minnesota.

HOLMEN: Do they have any materials available locally?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Yes.

HOLMEN: So why do you buy them in St. Paul instead of Eau Claire?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Because there's a lot of variety in the Cities. You can buy fabric, yarn, and food.

HOLMEN: The black fabric that you are stitching onto, it is kind of a waffle look. Is that what you've always used?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Yes we've always used these, but because these have the holes that are a little bit wider apart they look a little bit bigger. That's why these are a little bit bigger than the ones from Thailand.

HOLMEN: Why are the colors you use so bright?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I like the brightness of the threads, that's why I use them.

HOLMEN: Do you wear the same hat to each New Year?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Whichever hat I want to wear I chose. There's many.

HOLMEN: Do you have about five, ten, fifteen?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: With these type of hats I have about three right now. I have the black one with the straight sashes, I have three of those. If we want to wear the ones with the designs now a days, the new designs we can wear those too.

HOLMEN: What are the new designs? What do they look like?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: If you want to see the different kinds of hats you can go the Hmong New Year and you'll see the many hats there. On the 9th and 10th of November there's going to be the Hmong New Year and if you want to come and take a look you can. And she wanted me to tell you where it was, it's over at McPhee.

HOLMEN: I have gone and it is on my calendar. I am going.

[Talking]

HOLMEN: So is this a new design or an old design?

XIONG: It's old design.

HOLMEN: It's old?

XIONG: Yes.

HOLMEN: How has your sewing changed since you came to the United States?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: I have not changed these. I have changed the clothing only. But these are the clothes that I wear, that I used to wear, and I only sew these clothes. With the new designs I only do it for other type of Hmong peoples.

HOLMEN: Do you mean different clans?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: For example California, Wisconsin, Minnesota, they might have different type of clothing and so everybody wears different type of clothing. But this is only an example it's not here in the U.S, it's back in Laos and Thailand in different provinces.

HOLMEN: Hmong clothing here does not vary by the current state that the people live in?

INTERPRETER: No. What she was referring to is like if there's like three different villages like far apart, then people from this village look a little different, and the people from this village looks a little different. And then she's from the third village, but then she would probably only change stuff from like the first village or second village. Her she keeps natural, the same.

HOLMEN: Okay. Can you tell me why you keep what you are and what are you missing?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: Because the elders and ancestors have always done those and we have to keep them the same. It's a Hmong identity. The ones now that they have at the Hmong New Year where they have beads and all of the coins and beadings on the hat, those are not original.

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: We used to have the bags that we wear on the sides and we used to have the silver necklace. The beadings are not original. We only have the bags with the beads with the coins attached to it. The beaded outfits are not original, and the original ones are where you wear the silver necklace and the hat.

HOLMEN: Okay.

HOLMEN: Can you do just a few minutes of sewing so that we can see so that we can get some video with you sewing and then we'll be done?

[Xiong speaking Hmong]

INTERPRETER: If you make a mistake everything else will not fit.

HOLMEN: I think that's good.