



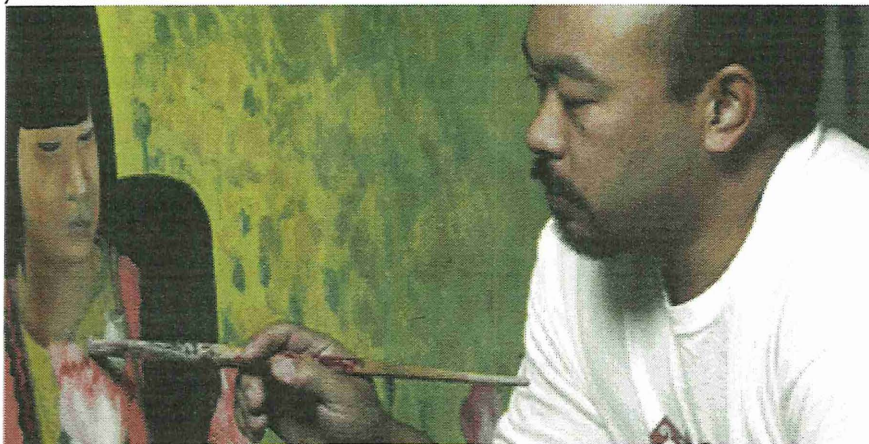
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A Picture is Worth 5,000 Years [May 2004]

Cy Thao translates Hmong oral tradition to the canvas.

by Michael Fallon



"A photo is all I have left of her," Chris Lang, the boyfriend of murdered college student Dru Sjodin, told a Judiciary Policy and Finance Committee at the Minnesota House of Representatives. His testimony culminated with a heated statement about Level Three sex offenders: "They're not like normal people. I think they're wired wrong. They're like animals. They need to be treated like animals, and animals are kept in cages." The committee, including freshman legislator Cy Thao, remained impassive. Lang stepped down, and discussion moved on to child abuse, crystal-meth addiction, and other problems.

"We don't have time to do all the emotional stuff," said Thao later that day, by way of explaining how legislators can seem inured to the personal horrors their legislation is meant to address. Capitol business is often conducted at a safe remove from emotional issues at hand, but that doesn't mean Thao, who was elected to office in 2002, sometimes finds the impersonal nature of policy and politics hard to take. A thirty-one-year-old Hmong-American whose round face is accentuated by a close-cropped haircut, Thao came to politics by an unusual route, as a painter and former arts organizer in St. Paul's Frogtown district. "Artists have to be passionate and emotional," he believes. "When I'm painting, I put my emotions into it. That's what drives me. But as a legislator, you've got to contain your emotion and turn it into strategies. You just have to focus on the policy."

When I met Thao several years ago, he attributed his political views to his college internship experience at the state Capitol: "I saw a lot of people who would only pay attention to people with wealth and people who knew the system. They just didn't pay attention to the little guy." Thao's frustration with the system led him to add an art double major to his political science major while at the University of Minnesota, Morris in the early nineties, and he's swung between the two ever since—much to his advantage. His stint some years ago as an organizer at the Center for Hmong Arts and Talent, an arts center on University Avenue, gave him skills crucial for politics: raising money, maintaining a grassroots organization, and conducting community outreach, as well as publicly addressing social issues through the Center's theatrical productions

and mural projects.

Meanwhile, Thao confronts issues through his art that are anything but small, addressing such horrors that would move even the most impassive of observers. Fifty of his paintings will be on display at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts beginning May 21 in *The Hmong Migration*, an exhibit that is part of the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program. In this series, Thao creates a compressed visual record of the troubled history of his people and his family.

Using a technique that is simple, raw, and unpolished, with quickly applied daubs of paint indicating simplified figures and forms, Thao draws from both Hmong folk-art quilting traditions and an interest in the work of Jacob Lawrence. Each work in the series depicts an episode in the history of the Hmong, starting with their creation myth and ancient history and continuing through the culture's dispersion and its struggles against China in the late 1800s, the French in the mid-1900s, and Communists during the American war against Vietnam and Laos. Thao focuses heavily on the aftermath of that war in works featuring long lines of families fleeing through mountains, across fields and rivers, and corpses left behind on paths or floating in water. In one particularly gruesome image, a Communist leader directs his soldiers to open fire on Hmong approaching a bridge, the passage to freedom in Thailand. Other images poignantly depict life in Thai resettlement camps, conjured from Thao's memories of the four years he lived in one; and still later the series conveys the difficult move and adjustment to Minnesota, where Thao arrived twenty years ago.

Thao had proposed exhibiting *The Hmong Migration* at the MIA before he was elected to the Minnesota legislature; it was a time when he had not yet learned to consider how the public or peers might receive his work. "An artist just wants his work to be shown," Thao says, adding that he probably wouldn't apply for an MAEP show now because of his work's emotionally raw nature. "I have some worries because in that art there was no holding back. I wanted to address every important issue. As a state representative, saying one word out of context or choosing one wrong word can result in different meanings and bring different outcomes. When I painted, I didn't worry about that at all. I just painted how I wanted to... But I think I will let the art speak for itself. If it hurts me politically, then it just does."

At noon, Thao abruptly leaves the committee room. Though the discussion on amendments to the Sex Offender Judiciary/Finance Omnibus Bill is not finished, Thao is unconcerned. "The decision on the bill was made back in February when the chair met with the governor," he says, and indeed, voting on the amendments had been running on strictly party lines. Thao makes his way to the steps of the Capitol, where Ann Bancroft, the polar explorer, is stirring up a crowd of several thousand at a rally protesting the amendment to ban gay marriage. "Laws that discriminate are just plain wrong," she shouts. "One thousand benefits received by married couples are not available to me and my partner, Pam. This includes education, health care reform... a home, for God's sake." The crowd cheers at her rising pitch, and Thao leans toward me. "She's got it right," he says.

Thao has his own early experience with discrimination and prejudice; among the most poignant of his paintings are those depicting the trials that his family and other Hmong faced upon arriving in Minnesota in the seventies and eighties. Parents visit the welfare office with kids in tow; an assembly line in a large colorless warehouse is manned entirely by Hmong immigrants, with the only hint of the outside world coming through a single small door; teenaged Hmong gang members fight in the streets. One painting depicts the projects in north Minneapolis as a zoo-like maze. Barred windows are the most prominent feature on the plain brick buildings, and on a wall someone has scrawled: "Chink go home."

Leaving the rally, Thao passes a tall, young legislator just arriving. Thao asks if he is going to make a speech. The lawmaker gives a gruff "no," without breaking stride. Thao laughs, and explains, "He's one of the most conservative members of the House." He is nothing if not feisty, having earned a reputation for passionately expressing his side of an issue—despite how futile it may seem in the current legislative atmosphere. Thao got into politics during the brief antiestablishment frenzy of the Jesse Ventura era. He had been peripherally involved in Ventura's 1998 campaign, and so was tapped by the governor to appeal to the Hmong community for the 2000 election. "I figured this would be the only chance that a governor would help out our community," recalls Thao, "and since no one else wanted to do it, I did it." He gained national attention for a TV commercial, filmed by two artist buddies, in which he chased prostitutes and criminals from Frogtown with a broom. He also tapped artist friends to run the campaign—going door to door, painting a van, silk-screening posters by hand. Though Thao lost that election (by a surprisingly small margin), the strategies he developed worked for him in 2002.

After an almost two-year hiatus taken as he learned the ropes at his new day job, Thao hopes to return to painting later this year. After his MIA exhibit, and after the current legislative session, he plans to begin a new series about America. "I think it will be interesting to see the history of this country from the point of view of an immigrant who was a product of American policy."

Thao had expressed concerns about a negative reaction to his exhibit, but I asked if his paintings might actually help his political cause. "It could work both ways," he says after a pause. "Especially during this time when the country is at war and has invaded another country and is imposing its will on people who have no clue about us. My paintings speak to that. Their imagery is critical of misguided policies, regardless of which president the policy comes from. We have a bad foreign policy in this country... But I'm an optimist. If we don't win this year, we always have next year."

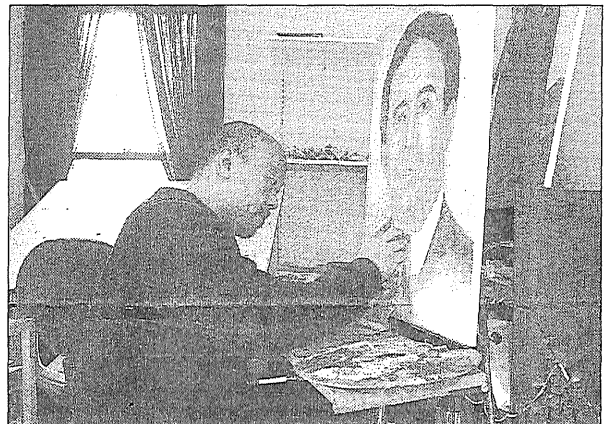
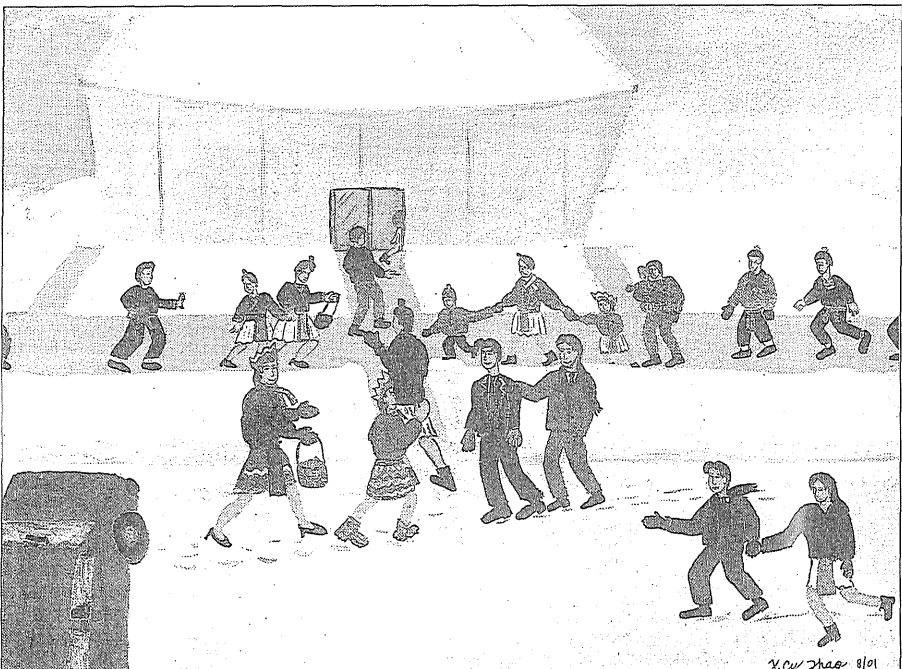
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Provided by Minneapolis Institute of Arts

Cy Thao's painting technique evolved as his series expanded. Some scenes have traditional European perspective while others, like No. 34, above, are given a medieval treatment in which characters' sizes reflect their significance, as when a guard about to shoot a refugee looms larger than the camp's guard tower.



