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Asian Pacific
Cultural Center



2008 Dragon Festival

Hmong Cultural Center Fundraising Banquet



Best Keej students (from left) Teng Lee, Michael Vang, Chai Lee, Txuzong Yang, and best dance students, Mai Ku Lee and Chu Cheng Lee.



Hmong Cultural Center Board Chair, Sean Lee, (on stage) introduced fellow board members (from left) Khue Yang, Treasurer (Assistant Vice President, University National Bank); Kin Vang (Capital Tax Consulting); Dr. Gerald Fry (Professor, College of Education, University of Minnesota); Dr. Gale Mason-Chagil, Secretary (Cultural Inquiry Consulting and Adjunct Professor, Metropolitan State University); Kamai (Dao) Xiong, Vice Chair (Southeast Asian Parent Advisor, PACER); and, Nao Thao (St. Paul Public Schools).

By Tom LaVenture

ST. PAUL (October 28, 2007) – The Hmong Cultural Center held its 2007 Fundraising Banquet last Sunday, at FoodSmart Supermarket Restaurant in St. Paul. The event drew hundreds to help support youth programs at the Cultural Center and for new materials for what may be the best Hmong academic archive in the world.

Seng Leng, Board Chair, spoke about the vital importance of community support to make the hard work of staff and volunteers meaningful and with a purpose. Without their participation and support the program would be meaningless.

"A lot of parents send their kids here for programs and this is a way to bring all the staff, kids and parents together to see what we have accomplished and to generate more support for the program," said Leng. "You are the foundation. Without you this would be meaningless for us. Thanks to all of you."

Leng explained this fourth event has expanded to include parents and participants, and now is open to others who have not heard of HCC and would like to learn more. This is chance to show the greater

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community the youth and bridge programs the resource center.

Leng noted that since last January the HCC has welcomed hundreds of visitors to the center. He said most of these visitors are local, and that requests for Resource Center information is from largely non-Hmong researcher. He would like to see more Hmong visitors coming to learn about their culture in the programs and research their academic library to find out about their past and present with the collections of graduate and doctoral work, studies, surveys and data analysis from around the world, by Hmong and non Hmong researchers.

The Keynote lecture was delivered by Gary Yia Lee, Ph.D. a Social Anthropologist from Sydney, Australia, and now a visiting scholar at Concordia University. Dr. Lee spoke on the topic, "Hmong Culture: Past, Present, and Future."

Dr. Lee began by talking about the refugee immigrants of the 1970s to the 1990s, who he said understood their culture, but did not necessarily know how to teach all of their history and its meaning to the next generation.

As they worked hard to begin a new life, they feared that all that was important to them as a people was going to be lost to history. As they encouraged their children to succeed in American society, they did not know how to balance the two, and so all too often the children did not see their identity and would only later discover its importance to them and a complete person.

Lee said that as people began to look introspectively when asked 'who are you? What is Hmong?'

"For that reason, the HCC is a vital institution that is rebuilding the history and culture," said Lee. "Children learn to understand the meaning of their traditional clothing, the language, the songs, the dance, the keej, and the stories and legacy."

Lee said the transformation is now with a younger generation that takes pride in who they are. He explained the "Hmong culture" has adapted in the American sense through the video movies, pop CDs, and that this is something "beautiful," and not to be feared. It has created a sense of nostalgia for people who have not experienced the culture as it existed before the war, and have kept it alive in media that makes it accessible to youth.

"The new culture" is not something to fear, as some do, said Lee. As it is developing based on the shared experience and fueled by the knowledge of Hmong history and culture on a scale not known before, it will become something that will teach the essence of being Hmong in ways that the old ways could not accomplish with kids today.

He said that each person has their own experience and knowledge of their culture based on their upbringing and can look further into the vast resources of the HCC library to have their questions answered that are often too difficult to ask until they understand the context they can learn from the academic resources.

"These are the folklore, the cultural and religious rituals, which will have better definition now that they are being written, and the use of technology is making it more accessible than ever before."

