

BRIDGING THE SHORES
SEGMENT A-2: TRANSITIONS

Producer: Halsted

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Lead :

Hmong refugees had a pretty hard time adjusting to life in the U.S. at first. Not only were they strangers in a strange land ---but very few people in the homogeneous, largely-white communities they arrived in knew why the Hmong were arriving in the first place. Gil Halsted reports on the Hmong's immigration experience in Marathon County, Wisconsin...

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The city of Wausau was the least ethnically diverse city in the nation in the 80's and 90's, when waves of Hmong refugees began settling there. One of the biggest obstacles they faced was that most locals didn't know that the Hmong had been recruited by the CIA to fight the communist North Vietnamese during the Vietnam War. All most people knew about these newcomers was that they looked Asian and had come from somewhere near Vietnam.

Phyllis Bermingham ran the county job training office and worked closely with the Hmong community. She says that lack of knowledge was enough to create an atmosphere of distrust

Cut "It must have been in the early 90's I was getting my hair cut and the woman who cut my hair said "Phyllis can you tell me why these people came here?"

Over a decade, the Hmong population ballooned from a few hundred to more than 5-thousand. By 1995, the Hmong made up 20 percent of Wausau's population. That year, a bitter debate developed in the community over a plan to bus Hmong children to largely white schools to increase their chances of learning English more quickly. It got national media coverage from Morley Safer and a crew from CBS's 60-Minutes. The report highlighted the negative side of Wausau's struggle to integrate the Hmong..

"They are workless on welfare in Wausau (you wanna take cash today) they may lack technical skills they may claim to primitive custom but they've gained a perfect understanding of how public assistance works and they know that Uncle Sam never misses a pay day (have a good day) and neither do they."

Peter Yang, director of the Wausau Hmong Mutual Assistance Association was disappointed .

Cut: I thought it was very one sided story it just talked about immigrants being on welfare and talked nothing about the contribution or the positive aspect of the community."

The report included comments from community leaders like Fred Prehn then the chair of the school board. Blaming U-S immigration policy for causing Wausau's problems.

Cut "give us the time to breathe give us the time to get over this conflict. Immigration is the lifeblood of America, to stop it I don't think would be right. Just slow it down."

"to me that is just racist"

That's Hmong community leader Vilai Her told telling sixty minutes, that slowing things down was the wrong approach.

"There's never too many. The United States is for everybody , never did it say that a town can only hold so many people or so many of this kind."

But since 1995 racial tensions have eased and the Hmong have become an integral part of the Wausau community. Peter Yang says overt expressions of racism against the Hmong no longer occur. He says that's largely because the Hmong have proven themselves to be contributing members of the community.

All the able bodied adults in the community are working and as a result we estimate about 70 percent f the Hmong families in Marathon county are now owning their own homes.

But it's not only that. At least some of the changes are the result of outreach projects like "Tapestry" a play written in the mid 90's by a Wausau school teacher. Through performing it a multiracial cast tried to educate the community about the Hmong and the challenges of racism they faced.

" stupid chink why don't you go back where you came from"

Tapestry ends with the cast holding up a traditional story cloth with images sewn onto it depicting Hmong History from their creation myth - up to their arrival in America

We are a 4 thousand year old people this is our story cloth for America

Despite efforts like these, the Hmong are still a segregated minority in Wausau. But Peter Yang says he's working with the city on a leadership development program to encourage Hmong professionals to join local civic organizations.

Unfortunately we have not been very successful in increasing that number in a visible way. we need to keep pushing and encouraging people to get involved"

And Phyllis Bermingham, who's worked to forge ties between local businesses and the Hmong community says things have improved even tough it's been gradual. She recalls a Hmong woman ten years ago who was about to enroll her child in kindergarten.

Cut "and she said ..at least he won't be spit on like I was what a heartbreaking thing to say at least he won't be spit on."

there is less tension in the Wausau schools these days at least partly because Hmong children now have the opportunity to be taught by Hmong teachers.

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