Duane Braley/Star Tribune

Cy Thao works on a portrait of Sen. Paul Wellstone in his home studio, above. (In this case, Thao's job was to clean off some red paint that his 3-year-old daughter, Cyanne, splashed on it.)

A detail from No. 43 in Thao's series reflects how the Hmong have adapted to U.S. life. The text that accompanies the painting reads: "To keep the culture alive we have to adapt. Instead of celebrating the new year outdoor and after the harvest season, we celebrate it during American holidays or on weekends because it is the only time we can get off from work."

E34 A42.10

Funeral-home work to start

ST. PAUL

Nonprofit group will operate facility for Hmong

PIONEER PRESS NOV 3 '04

BY KARL J. KARLSON

Pioneer Press

Work begins this week on the West Side to clean up a site for a third east-metro Hmong funeral home that will help accommodate a backlog of funerals, a longtime issue in St. Paul's large Hmong community.

The facility could open as early as May, according to Kou

Vang, owner of JB Realty, which will build the 20,000-square-foot facility under an agreement approved last week by the St. Paul Port Authority. The funeral home will be run by a separate, nonprofit foundation.

Vang said the building's design features two acoustically separated halves, which will allow more than one service to be held there at a time and still

be sensitive to traditional Hmong culture and beliefs.

Funeral rites, he said, include a special song performed on the qeej, a traditional flute-like instrument that leads the soul back to its ancestors. The song for one person cannot mingle with the song for another, he said.

"If a spirit hears the wrong song, it will be led back to the

wrong place," Vang said.

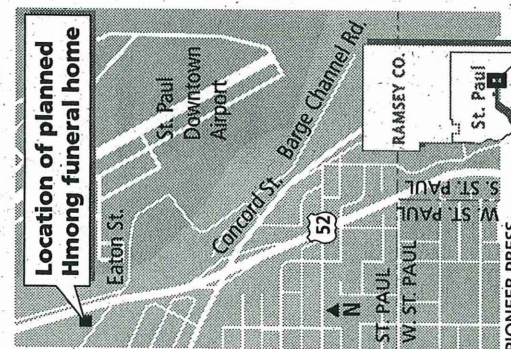
Because of cultural traditions, "Two funeral homes for 60,000 people is not enough," said state Rep. Cy Thao, DFL-St. Paul, who noted that the need for an additional funeral home has been a community issue for nearly a decade.

Hmong funerals usually are large, communal events that take place on weekends and can last three days. Their size and length, combined with the need to hold one service at a

time, has meant that the demand often exceeds the capacity of the area's two current Hmong funeral homes, one on Frost Avenue in Maplewood and the other on Dale Street in St. Paul.

Thao said funerals now can be delayed up to two months. If a family follows all the traditions, there could be nightly vigils until the service, a prospect that can become

FUNERAL HOME, 4B



Funeral home

expensive if host families feed and house out-of-town visitors.

The new facility will be in the Port Authority's Riverview Industrial Park on a 3/4-acre site at Eaton Street and a Lafayette Freeway frontage road, according to Port Authority spokesman Tom Collins.

He said that location, away from homes, should address issues raised by some neighbors of Hmong funeral homes who have complained about traffic congestion and large crowds attending the extended gatherings. With much of the activity concentrated on weekends, conflict with nearby businesses also should be minimized.

The Port Authority, which is selling the site for \$32,000, recently received cleanup grants totaling \$440,000 from the federal Environmental Protection Agency, the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development and the Metropolitan Council to bring the property up to usable standards, Collins said. The site used to be part of the city's State Street dump.

Groundbreaking ceremonies for the facility are set for Nov. 20.

Karl J. Karlson can be reached at kkarlson@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-5260.

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WHO'S RUNNING

PIONEER PRESS OCT 17 '04



ST. PAUL
LEGISLATIVE RACES

Here are the candidates and parties in the city's eight house districts:

District 64A: Kirstin Beach, Thrivent Financial executive administrative assistant, Republican; Matt Entenza, attorney, DFL.

District 64B: Kristina Jilek, student, Republican; Michael Paymar, resource specialist for Battered Women's Justice Project, DFL.

District 65A: Paul Holmgren, OfficeMax logistics associated, Republican; Cy Thao, artist, DFL.

District 65B: Bill Dahn, on disability, Independence Party; Carlos Mariani, nonprofit management consultant, DFL; Lori Windels, Comcast Cable information services analyst, Republican.

District 66A: Greg Copeland, public affairs and marketing consultant, Republican; John Lesch, St. Paul city prosecutor, DFL.

District 66B: Warren Anderson, Realtor, Republican; Alice Hausman, legislator, DFL.

District 67A: Mark Jorgensen, car salesman and newspaper carrier, Republican; Tim Mahoney, pipefitter, DFL.

District 67B: Sheldon Johnson, Ramsey County Corrections worker, DFL; John Klein, Independence Party; Gregory LeMay, owner of firm specializing in marketing businesses and products, Republican; Roger Alton Westall, part-time dispatcher for Park N'Fly, Green Party.

DFLers get to work to win state for Kerry

Minnesota Democrats are upbeat about their prospects, but are taking nothing for granted.

By Rob Hotakainen, Kevin Duchscher and Bob von Sternberg
Star Tribune Staff Writers

BOSTON — As they gathered together for breakfast one last time Thursday, Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak posed a question to the Minnesota delegates at the Democratic National Convention: "Does anybody really think we're a swing state?"

"No!" came the response in loud unison.

Looking ahead to the fall election, Minnesota DFLers were an exuberant bunch, ready to go to work on behalf of their newly anointed nominee, Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry. Some were displaying signs of supreme confidence.

"It is inconceivable that he could lose this election," said Scott Urban, 46, a social studies teacher from North Mankato.

Despite that kind of swagger, many Republicans insist that Minnesota is, indeed, a battleground state and that they've got a good chance of delivering its 10 electoral votes to President Bush.

The coming weeks could, in fact, be perilous for Kerry.

Until post-convention polls are conducted nationally in the next few days, it won't be known whether Kerry picked up the bounce in public support that most new nominees enjoy.

And now that he has accepted federal campaign funding for the general election, he lives under a spending cap that won't be imposed on Bush until after the Republican convention.

The Bush campaign has signaled its intention to wage a barnstorming campaign throughout the usually-sleepy month of August and already has begun pouring millions of dollars into a new round of ads in battleground states.

Democratic Party officials and issue advocacy groups known as 527s hope to counter that GOP advantage by launch-

ing their own barrage of ads, which by law must be independent of the Kerry campaign.

While Kerry's campaign plans in the coming weeks are, if anything, even more ambitious than Bush's, starting with a 3,500-mile cross-country campaign tour, polls show most Americans still haven't formed a firm impression of him.

Olympic effect

And August remains something of a wild card for both candidates. The biggest reason it has been so sleepy in the past is the shared calculation that most voters simply aren't paying attention. The situation is complicated this year by the Summer Olympics in Athens, which will monopolize the media's attention for more than two weeks and could bury campaign coverage inside newspapers and the tail end of newscasts.

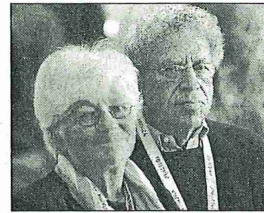
For their part, Minnesota Republicans dismiss the Democrats' confidence as ridiculously overblown.

"The truth of the matter is that Minnesota is and has been trending Republican for some time," said Sen. Norm Coleman, noting that in the last election Minnesotans elected a Republican to the Senate — himself — and to the governor's office — Tim Pawlenty.

"The Democrats are mistaken to take Minnesota for granted," said Tracey Schmitt, a spokeswoman for the Bush campaign. "We believe Minnesotans will reject a candidate whose record is not only out of the mainstream, but who vacillates on the important issue of national security."

Their optimism notwithstanding, some Democrats say the party can take nothing for granted. Although Democrat Al Gore won Minnesota in 2000, he did so by the barest of margins.

"When we get back to Minnesota, we've got to hit the ground running, and that means running hard and doing all the



Minnesota delegates Sylvia and Sam Kaplan, both major DFL donors, plan to hold a major fundraiser for John Kerry at their house in August.

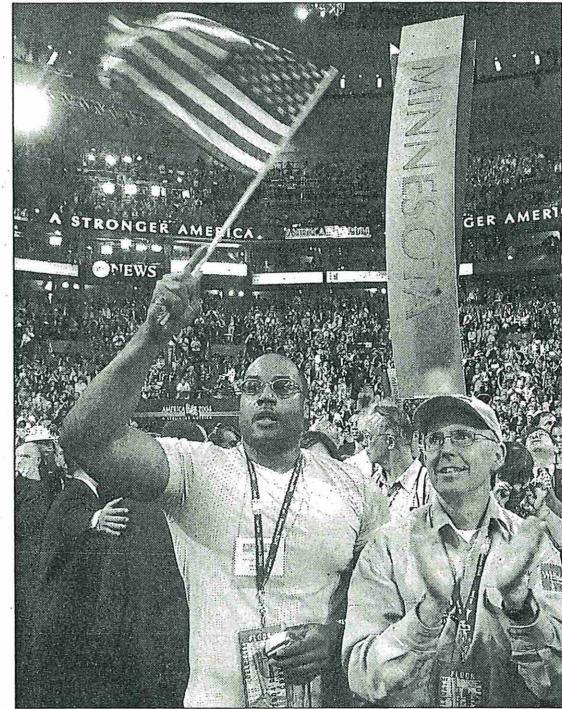
fundamental work," said Darryl Stanton, 41, a small-business owner from Eden Prairie and a first-time delegate to a national convention.

