CHER VANG

February 3, 1992 Interviewer: Linda Rossi St. Paul Children's Hospital

1. When did you come to the United States?

I came to this country way back in April of 1976. I was 15 years old.

2. From where did you come?

From Laos, I lived there 15 years.

3. Who sponsored your emigration?

Well actually, it was a Lutheran church back in Wisconsin. I came to Wisconsin for seven months. I came to a little town, so I don't think there's much chance of me moving up. Just thought maybe I should move to a bigger city. On my own with my brother, I moved.

4. Do you still have contact with your sponsors?

Not really, not me because I'm pretty busy . My brother and my mom they still have contact, but me I'm too busy.

5. How many of your family members came with you?

Well, when we first came to this country it was just me, my brother, his wife, one of his children, his son and my sister. Six months after that we asked the church to sponsor my mom and dad, and that's when they came. Right now we have like 20 in the whole family. So, it's like doubled in fifteen years. In the refugee camp at that time I was still like a kid and I don't see any opportunity to be somebody or do something I want to do. I cannot go anyplace that I want to go, even go to France, or to this country, or to Canada, My brother, he's a lot older than me. He used to work in the military for the C.I.A., so his situation would be classified dangerous if the communists take over the country. We would have to flee the refugee camp. He had first priority to come to this country, so I just decide to come along with Him. My mom and dad they choose not to come the first time. They say, "Why don't you and your brother and one of your sisters and your brother's wife and his kid go. If it is good, then you can come back for us, if it's not then we're not going to come." They heard a lot of rumors about this country, not being so nice or polite to other people. We came to a small town and we felt kind of lonely. We say to our sponsors. "We cannot stay here, because there's just only five of us in the family." During the daytime my sister and me went to school and my brother goes to work and the others at home, so it's pretty lonely. So, our sponsor say, "O.k., put in some application to I.N.S., so you can go back to Thailand and get your parents back here, too". Then we start the paper work, and six months later my mom and dad and whole family arrive. We were in a little town named Loganville, pretty small little town, a population of 199.

6. Have you studied English? Where? For how long?

Actually, I never studied English back in my country, not even a word. I studied French and Laotian, because English was like a foreign language to us. At that time I don't see any use for it. There are not a lot of American people working out of the country or at least I didn't know where, so I just didn't bother to study. When I first came to this country, I was put into ninth grade for two months. I was sitting in the classroom like a dummy. Everybody ask you, "Do you want something?" But, you say no. When they ask you if you want to eat, you want to eat, but you don't understand the word eat. You just say no. They say, "Do you want to go get that?" and you really want to go, but if you say yes, they ask you

some more questions, so it's easier to say no. During the daytime we go to school, my sister who is five go to first grade. When we get home someone from the church who can teach the whole family English, is there from five o'clock to nine o'clock every day, to help us get used to the language. For the first two months I know nothing anybody said. Inside you want to do things, but you don't know how to express yourself, or even know what they are asking. Now I think back and I say "this is easy, I'm hungry, I want to go rollerskating, I want to do this, I want to do that." The students are pretty open. It's a small town, everyone is a friend, but it's different from people in the big city.

When we first got to St. Paul, we move from this country to here, and we move from heaven to hell. It's like diversified. When we come in 1977, we cannot afford to live in a good neighborhood, so we have to live with the Hispanic and all kinds of people. It is a high crime area. In the wintertime you can see somebody walk from the house to your car, open the hood, take out the battery from your car, and install it in their car. You can see the footprints, but you don't dare go out and say, "Hey you stole my battery." You cannot do that. I think at that time, everybody still so afraid of people in this country. Then I was in ninth grade. We didn't know enough language to talk with them. Now I feel I know the culture, and am at home again. It took me from 1976-1979 to realize you need to stick up for yourself or you won't be anybody.

7. What grades in school have you reached?

I went to Washington High School. I then went to Michigan for two years to get my A.A. degree. I then transfer to Augsburg College in Minneapolis for another three years to get my B.S.W. I went to California for two years for my M.A. I lived there for four years before moving back. I worked at the college for three years as a counselor and then I moved into county health, mental health for four months. In 1988 when the Hmong people had the New Year's celebration, my brother came out from Minnesota. My brother said, "You know what? Mom asked me to come out here, to bring you back home." I ask him, "Why?" He answered, "Mom just asked me that, and I just do what I'm told, so you don't ask me a question. You go tell your supervisor you're going to quit your job, you're going home with me. Think about it, you don't have any money. You have your family and maybe they can support you. You can have a little bit more money and you can do a lot of things. While you don't have a job we can support you."

