

# GROWING UP

## From Laos to Iowa

Steve Thao

*Steve Thao is a Hmong American living in California and working in the area of media. He and his family settled in Pella, Iowa, in 1976.*

Pella, Iowa, is a town settled over a hundred years ago by Dutch immigrants who were trying to leave persecution, so it's known as a city of refuge. There was a documentary done about the town and our family as the second wave of immigrants taking refuge there.

I was four or five. I came with my younger brother and sister, and my parents. Two years after that my youngest brother was born in America. Shortly after we arrived we sponsored other families. My dad's brothers and sisters came to live with us. It was a small town, about seven thousand back then. We were sponsored by a Christian Reformed Church in town. I think there were three or four Christian Reformed Churches and each church sponsored a family. It formed my core values as a child going to church to understand about the Judeo-Christian tradition.

But a lot of Hmong are still traditional and practice the old country's religion: atomism. The Hmong traditional religion has a shaman who heals by way of talking to the spirits, and that has been documented in mainstream media and Hollywood, just recently on *Grey's Anatomy*.

**Growing Up in Iowa:** You're a kid growing up, reading fairy tales, Hans Christian Anderson fairy tales, and you think you're like everyone else, but then you grow up and understand you're different.

I didn't know any better. I loved it, I loved the small town. We lived in a small town in a time where you didn't lock your doors and you could walk around and didn't have to think about child molesters and being kidnapped or things like that. I think I had a pretty decent childhood in that aspect.

Originally we were in Laos, and after the fall of Laos<sup>1</sup> all of the Hmong people who sided with Americans had to escape to refugee camps in Thailand. Then we would go to a country that would accept these people as political refugees. When my parents got here, my father worked as a janitor for a couple of years and then we moved down to the capital of Iowa, Des Moines, which is forty-two miles away. I was in third grade by then. He worked in social services, helping refugees, Southeast Asians specifically, find work and get acclimated to American life.

In Laos he worked with the military, something like an air traffic controller or radio dispatcher, so he had to learn English. So coming to America he knew some English already. My stepmother did not know English. I guess she learned through living and talking with our sponsors before we came.

In Pella there were probably four or five other families, relatives that we helped sponsor and helped other people sponsor. I think it grew to maybe six or seven at the peak. The town was great. It had a tradition—it was called a city of refuge. I don't really have any recollection of any bad memories of any people saying this or that, so I think our experience was very positive. It was a very conservative town and I think they accepted us, or most of the people knew that they were going to have Southeast Asian refugees.

There were more Hmong in Des Moines.<sup>2</sup> It's the largest city in Iowa; it's much more diverse. There are African Americans, Hispanics, Latinos; it was a very big change for me, just because for the first couple of years Pella was a very homogenous area. I think probably the population in Des Moines was two hundred Hmong families, so it was huge.

This was the early eighties; during that time people were not as

used to seeing Asians everywhere as we are now. It was a big culture shock for me. In Pella everyone knew everyone and nearly everyone went to church together. In Des Moines, where the classes were so mixed, I did feel weird, even as a kid. As a third and fourth grader, I got taunted with names and things like that.

I see myself as Hmong American, not just Hmong, because politically we're Americans. I grew up in a town where I learned to have the American dream.

**The American Dream?** It changes, as I'm an adult now. You grow up and you don't feel that you're different. But as you go through experiences and life, you see how people react to you. Also, it's the institutional restrictions on you. You feel that it's based on who you are and how you look.

I look at the American dream as a young kid—you would talk about careers and you would dream about becoming a president of a company and you would think that's very attainable. But I think it's very hard for Asian American men or persons to be able to do that. That general American dream is not very realistic for a lot of Asians. What they do, I think, is find their own American dream and success within their communities.

I've bumped up against the ceiling many times. I wrote a screenplay about it. Politics plays in everything. In the military, in corporate, any job you have. I was in the ROTC in college—Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington. The cadets who were welcomed and fraternized well within the ranks of lieutenant colonels and captains were white males, and those who were able to become friends with them were young white males, who acted like them and talked like them. So it wasn't really based on scores or anything else. I had a friend who was Vietnamese and we scored very well on our physical tests and on our other tests, but we were never given positions of power or leadership. So I think we came to understand that this was going to be our life if we continued a career in the military. That's one of the biggest times when I encountered how the world was going to be.

**After College:** After college I moved to Fresno, California.<sup>3</sup> Fresno was probably the so-called capital of the Hmong community in the eighties. The leaders were here and the population was huge, upwards of thirty thousand back then. It's still huge. My family moved here to do business because my father encountered a glass ceiling and he realized if he was going to have any success it was going to be within his own community. He started a small business catering to the Hmong American community, so I came and helped him for a couple of years.

We were the first Hmong company to do documentaries and movies. He was right at the crest of the video craze that was sweeping America. The technology was making it easier for people to have their own cameras. So we started a video company and began making the documentaries, going back to Laos and taking videos of people in Laos, China, Burma, and Thailand and showing how they lived back then and showing some of the places we were visiting.

Right after that I went to Minnesota and worked as a television producer. I did community TV and produced a Hmong television show that was shown in Minnesota and also nationwide on the International channel. We did radio and I published a Hmong newspaper up there and the TV show. I just came to Fresno last year to run the radio station; I'm a general manager there. It's 1210 AM in Fresno. I speak Hmong better now through working with the community the last ten years. But in high school and college my Hmong was probably very elementary. It probably still is, but I've probably expanded my vocabulary about four- or fivefold.

As a Hmong American, I feel very fortunate to be a part of this community. Even though within every community you have problems—you have political problems where people are fighting—I think in my college years I found a sense of love for the community. That's my thing about being a Hmong American and that's why I have chosen to work with the Hmong community and in media throughout all these years after college.