There are good reasons for Minnesota DFLers to be hopeful. A Republican presidential candidate has not carried the state since 1972, when Richard Nixon swept the country. According to the most recent polls, Kerry has a slight lead in Minnesota. A Zogby Interactive poll conducted of likely Minnesota voters just before the convention showed Kerry with a 6.4 percentage point lead over Bush. But that's within the poll's plus or minus 3.9 percent margin of sampling error, and the state's DFLers are promising to work as though their nominee is behind.

"I'm not worried about whether we're a swing state or not. I'm worried that we've got a job to get done these next 95 days," said state DFL Chairman Mike Erlandson. "I'm going to treat this as if we're 10 points behind or more until Nov. 2, so that we're up by 2 points or more on Nov. 2."

Specific strategies

The Minnesota delegates have specific strategies in mind. Richard Rolland, 58, a teacher from Benson, said that while everyone is talking about the importance of swing voters, he believes that the winner will be the one who energizes his base and gets all his voters out in November. For instance, Rolland and other Kerry supporters painted road signs at a seed farm recently to win over rural voters.



Photographs by Richard Sennott/Star Tribune
Minnesota delegate Darryl Stanton, left, with fellow delegate Gregory Wright on the floor of the Democratic National Convention in Boston's FleetCenter on Thursday night.

"Now we have 20 road signs ready to go on Labor Day weekend for Swift County," he said.

Many said their work will begin with the basics, by telling their friends and neighbors about Kerry.

"Part of my plan is to just get John Kerry's name out there," said delegate Sara Kloek, 20. A student at the University of Minnesota-Morris, she wants to recruit campus volunteers and register more young voters.

"The key to the victory is going to be on college campuses, technical colleges and in high schools around the Seventh District," said Sharon Josephson, 59, an aide to Rep. Collin Peterson, D-Minn., and a delegate from Detroit Lakes. She said she intends to go home and fire up young voters at campuses in Bemidji and Moorhead.

DFL delegates are also banking on a good showing in com-

munities of color.

Native Americans should know about Kerry's support for tribal sovereignty on reservations, said Peggy Flanagan, 24, of Minneapolis, a coordinator for the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches and the Kerry campaign's Native American director in Minnesota. Flanagan said she will form a steering committee of Indians old and young, urban and rural, to chat up the Democratic candidate in households across the state.

The Rev. Doyle Turner, 60, of Waubun, Minn., and tribal chairman of the White Earth Chippewa, said he plans to register new voters and hold more house and block parties for Kerry.

State Rep. Cy Thao, DFL-St. Paul, said he will do as much as possible to turn out the vote in his area, including driving immigrants to the polls and sup-

plying them with interpreters.

"It's not rocket science," said Thao, 32, another of the many first-time delegates from Minnesota. "You identify who your voters are and you make sure on Election Day that they show up to the polls."

Delegates also say they need to answer questions from voters about who John Kerry is, and turn anti-Bush sentiment into a pro-Kerry crusade.

"Right now, the Hmong community is sort of like everyone else: We don't want George Bush, but they don't know Kerry yet," Thao said.

DyShaun Muhammad, a marketing manager from Minneapolis, said he will try to pass along the positive vibes from the convention about what Kerry can do for the country. "The minute I get back, I will block out days on the calendar that will be John Kerry days, days to devote to the campaign," he said.

Sam Kaplan, one of Kerry's biggest and earliest fundraisers in Minnesota, said he plans to continue raising money, working with Americans Coming Together (ACT), a new progressive political action committee that's out to unseat Bush. "We're having a very large fundraiser at our house on August 20 with Bette Midler performing," he said.

DFLer Urban plans to host "Kerry meetups" in a local coffee shop and hold a house party for the first presidential debate. "We'll invite friends over to watch and then to talk and share feelings," he said.

Rybak said Kerry is sure to carry Minneapolis "but the question is by how much." To do well in Minnesota, he said, the campaign needs record turnouts in DFL strongholds such as the state's big cities and the Iron Range.

"Then we're going to fan out into the suburbs," he said.

Rybak said he will chew up shoe leather to get Kerry elected, a promise echoed by other delegates as they left Boston and prepared for the decisive stage of the presidential race.

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B12 A2.6 H8.6

HEALTH

Abortion rule added to health bill

PIONEER PRESS MAR 26 '04

Providers would be denied state funds

BY TOM MAJESKI

Pioneer Press

A controversial provision banning state family planning money from going to organizations that provide abortions or referrals for abortions was added to an omnibus health care bill passed Thursday by a legislative committee.

The House Health and Family Services Finance Committee approved the measure, which has long been a priority of anti-abortion organizations.

Supporters of the plan call it the Taxpayers Protection Act, but opponents refer to it as the Super Gag Rule.

"It's quite clear what this is about," said Rep. Thomas Huntley, DFL-Duluth. "It's to take money away from Planned Parenthood and a few other groups that provide family planning services in addition to providing abortions."

The amended bill does not include a provision that some found particularly onerous. House members deleted a section that would ban state money from organizations that consider abortion as part of the continuum of health care.

Tim Stanley, executive director of NARAL Pro-Choice Minnesota, said the revised measure represents "a distinction without a difference." The measure, he said, "still greatly hinders the provision of comprehensive reproductive health services."

The abortion measure was part of an omnibus bill that folds the health care cost containment bill sponsored by Rep. Fran Bradley, R-Rochester, into a budget bill for the Department of Human Services. Its next stop is the House Ways and Means Committee.

The bill would transfer \$70 million from the health care

access fund to the general budget as part of Gov. Tim Pawlenty's effort to plug a \$160 million budget gap.

"I think this is a horrible bill," said Rep. Vy Thao, DFL-St. Paul. Thao pointed out that about \$300 million has been drained from the health care access fund in the past two years and that this shift will hurt the MinnesotaCare program.

"It's a program for working poor," Thao said. "We need that money."

In addition, Pawlenty wants to cut \$37 million from the department's budget to further help eliminate the budget shortfall.

"We chose not to do that," Bradley said, adding that he was able to find \$88 million to help fund programs that were cut last year and restore cuts that were made in other programs.

Among other things, the bill would eliminate Pawlenty's

plan to cut pharmacy benefits and continuing care provider rates by 1.5 percent. The House bill also would eliminate a \$500 cap on dental services, add an optometric benefit and improve diabetic coverage under the MinnesotaCare program.

Bradley said part of the new funding will come from \$36 million from a proposed casino at Canterbury Park racetrack, which the governor didn't include when he laid out his budget fixes.

Rep. Jim Abeler, R-Anoka, said the economy is still flat and hasn't recovered yet from the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"We had to make some tough choices," Abeler said. "I make no apology for the route we've taken."

Staff writer Rachel Stassen-Berger contributed to this report. Tom Majeski, who covers medical news, can be reached at tmajeski@pioneerpress.com or 651-222-2346.

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LEGISLATURE 2004

Health bill passes House

GOP plan restores some of last year's cuts

BY TOM MAJESKI

Pioneer Press

PIONEER PRESS APR 3 '04

After nearly five hours of passionate debate, the Minnesota House on Friday passed a comprehensive health care bill that would restore some of last year's cuts in programs for the poor and help contain soaring health care costs.

The 143-page bill, which passed on an 83-46 vote, also contains a controversial provision — dubbed the Super Gag Rule by opponents — that prohibits funneling state family planning grant money to organizations that provide abortions or referrals to abortion providers.

Rep. Fran Bradley, the Rochester Republican sponsoring the bill, said no one argues that abortion is a family planning tool. "That being the case, there's something to be said about where taxpayer money goes," he said.

Critics, such as Rep. Phyllis Kahn, DFL-Minneapolis, argued that restricting family planning funds to organizations such as Planned Parenthood would only lead to more unwanted pregnancies and more abortions.

Republicans called the bill a thoughtful attempt to restore some of the painful program cuts made last year while still holding the line on spending. Democrat-Farmer-Laborites said the restorations fall far short of undoing the damage.

"This is a bill that addresses, in many ways, smart portfolio management," Bradley said.

Rep. Cy Thao, DFL-St. Paul, disagreed.

"This is a bill only the Sheriff of

HEALTH BILL PASSES, 4B

Health bill passes

(continued)

Nottingham would love," Thao said, adding that the bill robs money from the poor and, at the same time, steals about \$70 million from the health care access fund that supports the MinnesotaCare program.

But Rep. Tony Cornish, R-Good Thunder, said he supported the bill because it restores some of the cuts made last year to nursing homes and improves the

nursing-home inspection process.

Critics also assailed a provision in the bill that would cut \$200 a month in welfare grants for families receiving both welfare and housing subsidies. Last year, the benefit was cut by \$50 a month.

Several times during the lengthy debate, Bradley pointed out that, despite recent cuts, Minnesota still spends \$379 per capita on health care for the poor. "That's the highest in the

nation," he said, adding that Iowa spends \$137, North Dakota \$151, South Dakota \$80 and Wisconsin \$201.

Although the bill calls for a moratorium on state mandates, lawmakers passed an amendment, over Bradley's objections, that would require health plans to pay for ovarian cancer-screening tests on high-risk women.

One of the most contentious debates centered on the bill's encouragement of best practice guidelines. National experts say following the guidelines would cut health care costs by 30 per-

cent and dramatically improve the quality of care.

"This is socialized medicine on the installment plan," Rep. Mark Olson, R-Big Lake, said of the best practices provision. "This is a tragic mistake."

Waving a large, somewhat tattered cookbook over his head, Olson repeatedly referred to the guidelines as "cookbook medicine" and claimed they would interfere with the patient-doctor relationship. Olson's amendment to remove the best practices provision was soundly defeated, 94-33.

The bill also would:

- Provide coverage for diabetic testing and insulin administration supplies under the MinnesotaCare program.

- Eliminate the \$500 annual limit on dental services.

- Provide nursing homes and home care agencies with a one-time rate adjustment to help pay for liability insurance premiums.

- Restore about half of last year's 1 percent rate cut for continuing care providers.

- Reduce monthly co-payments for parents of disabled

children by about 25 percent.

- Cut child-care licensing fees from \$300 to \$225.

- Initiate disease-management programs so that patients with diabetes and heart failure receive state-of-the-art care.

- Restrict cost shifting, which drives up health care premiums.

- Permit for-profit HMOs to operate in the state to increase competition.