When I get here I worked for a company out by Plymouth, called Medtech, for seven dollars an hour. My family suggest an M.A. shouldn't work for that, but I want to stand on my own two feet. My supervisor says I look different from the people here. On my resume I didn't put on all my education, because nobody will hire a master's for an assembly type job. He then promoted me, but I found a better job and left. They always say ,they want to find somebody like me. You work hard and make this a better place to live. But, sometimes you have to work for yourself, too.

8. What kind of dreams did you have for your future in Laos?

My dream was to have a lot of land and have people work for me. My mom and dad back in Laos were like rich people, upper middle class. You can own a lot of land and have people work for you and pay a little and make a good profit. Back in my country, if you have a taxi and work for ten years then you can have anything you want.

9. What is your occupation now?

The title of my job is, parent representative/interpreter. Pretty much what I do is, I explain the procedure of what the medical staff want to do for the Hmong patients. Educate the Hmong patients on the health care in this country and at the same time help the medical staff understand the belief in the culture of the Hmong people, so we can blend those two together.

Sometimes, when the Hmomg people come to the hospital and they're (the hospital) going to do 100% Western medicine, the mother will say, "No,no,no, that's not the way it's done in my country." You have to allow the doctor to know how the people feel and the people feel about the doctor. When I first got here, I thought this whole mess in the hospital is not because they do something wrong, but because people are different. The Hmong people feel they are different and feel the hospital must treat them

differently, than they treat other people, so they see some kind of descrimination or predjudice right there. Besides that, the doctor seems to do what he thinks is best according to the Western medicine. The Hmong people say, "No, that is not what we want, we just want this much." Today I think the doctor understands the Hmong people more and the Hmong understand why they (the doctors) want to do a certain test. We don't seem to have that problem any more as we did in the past. I ask the doctor to explain the pros and cons to them. Let's say, if somebody come with an appendectomy and they need surgery right away. Maybe the kid will die. I ask the doctor to show them the x-ray, why they need to do it, and how safe or risky the operation is. To explain the chance of recovery with the operation. Sometimes, if the patient is real sick, the parents say, "Since we're here and you tell us this, it must be true." But, sometimes, if they don't believe me, I ask them to bring in someone else they trust, and I explain it to them. I'm on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Sometimes I can do it over the phone unless it's an emergency, then I come down, I also work 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. at the hospital each day.

I start to learn on the job. The reason they hire me is, I used to work for mental health and besides that, my family reputation out in the community is so good. I still have problem with the medical terminology, but I don't feel ashamed if I don't know it, I just ask the doctor to clarify the terms so I can explain it to the patient. If anything I'm not comfortable with, I ask. You learn by asking. The terminology is difficult, but I get to just know it.

When I first took this job my Uncle said, "The Children's Hopital of St. Paul has a bad reputation for getting along with the IImong people." This was what I was told, "You don't need to work down there because a lot of Hmong people don't like it. You could get yourself killed." Sometime in the past, a lot of Hmong people against the police, because of the hold up of a surgery, because of the communications. I told my Uncle, "Either I will get killed, or I fix up this whole mess." My Uncle say, "How can you do that, we know you, you have a short temper, you cannot do that!" I say, "In my family I'm short tempered, but out in public I'm that long." (Cher stretches out his arms, to demonstrate.) My Uncle say, "You try and we'll see." I now try for two and a half years. Everytime I see my Uncle, I say, "See, I prove to you I can do the job. The mess is straightened out." He says, but I still don't trust the hopital." And I answer, "You either trust the hospital, or you don't trust me."

If the hospital do good to the Hmong people, then you have to believe in the organization you work for, in order to represent them. In the past the Hmong believed the hospital do experiments on them, this is on their minds. They hear rumors from other parts of the country, and I explain this maybe happen in one case, but you cannot blame all the doctors. I have to convince them we will do what is best for the patient.

A couple of times there has been a case in which, no matter what you do, you cannot cure the patient or communicate with the family. The family get very angry, and all the staff put tape over their last names on their name cards, because they are afraid of the family. I say, "Forget it, I will take care of this case." In this situation the child had a very bad case of the measles and the parents wanted him moved to Minneapolis Childrens, which was very risky. He later died while there. This caused a lot of stress for the community. This hospital is very good about spending time, talking with the Hmong people to reassure them, however.

10. What did you think life would be like here before you came?

Back in my country I only see maybe one or two American people, mostly male, you don't see any females or children. In my country they are huge people, so I think, well, if I go to that country, what am I going to be? Am I going to be like a little kid? Do they ever have a family back home? When you see them (Americans) you think, well maybe he just come up from the jungle, because he look so different from us, because you never see him with his wife and kids. When they come to refugee camp, they say, "Do not do drugs, do not steal." So, my first impression is, the U.S.A. must be a heaven, a nice place to be. Nobody steal from anybody, no cops. I was dreaming of living in a high building. It will be fantastic, we go up in elevators and you live on the 51st floor. But all the movies in my country show fires with no place to go. The elevators get stuck, so I think that's not the place. When I was seven or eight I was sent to the capitol city during the war. I lived by myself and my parents see me once a week. Movies show how clean it is, the nice cars, nice streets. People say when you go to the U.S. you can have any job you want. It doesn't matter how dumb or how smart you are. This is true, but it's not

that easy. My expectations are at about 70% of what I wanted. I still want to have my own business, maybe a car dealer, or clothing store. A small stable business.

