

Lah Thao uses martial arts to overcome bullying

By Keith Uhlig
Wausau Daily Herald

WAUSAU, Wisconsin (AP) — Growing up Hmong in Wausau during the 1990s wasn't easy.

It was the height of cultural and political upheaval created in the wake of the Hmong immigration wave that brought about a massive change in the racial profile of the community. School leaders were grappling with integration issues. Social-service agencies were stretched. And many longtime residents believed Asian newcomers were demolishing their vision of what an ideal community should look like.

For Lah Thao, the son of an Asian father and white mother, the times were arguably even more difficult than for the typical Hmong child. He's 35 years old now, a business owner, and a teacher at EEA Learning Academy, a Wausau School District charter school. But the memories still sting: Hmong kids telling him he belonged with white kids, and the white kids not accepting him because he was Hmong. He remembers being taunted, kids yelling at him, "Go home you (expletive) gook."

"I had my fair shares of struggles in high school," Thao said.

He started wrestling in elementary school. Thao used the sport to channel aggression, but he still often found himself answering taunts with taunts, punches with punches. Sometimes, he became the bully himself, he said.



His teenage anger was somewhat softened by strong family support and a firm Christian faith. But he also found a turning point, he said, when he began to study taekwondo, a Korean martial art that blends karate and other traditional fighting styles. The practice gave him discipline and self-confidence, Thao said, and curbed his tendency to lash out when

someone came at him.

"Taekwondo is primarily a defensive art," Thao told the *Wausau Daily Herald*. "It just helped me stay calm. ... I didn't get into any more physical confrontations after that."

Knowing that he could do things such as break bricks with his bare hands changed his attitude. He got more patient. His

DISCIPLINE & SELF-CONFIDENCE.

Owner and instructor Lah Thao, right, trains his students at the Rising Son in Wausau, Wisconsin. Thao uses martial arts to overcome bullying. (T'xer Zhon Kha/The Post-Crescent via AP)

confidence in himself got stronger. Things got better.

Today, as a teacher and the father of two daughters, Aerial, 15, and Akaya, 11, he still battles bullying, this time as an adult who works to curb it.

Overt racism isn't as prevalent today in Wausau as it was 20 years ago, Thao said, but it's still there. And kids face different challenges than he did, including the presence of online bullying.

Parents need to be aware of what their kids are thinking and feeling, he said, watching for the signs of bullying that erode a child's self-confidence and wellbeing.

"Make sure you know what your kids are doing," Thao said.

As a teacher, his main strategy against bullying is getting to know his students.

"In our school, we get the benefit of developing strong relationships, and that's the key," Thao said.

He also uses the tool that helped him deal with bullies when he was a kid — martial arts and physical exercise. He takes a group of EEA students on an 83-mile bike ride from Weston to Howard on the Mountain Bay Trail. Thao also has received grant money to offer martial-arts training at the school. Both of those activities help kids often understand they are capable of doing more than they thought.

In graveyard of dead coral in Pacific, hope and life bloom

By Seth Borenstein
AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON — In a ghost town of dead coral off a remote Pacific island, scientists have found a bit more life.

In excursions a year ago and then last April, scientists examined the normally stunning coral reefs around the island of Kiritimati and pronounced it mostly a boneyard of dead coral. About 85 percent of the coral was dead, 10 percent was sick and bleached but still technically alive, and only five percent was doing OK.

The same scientists returned in November and found six to seven percent of the coral is alive and not bleached, said University of Victoria coral reef scientist Julia Baum, speaking by Skype from the island.

"We left with a sense of dread and came back with a renewed

purpose because there are some corals that literally came back from the brink," said Georgia Tech climate scientist Kim Cobb, who returned from the expedition earlier. "It's the best we could have hoped for."

Many of the fish that rely on the reef and had been absent seem to be back, Cobb said.

Hot water — mostly from El Niño, the natural occasional warming of the Pacific that changes weather worldwide, and manmade global warming — had made the area one of the worst hit coral spots in the world. Later, nearby Jarvis Island was even more damaged. And the death of 85 percent of the coral of the better known and much larger Great Barrier Reef has been reported, said C. Mark Eakin, coral reef watch coordinator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

"But despite this mass



mortality, there are a few small signs of hope," Baum said. "It's clear that coral reefs have great resilience and the coral here is trying to recover."

Not only has some of the bleached coral recovered, she said, but "there are coral babies

that have settled on the reef sometime in the last year to year-and-a-half and these are the reef's best hope for recovery."

A study published recently in the journal *Current Biology* goes back more than a million years and finds that even during mass

CORAL COMEBACK? Georgia Tech climate scientist Kim Cobb explores underwater on the remote Pacific island of Kiritimati in November, finding a bit of hope and life amid what in April was a ghost town of dead coral. Cobb used bags and drills to examine the coral and take core samples. (Alyssa Atwood, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration/Georgia Tech via AP)

die-offs, coral species are able to rebound.

Eakin points to Scott reef off western Australia where 12 years after the damaging 1998 El Niño coral die-off, nearly half the original reef revived. But it was damaged again by the recent El Niño.

Even after the recovery seen at Kiritimati, Baum is wary: "It's like having a patient who is very sick and instead of letting them recover we keep infecting them with more and more illnesses. There's only so much that any person — or any natural system — can take."



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