

## Lee Vang

*Lee Vang lived in Long Chieng in Laos. She left Laos in 1980. Her brothers, sisters, and parents are still living in Thailand. She is a counselor and a citizenship coordinator.*



*About how old are you?*

I am 29 right now.

*What do you do?*

I'm working here at the Wausau Area Hmong Mutual Association as a women's community counselor/case manager. But right now I was promoted to a new position called Citizenship Program Coordinator.

*What is your educational background? Did you go to school?*

Yes, when I first came to this country in 1988, I went to Midstate Technical College for my diploma. Because I was twenty years old when I came to this country so I couldn't enroll in high school. In 1991 I graduated from Mid State Technical College. I went to college at Mount Senario College in Ladysmith, Wisconsin. I got my bachelor's degree in criminal justice, and a minor in social work. It took four years in Ladysmith.

*How many brothers and sisters do you have?*

I have two brothers and five sisters.

*What are their names?*

My first sister's is Kaying Vang, she's in California now. I have four other sisters still in Thailand. My two brothers are in Thailand, too.

*So, you and your sister were the only two to escape?*

Yes, my older sister, and myself are in this country.

*Where were you born?*

I was born in Laos.

*What was your homeland like when you were living there? Your government, your economy, and your living conditions?*

In Laos I was still young. I was only maybe seven years old when we left Laos so I'm not really sure.

*How old were you when you left?*

Ten years old when I left Laos, and then I went to the government camp in Thailand.

*Why did you and your sister leave your homeland?*

During Vietnam War the North Vietnamese wanted to take over Laos. My father was a soldier with the American CIA. So we could not live there any more. If we lived there we would be in danger if we had been caught. So we tried to escape to Thailand.

*Would they have killed your whole family if they were to catch your dad?*

It depends on the Vietnamese. Some Vietnamese will kill the whole family but some only kill the parents. I think they would not kill the kids. Mostly they would kill my father if they investigated and they know that my father is a soldier against them, they will kill my father so we just tried to escape together.

*Was it difficult for you and your sister to move to the U.S.?*

It's so difficult because we wanted to come to this country to get an education, but my mother and my father just didn't want to come here. It was so hard to come to this country. There were no parents to support us. We miss our parents a lot.

*Did you come directly to the United States or did you stop some place?*

I think we stopped by Tokyo. Then we change another plane in San Fransisco, California, and then we came into North Carolina first. I stayed there for just a month. Then my sister-in-law was living in Wausau here. She came to North Carolina and we just came with her by bus to Wausau in 1988.

*What were some of the difficult parts of the journey to the U.S.?*

It's so difficult when I first arrived here because the people are so different. I don't speak English. I can not drive. It's so hard when you first arrive here. But right now I have some education, and you know the right and wrong of this country. It's getting better now.

*What were your first impressions of the U.S. and Central Wisconsin?*

I like to stay here because it's seems like Central Wisconsin is a small town and it does not have any crimes here. The one that I don't like is snow, it's too slippery. Things like that. But it is a small town and it does not have any crimes.

*Did you or your family experience any discrimination upon your arrival?*

Yes, there is one thing I would like to mention. One day I was driving along the Bridge Street in Wausau and there was a white lady just yelling. That would be discrimination and I don't like it.

*Does this happen a lot?*

Not really a lot. This is small town, it happens not really a lot, just sometimes.

*Did you know a lot of people before you moved here?*

Yes, my sister-in-law came here in 1987, and I arrived here 1988. So, I know some people here before I move here.

*Were you financially assisted by relatives or other agencies upon your arrival?*

Yes, when I arrived here I got some assistance from the government. Because at that time I was still going to school and needed some help and I got some assistance from the government.

*How did you learn how to ride the bus or go grocery shopping or anything like that?*

When first I arrived here I had many relative here so they took me to the store to buy food. I had my sister-in-law, my relatives, and the Wausau Area Hmong Mutual Association to help me. I learned how to drive in six months and this was easier for me.