11. What has been the most difficult part of your adjustment here?

I just say it's because you're different, different color. Because something else you can adjust yourself to, but your appearance you cannot change. Sometimes, I just feel like that. Sometimes, I forget that I am Hmong, that my skin is yellow, my hair is black. People ask me for advice, so I'm just part of the system here. But, then I go into a restroom and there are a lot of people and I look in the mirror and I'm different than the rest of them. I cannot get used to this. I feel safe here. If I go out in public I think, well maybe those people haven't seen a lot of Hmong, and will think whatever we are. This country has many different people, so I get used to this. I just feel different from them.

12. What has been the easiest part of your adjustment here?

I have my older brother who did all the hard work at the beginning. I have my job. I know how to speak the language. I learn to live within my own limits, so I don't have to depend on someone else. I never charge anything. I live by a budget.

13. What do you wish most for your future?

I have a home. I have a car, I think that's all I ask for. I think what I want for my kid. I want more than for my own future. I'm new in this country. No matter how much I want, I will not get there. You have to build little by little. My mom and dad, they're not educated. They didn't send you to school, they didn't give advice. Now we know, so now we send them (our children) to different kinds of classes. When they grow up they can be a guitar player, a pianist, or they can be figure skater. We have all these ideas, so we can push our kids to do that. So, I earn enough money, so they can practice all those activities. When I'm gone at least they have something to base it on. Maybe next five or six generations, they will be in the upper class, but if you don't think ahead this will not be.

14. How many children do you have and what grades have they reached in school?

I have four kids, two boys, two girls. They are nine, eight, seven and six. One is in fourth grade, one is in second, one is in first, and one in kindergarten.

15. Who do you talk to when you need advice or help?

When it is concerning my Hmong family I talk to my clan leader. Someone in the community who is older and has a good reputation and is respected. The last name will be Vang, it needs to be someone I can trust. If it relates to my marriage I can talk to my clan leader, but if I don't like it I can talk to a friend about marriage or divorce. Legally it is harder for them to advise. They know more about personal or cultural issues. I try to make personal decisions, if it is a rule from the past I can't live with it. If you know you will inevitably divorce, they (clan leader) will advise not to, or it will be the end to your relationship with her people. But I cannot make decision based on this. It is between me and her. With my younger friends we feel the same. People in their 40's and older will be different. In my generation we know how to respect our elders. The little kids don't learn it as much. I'm more open, I say to my children," Just study hard and I will support you through college without expectations. I want them to be able to stand on their own two feet. I will prefer a boy more than a girl, although in this country the girl is more ambitious and more mature. But ,a girl once she marry, she will leave the family name, and belong to other family.

16. Have you had any difficulties with the laws in this country? Specifically, marriage, welfare regulations, divorce.

I haven't, but I think the laws are set up in his country that they protect the criminals more than the victim, and when I think about it, I don't like it. The I.R.S. seems to think I make too much money and

I don't think so. In the end to bother with this is a waste of time, to worry about what the government will do. I will just wait for them to prove it.

17. Have you made any changes in the foods you eat?

I'm flexible on that. Mostly at home it is my food. If I go with a friend, I will eat pizza, pasta, I will eat anything. At home it is 100% traditional, but my kids like McDonalds and their frenchfries.

18. Has your family had any problems relating to teenage marriage?

I have two sisters that got married, but are now divorced. I think it is a problem, because the family wanted them to marry someone Hmong and they marry a Korean and a Chinese.

19. What makes a good wife for your family?

To me, it's a little different than what my parents expect. A good wife to me is one that talks the same kind of language and likes the same kinds of things. She doesn't run around and have affairs with other people. She will teach my children to read and write after school. Just do regular housework and find a part time job. (We both speak English and the children are bilingual).

20. How do you feel about the changes regarding respect for parents/elders and responsibilities for young people?

My generation still think that our parents or our great grandparents are the ones who raised us and brought us to this point, so we owe them a life. In turn, we have to respect them. For my kid and younger generations in this country it's different, they don't owe us anything. When they are 18 they are free.

Is there anything additional you would like to add to this history?

If you live in this country, you have to make the best out of it. You are here to stay. This is home. Don't wait until the day you go back to Laos. You will waste your time, if you do. In this country we have to look to the Hmong people and respect them for what they believe in.