



LEE, KATHY

Kathy Lee is involved in many school clubs. She likes to play soccer and wants to go to college at the University of Wisconsin- Eau Claire majoring in marketing. She hopes that one day she will accomplish what she always wanted to accomplish.

When other people look at us Hmong girls, in their eyes they judge us. Not what we try to do, not what our talents are, not who we are, but what they think of us. They may look at me and say, "She's a Hmong and she's lazy. She's not the right size." I am not educated, but what they are missing is that I believe in myself. In time, everyone gives up on dreams, hopes, and wishes. In the traditional Hmong beliefs, we follow the rules, not because we want to but because we live in them. I never imagined how wonderful

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it would be to be a girl, not just any girl, but a Hmong girl. I look in the mirror and see myself; I see my reflection. I open my windows to the sunny morning and listen to the birds chirp. I close my eyes and picture myself in the bridal clothing. I listen to stories of the ancient history of my family. I wake up everyday and hope it will be a wonderful day and God will lead my way.

Still, people look at me and ask, "Who is she?" I am a Hmong girl who looks upon the earth. I follow my dreams and still listen to my parent's point of view. I am a Hmong girl wishing and praying everyday that there won't be anymore deaths because of war. Even if a Hmong girl feels that she is challenged, judged, and compared, she should know that nothing will change her and who she is: WE ARE HMONG GIRLS!

Before the doors opened in the United States, the Hmong lived in Laos and Thailand. Everyday there were chores to start the day: water to carry, wood to bring, animals to feed, food to be cooked, laundry to be washed, siblings to be cared for, and gardens to tend to.

Each day the sun got brighter, the fish swam in the water and every one of them lived, whether they had a full belly or ended the day with an empty stomach, they still were living. The hands of many lives reached for food, and even with no money they still worked proudly. Their lives depended on their own labor. Seasons came by, rainy days passed by, and we breathed in hot air. Markets were far away, and hospitals were in the city. Ill or starving, you waited for another day to come. Many people died: grandmas, grandpas, parents, and even kids left the earth. Left their families. How sad to be an orphan, how hard to be a widow. Stories have been passed throughout the generations; people telling how the Hmong lived.

Back then marriage was easy to deal with. You could be tricked and suddenly gone; off with a guy. You could be forced. Some young people were going to start a life, a life of their own. Just one image and

you're there. What a mistake you had made. Guys thought they were smarter, business was in their hands, money for them to hold, and more wives added on. They'd often have more than one wife. When New Year came by, chickens were taken care of and costumes were made and worn. Tossing Ball was eventually played mostly on that day. The bullfights were on, dances were performed for entertainment, males and females would sing songs back and forth.

Whether you had shoes or not, you still went to the garden to earn a little money. If you had no money for food, you worked on someone else's garden as labor. You sweat so much from working! You'd get so exhausted, but everyday you kept on going. The rooster crows as he was your alarm clock, and you'd then wake up. However, the girls had to wake up early, ready to do chores.

And now, as the little ones, we listen to our elders telling us about how life was then and how it changed when a war came. There was not any place to hide. They looked at how long the Mekong River was. How could they get to Thailand? When would it be the right time to leave for safety? With little chance to survive, and a fear of dying, many left. Some stayed and were killed by the angry Vietnamese. Some didn't make it, but the luckier ones came to the United States to start a new life for their young ones. They wanted to live where it would be safe, and where they would not have to go through life as they once had.

The world we lived in back then may not be the one we live in now, but still we follow our traditions. Our weddings are a little different now, but mostly the same. Our ceremonies are the same and we still celebrate the New Year. The chores may be different, but we will never leave the gardens behind, so today we still have our gardens in the United States. We speak two or more languages, but what difference does it make? We are human beings. Though I was not born in Laos, when my parents tell me of their lives in Laos, I feel that I am part of my parents' country. Although I live in the United States, I would like to one day visit the home of many Hmong in Laos.

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Poem by Kathy Lee

The country Laos,
 The homeland of many Hmong people,
 The fresh air we grew with,
 The memories that my parents had,
 The stories they tell,
 The place where I came from,
 The times that never pass,
 The days they spent,
 As a Hmong girl that I love,
 Whether in the river or in the mirror,
 Shadows show who I am,
 The trees in the U.S. or in Laos,
 Birds fly on and make their nest,
 The sky I look up at,
 Is the same sky I'd be looking at from Laos.