



## YANG, GOLDYER & MAITA

*Goldyer and her sister, Maita, were born in the United States, however their parents decided to move back to Laos when they were older.*

### Sisters return to U.S. after struggles in Laos

By Keith Uhlig Wausau Daily Herald kuhl@wdhprint.com WESTON - Goldyer and Maita Yang were just 12 and 10 years old when their parents made the highly unusual decision to move from the United States back to Laos. The two sisters were born in Modesto, Calif., and the family tried living in Minneapolis before making the move. But their mother struggled with health problems and allergies during their time in the United States. A doctor told the sisters' parents that a tropical climate was best for controlling her allergies and suggested the family move to Southeast Asia or Hawaii. The Yangs' parents had come from Laos, so they decided to return to the old country with the five youngest of their eight children, including Goldyer and Maita. For the next six years, the sisters lived in Nonsavang, a village near the capital city of Vientiane. They were immersed in a culture that was at once alien to them and part of their heritage. As schoolchildren, they found themselves targets of political animosity and racial slurs because Hmong are minority in Laos. And all the while, they relied on each other for support and couldn't wait to come back to the United States. Now, the two are living with their older sister and her family in Weston. Goldyer, 19, is working as a bilingual aide at Rib Mountain Elementary School. Maita, 17, is a junior at D.C. Everest High School and works part-time at a grocery store. Even though they are glad to be back "home," they still find themselves struggling between cultures and sifting through emotions to discover just what home means." Now, in our hearts, we miss two places at once," Goldyer said. History and politics are steeped through the girls' highly personal story, even though the two really don't have much to say about those subjects. Laos was the home of The Secret War during the Vietnam era. The United States enlisted the upland Hmong people to fight a guerrilla war against communism in Laos, and when the Americans pulled out of Vietnam, they also ended their support of the Hmong military efforts. The Hmong fought on against the Pathet Lao, an organization fighting for a communist government. In 1975, the communist Lao People's Democratic Republic was established. The Hmong poured out of the country, and about 130,000 Hmong ended up in the United States, including Goldyer and Maita's family. According to the State Department, after taking power, the communist regime took political prisoners and opened "re-education" camps, but those closed over time. The poor, landlocked country first imposed a strict Soviet-style economy, but the country has opened its policies to a more market-driven society. By 1999, more than 28,900 Hmong and lowland Lao had returned to Laos, 3,500 from China and the rest from Thailand, said the State Department. But the Hmong still are a minority in Laos, and are frequently singled out for abuse. It is in this environment that Goldyer and Maita landed. They found themselves the subject of scorn by teachers in their classes, and constantly

being asked, "What are you doing here?" They were the target of verbal slurs, and they never felt completely free." "You don't say anything about the government," Goldyer said. "You don't speak your mind." Maita struggled in school. She fought to fit in and the racial slurs cut deep." "I didn't know who I was anymore," she said. Even though, with time, they managed to make friends and build their lives, "We felt that we weren't accepted, really," Maita said. Leaving their mother and father behind was difficult, but both girls jumped at the chance to come back to the United States. Maita wants to go to college and become a nurse. Maita wants to become a teacher." "We learned about life," Maita said. "It made us stronger." They are living with their oldest sister, Maikou Yang, 27, an economic support specialist with the Marathon County Department of Social Services. She has visited Laos and enjoys it there but never would want to live there." "I'm so glad I didn't have to go through that," Maikou said. "That would be so hard. ... All I can say is that it's life changing. It's probably altered their lives."

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