



THAO, VIENGNEESEE

Viengneesee Thao is currently a senior at D.C. Everest Sr. High. She is involved with the Boys and Girls Club. Her goals in life are to become well-known someday and possibly live forever.

My name is Viengneesee Thao. I've been living in Wausau for about four years now and I'll be 17 in June. I was born in Thailand and have been living in the U.S. from about the time I was born because we came here when I was only three months old. However we first went to Milwaukee and lived there for about thirteen years before moving to Wausau.

What language do you speak at home?

We speak Hmonglish, which is a combination of both English and Hmong.

And what about at school?

Mostly English because everyone speaks English at school, and it's easier to communicate with everyone.

So what do you do for fun? What are your hobbies?

I like to play sports, but mostly I like to watch because I'm not very athletic. The only sport I actually enjoy playing and am decent at is tennis.

What do you think of other people your own age?

They're very mature, especially the Hmong. I can't say the same about other people though. I think this is because Hmong parents expect their kids to show respect and obedience when they're around other people.

And what do you think about yourself?

I think I'm a good person. I try to do the right thing.

How do you feel about being a Hmong girl?

It stinks, because we're at a disadvantage. People discriminate against us and there are very high expectations of us in the Hmong and American way. For instance, we're expected to learn how to cook and clean, but at the same time we're also expected to excel in school.

"Sometimes it's hard because I'm Hmong and you have to balance your Hmong and American values and morals."

How is your life now different from your parents' lives?

My mom used to farm all the time but I just go to school now. Parents don't understand how life is for

their kids because they didn't go through the same things we go through.

What has your mom taught you?

She taught me how to cook and clean and other momly things like that. Also laundry, babysitting and how to be strong and take responsibility.

What about your father?

He was a math teacher in Thailand so he taught me math. He also did daddy stuff like teaching me how to play ball and fight.

What are your parents' expectations of you?

They want me to go to college and get a doctor's degree because that's, I guess, "top dog." I think they want me to get married at some point, too, just not anytime soon. They expect him to be this great family guy who's perfect! But I doubt that will happen.

What are your expectations of yourself?

I want to be someone and to do something really great. I want to be the first Hmong astronaut or president. I really want to do something big, not because I want to be "famous," but because I'm Hmong and I want to show other Hmong that we can do whatever we want; we don't have to be Caucasian. That's a big thing. Hmong people think we can't go very far because we're not caucasian. I just happen to disagree.

What do you expect of your brothers?

They better not get anyone pregnant because that's a big concern in the Hmong community. But basically I just want them to have fun, succeed and still remember their family.

Have you ever been asked to join a gang or have you ever been in a gang?

No, I think mostly guys are in gangs. I have heard about girl gangs but I would never join one. A lot of Hmong are in gangs. I think many join to fit in somewhere because at school we don't actually fit in with Caucasians. At least that's how they feel and that's why they join.

How do you feel about gangs?

I don't know much about them, but they are violent and I don't think we need them. I also don't see the point of being in a gang. But if people want to be in them, then it's their choice. I just wouldn't be in one.

Do you ever feel trapped between the Hmong culture and the American culture?

Yes, I admit I do. I don't know if this is really being trapped, but my mom's always saying, "Go to college." But she also hears about other girls who don't get married until they're like thirty because they chose to go to college, and she kind of makes fun of them. Basically, Hmong parents are just a bunch of hypocrites. Also, they have double standards for boys and girls. They're more lenient towards boys and less trustful towards girls. I find it hard sometimes to live up to everyone's standards.

What do you see for your future?

I'm definitely going to college and going to move outside of Wausau. It's too small of a town for me.

Being a Hmong girl, what are you most proud of?

I'm just proud that I can speak the language because most people can't. I also know alot about my culture. For instance I know a couple of "da neng," or stories, and I know about the religion "shamanism" even

though my family is Catholic.

Have you ever encountered any racial discrimination or prejudice?

In Milwaukee I use to ride the bus to school and if you sit in someone's seat, they tell you to get out, but that's basically it. It's not really discrimination, they were just being selfish.

How do you feel about racial issues?

I think they're dumb because people probably don't understand the Hmong and that's why they discriminate. I guess I'm guilty of doing it too, even though I try not to.

Anything interesting you want to share with us?

I'm glad that they're making this book on the Hmong and I think things like this make people more aware and understanding of the Hmong. In English class, my teacher showed this movie on the Hmong and it kind of surprised me. Many of the kids in there were like, "Wow, I didn't know this and that about the Hmong." It was really great!

Have you ever had any peer pressure pertaining to your culture or race?

No, because my friends know what I'm like and they wouldn't force me to do anything I wouldn't want to do.

Do you feel pressured to do something just because you're Hmong?

Yes, from the older people. They expect you to know how to cook and clean and be proper. I think people expect me to be smart as well. It's not bad because I do know how to do most of these things, but they want you to cook and clean everyday, and I don't do that.

"You can't make people like you, so you just have to keep an open mind and forgive them if they don't understand."

How do you feel about being a girl and not a boy?

I think boys have it easier because if you're a girl people just automatically down grade you. In the summer I go to Upward Bound and this camp counselor joked about me getting married the next year. Just because you're a Hmong girl doesn't mean you will get married early. I was so mad, and now I won't get married just so I can rub it in his face later. (laugh) I'm just kidding, but I definitely think the girls have it the hardest.

What do you like and dislike about being Hmong?

I like being Hmong because if you go to a new school and there are Hmong people there, then you automatically fit in. But it stinks, too, because people don't understand the Hmong and they discriminate a lot. They think stupid stuff like we eat cats and dogs. But I think no matter what race you are, there is going to be a good and bad side. Being Hmong is no different than being Hispanic or African American. For the most part I really enjoy being Hmong.

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

They should probably talk to other Hmong teens because they're probably going through the same things. Also don't be afraid to stand up for yourself. If you hear someone say something untrue about the Hmong, then correct them!