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## Hmong Cultural Center exhibit traces immigrants' history

By Sarah Horner

[shorner@pioneerpress.com](mailto:shorner@pioneerpress.com) (<mailto:shorner@pioneerpress.com?subject=TwinCities.com:> )

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An image from an exhibit at the Hmong Cultural Center shows Hmong residents of Liberty Plaza enjoying wintertime fun, sometime in the early 1980s. (Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society)

The black and white photograph is one of Mark Pfeifer's favorite elements in an exhibit that opened at the Hmong Cultural Center in St. Paul this week.

It shows three Hmong children bundled up in winter gear outside St. Paul's Liberty Plaza, where the trio is busy building an igloo out of snow. The Minnesota State Capitol stands behind them in the background.

The shot -- taken in the early 1980s -- can be seen on one of the 10 wall panels in the cultural center's new display.

The exhibit takes people on a journey through Hmong history in Minnesota, starting with what propelled the Hmong to flee Laos in the 1970s all the way to highlights from what life is like for Hmong in the Twin Cities today.

"It's a really unique exhibit," said Pfeifer, who serves as director of programs and development at the Hmong Cultural Center, which is located on University Avenue in St. Paul.

"The Minnesota History Center did a great job with their exhibit (We are Hmong Minnesota)... but that is going to end in a few days. We hope to be that (permanent) place where people can come to learn about Hmong history and culture," Pfeifer said.

One panel, titled Hmong Minnesotan Achievements, details notable political accomplishments over the past 40 years, including the historic moment that took place in 2002 when Mee Moua became the first Hmong to win a seat to a state legislature in the United States.

Another slide delves into Hmong activism in Minnesota, including the time many in the Hmong community protested "negative stereotypes of Hmong culture (made) on Tom Barnard's popular KQRS radio show" back in 1998, according to the exhibit.

The panels are hung along two walls in the cultural center. Glass display cases showcasing traditional Hmong clothing and implements allow visitors to explore another dimension of Hmong culture.

The launch of the exhibit coincides with an expansion to the center's library, which already boasts one of the most robust collections of books and scholarly articles on Hmong history and culture in the world, and the biggest in the United States, Pfeifer said.

The center has added about \$6,000 worth of new materials this fall with funds from a grant and also has plans to expand its collection of children's books.

The new exhibit -- Hmong Minnesota: Yesterday and Today -- was also funded by a grant.

### IF YOU GO



The Hmong Cultural Center is at 375 University Ave. W #204 in St. Paul.

For more information, visit the [cultural center's website](http://www.hmongcc.org/) (<http://www.hmongcc.org/>).

Txongpao Lee, executive director of the Hmong Cultural Center, recently reflected on the changes that have taken place at the center since it first opened in 1992.

At that time, it served primarily as the local preserver of traditional Hmong marriage and funeral ceremonies.

Its focus has broadened since, Lee said, noting that the center now also offers English and citizenship classes to refugees, as well as a Hmong 101 course aimed at non-Hmong and younger Hmong generations looking to learn the basics of Hmong history and culture. It's also expanded its offering of courses on traditional Hmong dance and music.

Txongpao Lee said he has hope that the center will continue to evolve in the future, perhaps one day becoming a "big institution" that wears several hats: Hmong history and cultural center, Hmong academic library, multicultural resource center and St. Paul tourist destination.

If his dreams come true, that would happen in the new building, too.

"We hope down the road... to become more like the history center or a major institution that people from all over come to see," Txongpao Lee said. "It will be a long time ... but if we stay like this, we can slowly get there."

Sarah Horner can be reached at 651-228-5539. Follow her at [twitter.com/hornsarah](http://twitter.com/hornsarah) (<http://twitter.com/hornsarah>).

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For more information, visit the cultural center's web site at <http://www.hmongcc.org/> (<http://www.hmongcc.org/>)

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