

BRIDGING THE SHORES
SEGMENT C-1: Generation Gap
Producer: Murray
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Host:

Much like waves of immigrants before them, Hmong must walk the line between adapting to American society while embracing the traditions and values they brought from home. This is especially tricky for younger Hmong who grew up in this country but live with elders who grew up in a completely different culture in Laos. Patty Murray has a look at the generation gap Hmong style...

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Lee Lo Yang is cultivating a two acre plot along a rural highway outside of Green Bay...

("Pepper, eggplant, sweetpea....")

Speaking through interpreter Lia Lor...Yang describes what she grows...and it's just about everything. It's also similar to the large gardens she tended in Laos before she came to this country nearly 30 years ago. Back then families depended on their crops for food. Here, they sell produce at farmers markets.

Lor has 13 children ranging in age from 13 to 37. The younger ones are helping her keep the weeds down:

(sound of hoe-ing....)

Lor tries to preserve traditions at home, and she encourages her children to learn the meanings behind different rituals...especially Hmong religious beliefs.

("Hmong...She says if they don't preserve the traditional cultures then they will probably turn all Christian and just go to Church.")

(Music: Hells Bells....")

Meanwhile...a few hours south of Green Bay and seemingly a world away...20-something Addison Lee is at a bowling alley with his friends.

("The gap in generations between the youth and elderly is pretty broad, whether it's religion, weddings, how you deal with certain issues.")

Addison was born in the US...and says his parents encouraged him to fit in with the larger society. That meant going to a Christian Church, but still taking part in traditional Hmong ceremonies based on shamanistic beliefs. He says he does it to pay respects to his grandparents.

Lee came to an uncomfortable intersection recently. In the summer of 2007 his girlfriend Mahalia Xiong went missing after a night out with friends. After a few chilling weeks, Xiong's family and friends were told her car had been found in Green Bay's Fox River. She was dead.

Lee says traditionalists told him he must get rid of remembrances of Mahalia...and he should change his name.

"I was born with this name and I'll live with it 'til it's my time to go. They'd tell me stories like we had a cousin or something and his girlfriend passed away and a couple months later he went missing. It's kinda like after I'd hear stories like your cousin's uncle's brother's sister's half brother was talking to a ghost or something. I'd be ooooookay. That doesn't make any sense at all.")

It's that line between embracing western ways while respecting the old ways that many young people walk. And it's not *just* an issue between young and old. Ray Hutchison Chairs the department of Urban and regional Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Green Bay. He says with the Hmong one's calendar age isn't the only thing that determines how a person fits into society. It's more about when a person came to America.

("So you can look at Hmong of adult age some have just very recently been in the US. Others essentially were born and have grown up here. So we're running into some very interesting patterns that are quite distinctive from most other immigrant populations.")

Once in this country, Hutchison says Hmong eagerly pursue an education for their kids. 15 years ago he surveyed Hmong elders about what they want preserved...and even though they see the importance of learning English, they cited their language as something they don't want to disappear.

("For the Hmong there's both the importance of learning English and the importance of education and schooling but also the desire to keep the language and knowledge of traditional culture. Family and Clan is also very important.")

Family and Clan meetings can involve elaborate feasts...and 17-year old Candy Vang says she's expected to help cook and wash dishes.

("It's like one of the main roles us women have to do. Sometimes you get lazy and don't want to do it too but you kind of have to because it's something you grew up doing and all that stuff. It's a lot of work and is tiring. I wish I'd get a break from it.")

When she does get a break Vang does what most teenage girls do...she hits the mall.

("I got a pair of high heels before, really high too, I can't walk in those....")

Many Hmong people understand the value of an education. So When she's not helping to prepare and clean up after elaborate feasts Vang says she's expected to get very good grades. And that pressure can be hard to cope with. Vang says she tries to explain the American education system to her parents, but wonders if they "get it."

("When they were younger they weren't educated like we were. So I know they want us to be educated but they need to understand it's hard for us too. And it's like we don't think the same as when they were in Thailand. they get mad at me when I tell them this.")

(rural highway, birds, people talking Hmong)

In her garden among the plants and birds Lee Yang sums up what she wants for her children in this country.

(She wants her kids to get an education and a good job.")

So it turns out despite the differences between cultures and the differences between the generations some things are universal.

For Bridging the Shores, I'm Patty Murray in Green Bay.