



One Girl's Story

ARTICLE by Debra Carr-Elsing

Adjusting to life in Madison was a big leap for Mai Ya Xiong (pronounced "shong"), who was born in a Thailand refugee camp. She didn't speak English, and she had never seen snow before. Nor had she ever felt cold weather. "Everything was very different here, and I remember being afraid to go out of the house," recalls Mai Ya, who was 7 when her Hmong family came to the United States in 1987.

Hers is a contemporary refugee story, and it's told in a new children's book by Madison author Sheila Cohen. It's titled "Mai Ya's Long Journey" (Wisconsin Historical Society Press, \$12.95).

"I met Mai Ya when she was quite young, and I was very impressed by members of her family and their sense of resilience and hopefulness, and yet they had gone through so much," Cohen says. "I felt they could be a good role model for anyone faced with difficult times." That's when she started writing "Mai Ya's Long Journey," which could be typical of the stories of more than 200,000 Hmong people who now live in the United States and who struggle to adjust to American society while maintaining their own culture as a free people.

In Wisconsin, the Hmong population is more than 47,000. It is the third largest Hmong settlement in the country, topped only by those in California and Minnesota. "I really learned what close connections they have as families and as clans," Cohen says. "A strong thread in Hmong culture is the fact that they're always there for one another. They have a great sense of community."

Early in the book, young readers learn how the Hmong secretly aided the United States military during the Vietnam War and how they had to escape their hillside homes in Laos to save their lives. It's a journey that finds them resettling in an unfamiliar society.

"Being a Hmong American, I wasn't quite sure who I was when I was growing up," Mai Ya says. "It was very hard to balance the traditions of my heritage with American culture." With the support of her family, however, Mai Ya faced each challenge as it came her way and found success. She graduated from East High School in 1998, and served as Miss Lao-Hmong Wisconsin from 2000 to 2001. "The pageant was about discovering yourself and being committed to giving back to the Hmong community," Mai Ya says.

She started a Girl Scout troop for middle school Hmong girls, and, as a college student, became involved in the Hmong American Student Organization and the Asian American Student Union. In 2002 she received a bachelor's degree in finance and marketing from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She is now a merchandise analyst for Kohl's department store.

"I'm very proud of this book because I want other immigrants to know that they're not alone in their struggles to fit in here," she says. "It's OK to feel different, and, eventually, feelings of self-doubt can be overcome. It's very important, however, to know yourself and to trust your own instincts."

In elementary school, Mai Ya struggled to speak English well because she wanted to be just like her American classmates. "I wanted to be someone else and part of the mainstream, but I've learned to really appreciate my Hmong heritage," she says. "It's great to have that culture, too."

In a lot of ways, Mai Ya was a pretty typical American teenager. She stayed late after school when she needed extra help, held a part-time job in a T-shirt shop and fought with her parents while struggling to establish her own identity. Yet Mai Ya, the first-born daughter of Hmong immigrants, wasn't just rebelling against mom and dad, but an entire culture.

"I wanted to blend in with everyone else, and have American friends," she said. Eventually, she learned to balance her place in the Hmong community with her status as an American. Her family left the Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand and arrived in Madison when she was 8 years old.

Author Cohen, the teacher of Mai Ya's seventh-grade ESL class, noticed the resiliency of the girl and also of her mother, who would frequently come in to chaperone and make egg rolls for the class despite speaking very little English. "They just struck me as a family that had a hopeful attitude even though they were going through a lot," she said.

Following the Vietnam War, the influx of South East Asian children into her classrooms and a lack of literature depicting the culture convinced Cohen to write her own book on the Hmong people. "I knew very little about them at that time, and their classmates knew even less," she said. "I want people to have an understanding of what the Hmong people have gone through in order to get to this country."

Though she initially rejected her heritage, Mai Ya began to take an interest in high school. She volunteered for both United Way and the United Refugee Service, and formed an Asian club at her school. But she and her siblings continued to assert themselves, which didn't always harmonize with the expectations of the Hmong community.

"My father had to bend a lot of rules for his kids," she said. "We had to take a stand and educate our parents to what is important in this culture." For example, Xiong, who attended UW-Milwaukee and now works at Kohl's as a merchandise analyst, is single. The Hmong tradition usually expects young women to marry by 18. "A girl with a good reputation would have been married already," she said, being half-serious. "I want to live my dream and not fall into that trap." "She's sort of a frontrunner in that area," said Cohen.

Mai Ya hopes the book will serve as a historical document, as well as a resource to students and teachers. And maybe even help others reach a conclusion it took her years to discover. "I want immigrants to understand that it's OK to be different," she said.

Mai Ya's Long Journey can be ordered from the Wisconsin Historical Society,
<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org>

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