

BRIDGING THE SHORES

SEGMENT B-2: Politics

Producer: Moberg

Length 5:46

Host:

In the decades since the first Hmong immigrants came to America, they have had trouble developing a political voice, and getting their people elected to political office. That is beginning to change, and one Midwestern woman is leading the way. Glen Moberg reports.

=====

capitol floor 00:04 "... There's a reddish pinkish stone around the third floor, that thin band, that's pipe stone"

Politicians hustle past a tour group under the opulent Minnesota state capitol dome. Among the most important is a person who sometimes feels out of place... the chair of the senate judiciary committee, and the highest elected Hmong official in America, Senator Mee Moua.

Moua 00:15 "When I walk into this magnificent building I have this weird, out of body experience that in another parallel universe I am strapping a big basket onto my back and walking barefoot on a dirt path to the rice paddies.

That parallel universe is Mee Moua's childhood home, half a world away in the jungles of Laos, and two centuries removed from the present.

Moua 00:24 "We lived deep, deep in the mountains, in a bamboo hut with a thatched roof. We cooked by firelight, no running water, no electricity. But even more important than the village in Laos, I lived for three years in a refugee camp in Thailand."

It was the late seventies, and the eight year old Moua had fled with her family to the Bahn Vee Nye camp, where she lived on a dirt floor, and played in a garbage dump. Her father had been a medic, helping the U.S. in the Vietnam War. It was the family's ticket out to a different world.

Moua 00:15 "It was very hard, but I think I was blessed to have come to the United States when I was only nine. You know, I grew up poor. We never went on vacations, we never went anywhere. But every Saturday I would spend hours and hours at the public library where I was transported to worlds that I had never been before."

And soon, she would be transported to the world of state politics.

rally 00:15 "bang bang bang, hmong speech, everyone know why we're here?" we are here to put the first Hmong American in the Minnesota state senate."

It was January of 2002... a special primary election for a vacant senate seat on St. Paul's east side. Mee Moua was an improbable long shot, one of four Democrats competing in a blue collar, predominantly white district. But she showed a knack for politics and organization.

door know 00:15 "knock knock knock. "Good morning." "Good morning." "How are you." "Fine." "My name is Mee Moua." "I know who you are. I'm glad you're running. We need someone good here on the east side." "All right!"

Moua and her supporters went door to door, distributing 20,000 pieces of literature, and registering hundreds of new voters. At a Hmong New Years celebration, she attracted the attention if not the endorsement of a powerful mentor, U.S. Senator and progressive icon Paul Wellstone.

Wellstone 00:04 "Here's what I would say, she's wonderful, she's great!"

On election day, a shaman prayed with incense and divined the future over the horns of a bull.

Shaman 00:05 "(chant in Hmong)

The prediction... Mee Moua would win. And defying the odds... she did.

Cheers 00:02

Moua 00:15 "Those of us who are only recently immigrated to this country, we have the deepest appreciation because the contrast is so stark, and that deeper appreciation translates into a very fierce sense of patriotism, that it could only happen in this country."

Moua has immersed herself in the day to day grind of state politics, compromising, and working out deals behind the scenes.

Hearing 00:04 "I wonder if there's been a discussion, of if that discussion ever took place. "We certainly did discuss that issue..."

And Minnesota Senate Majority Leader Larry Pogemiller says Moua HAS taken the lead on at least one sensitive issue.

Pogemiller 00:14 "I travelled with her to Thailand several months ago to deal with the exhumation issue of Hmong graves. It was interesting to watch how a person who had gone through as much as she had, handled that kind of pressure, dealing with the Thai government, and with various religious leaders in Thailand, and it was very impressive."

In Thailand, Moua was confronted with old memories of the refugee camps, and was angered by the desecration of Hmong burial sites. Her delegation confronted the Thai government...and the government backed down. Moua's passion for the issue was evident in her keynote speech at the Wisconsin Hmong Annual Conference in Wausau.

Moua speech 00:14 "They thought they could get away with destroying Hmong graves. It never even crossed their minds that Hmong people would have the will or the ability to protest their action."

And Moua told the young people in the audience ... that they too needed to stand up for their heritage, even as they embrace their new homeland.

Moua speech 00:20 "We Hmong are a proud people. We have great hopes and dreams. We have been chasing those dreams and hopes through many valleys and mountains, through wars, death and starvation, crossing countless borders, and our souls have searched through the centuries of time. And here we are today living in the greatest country on earth, the United States of America."

The speech had the desired effect on three young women... sisters Mai Lao and Nhia Xiong, and their cousin, Bao Xiong, all of Oshkosh.

Nhia Xiong 00:09 "It was a really inspiring and great speech she made. I'm really happy that we have a powerful Hmong lady like this."

Mai Lao Xiong 00:06 "There was a very powerful, strong, story going through my head the same time she was presenting her speech, I think that it was excellent."

Bao Xiong 00:07 "I thought it was really powerful, and she's a great leader. America gives us opportunities to rise up and beyond."

And what opportunities lie ahead for Mee Moua?

Moua 00:27 "People ask me facetiously whether I want to be President some day, and that's such a compliment, but technically I can't qualify to be President because I was not born in this country." "Alright, so the presidency is out. How about Governor? Do you want to be Governor" "(laughs) Oh you know again, I really enjoy policy making at the state level..." "You're not answering the question" "Most young people say that you never say no. Even contemplating being Governor of the State of Minnesota is not out of the question."

Mee Moua wants a new generation of Hmong leaders to know that for all of them, nothing is out of the question. For Bridging the Shores, I'm Glen Moberg in Wausau.