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Long Time Director and Founder of the Hmong Resource Center Mark E. Pfeifer, PhD Leaving Hmong Culture Center

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Mark E. Pfeifer, PhD, Director of the Hmong Resource Center at Hmong Culture Center (HCC) and Editor for the Hmong Studies Journal, spend the last six years building the Resource Center into a nationally recognized library of Hmong-related literature and research materials. He also created the website www.learnabouthmong.org to educate about Hmong culture and heritage. Mr. Pfeifer will be leaving HCC at the end of July to continue his academia at the University of Texas A & M. Mr. Pfeifer have been an invaluable asset to the Hmong and academia community. He will be missed.

HT: Mark, can you tell us about yourself, education, and previous work history before joining HCC?

I am from Madison, Wisconsin. I earned a Bachelor's in Urban Affairs from Marquette University, a M.A. in Urban Studies from Temple University, a M.S. in Library Science from the University of North Texas Minnesota program and a PhD in Urban Social Geography from the University of Toronto in Canada. I was a graduate student for many years. My only other major professional job before coming to the Hmong Cultural Center was a semester as a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Dept. of Geography, Geology, and Planning at Southwest Missouri State University (now called Missouri State University) in Springfield, Missouri.

HT: How long and what role did you do at the Hmong Culture Center?

I moved to Saint Paul in November 1999 and initially served as a tutor in the Americorps program with Hmong children and youth at Lauj Youth Society and a local charter school. I started at the Hmong Cultural Center (initially as a volunteer) in April 2000 and came on the paid staff in August 2000. I actually came to Saint Paul with the goal to learn more about the Hmong community about which I had long had an interest. My Master's and PhD research however was related to the adaptation of Vietnamese Americans and Vietnamese Canadians.

HT: Why are you leaving HCC?

I am leaving because I would like to return to academia. Being immersed in the grassroots Hmong community at Hmong Cultural Center for 6 years has been wonderful and I have learned a great deal with experiences I would never have otherwise had but at age 37 I feel I am at a point where I would like to move out of the non-profit sector and back into the academic world. Throughout my educational and professional career, I have always enjoyed experiencing new challenges and different regions of the country or North America every 4 or 5 years or so. Texas is a very diverse area of the country in which I have not spent much time so to me the opportunity to work as a Tenure-Track faculty Librarian at Texas A & M University is very exciting. The administration and staff of the Library also were very supportive of my academic work in Hmong Studies and I will be able to continue to work on the Hmong Studies newsletter, annotated bibliography while also serving as the editor of the peer-reviewed Hmong Studies Journal at this new job. I decided to pursue academic library positions because I have learned over time that I am more interested in Librarianship and Research than I am in Teaching and Research.

HT: What is your passion?

My passion has been and will continue to be promoting the development of the interdisciplinary Hmong Studies academic discipline through my publications in Hmong

Studies and my Hmong Studies website at www.hmongstudies.org. Another passion I have is promoting knowledge of and greater understanding of the Hmong people and their culture. With the staff of Hmong Cultural Center, I developed the LearnaboutHmong multicultural education and arts website 2 years ago. The site includes powerpoints on Hmong culture and history as well as many video clips of Hmong folk arts. I am also very proud of the work that I have been able to do with the Executive Director of Hmong Cultural Center, Txongpao Lee to present to a couple thousand service providers and community members about Hmong culture and history with the Hmong 101 curriculum that we developed.

HT: Will you continue to help HCC, why and how?

It is very important for me personally to continue to help HCC if I can, as I believe very strongly in its mission of preserving Hmong culture while also promoting cross-cultural understanding between Hmong and non-Hmong. I have talked to our board and staff about participating in many meetings via conference phone. I also plan to continue to write some proposals and funding reports and work on program curriculums for the center from Texas. The center is very fortunate, that a retired Century College

Librarian Ray Murray, who has 40 years of Librarian experience, will be working in the Hmong Resource Library after I leave.

HT: Did you know much about the Hmong before joining HCC?

Not too much to be honest, I think I did know a fair amount about Vietnamese-American and Vietnamese-Canadian culture through my work and community volunteering in earlier years. I lived with a Vietnamese family for 3 years in Toronto. At HCC, I quickly learned that Vietnamese and Hmong culture are in many ways, very, very different.

HT: What was your perception about Hmong people before and after working with them?

I didn't know that much about Hmong before coming to Saint Paul beyond what I had read in academic journals. Over the years at HCC, I have developed a great respect for the complexity of Hmong culture and the achievements of Hmong in the United States. I think working at the center all these years has really made me particularly empathetic to the difficulties non-Christian Hmong face in keeping alive their religion and culture in a majority Christian mainstream society. Over the past 2 years at the center, I have worked closely with many of the newly arriving Hmong refugees from Wat Tham Krabok and have served as a tutor for a small group of advanced ESL students who came from the Wat. Having this opportunity has very much added to my understanding of the many challenges refugee newcomers face with integrating into the American society and economy.

