



LETTER from the President

Dear Friends,

Over the past year, our Board of Trustees held strategic conversations about men's leadership role at the Women's Foundation. After careful consideration, the Board voted to include men on our Board of Trustees, starting in May 2012.

Our decision to include men on the Board is based on an understanding of the natural progression of social movements. All such movements — civil rights, LGBT rights, labor — began with only the marginalized group in leadership and membership. Over time, these movements evolved to include leadership and membership outside of the marginalized group, adding allies to strengthen the movement and results.

Similarly, the Women's Foundation knows that in order to reach our mission of gender equality, we must engage the broadest and most diverse group possible, including men. Unless we broaden our leadership to include men, we know that gender equality, economic justice, child care, reproductive health, safety and security and women's leadership will continue to be marginalized as "women's issues," and our movement will stall.

Men have long played a role in the Foundation's work as committee members, donors, and grantee leaders. Take the story of Pheng Thao, who we profile in this issue. Pheng is the director of Family Dialogues, a program of Hmong Women Achieving Together, a Social Change Fund grantee. Pheng's inherent understanding of Hmong culture enables him to plant the seeds of gender equality, tend them carefully, and watch equality grow for women and girls in his community.

Here's to Pheng's leadership and growing more feminist male leaders in our movement!

Thank you for your continued partnership in our work. Together, we are growing equality and funding change.

Onward,

Lee Roper-Batker,
President & CEO



GRANTEE PROFILE | Hnub Tshiab: Hmong Women Achieving Together

PHENG THAO: Pushing Boundaries to Affect Systems Change

by Julie Corty

If every cultural community needs at least one leader to push against the grain for social change, Pheng Thao certainly qualifies. Born in rural Laos and immigrated to the United States at age five, he spends most of his time trying to make life more equitable and safe for women in the Twin Cities' Hmong community.

Pheng (pronounced with a silent 'h'), despite being raised in a community where male privilege is the rule, wants a world where that is the exception — and he wants other men to join him in that quest.

"What I want is for them to understand that if women were treated fairly, not owned like property, their own lives would be better; they would experience more love, less stress, and more connection with other men."

But in the Hmong culture, he explained, this is an extremely threatening idea and not one that is openly received. Determined to start having this conversation, Pheng facilitates "dialogues" between men and women.

Funded with a grant from the Women's Foundation of Minnesota, Family Dialogues is a program of Hnub Tshiab: Hmong Women Achieving Together (HWAT), a nonprofit in St. Paul that seeks to be a catalyst for lasting cultural, institutional, and social change to improve the lives of Hmong women.

The dialogues are held three times per year with a goal of loosening the kind of cultural conditioning that does not allow women to be seen as individuals, separate from their husbands. This bias, Pheng explains, means that women who are single or divorced may not have positions of



As Family Dialogues program lead, Pheng Thao understands that the pathway to gender equality within the Hmong community must begin within Hmong families.

authority or value in the community, no matter how accomplished they are. He believes this is a tragic waste of resources in a community that worries about its own future and integrity.

Devaluing women can also lead to domestic abuse and sexual assault, both seen in the community as "normal" and a husband's right. During Pheng's career as a community organizer and advocate for victims of sexual and domestic abuse, he has seen how a culture's prevailing beliefs can excuse those with power from taking responsibility for their actions. The only way to end this kind of behavior, he said is "...to dismantle the patriarchal system and liberate women to be partners of men and not servants."

One wonders how this smiling, polite man, 28 years old and newly married himself, came to hold what must be

- Continued on other side...

A FUTURE

minnesota girls ARE NOT FOR SALE

A campaign of the Women's Foundation of Minnesota

SNAPSHOTS

Gathering for Connection, Education & Action to End the Sex Trafficking of Girls in Minnesota

JULY 20, 2011



1) Keynote speaker Rachel Lloyd, founder and executive director of GEMS: Girls Educational & Mentoring Services, NY. GEMS is the nation's largest organization offering direct services to American victims of child sex trafficking.

2) The audience of 200 was riveted by Rachel's inspiring stories about her personal experiences as a survivor and daily work with survivors through GEMS.

3) Suzanne Koepplinger (*mic*) (MN Indian Women's Resource Center) was one of seven panelists in discussion with the audience, which included (*l-r*) Vednita Carter (*Breaking Free*), Ramsey County Attorney John Choi, U.S. Marshal Sharon Lubinski, St. Louis County Attorney Mark Rubin, Jeff Bauer (*The Family Partnership*), and Michele Garnett McKenzie (*The Advocates for Human Rights*; Bauer, McKenzie not pictured); (*far right*) Robyne Robinson was the panel's moderator.

4) Sha Cage and MaMa mOsAiC Theater for Women closed the conference with a powerful performance about the lives of four girl survivors of sex trafficking.

- Hnub Tshiab, *continued...*

considered by some in his community as radical opinions. He points to three primary influences.

One was his paternal grandfather who lived with his family after immigrating from Laos. "He grew up an orphan and was abused by his older brother. He was such a kind father himself that he never beat his children and only used harsh words once in his life against my father."

Another story is about when his grandfather made a New Year's sacrifice of a rooster, a tradition in Hmong culture. He was supposed to only give the boiled meat to the boys who would, as the cultural reasoning goes, grow up to keep wealth *in the family*, while the girls would take it away *to the husband's family*.

"But my grandfather always refused and said he would give to both his sons and daughters, because both were hungry."

Pheng was impressed also with the kind of marriage his grandfather and grandmother had. "He taught me how to have a relationship with a woman, that they did not need to submit, and you should communicate and negotiate with each other. They had a true love story. If they had a fight, soon after I would hear them laughing."

Another event that deeply impacted Pheng and his family was the murder of his five-year-old sister during a home robbery in Wisconsin. Pheng was 11 years old. The family moved to

get away from the memories and the public attention, but Pheng did not forget.

While in high school, he interned with the district attorney's office. In college, he was a volunteer advocate for sexual assault victims. And in graduate school in Milwaukee, he volunteered as a special advocate for children, eventually becoming a juvenile correctional officer.

With each new experience, Pheng grew to understand more and more about the tragedy that took his sister and devastated his family, as well as its legal resolution. (A man, a stranger to the family, was caught and sentenced to life in prison.)

A third influence on Pheng was a college course in gender and violence. It made him aware that he had freedoms not available to his sisters.

His experiences in the court system deepened this perspective. "I saw that women have a unique kind of strength, audacity and will to survive. They can be stripped of everything, have everything taken from them, and still have hope — and even make amends with the men who beat them. Men couldn't do that," said Pheng, who punctuated these bold statements with laughter, as though still amazed at what he's discovering about gender inequities in his community.

In his conversations with Hmong men, Pheng tries to lead them to understand how their own experiences of being "owned" by their fathers and grandfathers have constricted their lives. He tells them how this lack of freedom is what Hmong women feel, and even more so, in their families, communities and relationships.

When asked how many men are starting to understand the connection, Pheng again laughed and said, "Maybe one percent! And that is the challenge: how will we get the other 99 percent to the table?"

The irony, Pheng notes, is that Hmong women are taking advantage of educational and career opportunities, but the men are not following their examples and are not giving them the respect they deserve in their own homes. According to what he calls "The Pheng Theory," Hmong men can no longer afford to feel threatened by this change or to be held back by the traditions of their ancestors.

"A strong sense of family and community is essential. But how do we keep these at the forefront while being able to elevate the status of our women and girls? This is the only way the Hmong culture will survive -- and we must do it together."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Julie Corty is a community volunteer, writer and trustee of the Women's Foundation of Minnesota.*