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LAOS

Hmong rebels reportedly surrender

Monitoring urged to protect their rights

PIONEER PRESS MAR 5 '04
Staff and wire reports

As thousands of Hmong refugees in Thailand seem closer to their dream of a life in the United States, hundreds of Hmong in Laos recently came out of the mountains and surrendered for resettlement, the Laotian government announced Thursday.

Amnesty International and representatives of the Hmong community in St. Paul are urging the Laotian government to allow international agencies to monitor the treatment of the Hmong surrendering in Laos.

"I think that's good news," Rep. John Lesch, DFL-St. Paul, said of reports the Laotian government had offered amnesty and land to the Hmong. "But they've been trying to get these folks out of the jungle for decades. We need to ensure

that the Pathet Lao government is not just using this as an opportunity to imprison these people or deprive them of human rights or otherwise mistreat them."

Lesch, who represents an area of St. Paul with a large Hmong population, last month sponsored a resolution with fellow St. Paul DFL legislators, Sen. Mee Moua and Rep. Cy Thao, calling for international access to Hmong still living in the jungles and an end to violence against them.

Although many of the Hmong in Laos have been fighting a low-level insurgency against the communist government since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the remaining Hmong are in desperate straits for food and are not a military threat, Lesch said.

"These people are poor," he



✓ Rep. John Lesch

said. "They have very little food or military hardware. They don't have enough ammunition to fight, yet they are being systematically starved."

In connection with the upcoming resettlement of Hmong refugees from the Tham Krabok camp in Thailand, U.S. officials recently warned Hmong living in the United States that it is illegal to aid insurgents still operating in Laos.

The U.S. government is seeking improved relations with the Laotian government.

A report from the U.S.-funded Radio Free Asia said the Hmong surrenders came after Hmong rebels in northern Laos has been surrounded

by government troops and offered amnesty and resettlement.

Citing unidentified sources, it said 300 people surrendered near Luang Prabang, including three high-ranking rebel officers, and between 300 and 400 in Xieng Khouang, including five Hmong generals.

The surrenders took place in late February, Radio Free Asia reported.

Amnesty International issued a statement saying it had received conflicting reports as to the reception of the Hmong and their treatment by the authorities.

"The organization calls upon the Lao government to ensure that all those who put down their arms and their civilian noncombatant family members are treated humanely and with dignity and respect," the Amnesty International statement said.

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Hmong refugees

(continued)

Carolina. "I thought all along that people would just say, 'Yes, we want to come to America,'" Moua said. "It just breaks my

heart that people are having doubts about coming here."

Hmong refugees still in Thailand have just been offered the opportunity to resettle in the United States, rather than being

forced back to their ancestral homes in Laos or trying to live illicitly elsewhere in Thailand.

State Rep. Cy Thao, DFL-St. Paul, who followed Moua into the Legislature in 2002, said interest in bringing the refugees to the United States is nonetheless very high.

Refugee advocates contend the communist government in Laos already persecutes its minority Hmong population for siding with the United States against the communist insurgency in Laos during the Vietnam War. Hundreds of thousands of Hmong fled after the Lao monarchy fell in 1975.

Now, nearly 30 years later, between 14,000 and 20,000 refugees remain in neighboring Thailand, poised to join the Hmong who have already reset-

tled to California, Minnesota, Wisconsin and North Carolina.

"They have heard about the challenges here in the U.S.," Moua said. "They have heard about the gang issues and about the freedom that children have. They fear it will make children disrespect their parents. ... And there's the other side, too, that Americans don't really want them here."

She said the Hmong in the Wat Tham Krabok compound are keenly aware of anti-immigration sentiment and cuts to human services programs in the wake of the recent recession — twin challenges that will make it tougher for their families to make a new home, she said.

"I think, though, that the fear of backlash is less," Moua noted. "I think the biggest

worry is of the unknown. ... Some say that at least there or in Laos, they can get a plot of land and farm and make it day to day.

"But when they call and ask me who will take care of them here, I tell them there are no guarantees, that they have to take care of themselves. So everything is up in the air, and that's how it was when I was there. One day you wanted to go to America, the next you didn't."

Thao, also a Hmong immigrant, said there are other forces at work, as well.

"There's a political piece here," Thao said. "There is still



Cy Thao

some hope that someday the regime will change in Laos and all these people will be able to simply go home."

Part of the dilemma is also generational, Thao said. Younger refugees don't have the ties their parents had to Laos and would rather start fresh somewhere else.

Jim Anderson, a human services planner with Ramsey County and a former refugee camp worker, said other options for the Hmong refugees seem to be running out.

The Wat Tham Krabok compound is the last significant refuge for the Hmong who fled Laos, Anderson said, and the Hmong are generally not welcome to simply disperse throughout Thailand.

The State Department also has said this will be the last effort by the United States to accommodate their former allies.

"A lot of these folks were in the Ban Vinai and Chaing Kham camps and had access to resettlement before but didn't go. I suspect that many of them were actually approved (to come to the United States) and then elected to stay," Anderson said.

"Clearly there are folks, unquantifiable, at this point, who don't want to resettle," Anderson said. "But how this all will play out continues to be very, very unknown."

Tim Nelson can be reached at tnelson@pioneerpress.com or 651-292-1159.

Moua gets firsthand refugee accounts

Lawmaker says many ambivalent about U.S. life

BY TIM NELSON

PIONEER PRESS JAN 24 '04

It may not yet be clear how many Hmong refugees will be headed to the United States this year or where those immigrants might settle, but one thing is for sure: Some of them already have Mee Moua's home phone number.

"When the phone rings at 3 or 4 in the morning, I know it's from Thailand. People are calling my house from the camp," said the DFL state senator from St. Paul's

East Side, who came from Thailand herself in 1978 and won election to the Legislature in 2002.

The camp is the Wat Tham Krabok compound at a Buddhist temple in central Thailand. It is scheduled to be closed, and its Hmong inhabitants could be repatriated to Laos this year.

"There's a lot of uncertainty there," she said in an interview this week, before she left to visit a Hmong gathering in North



Mee Moua

Coming Sunday:

The Pioneer Press will examine the role of public assistance in helping to settle Hmong refugees who might arrive in Minnesota this summer.

HMONG REFUGEES, 8A

65A

A42-10

Powell, U.N. to confer on Laos

Fate of Hmong rebels
in country is uncertain

PIIONEER PRESS, MAR 26 '04
BY TODD NELSON

Pioneer Press

Hmong-Americans in the Twin Cities and other advocates for Hmong resistance fighters holed up in the mountains of Laos welcomed Secretary of State Colin Powell's statement Thursday that he would contact the United Nations about the rebels' plight.

Some said they wished the move had come earlier, while others said they hoped it would result in more than simply having U.S. Secretary-General Kofi Annan send observers to Laos.

Contacting the United Nations or other third parties to investigate the circumstances of the Hmong in Laos is exactly what Hmong-Americans have long asked U.S. officials to do, said state Rep. Cy Thao, DFL-St. Paul.

"This should have been done a long time ago," Cy Thao said. "I'm disappointed. It's too bad so many people had to die before they even gave it this attention. But it's better now than a year from now."

Powell was responding to a request by U.S. Sen. Herb Kohl, D-Wis., at a Senate hearing in Washington. Kohl wants the United States to push for a U.N. fact-finding mission to Laos.

"We believe the U.N. can play an appropriate role," Powell said, without



Colin
Powell

HMONG IN LAOS, 4B

Hmong in Laos

(continued)

committing to Kohl's request. He added that he would speak to the U.N. chief about getting more access to the Hmong, who have been emerging from jungles after decades of fighting the communist Lao government.

The fate of the Hmong in Laos is a highly emotional issue for refugees in the United States because many in the jungle have relatives in this country, said Bo Thao, executive director of Hmong National Development Inc.

"There have been unconfirmed reports about what's happening, why people are coming out," Bo Thao said. "It's such a closed country, it's been difficult for people to really gauge what's going on."

Some reports say the Lao government has offered the Hmong fighters amnesty, while others say government officials have denied that and claimed the rebels were leaving on their own.

The Hmong were U.S. allies during the Vietnam War. Recent weeks have brought unsubstantiated but persistent reports that Hmong resistance fighters are being harmed as they emerge from decades in the jungle.

Several groups of Hmong resistance fighters have been reported to be surrendering to Lao government forces.

U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, D-St. Paul, continues to call on the Lao government to allow a third party to observe what is happening in the mountains, said her spokesman, Josh Straka.

In a letter last week, McCollum asked the Lao government to allow the United Nations or officials from the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane access to Hmong emerging from the jungle.

Kohl and U.S. Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis., on Monday asked the United Nations to conduct a mission to Laos to look into reports that Hmong resistance fighters were being harmed.

"At least now the State Department is admitting there are insurgents, there is a situation over there, there are Hmong surrendering," said Philip Smith,

executive director of the Center for Public Policy Analysis in Washington, which focuses on defense and foreign policy issues and has conducted forums on the Hmong in Laos.

"It's a major first step, particularly at that level within the Department of State," Smith said.

"You have a higher level of engagement here. If Powell takes this to Kofi Annan as he has pledged to do, this will be a huge development."



Sen.
Herb Kohl,
D-Wis.



Minnesota
State Rep.
Cy Thao

65A



Joey McLeister/Star Tribune

When former refugee **Cy Thao** graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1995, one goal was to have a show at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts or Walker Art Center within five years. He beamed recently while visiting his exhibition at the institute.

TALKING PICTURES

STAR TRIBUNE MAY 30 '04

Artist and Minnesota legislator

Cy Thao paints 5,000 years

of Hmong history in a new show at the

Minneapolis Institute of Art.



Provided by Minneapolis Institute of Arts

This pretty image of a woman tending a field of poppies, suggestive of an Impressionist landscape, carries a darker political meaning. Thao explains that when Laos was a French colony, the French encouraged the Hmong to grow opium poppies so they could pay colonial taxes in opium instead of cash.

A SLIDE SHOW OF MORE PAINTINGS BY CY THAO is available online at <http://startribune.com/freetime>

Wiry, intense, incredibly hard-working and gifted with an infectious laugh, Minnesota legislator and artist Cy Thao has accomplished more in his 32 years than many Americans aspire to in their lifetimes. Through his unlikely career choices — politician and painter — he has found a means to help his people and to tell the story of the culture they left behind.

