



Lo Neng Kiatoukaysy Talks About Milwaukee's Hmong Culture

BY TOM JENZ

In the mid-1970s, the Hmong came to the United States as political refugees from Laos. Due to their involvement with America during the southeast Asia wars, more than 130,000 settled in the United States. By 2020, the U.S. Hmong population had risen to over 368,000. Almost 80 percent live in three states, the most in California, followed by Minnesota and Wisconsin. In Wisconsin, the majority of Hmong community members are employed in manufacturing, educational services, health care and social assistance. The Milwaukee metro area has nearly 13,000 Hmong residents.

Lo Neng Kiatoukaysy has served for 28 years as executive director of the Hmong American Friendship Association. He is 53, the father of seven children ages 7 to 33. I met him at his office in a well-worn building on 38th and Vliet, the heart of Milwaukee's inner city. A small man, thin and fit, Kiatoukaysy laughs often during almost any topic of conversation. After hearing his harrowing life story, I wondered how humor survived the journey. He led me to a conference room, and we talked.

You have an interesting, even dramatic background. You were born in Laos during the Vietnam War. I understand that at the age six, you fled Laos with your family among thousands of Hmong people who feared retribution for aiding American troops during the war. Tell me your story as you remember it.

I was born in 1971. Our family was living in Laos. My dad spoke five languages and worked as an interpreter for the American military. By 1975, the Viet Cong were killing Hmong who had a relationship with the Lao government or American troops. My dad had to get my mom and five children out of the country. We crossed the Mekong River in a long boat into Thailand along with many other Hmong refugees. I remember the mist and fog. We children were scared and had to be quiet. Parents gave their kids opium to stop them from crying. Some died from overdose. We ended up living in a primitive refugee camp in Thailand. After that, we were moved to a resettlement camp in Thailand. It was a tough time. We were almost starving. We lived there from 1976 to 1979, picking cotton for the local farmers. When they closed off the camp, we registered to come to America.

How did you finally end up in the United States?

My dad used to be involved in the Vietnam war, working for the CIA. He was worried he would be caught, and he registered to come to America. For six months, we lived in a kind of prison in Bangkok, Thailand, waiting to depart. Me, my mom, my brothers and sisters, ended up in Little Rock, Arkansas. We were sponsored by a church. My dad came a year later in 1980.

When did you eventually arrive in Milwaukee?

My mom missed her family. She had two cousins living in Minneapolis. We got a U-Haul and moved up there. We lived in the Twin Cities from 1981 to 1996. At first, I had to learn to read and write. I was recruited by the Catholic church and enrolled in the Crosier Seminary two hours north of Minneapolis. I was the only Asian kid. It was a culture shock, but I did learn English and Latin. Graduated in 1989 with a degree in Philosophy and English.

But you made it onto college, right?

Yes. I went to St Thomas College in the Twin Cities and studied to be a priest. After two years, I switched to business and graduated in 1993 with a degree in philosophy, theology and English. I then became a community organizer for the Minnesota Acorn Organization. My uncle lived in Milwaukee, and he had founded the Hmong American Friendship Association, a nonprofit. In 1996, I came to Milwaukee to become the director. The first years were hard. I had to raise money, met with every bank in Milwaukee. Finally, Michael Crowley, Jr. of Bank Mutual, lent our association \$150,000, and I am still here today, 28 years later.

You once said, “As a kid, I did not like the community at all. I thought that being Hmong was being primitive, so I was always looking for ways to escape being Hmong.” Can you elaborate?

I did not want to be Hmong because I was the first generation who came to America. I wanted to be Americanized, but I couldn't get away from my culture and my bad accent. I couldn't be popular because I was Hmong. Much later, I learned the value of my culture.

What exactly is the nonprofit, Hmong American Friendship Association? You've been the executive director for a long time. What are your responsibilities?

Fund raising. Grant writing. Personnel issues. Working with my staff. Making sure all the programs we sponsor are fulfilled. My biggest responsibility is people, talking with funders and potential funders, making friends with them, keeping them updated on what we are doing. I always ask funders, “How can I help you increase your services to the Hmong community?” For example, I work with Froedtert Healthcare. We give in-service training to the Froedtert staff regarding eastern versus western medicine. Mainly, it's how we can benefit from each other.

