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Emotional farewell for Mark Pfeifer

By Tom LaVenture

ST. PAUL (July 21, 2006) - Mark E. Pfeifer, Ph.D. has left after six years as Director of the Hmong Resource Center in Saint Paul, to become a faculty librarian at Texas A & M University at the Corpus Christi Campus. He left for Texas earlier this week and will begin his work on the main campus library as a professional staff librarian.



The past few weeks at the Hmong Cultural Center brought in countless friends and colleagues who remarked on Pfeifer's work in creating the most comprehensive Hmong academic library, online database and peer-reviewed journals as an invaluable community resource.

Kazoua Kong-Thao, vice chair, Saint Paul Public School Board, said she was skeptical at first when she heard years ago that a non-Hmong was in charge Hmong Cultural Center. After some consultation with the Center about youth program and outreach for new refugees, she came to know Pfeifer and changed her perspective after seeing that his skills for the position were matched by his passion for the community.

Kong Thao described Pfeifer as soft-spoken and actively engaged with the community. He volunteered to help her establish the annual Hmong Resource Fair with the Saint Paul Public Schools.

She said the new arrivals, seniors and the veterans like Pfeifer. There were many tears to match the smiles and well wishes at his goodbye party last week.

"They love him. They call him 'teacher Mark'," said Kong Thao. "...We cannot thank him enough. He is a very special person and will be remembered."

Kong Thao said there is an old Hmong saying to show that people may be born to different families but can be as much a part of another family as they're own.

"(Mark) has the spirit of a Hmong person," she added. "We are losing not only a wonderful colleague but also a friend of the Hmong community," she said.

Pfeifer was born and raised in the Madison, Wisconsin area and graduated high school in the 1988.

In 1992 he graduated Magna Cum Laude from Marquette University with a degree in Urban Affairs. He earned his master's in Urban Studies from Temple University in 1994. He received his doctorate in Urban Social Geography from the University of Toronto in 1999. He earned an addition master's degree in Library Science from the University of North Texas in 2005.

“My first work was with the Vietnamese,” he said. “My master’s thesis was related to Vietnamese businesses, and also residential people moving into neighborhoods and how that impacted neighborhoods in the Philadelphia area. “To do the study wanted to better understand the communities and started teaching ESL at Vietnamese Catholic church and a Buddhist temple,” he added.

Pfeifer continued this connection in Toronto. He continued to teach ESL and lived with a Vietnamese family while working on his doctoral dissertation.

After filling a temporary faculty position at Southwest Missouri State University, Pfeifer came to St. Paul with an Americorp grant in 1999 and wanted to learn more about the Hmong, a group he became familiar with in his work with the Vietnamese. He began with tutoring Hmong youth through Ready-4-K, and other organizations.

Less than a year later, he was volunteering for Hmong Cultural Center developing website and building a library. He started on grant writing and outreach for multicultural education and was taken on as staff.

“One of the things I most value from these six years was the opportunity to work within the community, in very much a grass roots situation,” he said. “I think that gave me very valuable experiences and insights that would not have been possible if I had just stayed in an academic setting.”

The Hmong Cultural Center website (www.hmongcenter.org) features an online Resource Library Catalog that is now the only one of its kind. It features an annotated bibliography of Hmong-related collections and research databases, that are now integrated with ProQuest’s Ethnic NewsWatch a national journal article index.

Ray Murray, a retired staff librarian at Century College, is volunteering on weekdays to continue the archiving and administrative work. He commended Pfeifer as a meticulous professional that leaves behind a system that another librarian can appreciate.

Pfeifer is the editor of the Hmong Studies Journal, the only peer reviewed academic journal with a focus on Hmong Studies. They have published 6 volumes and more than 40 scholarly articles since 1996.

He is co-author of a study of Hmong-American socioeconomic, demographic and educational trends in the 2000 census with Hmong National Development of Washington D.C. His Hmong census study was purchased by libraries, universities, and social service providers across the United States.

Pfeifer is very proud of the impact of their newest project, (learnabouthmong.com), a curriculum-based website on Hmong culture and history. It is designed with lesson plans and English language description in computer presentation formats, and available for download online.

The site has prompted emails and calls from organizations all over the country. They call looking for cultural lessons to use for employees in health, education and other settings.

“That has had a major impact, not just in Minnesota,” said Pfeifer.

Pfeifer is confident the Center's collections are up to date, and that it will be a matter of maintaining them. He will still run the newsletter, phone conference as an advisor, may take part in other projects.

"I plan to stay very active in Hmong studies," said Pfeifer. "I am going to stay very active in the field through those scholarly pursuits, and what's nice about this (Texas A&M) job is that that kind of activity is strongly encouraged; in fact, it is part of the evaluation process," he said. "So, they were very supportive of my work in Hmong studies and I think they thought that was a real strong thing I brought to the position."

Pfeifer was asked to join the editorial board of the Southeast Asian American Education Journal, a Texas based scholastic review for educators and researchers.

"It will be an opportunity for me to get involved again with some of the research and the community work with the some of the other groups," he added.

"Wherever he is, Mark will continue to serve the Hmong and Southeast Asian community," said Dia Cha, Ph.D., professor of Cultural Anthropology in the Department of Ethnic Studies at St. Cloud State University.

Dr. Dia Cha said that to her knowledge the Center is the only place to find extensive academic literature about the Hmong and Southeast Asia. She said that with the newspaper, video and audio collections, it is also as valuable to the community as to academia.

"The Hmong Resource Center is very important," she added. "Mark is very resourceful," she added. "If doesn't have it, he can get it."