When he arrived with his family in the United States in 1980, Thao was an 8-year-old Hmong boy who spoke no English. His story of refugee camps, resettlement, hard work and embrace of American life is a familiar one among refugees who fled Laos after the United States abandoned neighboring Vietnam in 1975.

In 2002, Thao, a DFLer, became the second Hmong elected to the Minnesota legislature, winning 81 percent of the votes for a House seat. He represents district 65A, which includes his Frogtown neighborhood of St. Paul. This month he became the first Hmong artist to have a solo show at the Minneapolis

By Mary Abbe

*Star Tribune
Staff Writer*

Institute of Arts, where his series of 50 paintings, "The Hmong Migration," runs through July 11.

"When I graduated [from the University of Minnesota in Morris] in 1995, I wrote a goal that within five years I was going to have a show at either the Walker or the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, so I just missed by four years," Thao said recently, beaming with pleasure as he stood surrounded by his colorful paintings at the museum. "At the time I had read or heard that guys like Lee Iacocca or Eddie Murphy set achievable personal goals for themselves and this seemed simple, but achievable."

Simple to imagine, perhaps, but not easy to execute. While many of the paintings are informed by his family's refugee experiences, the series has a larger historical scope. He worked on them for more than six years, during which he also won fellowships from the Bush and Jerome foundations that helped with living expenses and provided travel money for research. He traced the history of the Hmong at sites in China, Laos and Thailand in 1999, taking his father, Nhia Yong Thao, along as translator.

"I didn't speak Lao or Thai, and I needed my dad to start the

THAO continues on F15

THAO from F1

As a child, he used his his art to reach out

journey for me," he said.

Unlike many Hmong families who lost members in the post-war chaos, Thao's parents and their eight children arrived in the United States together; a ninth child was born here. A farmer and provincial governor in Laos, Nhia Yong Thao also worked with the CIA during the Vietnam War, as did many Hmong. In 1975, the senior Thao and his family fled to Thailand, where they spent five years in refugee camps before gaining permission to come to the United States. They settled in St. Paul.

Thao recalls his family's story candidly, without bitterness or sentiment.

"Because he was a government official, he had the paperwork" to get us out of Laos, Thao said of his father. "He hired smugglers to get us across the river, but we couldn't go together because there were too many. My brother, who was 7, and sister, 5, went first. I went by myself. I was nearly 3. I still remember the boat and the man who took me. The guy took me to a house and I remember playing with another boy. The next day they took me to a road and a bus came. They put me on the bus and at the back was my mom and two younger brothers. They took us to the refugee camp, and dad showed up a week later."

Three more children were born in the camp, and all survived, although one sister is "developmentally slower and her growth is stunted," because of illness contracted in the camp, he said.

"I knew there was death all the time because when someone passes away, we play a huge drum, and every night there were two or three drums that you would hear across the whole camp," Thao said.

Art became important to him in the United States when he realized that he could use

drawings to compensate for his lack of English.

"I would give my drawings to other kids, and that was how we became friends," he said. "So I learned at an early age how to use art to communicate."

Hmong history in pictures

In colorful narrative images, Thao's 50 paintings detail 5,000 years of Hmong history, culture and customs beginning with an imaginative creation myth and a flood legend, continuing through centuries of strife and persecution in China, oppression by the French in Laos and fighting for the Americans against the communists in a 15-year "secret war" run by the CIA.

The last half of the series recounts, in often graphic detail, massacres, genocide, brutal clan rivalries, perilous river crossings, camp privations and the difficulties and disappointments of life in the new "land of uncertainty, confusion and fear," as he describes the America that refugees encountered. One scene alludes to killings among teenage Hmong gangs and another to the suicides of older Hmong and the despair that drove a Hmong mother to kill her children.

When he started the series, Thao said, he didn't know much about Hmong history. Centuries of displacement and the absence of a written language left the Hmong dependent on transmitting their history and culture through stories and picture, including the elaborate embroidered "story cloths" that Hmong women made even in the refugee camps. His paintings continue those traditions in another format. Each painting is accompanied by a brief story highlighting bits of history, which Thao added after an encounter with the paintings of African-American artist Jacob Lawrence.

Lawrence is most famous for a painting series known as The Great Migration that recounts the exodus of black Americans from the South a century ago. While he was working on his own migration series, Thao saw at the MIA a show of Lawrence's paintings and texts telling the stories of black heroes Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass.

IF YOU GO

The Hmong Migration

What: Fifty paintings by artist and Minnesota legislator Cy Thao recounting 5,000 years of Hmong history, including Vietnam-era atrocities in Laos and recent events in the Twin Cities.

When: Thru July 11.

Where: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2400 3rd Av. S., Mpls.

Tickets: Free. 612-870-3131.

"I was maybe halfway through my series when I saw his stuff, and it reminded me of my own paintings," Thao said. "At that time I was struggling because I had not decided to put writing with them, but friends would ask me questions. I know it's spoon-feeding, but I think the viewer gets a deeper understanding and feeling if they read about it as well."

Despite some horrific scenes, there is a brisk pace to the series that gives it an epic, rather upbeat sweep. It is mostly a generic history of the Hmong, rather than a tale studded with individual heroes as is typical in European or American history painting. One painting of four fighter planes, however, is accompanied by the story of Lee Lue, "the fearless Hmong pilot" who distinguished himself during the secret war by flying more than 500 missions before he was shot down.

For centuries, most Hmong were farmers, so there are many bucolic images of peasants carrying water, tending

fields and feeding animals. Chickens scratch the dirt and cartoon-style pigs root about, seemingly oblivious to the human drama around them. The series ends on a positive note with depictions of a Hmong Pride parade, new festivals to preserve traditional ways, and a shopping mall bursting with Hmong businesses — including a Thao Art Gallery and a billboard announcing his political candidacy.

"I'm just thrilled by this show, both its incredible narrative and its style and the tough story that he tells with such clarity and feeling," said museum director Evan Maurer, who stopped in to greet Thao, whom he met when they served together on an arts panel several years ago.

Thao's painting technique evolved as his series expanded. Starting in 1996 with a raw, emotionally loaded and highly detailed folk-art style, he gradually changed to a simpler, almost childlike approach with shifting points of view and strangely sized figures. Some scenes have traditional European perspective with distant objects smaller than those in the foreground. Others are given a medieval treatment in which characters' sizes reflect their significance, as when a guard about to shoot a refugee looms larger than the camp's guard tower. Many have aerial perspectives common to Japanese art.

Having studied art (and political science) in college, Thao found that his hardest decisions were stylistic, "when to make it look like it's trained, and when to let it all out and just paint," he said.

Some of the agrarian images

have sly, double-edged political implications, too. One of the prettiest paintings shows an attractive woman in a field of tall green plants that stretches to the horizon, a kind of folk-art version of a Monet landscape. Gardeners and students of French colonial history will immediately recognize the plants as opium poppies. As Thao explains in an accompanying text panel, "When collecting taxes the French preferred opium to cash."

Politics and art

Having grown up poor in a family that was for five years dependent on welfare, Thao is grateful for and fiercely protective of the government social services that helped his people gain a foothold in the United States. As a legislator, he has tried to get the federal government to extend veterans benefits to the immigrant Hmong soldiers who fought alongside U.S. troops. As an artist he has tried to record their fast-fading stories.

"So now you start to see my art work and my political life coming together," he said.

As for the future, he expects that within a few generations the Hmong, too, will have melted into their new culture. His 3-year-old daughter replies in English when he talks to her in Hmong.

"We will be 'Asian-Americans' — can't do anything about it," he said, laughing ruefully at the generic term. "The most I can do is paint pictures of who we are and how we got here, and hopefully that will give them some glimpse of who they were."

Mary Abbe is at

BIOGRAPHY

Cy Thao

Born: 1972, Laos.

Family: Wife, Lee Vang, director, the Center for Hmong Arts and Talent in St. Paul; daughter Cianne, 3; baby due in July.

Education: B.A. in studio art and political science from the University of Minnesota, Morris, 1995. University of St. Thomas, education degree.

Career: Second Hmong elected to Minnesota legislature, DFL party representative from District 65A (St. Paul), November 2002. Taught in Minneapolis public schools and worked as actor and art instructor. Co-founder of Community Action Against Racism.

Awards and Honors: Bush Foundation artist fellowship; Jerome Foundation travel grant; Minnesota State Arts Board fellowship; St. Paul Companies Leadership and Initiative in the Neighborhood grant.

Recent achievements: First Hmong artist to have solo show at Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

Mary Abbe



Cy Thao (with his arms around two brothers) emigrated to the United States in 1980, when he was 8 years old. Twenty-two years later, he was elected to the Minnesota House.



"This mix of art and politics ... I'm still trying to figure it out," said Cy Thao, artist and member of Minnesota's House of Representatives. "My art is about preserving culture, and the politics is about changing culture. One day I'll figure it out," said Thao, who represents House District 65A (which includes parts of St. Paul's Frogtown and North End neighborhoods). An exhibit of Thao's paintings opens this week at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

RICHARD MARSHALL, PIONEER PRESS

STARTS MAY 16 '04

BY MATT PEIKEN
Pioneer Press

Painting a people

*An exhibition by St. Paul artist
Cy Thao brings the story of
"The Hmong Migration" to life.*

For Cy Thao, a picture is worth a thousand hurts.

"We're one of the few lucky families who came here intact," he says.

Thao is sitting on the porch of his Frogtown home, flipping through a catalog of oil paintings he collectively calls "The Hmong Migration." Most of the paintings depict the clashes, classism and carnage that devastated Hmong villages during the Vietnam War and drove thousands to refugee camps, later to settle in America.

Thao was just 8 when his family came to the Twin Cities in 1980, but images from the war, as told to him by family and clan elders, are so burned into his psyche that, in a sense, he painted from memory. Thao views the 50 paintings as one body of work, like a tapestry quilt, each canvas marking a chapter in the Hmong migration and cultural immersion into America.

PAINTING A PEOPLE, 2E

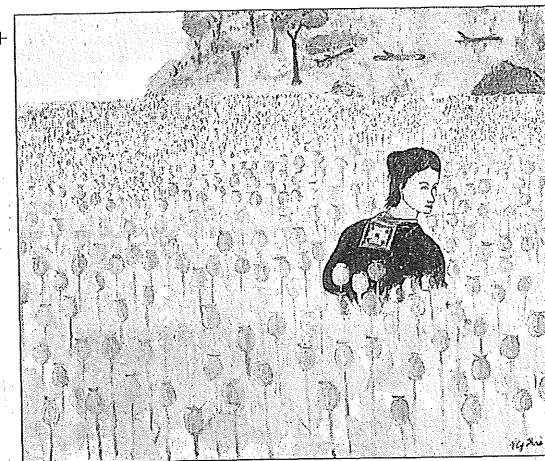
■ **What:** "The Hmong Migration," paintings by Cy Thao

■ **When:** Opening reception 7 to 9 p.m. Thursday. Exhibition runs through July 11.