There are some first-rate nonprofits in Milwaukee. For instance, does the large nonprofit Greater Milwaukee Foundation help you?

They are wonderful. They really help us. Another funding source has been the Forest County Potawatomi. A third one is Bader Philanthropies. Bader is sensitive to different cultures and most welcoming to us.

How would you describe the Hmong culture, family tradition, and personal style?

Hmong culture values family and tradition, respect and working together. A perfect utopian society. I am so happy to be Hmong, to have a root.

I did not ask you about religion. What is the traditional Hmong religion?

Our primary religion is animism, that spirits inhabit all living and nonliving things. Traditionally, Hmong religion is centered around ancestor worship and communication with the spirit world.

In contemporary America, there are a lot of nuclear families because citizens move around so much, seeking good jobs and independence. They sometimes have to move away from extended family—grandparents, cousins, uncles and aunts.

I know, and Hmong culture is changing, too. Once upon a time, the youngest son in each family was obligated to care for the mother and dad, who would move into the son's family home. That is the tradition. If the youngest son moves to another city for a good job, the parents move on, too. Personally, when I get old, I don't want my son to have the burden of caring for me. I will go to a nursing home instead.

What are some of the Hmong-owned businesses in Milwaukee?

There are two Hmong shopping malls and Hmong Town. We also have a senior center funded originally by Bader Philanthropies. Daycare for the elderly. There are a number of Hmong-owned stores. We also have a successful insurance agent. The younger Hmong ask themselves, ‘How can I become a businessman or woman and live the American dream?’

Hmong are noted to be productive farmers. Are there many farmers in the Milwaukee area?

Yes, there are. In fact, my dad used to be a vendor at the farmer's market in the Twin Cities. As a boy, I had to work in the fields with dad and mom, get up at 5 a.m., pick vegetables until dark, go home, get up early and sell the vegetables at the market. Very hard work, and we didn't make much money.

I notice that there are a lot of Hmong farmer vendors at the Milwaukee Fondy Farmers Market in the inner city.

Yes, a lot of Hmong vendors. Unfortunately, they often undercut each other on pricing their goods. Hmong farmers need to stick together.

Let's talk about Hmong youth. What are the major issues for Hmong children and teenagers? Have they become Americanized?

Many have. Back in my youth in the late 1990s, there were Hmong gangster drug dealers. Currently, we see some of the Hmong youth having health issues.

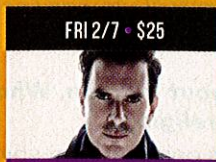


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Opioid users, withdrawal symptoms. Our mission here at the Hmong American Friendship Association is to help people become self-sufficient. We teach our people oral tradition, poetry, Hmong dancing, our culture. In music, we teach the gaeng, a traditional musical instrument. We also have a computer lab. A lot of our kids want to learn about the Hmong culture. I've been here 28 years, and I've seen kids grow up and get their college degrees. One girl became a doctor.

The Hmong American Peace Academy (HAPA) was founded in 2004. It started as a public charter school of the Milwaukee Public School system and as the first Hmong Charter School in Wisconsin. I believe there are now 1800 students. Are the students mostly Hmong? And how is the school doing currently?

I work pretty closely with Chris Her-Xiong, founder and chief executive officer of the academy. We help some kids who are traumatized. I think the school enrollment is about 80% Hmong. Most Hmong kids are well behaved. Many go onto college.

The Milwaukee Hmong residents live in the inner city with African Americans as neighbors. Do the Hmong residents socialize with Black folks?

At our food pantries, we provide free food to African Americans and Hispanics, 40,000 residents each year. The food pantry is located in the back of this building and is open Tuesday and Friday each week. I consider us a neighborhood association who serves all ethnic groups.

You've said, "The Hmong New Year is our community's pinnacle cultural celebration." Why is the Hmong New Year important?

We started our annual celebration 20 years ago in Milwaukee. The goal is unity and to share our culture with Milwaukee residents. All volunteers. This year's celebration took place on December 15-16. We had 45 sponsors and about 25,000 people attending at the State Fair Expo Center. There were 45 counters, ten run by Hmong people.

For more information about the Hmong, visit hmongfriendship.org.

Tom Jenz writes the weekly Central City Stories column for shepherdexpress.com

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