

Wisconsin Hmong leader emphasizes cultural understanding

By Lauren French
The Leader-Telegram

EAU CLAIRE, Wis. (AP) — When Vincent Xiong was in college, one of his professors asked him a question he couldn't answer.

"Who are you?" his professor asked. Xiong casually replied, "I'm Vince."

His professor pressed further: "Yeah, but who are you? Do you know your culture, where your parents came from? Can you speak the language? What religion do you practice?"

Xiong has some memories of the Thai refugee camp in Nongkhai that was his home from age five to eight-and-a-half years old: the smell of sewage running down the middle of the street, expired fish for dinner, violence against women and other refugees who tried to cross the fence, and fear.

But mostly, Xiong has memories of growing up in Oklahoma City and later Appleton, where his family was among the first Hmong families to arrive after fleeing Southeast Asia in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Xiong's family was one of only two living in Oklahoma City when they arrived in December 1979.

As the eldest son in his family, Xiong began working at an early age to help his parents and siblings fight through poverty. As the years went on, Xiong adapted to U.S. culture, and his ability to



speak Hmong and Thai slipped. He later went to the University of Wisconsin-Stout in Menomonie to study mental-health counselling.

"After that conversation I had with (my professor), I struggled to identify who I was," Xiong told the *Leader-Telegram* after reflecting on his upbringing in the U.S. "... I don't want the kids nowadays to go through that. I want them, as they grow up, to be able to say, 'This is who I am, and this is who my parents are.'"

Xiong hopes his new role as executive director of the Eau Claire Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association will help make sure that happens. As he looks toward the association's future, he sees education — for the young Hmong community and the Eau Claire community at large — as a powerful tool for understanding.

In his first couple weeks, Xiong said, he's working to put a stop to a high employee turnover rate and build a solid foundation.

KEEPING CULTURE. Vincent Xiong stands near the Eau Claire Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association office in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Xiong is the association's latest executive director. He first began working with the association in May as the community engagement coordinator. (Elena Dawson/Eau Claire Leader-Telegram via AP)

In the long run, he'd like to see the association hire an in-house counsellor for Hmong community members who can't speak English, add a human resources department, and turn the agency into an educational culture center.

With plans for a larger location in the works, Xiong is starting with projects easily transferable.

In the current entryway to the Eau Claire Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association, visitors can see some physical evidence of the agency's background and purpose.

But Xiong wants it to be obvious whenever someone walks into the building.

"From the moment you walk in the door, you can really see this is a Hmong agency because it has all these representations of what the Hmong culture is," he said of his hopes for the organization's building.

Some examples include displays of the clothing worn by cultural subdivisions of the Hmong people — such as White Hmong, Green Hmong, and Striped Hmong — and traditional instruments such as the *ncas*, which is used for

Continued on page 13