■ **Where:** Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2400 Third Ave. S., Mpls.

■ **Tickets:** Free admission

■ **Call:** 612-870-3131



Painting a people

(continued)

First exhibited in a parking lot not far from his house, "The Hmong Migration" will have its first formal Minnesota viewing through the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. The opening reception is 7 to 9 p.m. Thursday.

"This series was a huge risk, but everything I do is a huge, huge risk," Thao says. "I felt an obligation to tell these stories, no matter what people thought of them."

Thao's own story is one of success and a community model. He led rallies and boycotts against a Minneapolis radio station whose morning host made derogatory comments about the Hmong. He won a Bush Foundation fellowship that allowed time to make these paintings. Then, two years ago, he became only the second Hmong in this country to hold elected public office, winning the seat for District 65A in the Minnesota House of Representatives.

Thao sees a parallel purpose with his art and budding political career — helping immigrants struggling to find their social, cultural or financial footing in America.

"We wanted to organize a campaign, but nobody wanted to be the candidate, so I said I

would," he says of the Hmong in St. Paul. "That's how it's always been for me, in a way. Lots of people have good ideas, but they might be too shy and not really put themselves out there. I have never been shy like that."

EASEL AND TRANSFORMERS

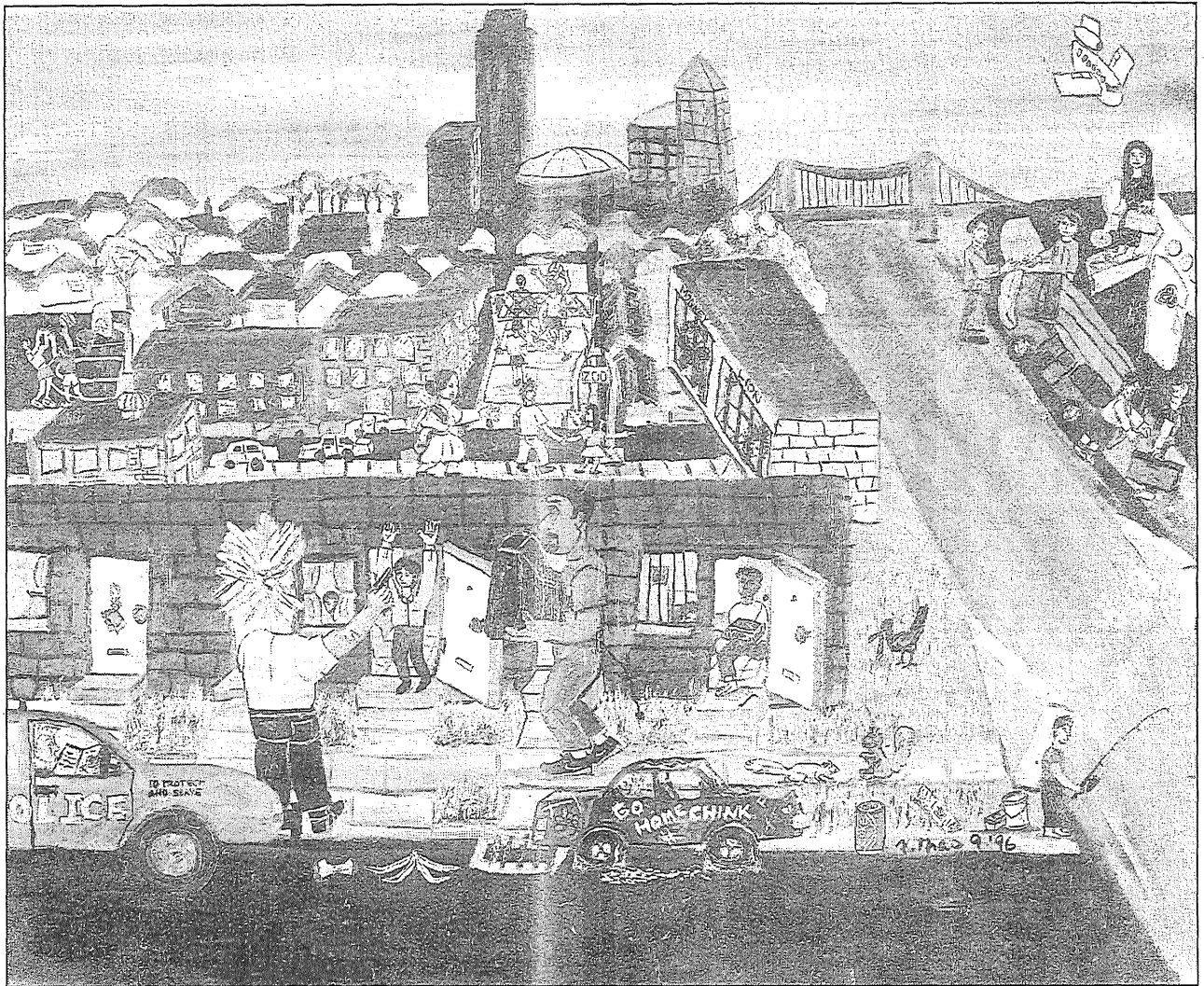
The third of nine adult children, Thao is short but broad shouldered, with a balding, perfectly rounded head accented by bright, brown eyes and a thin goatee.

He has turned a half-sized corner bedroom into his studio. Behind an easel and palette coated in dollops of paint stands a posse of plastic toy Transformer robots. Thao bought them in an impulsive burst of nostalgia for the cartoons he watched after first coming to America.

Thao picks up a portrait of Paul Wellstone that was leaning against a wall. He has been painting portraits such as these solely to hone his technical skill.

"If you take this stuff and the series stuff, you can't tell it's the same artist," he says with a smile.

Thao first stepped into art at the University of Minnesota-



Cy Thao's paintings deal with many facets of the Hmong experience, both in their homeland and in the United States. Thao's work will be on display starting this week at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

Morris, where he enrolled after graduating from Park Center High School in Brooklyn Park largely to stave off finding a full-time job. He majored in political science but got an internship at the state Capitol that so soured him on politics that for a time he crossed it off his mental list of career options.

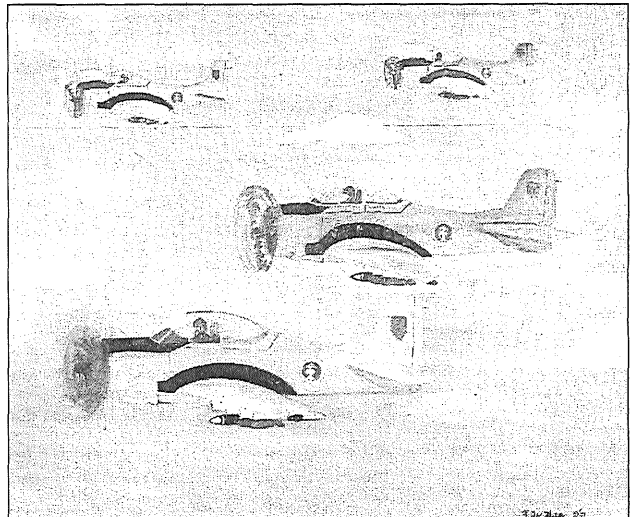
Thao later got involved with a Hmong theater group in St. Paul, expanded its scope to include writers, poets and visual artists, and eventually took over as director of the renamed Center for Hmong Arts and Talent. His wife, Lee Vang, now runs the center. But he didn't get serious about his own art

until he conceived the immigration series.

He traveled to China, Thailand and Laos to research paintings and personal histories, collect oral stories and study blacksmithing. This immersion and the work that emerged from it occupied Thao for nearly five years.

TELLING THE STORY

The paintings in this series are cartoonish and the characters so simplistically rendered they could have come from a high schooler's brush. What the paintings lack in technical achievement they make up



for in layered content.

Thao blends the realism of village gatherings and celebrations, farming life and stark wartime violence with images drawn from creation myths and 3,000-year-old histories of the "Hmong kingdom." The series is rife with religious symbolism, and Thao drew on a tendency he noticed in Christian artwork to exaggerate the size of some figures. A single painting might depict several storylines, and Thao closed the series with a splash of paintings touching on the hardships and pitfalls of adapting to America.

"I don't spend a lot of time on the image. The overall story is more important," he says. "To me, bringing those moments of Hmong history onto canvas, it's almost like a motion picture. The hardest part sometimes was finding the right characters to tell the story."

Two years ago, Thao hung his paintings in a tent erected in the parking lot of a convenience store just north of his house, along University Avenue. About 500 people, most of them Hmong, walked through the

exhibition over two days.

"They don't normally go to galleries to see this stuff," Thao says. "A lot of people saw it once and came back with their children or parents so they could talk about these things. The older people, the people who were old enough to remember, they would look at a painting and say 'Oh, that's just how it was.' That made me feel pretty good, that I got it right."

Thao is gearing up for a reelection campaign, expecting his second child and planning to return to his studio this summer to begin what he's calling his "America" series.

"I'm a product of American foreign policy, and I'm an immigrant and refugee, and instead of straight from the textbook, I'll tell America's story from my perspective," he says. "I'll give everyone the same weight, not like in the history books, but it won't be negative at all. For me, it will be a truthful story."

Matt Peiken can be reached at mpeiken@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-5440.

Cy Thao wants proportional board membership for CAPM

By Tom LaVenture
Asian American Press

ST. PAUL (March 31, 2004) – State Representative Cy Thao (DFL 65A) on March 25, introduced legislation that would change the composition of the Board of Directors of the State Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans. If passed, Thao's bill would require a CAPM Board that is comprised in proportion with the percentage of the Asian and Pacific Islander population.



Representative
Cy Thao
(DFL 65A)

Thao said he was approached by constituents who said they did not feel their issues were adequately represented by CAPM. He added that former Hmong board members of CAPM said that their issues, and those of the other Southeast Asian communities, the majority of the API population in the state, needed more attention with the council. He also cited a general lack of understanding of each community's respective concerns and issues.