HT: What are some of the experiences you enjoyed most about working with the Hmong community and HCC?

Getting to know more about Hmong culture, being invited to Hmong community events and family ceremonies, and getting to know many of the newcomers from Wat Tham Krabok as an ESL tutor over the past couple of years. I also enjoyed being co-chair of the

Hmong Resource Fair held at Arlington High School the past 2 years and serving on the organizing committee of the Hmong National Conference held in Minneapolis this past March.

HT: Tell us about the Hmong Studies Journal - why do you think it is important?

The journal is very important because it is still the only peer-reviewed academic journal in Hmong Studies and has been around on the Internet (now at www.hmongstudies.org) since 1996. Many prominent Hmong and non-Hmong scholars doing work in Hmong

Studies have published their work in the journal and the journal articles are widely read by scholars, students and community members interested in Hmong Studies around the world. Robin Vue-Benson and Anne Frank of the University of California Irvine started the journal. I was asked by several Hmong-origin scholars to become editor in 2002. We have published 3 volumes since I have become editor and we received 18 submissions from scholars for Volume 7, which should be out this fall. Several professors and PhD students who have done work in Hmong Studies serve as the editorial board. All of the past issues and articles in the journal can be viewed at the journal website.

HT: Did ever feel like an outsider or were you treated like a family member?

I think most of the time at HCC, I was treated like a family member and I am well known by many community members outside of the center as well. However, I still get people surprised to see a White guy working at a Hmong organization after all of these years. Many of these people who are surprised aren't Hmong however.

HT: How did your friends and family feel about you working for HCC and with the Hmong community?

My friends and family are mostly not in Minnesota but are in Wisconsin and other states. They often commented to me that they thought it must be pretty interesting to work in a Hmong organization and were

supportive.

HT: You were a key person gathering the petition to stop the CAPM's Hmong Marriage Bill, can you tell us about that?

Well, I think the Council does some very valuable work and I have worked on certain issues with some of their staff in the past, however, on the Hmong marriage bill, I feel the Asian Council acted very inappropriately. The version of the bill that the Council supported in the legislature this past session criminalized Hmong marriage ritualists (Mej Koobs) and singled out Hmong as a problem group under Minnesota marriage law, treating the Hmong differently from other groups. The bill was strongly opposed by Senator Mee Moua and Rep. Cy Thao, the only 2 Hmong elected officials in the state legislature. I believe the bill was basically an attack on traditional Hmong culture and religion. I think it was very improper for the Asian Council to take an advocacy position on such an offensive bill without getting the support of the culture-practicing part of the Hmong community, which it did not make any effort to do. I saw how offensive and hurtful the bill was to most of HCC's clients, many of whom do not understand the American legislative system that well and do not have much of a voice in it, that is why I felt compelled to get involved in this issue.

HT: From your experience what was the relationship between CAPM and the Hmong community like?

I think CAPM has done some valuable work on some issues like problem gambling, health care and sexual trafficking but unfortunately it has significantly damaged its working relationship with a huge segment of the Hmong community due to its pushing the culturally offensive Hmong marriage bill and the ongoing lack of a Hmong board member.

HT: Does CAPM's action violate the basic human rights?

I think mandating prison terms for Hmong cultural ritualists raises some significant human rights issues that likely conflict with the article of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights having to do with the freedom to practice one's religion, which I think is Article 18.

HT: What kind of change would you like to see with CAPM?

2 basic important things -

- The intrinsic need for Hmong representation on the board of the council that is well respected by the larger Hmong community and has strong connections to both the Hmong organizational community and the Hmong culture practicing community (i.e. Mej Koobs, 18 Clan etc.).

- A commitment by the Board of the Council that the Council will no longer go its own way and do its own thing on issues important to the culture-practicing part of the Hmong community (i.e. the marriage bill) but will work closely to form a consensus on issues with Hmong organizations such as HAP, Lao Family, Southeast

Asian Council, AHWM, the 18 Clan Council and Hmong Cultural Center. Through the thousands of community members they serve each year in various cultural, educational and social service programs, these organizations logistically have much deeper and substantive connections to the everyday people in the Hmong community than the Asian Council.

HT: What kind of change would you like to see in the Hmong community if there are any?

I would like to see the older and younger generation, non-Christians and Christians, clan leaders, cultural experts, professionals, and business people coming together to work in a respectful manner of give and take on such matters as a culturally appropriate Hmong marriage bill and other contentious social issues in the community.

HT: Will you move back to Minnesota again?

I wouldn't rule it out later in my career but I think it would be as an Academic Librarian rather than as an employee of a nonprofit organization. I am very excited about experiencing something very different in Texas, especially the ethnic diversity, the very warm winters and the beach area where the university is located. I am not so excited about the very hot summers.

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