

BRIDGING THE SHORES
SEGMENT B-3: KAJSIAB HOUSE (PTSD)

Producer: Halsted
Length 4:24

Lead :

“Among the political issues the Hmong want addressed, is veterans care and services. More than 30 years past the Vietnam War, many Hmong veterans still suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. A unique, culturally-sensitive treatment center called Kajsiab [gah-SHEE-ah] House has helped many PTSD victims, though budget issues may force the innovative and culturally-sensitive facility to close. Some Hmong say they’d despair – and even consider ending their lives – if that happens. Gil Halsted visited the center at the Mendota Mental health Institute in Madison and prepared this report.

=====

open with chattering Hmong gathered for a breakfast

Every morning more than a hundred Hmong senior citizens gather for a mid morning snack in a large room in this nondescript one story institutional building. called Kajsiab(Ga Shee' ah) House. Men and women are clustered in small groups sipping coffee and munching on donuts.. the atmosphere is warm and cozy.

cut from Shwaw Vang " Many of the elders because they usually can't sleep well they get up at 4:30 or 5 in the morning and then they wait Kajsiab house to pick them up so they eat breakfast at about 6am and when they come in they have a light snack."

Shwaw Vang is a clinician at Kajsiab house. He says the word “Kajsiab” means –“relief from the stress of worrying about the safety of loved ones”. With Shwaw vang translating, 70-year old Xao Her Xiong says that relief means a brief respite from the real physical pain she suffers from post traumatic stress disorder or PTSD.

When she comes to Kajsiab it’s a feeling like when you see the sun rise over the horizon when she comes her the pain in her back in joints arms and hands disappears so it's a place of healing for her.

That healing comes mainly from sitting and chatting with other elderly Hmong refugees who suffer the same kinds of pain. Pain that Vang says comes from their experiences fighting with Americans on the losing side of the war in Vietnam in Laos 30 years and then decades of living in stark conditions in refugee camps in Thailand.

cut bring up vachou

66 year old Vachou Vang says he fell down from the pain he was feeling when he first arrived in the U-S again Shwaw Vang translates

cut he went to the doctor and he had physical pain but they couldn't find anything wrong with his body since then coming to Kajsiab house talking with staff here helped to explain the reason why he had those pain. "

Vachou Vang says another source of mental stress for older refugees is watching the traditional clan system disintegrate as the next generation of Hmong born in the U-S lose touch with their parents traditions.

CUT many of the young children here were getting involved with gangs and drugs and that was a sadness for him and caused much pain to see the community in such disarray.

But Shwaw Vang Says Kajsiab house offers a place to heal those wounds. Xao Her Xiong says without Kajsiab House many Hmong elders would have given up on adapting to their new life in America.

CUT She hopes that the community will continue to support Kajsiab house if there's no place like this she thinks that a lot of the leaders would have passed on already."

In a daily group meeting a Kajsiab house an intern translates for a psychiatrist who runs a group therapy session where people talk with each other about the stress of living with their past in an unfamiliar culture. Today the topics are people's fears about ending up in a nursing home and then the group tries to comfort a woman who just got news that her brother has died in Laos and she can't afford to go to the funeral.

cut

Vang says despite the fact that the center is now a model that Hmong communities in Minnesota and California are trying to duplicate, federal funds are drying up so now a county funds, Medicaid payments and small grants from local industries are just barely keeping Kajsiab House afloat . Vang says he's inspired by working with the elders and the center has also become a place for young Hmong to come and reconnect with their traditions.

For Bridging the Shores, I'm Gil Halsted in Madison.