"We thought that maybe one better way

CAPM

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

NOTICE: THIS MATERIAL

Ethnic APIA Population of Minnesota

Hmong	45,443 (26.4%)
Vietnamese	20,570 (11.9)
Asian Indian	19,963 (11.6)
Chinese, except Taiwanese	18,622 (10.8)
Korean	15,255 (8.9)
Laotian	11,516 (6.7)
Filipino	9,696 (5.6)
Cambodian	6,533 (3.8)
Japanese	6,483 (3.8)
Native Hawaiian	1,526 (0.9)
Thai	1,498 (0.9)
Pakistani	1,166 (0.7)
Tibetan	1,100 (0.6) (estimate)
Taiwanese	747 (0.4)
Sri Lankan	485 (0.3)
Indonesian	429 (0.2)
Malaysian	387 (0.2)
Bangladeshi	311 (0.2)
Other Asian	660 (0.4)
Samoan	767 (0.4)
Tongan	71 (0.0)
Other Polynesian	77 (0.0)
Guamanian/Chamorro	483 (0.3)
Micronesian	91 (0.1)
Fijian	14 (0.0)
Melanesian	27 (0.0)
Other Pacific Islander	97 (0.1)

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Asian American News
4-2-2004

CAPM

Continued from page 1

to do that is to have a board membership that is in proportion to that of the states Asian population," said Thao. "The bigger the group the more members are there that understand and address the issues that are pertinent to them."

Minnesota Statutes (Section 3.9226, subdivision 1) requires the State Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans consist of 23 members. Nineteen members are appointed by the governor. The bill would amend the statute on CAPM membership, which is designed for a broad composition by not allowing more than one council member from each of the respective Asian-Pacific Islander ethnic communities.

Thao's bill (H.F. No. 3136) would "amend...in proportion to that community's representation in the state's Asian-Pacific population based on the most recent decennial census."

According to the CAPM report on the 2000 Census there are approximately 172,166 APIA Minnesotans. Under a proportional board membership CAPM would be 26 percent Hmong (5 or 6 members), followed by Vietnamese (2 or 3 members), Asian Indian (2 or 3 members), Chinese (non-Taiwanese) (2 members). The remaining ethnic groups would fill the other CAPM seats with no more than one member.

Under Thao's bill the CAPM board would remain the same size at 23 members. With more than 40 ethnic APIA groups in Minnesota, to allow a proportional board would concern all but about five major groups with having a seat. Thao says that all APIA communities would have a voice by being allowed a non-voting seat on the board in which to address all issues and introduce their own.

CAPM Executive Director Ilean Her was unavailable for comment.

Thao cited the Hmong marriage bill issue as one example where

more Hmong membership from the states largest ethnic Asian community would have made a difference. He was upset that an issue several years old is just now being looked at by the council. He said there is an incorrect perception that the community has become angered to the point of violence on the issue.

"We can't ignore the issues that are impacting the large Asian groups in Minnesota any more," he said.

After Thao introduced the bill last week it was sent to the Commerce, Jobs and Economic Development Committee. The Committee will determine if a proportional system of CAPM board membership will impact the state's economic development and will provide additional standards to better reflect the community composition.

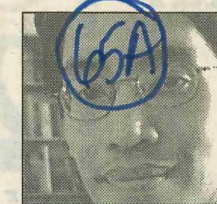
The state statute with which CAPM operates requires other criteria for membership and these are not addressed in Thao's bill. The statute calls for the governor in considering an appointee to look for "proven dedication and commitment to the Asian-Pacific community and any special skills possessed by the appointee that might be beneficial to the council, including at a minimum experience in public policy, legal affairs, social work, business, management, or economics."

The current CAPM Board Members include: John Doan, chair (Vietnamese); Evelyn Lee, vice chair (Indonesian); Wangyal T. Ritzeke (Tibetan); Ale Eleasalo (Samoan); Aly Xiong (Hmong); Jennie Hsiao (Chinese); Tin Win (Burmese); Stephen Huh (Korean); Lina Jau (Malaysian); Vinodh Kutty (Singaporean); Rungthip Langseth (Thai); Adeel Z. Lari (Pakistani); Ananda Srilal Liyanapathiranage (Sri Lankan); and Pastor Cherian C. Puthiyottil (Indian).

The CAPM board also has appointed legislative (nonvoting) members. Currently, Sen. Ellen Anderson, Sen. Pat Pariseau, Rep. Stephanie Olsen and Rep. Tim Mahoney fill these seats.

Asian council change would hurt community

It's not every day you see a Minnesota legislator pulling the welcome mat out from under a community's feet. But that's what's happening to our Asian Pacific residents with the introduction of H.F. 3136 by Rep. Cy Thao.



BRYAN
THAO
WORRA

Buried under the mountain of other bills in the House, H.F. 3136 could easily be overlooked - as just another minor adjustment to a state agency. But it's far from minor, presenting a significant threat to the unique progress Asian and Pacific Islanders have made here in the land of 10,000 lakes.

Cy Thao's bill calls for a restructuring of the Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans, calling for the 23-member Council to "represent each Asian-Pacific ethnic community of the state in proportion to that community's representation in the state's Asian-Pacific population based on the most recent decennial census."

In plain English: The more there are of you, the more you get.

It should be clear whom Thao intends benefit with this shift in structure - the Hmong. What might not be as clear are the enormous problems this change would create.

Since its creation by the Min-

nesota Legislature in 1985, the Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans has been a key agency in ensuring that Minnesota legislators hear the voice of the Asian Pacific community in Minnesota. Our voice consists of residents from more than 50

nations and ethnicities - more than 172,000 people. And the only way we get heard is through a united, Pan-Asian approach.

The Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans is an example of the Pan-Asian model at its finest, uniting diverse ethnic groups as a collective voice while still supporting individual community interests, no matter how seemingly small.

This sort of intercultural collaboration is almost unheard of in any other state. It's an example of what's right with Minnesota.

But now, H.F. 3136 is undermining our distinctive Pan-Asian vision with its language for proportional representation. It invalidates the needs of our smaller Asian communities, stripping them of a voice and a chance to grow.

For example, the tribal Montagnards of Vietnam fought bravely alongside U.S. forces during the Vietnam War, but they have only just begun to resettle in the United States thanks to

If this bill passes, it will send a clear message that Asian Minnesotans cannot expect fair representation in Minnesota.

recent changes in American and Vietnamese policy. But they are certain to grow in the years ahead. Just not in Minnesota, if H.F. 3136 passes. Thao's bill will ensure they are denied a voice and the resources to succeed in Minnesota, because there just aren't enough of them here to be worth listening to.

If this bill passes, it will send a clear message that Asian Minnesotans cannot expect fair representation in Minnesota. It also sends a disturbing message about the relationship of minority legislators to their own personal cultural interests. Would Cy Thao have introduced such a bill if Fijians were the dominant Asian minority in Minnesota?

The fact is, few agencies have worked as hard and consistently as the council to keep Asians in Minnesota aware of key legislation that affects

them, and to help us understand the implications of new bills and policies that emerge. It has been an incredible asset to legislators, the media, national and international researchers and our community, keeping Asian Americans fully engaged in our democratic process every year.

Proportional representation will undermine all trust and credibility of the council. Supporters of this bill are alienating Asian Minnesota. The council must not become a big wheel of fortune that always lands on one particular group.

If H.F. 3136 passes, it will be a clear and hostile signal that non-Hmong Asians might as well just move out of here.

I stay in Minnesota because I like it here, and believe it's a great place to raise a family. I love Minnesota because of its diversity, and even if my people aren't the most numerous, I'd always believed that our voice would be fairly heard here. It's very clear that could change soon, and not for the better.

Legislators need to understand that just because a bill has the word Asian in it, that does not mean that the best interests of Asians are represented.

Bryan Thao Worra, of St. Paul, is a Laotian-American poet who has worked on Southeast Asian refugee resettlement issues at the regional and national levels.

Political priorities set Holmgren, Thao apart in District 65A

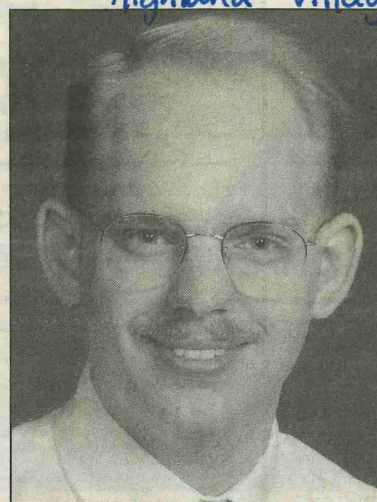
by Kevin Driscoll

Freshman District 65A Representative Cy Thao's bid for a second term is being challenged by Frogtown resident Paul Holmgren in the November 2 general election.

The Republican-endorsed Holmgren, a single, 29-year-old accountant, said his campaign is based on the "defense of the family and the defense of freedom. I am pro-life, anti-homosexual and opposed to gay marriage."

Holmgren said the state is "too deep into education. I believe school boards should be responsible for all funding for schools."

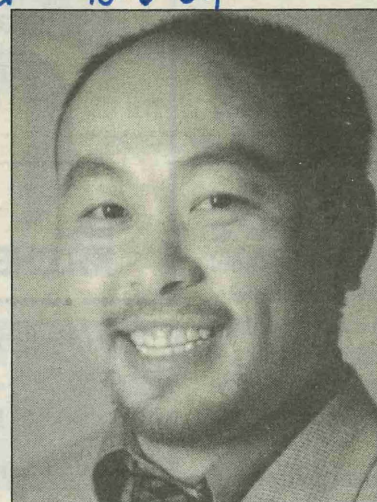
"Starting a business in Minnesota is too cumbersome," Holmgren said. "You have to go through so many state agencies just to get going. I would push for a review of the state tax codes and change them to be more business-development-



Paul Holmgren

friendly."

Holmgren was disappointed in Ramsey County District Judge John Finley's ruling earlier this year that struck down the state's new "conceal and carry" law regarding handguns.



Cy Thao

"The state should be protecting people's civil and personal rights to protect themselves," he said. "I'd vote for a new bill to do just that."

Thao, a 32-year-old artist of the Summit-University neighborhood

who is endorsed by the DFL, said he played a big role during the last session in passing a bill prohibiting mortgage flipping. "In flipping, someone buys a foreclosed home and leases the house back to the owner," Thao said. "Then he raises the rent more and more, finally driving the owner and his family out, and sells the house at a significant profit. Now, whatever profit is made on a sale, 82 percent of it must go to the original homeowner."