*What were some of the greatest challenges when you first came here to Central Wisconsin?*

Yes, the problem is you don't know what is right and what is wrong here. It's very difficult at times. So you need many help from the government or from relatives or from friends, and it's very difficult. So that why I tried to go to school so I know more and I can help yourself.

*You said before that you didn't know what was right or wrong here. Is it really different between the right*

*and wrong here and in Laos?*

When you first arrive in a new country, you don't know the laws and you're thinking that you would like to buy something or want to go places. Or you can say something to people, but you're kind of scared that, if you say this to a different person, you know is it a bad thing or not? So you're kind of scared that maybe people want to hit you, spit at you or yell at you. You have to ask some people that have been here before, so maybe they'll give you new ideas. Compared to Laos, you can walk along the street as far as you could, and nobody yells at you or even hits or spits at you.

*In what ways did your family change after arriving in Central Wisconsin?*

Life was changing a lot. They changed just by deciding to go to school. They changing your life because you don't want to stay on government. You're thinking that you are so young and that you go to school so you can get a better job, and higher pay. I was thinking about my future and then my husband and I discussed to see what we can do in the future. So you can support your family, and that's a big change.

*Are you still with the government help?*

No, not now. I got out of government assistance three years ago. Yes, after I graduated I just worked until now.

*How are the members of your ethnic group different in Central Wisconsin than what they would have been in your homeland.*

The Hmong change, mostly the younger people. The elderly, they still act and do things the same as they were in Laos. The big change is the younger people or the youth. They are learning a lot in this country, and they are Americanized here. The elderly are still doing something similar to Laos, and it's kind of like, you have some conflict there. The youth or the children are very Americanized and they would like to go through what the teacher says, or it's in school. But the elderly still very traditional.

*What are some of the differences between the Americans and Laos?*

The difference is some laws, food, people, and religion. Many things are different. If you arrive here you have to learn, you know, in order to live in this country.

*What customs like food, habits, and dress do you still maintain from your culture?*

Our main food is rice. We always have rice on our table when we eat. Mostly, the main food is rice and vegetables. We have our own different vegetable from the store, the American store that you go to. The clothes, they still carry their own clothes, like traditional clothes. Every family will have own clothes. You wear traditional clothes at the New Year celebration.

*Do you wear your ethnic clothes during holidays like New Year or Fourth of July or something like that?*

Mostly New Year...We wear them when we have traditional dance, show or in New Year only.

*Are most of your friends of the same ethnic background?*

No, I have American friends and Laos friends. Whichever person that I like what they say, or maybe they like what I say. I also have other friends too, not only Hmong friends.

*How do you think other people view your ethnic group?*

I think they view Hmong and wonder why we are here, and they would like to know why we are here, where we are come from and some people don't want us to stay in this country.

*Do you think there is a lot of prejudice going around?*

Not really here because it's a small town. But in a big town, yes, I heard something like this is

happening in big towns, but its not really here.

*What language do you speak at home with your family and friends?*

I speak Hmong and English to my family and friends.

*What part of your culture would you like to see preserved for the future?*

For culture we have some new things going on, music, clothes, everything. I want people to know that we are from Laos, and we are here. I want people to continue to keep culture and traditions, and things.

*What do you think Central Wisconsin will be like 20 years from now in regard to your ethnic group?*

I think in the future it's getting better because we have our youth and the young people are going to school. I think that if they graduate, they continue education. I think that 20 years from now, we are getting better and the reason I say getting better because right now we have many elderly that can not speak English. They can not drive, they can not work because they are old and they don't know anything. They can not speak English. So, I think in a 20 years from now, the youth or the young people can work so everything will be changing.

*Do you think that there will be a lot of mixed marriages between white and Hmong?*

Yes. right now we have so many people that are marriage in American girls or wives. I am thinking that they go to school together, and they become friends. Many people are marriage to Americans. And in the future I think that will be more than this.

*What do you think it means to be an American?*

It is okay because I graduate from school, and you know that school is so important. It's okay right now you know, but I have family I already told you that it's hard for because they can not speak English. They cannot go to the store by themselves. Or, the people you had education here who got a job, everything's okay. You know, in America here.

*So, you think it would be easier for the younger kids?*

Yes.