"The HCC as resource center collection will teach young Hmong who they want to be," said Lee. "Adapting to be good citizens of country means having to have pride in own identity first."

The event was also an opportunity to single out the many volunteers who help the limited staff follow through on all the growing programs. Without their dedication none of the programs would be possible.

The HCC staff, led by Txong Pao Lee, executive director, includes: Thai Vang, Adult Basic Education Instructor; Tougeu Leepalao, Cultural Arts Programs Instructor; Xai Lor, Librarian and Adult Basic Education Instructor; Nara Chea, Adult Basic Education Instructor; Nai Christopher Lo, Building Bridges and Men's Circle Programs; Jonny Lee, Blia Lee, Dance Instructor; Qeej Mentors, Jonny Vang, Kong Meng Lee and Mexai Xiong.

The volunteers include Ray Murray, Volunteer Librarian, who replaced Mark E. Pfeifer, Ph.D., who remains an Advisor to HCC Staff and Board at his new position at the University of Texas A & M at

OPINION & EDITORIAL

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Corpus Christi.

The HCC Board Members were also introduced. Among them was Dr. Gerald Fry (Professor, College of Education, University of Minnesota). He takes groups of students and community (there is a waiting list) as part of his International Education Block Study to Northeast Thailand and Laos – in part as the study of the Hmong culture and people. Many of the students are American-born Hmong going to the home of their parents for the first-time.

“I was introduced the HCC through the University of Minnesota four years ago and was invited to join the board by Dr. Yang Dao,” said Fry. “I think it’s a great organization, and maybe the best in the world at what they do.”

Nao Thao, ELL team, board member and St. Paul Public Schools staff, started his kids in the program a couple years ago and slowly became more involved. Around four months ago he assumed leadership of the youth services programs and joined the board.

Nai Christopher Lo, coordinator, Building Bridges and Men’s Circle Programs, works with the Hmong Enrichment Circle, a program that helps Hmong male high school students. He finds they perform better when they get together and find that others share their experience.

“There is strength in Hmong,” he said.

Blia Lee, dance instructor, was present to show how much her boys and girls have progressed since taking over one-year ago, from Ms. Yer Lo, who was her instructor for the previous four years.

According to Lee, the kids perform traditional Hmong songs about love, the new year and celebration, along with some blending of Lao, Thai and Indian dance into other original choreography.

Mai Ku Lee and Chu Cheng Lee were singled out as the outstanding dancers for 2007.

Three groups of Keej performers of the traditional bamboo-wind instrument in Hmong culture, entertained guests. The groups ranged in experience and types of songs.

Teng Lee, Michael Vang, Chai Lee and Txuzong Yang were singled out as the Best Keej Performers for 2007.

St. Paul Ward One City Council Person Debbie Montgomery was present to say she is happy to see so many young people carry on their culture.

“The blending of peoples is what America is all about,” she said. “It is great to see vital organizations like HCC ensure that kids learn and embrace their cultural identity and traditions.”

Montgomery traveled to Thailand in 1995, as part of former Mayor Randy Kelly’s mission to assess the status of Hmong refugees living at the Wat Tham Krabok, a Buddhist monastery in Saraburi, Thailand, and would come to live in St. Paul. The Hmong population is large in her district. She said the Hmong have been a great source of support and she pledged to work with them in the future on protecting the small business owners, who she called the essential engine to the economic vitality of the city.

St. Paul School Board Vice President Kazoua Kong Thao was also present. She reflected on the past four years with HCC, saying she is “excited and honored” to be part of the organization.

Kong Thai said HCC helps kids embrace their identity. She was not proud to be Hmong as a child growing up, because she “didn’t know the culture of her parents and didn’t speak the language.” That she does now makes all the difference in her perspective and she wants HCC to help kids of today have that same experience.

The Hmong Cultural Center is located at 995 University Ave W., St. Paul. Call Xai Lor at 651-917-9937 or visit online at www.hmongcc.org.

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