



THAO, PENNY

Penny is a twelve-year old girl from Wausau, Wisconsin who believes that being a Hmong person is an advantage in America. She enjoys being with her family and friends. If she ever got a chance to be anything else in the world, she wouldn't. She likes the way things are now.

My name is Kang, my American name is Penny, My last name is Thao but I am supposed to be a Xiong. I was born in Wausau, Wisconsin. I am twelve years old, turning 13 on February 28th. There are three people in my family: my mom, my sister and me. My sister is at a foster home. My dad lives in Wausau with his wife and his 10th grade son. He has three or four more sons and three daughters.

How do you feel about being a Hmong girl? Why? What are the advantages and disadvantages?

I am glad that I am Hmong. I have more opportunities and I learn more. I can be different. Not being Hmong would be weird. I wouldn't be able to speak Hmong and couldn't understand what other Hmong people were or are saying. Being Hmong, like I said, gives me more opportunities and I get to have two cultures mixed together.

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What do you know about your traditions and culture and how do you feel about them?

The marriage, I think is half and half. When the guy has to pay or give money for the wife, it seems like he is buying her. If he didn't pay a lot, it's like saying that she is not worth as much. I don't like how you have to drink; otherwise, I do agree with the way marriages are performed. I am a Christian so I have different beliefs. The language is good, but sometimes it can be confusing.

How do you feel about being Americanized?

I feel good, it gives me more opportunities. There is more freedom too.

How do your parents feel about it?

My mom thinks it is good because you can make a difference and get a good education. You have more friends and more freedom.

Which culture do you feel is more beneficial and why?

Both, because I am both of those things and they both benefit me personally. Without one, I wouldn't be the person I am today.

Are your parents more Americanized or stuck in the traditional way of life? And how do you feel about that?

Traditional. I don't really like it but it reminds me that I am still Hmong and that I have my own culture.

What have your parents taught you and how will you use it?

My parents have taught me about the culture and why we do things. I will use it as a guideline to grow on, and learn more about other things.

Is education important to you? Why or why not?

Yes. Without it you couldn't do anything in this world. Not anything, but most things! If you didn't know how to count, you could not code, or learn or do a lot. If you didn't know how to talk, you couldn't communicate to others.

What are your expectations and your parent's expectations for your future?

Well, to get a car and license and to pass high school with a good grade point average. Go to college, get married, have kids, be a mother, and get a job.

Have you ever been discriminated against because of your ethnicity? If yes, how, and how did you feel and react to it?

There were two guys talking about having half Hmong children if they went out with me. I felt bad. I wanted to bleach myself, change my color. I said, "I'm just like you. You are different, too. You're part something else, too. How would you feel if they look just like white babies?"

What advice would you give to someone who wanted help on how to deal with his or her racial issues?

To go up to those who tease you, say "cut it out" and tell them how you feel. You need authority, then go to someone who can help you!

Why do people discriminate because of ethnicity?

They don't know their culture and they are afraid because they don't know.

How do you and your parents feel about interracial dating?

I think it is okay. My mom says you shouldn't because it would be hard. You have two different cultures and one will have to follow the other.

A stereotype is that all Hmong are in gangs. How do you feel about that? Have you ever been asked to join, and why do people join?

I think that is so not true. I think that what they say is stupid. I have never been asked and people join because they want something that they don't have at home. They don't have attention at home; they find it in a gang. Whatever it is, I think it is a sad thought.

What do you see in the future for the Hmong? What are your hopes for them?

I see a lot for the Hmong. I hope that one day we will have a Hmong in office; somewhere in government. Whether a governor or a mayor, it would be really cool to see a Hmong person, boy or girl, in office.

Do you have any advice or words of wisdom to share?

When the going gets tough, the tough gets tougher. Everything is really hard. Just keep your focus on one thing and everything will work out.