

Change through participation

Former Senate intern and House candidate, Thao brings a lifetime of experience to his new position

By DAVID MAEDA

While Rep. Cy Thao (DFL-St. Paul) recently gave a tour of an upstairs bedroom turned into a small art studio in his house in the Frogtown neighborhood of St. Paul, his wife Lee Vang quietly got their 1-year-old daughter, Cyanne, ready for the day ahead.



Rep. Cy Thao

Examples of Thao's award winning artwork adorn the walls throughout the century old house—many of the paintings depicting the experiences of Hmong people as well as personal memories of the artist. The oil paintings are rich in color and visuals—using every bit of the canvas to help tell their stories.

And much of the work may never have come to be if Thao had experienced something different while a college intern with the Minnesota Senate 10 years ago.

Thao left his internship feeling disillusioned with the wheeling and dealing lawmaking process. He said that seeing the behind the scenes compromises necessary in building consensus squelched any further interest in a possible political career at the Capitol.

Instead he turned his energy to his art. Two years ago he was awarded a \$40,000 Bush Artist Fellowship, and he has spent much time since working on a 50-piece collection depicting the migration of the Hmong people. The collection was recently displayed at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

But the desire to help the community at large never left him. He has remained active as a community organizer and ran for a House seat in 2000 as a member of the Independence Party. The University of Minnesota-Morris graduate said his life experience helped teach him the best way to affect change is to be a participant in the process.

"I'm at an age where I'm comfortable enough to say I'm willing to work within the system to change the system," Thao said. "That wasn't the case 10 years ago. I just wanted to

change the system without knowing what I wanted to change. I just wanted change."

Thus a decade after his first exposure to the lawmaking process Thao finds himself a newly elected member anxious to work with others to improve the state. He said being an immigrant helped him learn firsthand how state government works—and sometimes doesn't—for poorer people.

Thao was born in Laos in 1972. His family left the war-torn country for a refugee camp in Thailand when he was 2. They came to the

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United States six years later. Thao said his father was reluctant to come to America at first, preferring instead to see if the situation in Laos would stabilize enough for the family to return home.

Like many newcomers to the Twin Cities, Thao's first impressions included shock at the cold weather. When his family arrived in March fresh from the tropical Thailand climate he was dressed in a T-shirt, shorts and sandals.

Thao said his parents struggled to make it in their new country having to find the time to learn English in addition to working long hours at minimum wage jobs just to make ends meet. He said without the state's welfare programs his family would have had a difficult time surviving.

But he said his father decided after a few years in the new country that the only way his family could succeed was to become self-supporting.

"I remember we had a meeting and my father sat us down and said, 'OK we're going to lose our benefits, our health benefits, everything. We're going to get off welfare.'"

A teenager at the time, Thao said he in many

ways became the head of the household as both of his parents took on multiple jobs. His father now owns a clothing store in St. Paul.

"Another piece of why I'm so interested in being a part of the state Legislature is to be in a position to help decide what direction we want to take those (welfare) programs in," Thao said.

He said one of the priorities for his district is economic development and renovating run-down homes and businesses. He said such a renovation not only helps spur the neighborhood economy but also helps reduce crime.

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Sen. Mee Moua (DFL-St. Paul) said Thao's

background as a community activist will serve him well in the Legislature.

"Cy is very outspoken and assertive. He doesn't hesitate to stand up and speak his mind," Moua said. "He has a very likable personality and the ability to defuse animosity, particularly face to face."

DISTRICT 65A

2002 population: 36,610

Largest city: St. Paul

County: Ramsey

Location: Twin Cities

Top concern: "I know a lot of poor people who want to work but are sort of stuck in a trap. If we are going to cut benefits I want to see more programs to help them find jobs — adult education programs — making sure they learn enough English to get jobs. I want to see more of that versus just cutting."

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