

In two worlds

Zoe Ryan | Nov. 9, 2010



Rose Xiong: "My mom told me my first year here that she has the strength to be a better mom because I'm in college." (Photos by Rebecca Zenefski)

ST. PAUL, MINN. -- The word "college" was nonexistent to Mysee Chang until her sophomore year of high school.

"I thought it was elementary, middle, high school and then I was done," said Mysee Chang, who is from Corcoran, Minn. Listening to teachers and mentors as well as partaking in an all-female literature class encouraged her to research her college options.

Toward the end of her sophomore year, Mysee Chang started her college quest by searching "all women college, St. Paul, Minn." on the Internet. St. Catherine University was the first hit.

"I looked at their mission statement -- "Educating women to lead and influence" -- that was one phrase I never forgot," she said. "It just spoke to me and I knew I wanted to lead and influence."



St. Catherine University, nicknamed "St. Kate's," is the largest college for women

in the nation. It was founded by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet in 1905 as a higher education institute for

women. The school has a campus in St. Paul and Minneapolis and also offers graduate and associate programs for both women and men.

About 15 years ago, the multicultural population at St. Kate's was only 10 percent of the student body, said Mai Nhia Xiong-Chan, assistant director of admissions and financial aid at St. Kate's. "We've seen the multicultural population grow to over 22 percent now, with the majority of them being Hmong students."

Since the end of the Vietnam War in the 1970s, Hmong people have emigrated to the United States from Southeast Asia. Minnesota has the largest Hmong population in the United States, along with California and Wisconsin. About 50,000 people of Hmong descent live in Minneapolis and St. Paul, according to *Diversity & Democracy*, a publication of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

When St. Kate's decided to increase outreach to multicultural populations in the late 1990s, it asked its Hmong students at the time about their experience meeting the demands of a Hmong family and meeting the demands of college.

"Often the parents didn't speak English so it was really the students' responsibility to understand all the information and relay it to their families," said Marlene Mohs, associate dean of admissions.

The language barrier and familial obligations were two tough obstacles for Hmong families when sending their daughters to college. So St. Kate's started translation services and a meeting group where students from Hmong families could express the difficulty balancing school life and family life.

"At St. Kate's, you're encouraged to speak your mind," said Xiong-Chan, who is one of a handful of Hmong staff members. "As Hmong women, we're not raised that way. We're the last ones to raise our hands, the last ones to comment -- it's walking in two worlds."

The staff at St. Kate's realized the strong family ties within the Hmong community and tried to bridge the gap to make college information more accessible to parents, as well as accommodating students.

"Some of the things that we had always done with students -- a lot of personal contact, helping with each step of the college process, and reaching out to the community -- really resonated with the Hmong community," Mohs said.

In the last five years, a special emphasis on recruiting Hmong students took place, Xiong-Chan said. The college's orientation and its financial aid day are available in Hmong. Also, the school provides DVDs in Hmong that orient parents with the college.

"It was the first college that offered a tape about the college in Hmong," said Mysee Chang, who is a sophomore double-majoring in critical studies in race and ethnicity and women's studies. "They have financial aid sessions [translated] in Hmong, so my mom was on board with me every step of the way -- that was a big part of why I chose St. Kate's."

Hmong culture is a patriarchal society with strong community bonds, Xiong-Chan said. To tap into the population, college magazine ads and brochures fall to the wayside compared to conversations in the community.

"In the Hmong community, a lot of it is just word-of-mouth," said Xiong-Chan. "I think we've been very fortunate that our Hmong students here are not afraid to go back into the community and say, 'I'm a Katie -- I go to St. Kate's and I'm proud of it.'"



Efung Chang, a sophomore chemistry major who grew up in Fresno, Calif., and now lives in Minneapolis, was impressed by St. Kate's attention to her during high school.

"St. Kate's was always checking up on me to see how I was doing with high school, what else they could say to help me with my decision even if I chose elsewhere," Efung Chang said.

St. Kate's credits its appeal to the Hmong community because of the shared values.

"The small size, the individual attention, the inclusiveness we're able to offer the families, and a lot of the majors we offer are really appealing to, I think, immigrant populations," Xiong-Chan said.

Many parents, as well as students, like the fact that St. Kate's is a college just for women.

"[My parents] wanted me close because I'm the only daughter," Rose Xiong, a sophomore nursing major, said. "That's one reason why they want me to go to St. Kate's -- because it's an all-girls school."

Xiong lives with her mother, father, four brothers, two sisters-in-law, and three nieces and nephews in Anoka, Minn. It's common for some Hmong students to live with their families while attending college. While living at home, Xiong performs many daily responsibilities such as cleaning the house, watching her brothers' children, and sometimes helping set up her father's doctor's appointments.

"I have to spend my time wisely," Xiong said. "When I get done with school, I go straight home and start doing all these chores. I usually have to stay up really late, like 1 or 2 a.m. just to do my homework."

Although her parents expect her to carry out traditional Hmong duties such as running a household, they fully support her decision to attend college.

"My parents are proud of me, so everywhere I go, they always brag about me," Xiong said. "Sometimes it gets embarrassing."

None of her brothers went to college, so her parents have more hope in her, she said.

"My mom told me my first year here that she has the strength to be a better mom because I'm in college," Xiong said.

Noticing a need for Hmong students to discuss issues relevant to their experience, a group started on campus in 2007. Ntxhais Hmoob, or Hmong Daughters, was created by Sia Vang, program coordinator of St. Kate's Abigail Quigley McCarthy Center for Women and a 2005 St. Kate's alumna, and Deep Shikha, chair of the economics department.

"When you stop being responsive to needs of students, those students stop enrolling in your school," Vang said. She encourages the students to participate in class discussion as much as they do in the Hmong Daughters meetings.

"It's just a pleasure to witness these students flourish," Vang said.

Some Hmong parents may adhere to strict cultural traditions, but the trend of sending daughters to college and supporting them is growing.



Chee Moua, a junior nursing major from St. Paul, has supportive parents

as well. Her parents tried to attain an education in the United States after leaving refugee camps in Thailand, but the language barrier and raising a family stood in the way. They stressed the importance of higher education to their children, all six of whom are in college.

"Their sacrifice is the motivation that encourages me to strive for more, to continue what I am brought here to do, and to pursue my life's purpose," Moua said.

St. Kate's is known for its nursing, business and education programs. For many Hmong parents, these majors are valued because they lead to a vocational job.

Not all Hmong families support their daughters going to college. Xiong talks to friends' parents about the benefits of college for the whole family, but it's difficult to persuade them to let their daughters go.

"Not a lot of girls go to college because they tend to marry early," Xiong said. Marriage and children can also add to the balancing act of college for Hmong students.

Although St. Kate's is a Catholic university, that doesn't deter non-Catholic students from applying or living the spiritual life it offers.

"I think we need to remember that Catholic means 'universal,'" Xiong-Chan said. "Here at St. Kate's, we aim to really educate women to lead in influence, just like our mission statement says."

That statement resonates with many students, including Mysee Chang, who remembers reading it the first time she searched St. Kate's Web site. She lives that mission through her job as a resident adviser and her involvement in numerous student groups. She heard that St. Kate's, being a Catholic university, emphasized social justice.

"At the time I was young and didn't really know what social justice was," she said. "As soon as I got to campus, I lived it, breathed it, believed in it, and it was my life philosophy."

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