

BRIDGING THE SHORES  
SEGMENT B-1: HMONG MIGRATION ED ACT  
Producer: Bull  
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Lead :

The Hmong readily tied higher education with success in the U.S. Parents push their kids to achieve, even if they themselves are unfamiliar with many subjects taught in American schools. Unique graduation ceremonies are held for high school and college seniors, where elders tie yarn to the students' wrists, and give them hard boiled eggs – all symbolizing luck and success.

**GradCeremonyClip:** (ambi of elders talking)...BULL: "You've got a lot of yarn on that wrist."  
STUDENT: "Yeah, thanks!" [FADE OUT] (:08)

But many Hmong students flipping through textbooks about the American Revolution, the Civil War, and the Space Race, feel that their part in American history is being ignored...and they want to change that. Brian Bull reports:

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On a brisk winter day last year, about 600 Hmong packed Wisconsin's capitol building in Madison. [AMBI: "Good morning!" ("Good morning.")] They came to support the Hmong Migration Education Act, which would encourage school districts to teach about the Hmong's support of U.S. forces during the Vietnam War, their persecution by the Laotian government, and their exodus to America beginning in the 1970s. The bill's main sponsor, Donna Seidel, and advocate ChaSong Yang, spoke to the assembly.

**HmongMigEdAct01:** "Our goal is that this legislation will create an environment in our state, of mutual respect and tolerance." (Seidel) "Therefore we ask for everybody's support to make sure that the bill will not be put away, but passed and the Governor will sign into law..." (Yang) [APPLAUSE] (:20)

That "environment of mutual respect and tolerance" referred to several bloody and racially charged confrontations in Wisconsin, including the murder of a Hmong man by a white sportsman, which made statewide headlines.

**WPR NEWS CLIP:** "Authorities found Cha Vang's partially concealed body in the Peshtigo Harbor wildlife area. The Hmong hunter had been shot once and stabbed six times..." (:08)

But the bill – like one introduced before it in 2005 – sat and died in the legislative pipeline. Mai Na Lee, the first Hmong woman to teach at the University of Minnesota, says many Hmong are upset by the lack of action in including the Hmong immigration story in classrooms.

**MNLee03:** "This is part of the desire of the community for their children to know about their history, and for the mainstream community to know about their history, and I think it comes out this desire in the Hmong community to construct themselves as a unique immigrant, with a unique history."

**JohnnLy04:** "Well, it's definitely been difficult growing up, not knowing who you are." (:03)

Johnny Ly is a recent U-W Madison graduate. He's among those who'd like to see more written about the CIA's "Secret War" during the Vietnam conflict, where Hmong recruits led by General Vang Pao fought Communist soldiers and saved downed American pilots. Those who didn't die in combat were persecuted after the war...which Ly says is why the Hmong people are here in the first place.

**JohnnyLy02:** “Your parents tell you the Hmong were allies of the U.S., we fought together, we were hand-in-hand. And then you go to school and you don’t hear anything about yourself.” (:10)

Ly has been at odds with the American school system before. Last year, the Madison school board considered naming a new grade school for General Vang Pao. Many Hmong cheered the idea, saying it’d promote cross-cultural understanding. But after critics brought up Pao’s alleged history of drug trafficking and human rights abuses, the idea was dropped. In this 2007 recording of the Madison School Board meeting, Ly gave his high school diploma back to the school board [**PLOP!**] and chastised them.

**Ly06:** “Keep my diploma, as a sign of your foolishness.” (:03)

Other recent incidents have included claims that a U-W professor lecturing about Hmong men stereotyped them as violent. The controversy has quieted, but many Hmong are still concerned about how their culture is viewed by others. Professor Chia Vang of the U-W Milwaukee says there’s definitely room for improvement as there continue to be misconceptions based on old stereotypes.

**CVang02:** “Colonial, administrative descriptions of Hmong. Missionaries trying to convert Hmong to Christianity. And a lot of that information is used by policy makers...educators...who have authority. If there is no genuine opportunity for people to dialogue, then we will continue to perpetuate those kinds of negative experiences for a lot of people in this growing community.” (:23)

[FADE UP CLASSROOM AMBI FAST, HOLD UNDER TRAK AND CUTS UNTIL BEFORE SOC]

Another person who supports more early teaching about Hmong history and culture is Bao Thao, a freshman here at the U-W Madison campus. She says something like the Hmong Migration Education Act would help her white classmates better relate to her culture, and perhaps stop mistaking her for Chinese or Korean. But Thao says such legislation would also benefit her Hmong peers.

**BThao03:** “Because a lot of Hmong people are becoming more Americanized and not being very traditional so I think it would help them and encourage them to get education and to keep their tradition going. And if we don’t practice and keep it now, then we will just lose it.” (:13)

Legislators who’ve introduced two Hmong Migration Education bills already say they’re going to keep at it, to help stem future cultural conflicts and honor the Hmong’s role in the Vietnam War. A similar bill has been through both legislative chambers in California, and is expected to reach Governor Schwarzenegger’s desk later this month.

For Bridging the Shores, I’m Brian Bull in Madison.