

Originally printed in [The Citizen](#), May 2008

New to the Neighborhood

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When the “For Sale” sign next door gets the word “Sold” attached to it, it’s human nature to wonder a little bit about who will soon be moving in. Will it be someone with a family like your own? With they have kids the same age, or similar interests? Will it be people you’d feel comfortable turning to for the proverbial cup of sugar—or better yet, someone you’d want to barbecue with every once in a while?

In communities like Hugo, Centerville and Lino Lakes, long-time residents are dealing with new neighbors who might look a little different from the farming folk and typical suburbanites that they’re used to. Unfamiliar ethnic groups, such as the Hmong, have relocated to the area, which means that some residents who may have never given a second thought to racism have had to face some unexpected issues of their own head-on. Will our communities succeed in doing this successfully?

Helping immigrant families to fit in

Experts like the University of Minnesota’s Dr. Zha Blong Xiong estimate that the Hmong population in outer suburbs like Hugo, Centerville, and Lino Lakes has been on the rise over the last five years. While the census data isn’t broken down to a city level, it’s estimated that there are nearly 50,000 Hmong living in Minnesota. In fact, St. Paul has the largest Hmong population of any city in the U.S.

Dr. Xiong has helped immigrant families, Hmong and otherwise, to weather the transition to Minnesota through a curriculum called “Helping Youth Succeed.” In addition, he helps to educate the communities themselves as they welcome these families. For example, he will be giving a presentation called “Understanding Hmong Youth” in Forest Lake later this month, where he will discuss current Hmong youth issues, as well as provide tips for positive interaction.

Xiong knows firsthand the challenges that Southeast Asian youth are facing as their families relocate to the United States. He was born in Laos, and came to the U.S. as a refugee at the age of 15, in 1982. He had very little formal education before that time, yet enrolled in and later graduated from high school. Today, Dr. Xiong is the first Hmong tenured professor at the University of Minnesota, and the first at a major research university in the United States.

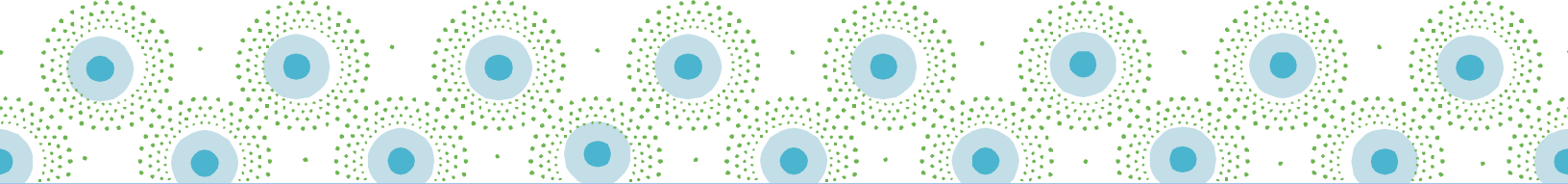
As a tenured professor, Dr. Xiong plans to begin some long-term research on a national level about why some kids from Hmong and other diverse backgrounds fall into delinquent behaviors such as stealing, fighting, and drug use, while others—much like himself—are able to protect themselves and succeed. He plans to follow a group of kids in grades K-3 through adolescence in order to see how factors in their family, school, and community impact them and their choices.

Dr. Xiong did short-term research on similar topics while working toward tenure, and will discuss some of his findings at his presentation on April 29. “One of the cultural factors [affecting students from immigrant families, such as the Hmong] is that the families tend to be more hierarchical, but the students are living in a culture that is more democratic,” Dr. Xiong said.

“In white middle class families, it’s more bilateral. In immigrant families, the children are adopting a more democratic culture, and that’s creating a lot of conflict.”

Two cultures can easily clash

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Susan Thao is one example of a student that grew up in the midst of both worlds—a traditional, hierarchical experience at home, and a more traditionally American experience at school. Thao was born in the U.S., but her parents are from Laos, and her family moved to Hugo from Maplewood over four years ago.

“My family is very grounded culturally,” Thao said. “We speak Hmong at home, eat Hmong food, and wear traditional clothing at New Year’s.” This history and heritage have been very important to her over the years, and she has many Hmong relatives and friends in the area—but it hasn’t stopped her from building friendships that cross the lines of race. “I’ve always been a minority, but I’ve never had a problem with that,” she said.

At times, it meant that Thao would miss out on some social activities with her friends. “As girls we weren’t able to go out much in middle school. We came home and took care of the family, took care of the house,” she said. “We didn’t like the idea, but we understood and respected it.”

Thao laughed when she heard her stepfather’s response when asked about his decision to move to Minnesota. “We had the choice between Minnesota and Texas, and chose Minnesota because it is cold and our kids will study,” her stepfather once said. Still, Thao understands his perspective. “Many Hmong feel strongly about education,” she said. “Our parents want us to succeed in school and in our jobs. One reason is that they did come here [to the United States] for the opportunity.”

A friendship that transcends language

Andy Goiffon is a third-generation resident of Hugo, and lives on a farm that has been in his family since 1892. In the 1970s he made his first connections with the Hmong community in the area, through the private, family-owned butcher shop that he ran on his property.

“All of our customers were word-of-mouth,” Goiffon said. “We did home processing for people, and one day were outside of Nadeau’s when we met a Hmong couple [that was looking for a butcher shop that would process meat for them].”

In 1983, Goiffon’s cross-cultural friendships deepened when he hired a Hmong man to work in his butcher shop. Today, Goiffon is retired, but that same man leases his facility, continuing to process meat for others. Goiffon also provides some land where the family can garden.

The friendships they’ve built have certainly enriched Goiffon and his wife, Kitty’s, lives over the years. “We’ve been invited to weddings—they’re very interesting people,” he said. For Goiffon, what began as a business relationship grew into a great friendship—and according to Dr. Xiong, connections like these are key to creating communities where racism isn’t an issue.

Embracing a diverse future

“It’s always difficult for any suburban area where diversity wasn’t part of the past,” Dr. Xiong said. “There is certainly a perceived racism, whether it is real or not.”

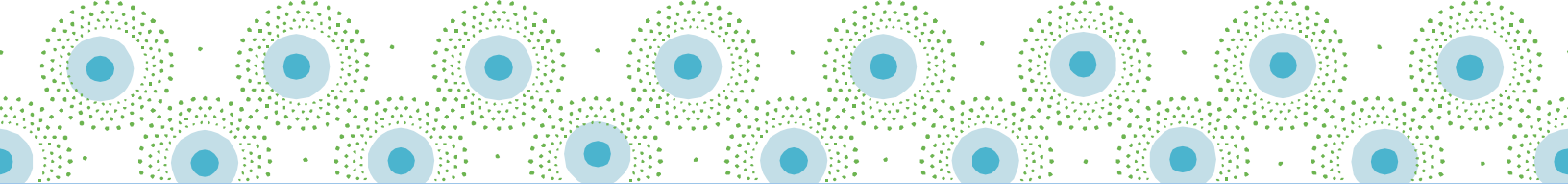
Dr. Xiong encourages communities like Hugo, Centerville, and Lino Lakes to step out and break that myth. “Simple gestures would be a wonderful attempt to connect people and build a neighborhood,” he said. “Wave, stop by and say ‘Hi.’ Simple gestures create friendships.”

Thao agrees that cross-cultural relationships are important, though they take effort. “A lot of people have asked me about being Hmong, and I’m never offended. I’m always willing to share,” she said, adding that it takes patience and tolerance to reach across racial lines.

“I don’t like to judge people when I meet them,” Thao said. “I put myself in other people’s

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shoes—that’s a big, big thing for me.”

So, the next time a “For Sale” sign goes up in your neighborhood, think like Thao does. Make the decision to introduce yourself whether their family looks like yours or not. As Andy Goiffon knows, what could start with a simple gesture could one day grow into a unique friendship for life.

Sidebar/Box:

Curious About Your Hmong Neighbors?

Here’s a very brief history. The Hmong are a mountain tribe that is originally from the heart of China, and who began migrating throughout Southeast Asia over 200 years ago, for both political and economic reasons. Those who had settled in Laos were recruited by the CIA to fight alongside Americans in Vietnam; in fact, more Hmong than Americans were killed in this “Secret War.” Once the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam, these Hmong were abandoned, with no hope of a free future. Some were able to escape Laos and find their way to Thai refugee camps, but those who didn’t were marked for genocidal extinction by the North Vietnamese. From Thailand, Hmong refugees have scattered throughout the world, including the United States.

Learn More:

- “Understanding Hmong Youth” by Dr. Zha Blong Xiong. 5-6:30 p.m. on Tuesday, April 29, in the media center at the Forest Lake Area High School
 - *The Betrayal*, a documentary about the “Secret War” showing at the Minneapolis/St. Paul International Film Festival, April 17-May 3 (www.mspfilmfest.org)
 - “Hmong 101” from the Hmong Cultural Center (www.learnabouthmong.com)
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