Married and the father of two children, Thao sits on the House of Representatives' Health and Human Services Policy committee. He said he favors "a move to a single-payer, or universal, health-care system in Minnesota, anything that expands health care systemwide."

If re-elected, Thao said he would continue to work to reduce crime in his district. "The incidence of crime has gone down, but we need to keep

fighting," he said. He favors renewing the Sunrise Operations grant that put more police in the neighborhood.

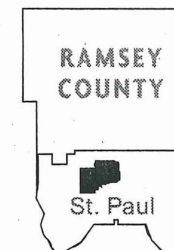
Thao said he would also continue to support efforts to build light-rail transit in the central corridor between downtown St. Paul and downtown Minneapolis.

The Villager's 2004 campaign coverage will continue in the October 20 issue with stories on the races for the U.S. House of Representatives in District 4; the state House of Representatives in Districts, 62B, 64B and 65B; Minneapolis School Board; and Mendota Heights mayor and city council. That issue will also include the Villager's Voter's Guide.

House District 65A



Cy Thao



DISTRICT 65A

10.20.04

Cy Thao

A longtime community activist who has won the confidence of legislators from both sides of the aisle, **Cy Thao** has advocated strongly for the diverse residents of his district in his first term. Born in Laos and a resident of the United States since 1980, Cy Thao has a gift for fighting for the downtrodden without characterizing them as victims. He's energetic, eager to learn and shows an ability for bipartisan cooperation. For that last quality alone, he deserves another term.

Cy Thao's legislative priorities include reforms to the mortgage industry that would make foreclosure equity stripping more difficult for unscrupulous lenders. The bill, which gives protections for homeowners on the brink of foreclosure, was signed by Gov. Tim Pawlenty in May. Cy Thao has also sought recognition for Hmong veterans who fought with the United States during the Vietnam War. He has worked to reinstate state funding for English language classes and to provide additional food assistance relief for noncitizens. He was a co-founder of the Center for Hmong Arts and Talent and received a Bush fellowship for an art project that depicted the history of Hmong immigration.

Cy Thao, 32, is an artist and actor and applies his creative gifts in resolving legislative issues, as well. He's been described as

"delightful" to work with by a Republican legislator who also praised him for his self-deprecating humor. If there's one thing the state House could use more of, it's the ability to not take oneself too seriously. Cy Thao takes his work as a human rights advocate seriously, yet understands the importance of flexibility and respect for his fellow legislators.

His challenger is Paul Holmgren, 29, a Republican who is employed as a retail associate for an office supply store.

FIND OUT MORE

Cy Thao: www.house.leg.state.mn.us/members/members.asp?district=65A

Paul Holmgren: No Web site provided

HMONG HUMAN RIGHTS MEASURE INTRODUCED
PIONEER PRESS FEB 25 '04
 Three St. Paul lawmakers have prepared a resolution calling on Laos to halt acts of violence against the Hmong population and to allow human rights groups, the United Nations and Amnesty International to visit the Hmong left behind.

The issue: St. Paul's Hmong-American community is deeply concerned about Hmong still living in the jungles of Laos. Human rights groups say the remaining Hmong are subject to persecution by the Laotian government. Sen. Mee Moua, DFL-St. Paul, said this week that Hmong-Americans in St. Paul have relatives in Laos "who have been hunted like animals."

The impact: Resolutions have little impact beyond helping publicize an issue. With hundreds more Hmong headed to St. Paul from Thailand, the resolution will be closely watched by the Hmong-American community.

Next step: The Senate resolution has been referred to the Senate Rules and

Administration Committee.

Key lawmakers: The sponsors of the resolution are Sen. Mee Moua and Reps. John Lesch and Cy Thao, all DFLers from St. Paul.

More information: The resolution, SR108, is online at www.leg.state.mn.us.

— Jim Ragsdale

POLITICA

STATE REP. THAO INTRODUCES BILL TO PREVENT FORECLOSURE RESCUE SCAMS

St. Paul, Minn. — State Representative Cy Thao has introduced a bill to protect vulnerable homeowners from predatory companies and individuals who target homeowners facing foreclosure with the promise of saving their home, only to strip the owners of any equity in their home.

His bill, HF 2095, would protect homeowners facing potential foreclosures by requiring companies and individuals that buy homes in foreclosure procedures be licensed and to make sure homeowners are aware of their rights in foreclosure proceedings.

The bill would also allow the Attorney General to impose a fine of up to \$25,000 against lenders found guilty of mortgage flipping or to pay

restitution to the victims of mortgage flipping. Mortgage flipping is the purchase and rapid resale of property for a big gain in price. It is illegal if fraudulent means, such as phony documents, deflated property appraisals or fraudulent foreclosure scams, are used.

"With our economy struggling, a lot of hard-working families are a lay-off or plant closing away from finding themselves in foreclosure proceedings," Thao said. "Unfortunately, there are too many unscrupulous individuals willing to take to advantage of these families to turn a quick profit. We need to protect families from these predatory buyers and make sure that they aren't taken advantage of and that they get all that's

coming to them if they sell their homes."

Recent news reports have found more than 400 fliplike transactions, most of which are concentrated in low-income neighborhoods.

"More than anything, families and individuals caught in foreclosure proceedings need accurate information about their rights and options," Thao said. "By licensing companies and individuals who buy homes in foreclosure, we can weed out the few bad apples looking to take advantage of other people's troubles for a profit."

You can contact Rep. Thao at (651) 296-5158, 315 State Office Building, 100 Martin Luther King Blvd., St. Paul, MN 55155 or via e-mail at rep.cy.thao@house.mn.

Pawlenty Campaign Treasurer Involved in Alleged Equity Stripping and Foreclosure Scams

Scam Victims Demand That Governor Act to Stop Problem

On Wednesday, February 24, 2004 at 12:45 p.m., members of ACORN and victims of alleged equity stripping by Governor Pawlenty's Campaign Treasurer Ron Esau and other scam perpetrators were to hold a press conference in front of the Governor's Mansion at 1006 Summit Avenue in St. Paul.

The group is demanding that Pawlenty meet with victimized constituents and that he support strong legislation to protect Minnesotans from losing their home.

Cy Thao bill on predatory scams

STATE OFFICE BUILDING
 ST. PAUL, MN 55155



State Representative Cy Thao

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2004 March 2 Asian American Press

COMMUNITY



Cheu Lee / HMONQ TIMES

Rep. Cy Thao, Sen. Mee Moua and Rep. John Lesch talk about the Human Rights problem in Laos.

By Terri Thao

In an historical movement by a state government, State Representatives John Lesch (DFL-66A) and Cy Thao (DFL-65A) and Senator Mee Moua (DFL-67) announced the introduction of simultaneous resolutions condemning the violation of human rights in Laos. Surrounded by supporters at the State

Capitol midmorning on Monday, February 23, the state representatives and state senator wanted to call attention to the plight of the Hmong living in the jungles of Laos.

HUMAN RIGHTS

continued on page 10

HUMAN RIGHTS

continued from page 1

Sen. Moua commented how deep this issue affected the Hmong community. "This issue just does not touch lives of strangers but of people I care about, relatives related to me...every single one has someone who is being persecuted...the only way relatives stay alive is to be used as a political ball in a political game. Every second that human rights organizations are delayed and denied access to those in the jungles will impact those who will forever not have a future if we fail to act."

Commonly known as the *cobfab*, or the jungle people, are the Hmong soldiers and families who fled to the jungle after the Communists came into power in 1975. Though there have been no official numbers given, a 2001 estimate that there were about 17,000 jungle people; current estimates are much lower, just in the thousands. The Lao People's Democratic Republic (LDPR) has long denied the existence of the jungle people, but videos and personal testimony have circulated in the Hmong American community proclaiming their existence.

The resolutions call for "provision of access to Hmong rapped in the Laotian jungles

by international human rights organizations, the United Nations, Amnesty International and other humanitarian and medical aid organizations; and it recommends the call by the United Nations Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination for the Lao People's Revolutionary Party to halt immediately all acts of violence against the Hmong population and provide them with humanitarian assistance."

Participants in the citizenship program, the Jane Adams School (JAS) headed the grassroots effort that pushed for these resolutions. "In our citizenship class, we asked what the participants wanted to do and this was the issue those participants were most passionate about," explained D'Ann Urbaniak JAS coordinator. Along with research assistant Pakou Hang, JAS staff encouraged the participants to use the democratic process and write letters to their state senators and representatives urging them to examine the issue.

Dang Vang, a student at Humboldt High School and part of the JAS group spoke about the research he gathered regarding the human rights situation in Laos and implored to the public that "[during the war] the Hmong specialized in helping U.S. soldiers get out of Laos and now the Hmong are trapped, and we need to help them get out."

Rep. Lesch's involvement occurred when he was approached by three of his constituents in December 2003. Rep. Lesch had "felt strongly" about the issue before and realized the importance of this issue sharing the history of the Hmong migration to the U.S. and the plight of those left behind in Laos. "Most Americans suffered a lack of knowledge about people who are suffering in Laos," stated Rep. Lesch.

Mai Yia Moua, one of the three original constituents was present at the announcement and testified about her personal experience living as one of the jungle people for 12 years. "I ate what grew in the jungle: wild yams, tree roots, bark of the banana tree. Cooking had to be done before dawn so that the enemy could not see you. They should have the same right to life as we do."

One couple that was present at the press conference, Koua Yang Her and his wife, Lee, told their story of a 16 year old nephew who had been born and raised in the jungle. Because of the harsh conditions and extreme poverty living in the jungle, their nephew, Meng, left to earn a living in the more urban areas. According to Koua Yang Her, Meng was "immediately arrested" and sent

to prison where he was tried as an adult. Koua Yang Her's family did not know Meng's whereabouts for two years, until recently when it was discovered that Meng was imprisoned and working in the same jail cell as the Rev. Naw Karl Mua. Despite the fact that the Hers may never see Meng again, they hoped that by telling his story that "the world should know about the situation in Laos and pay attention."

In supporting the resolutions, Rep. Thao acknowledged that, "I know there is a push for normal trade relations (NTR) with Laos, but I truly believe that the issue of human rights needs to be before the Lao government before NTR." Thao added, "the U.S. government has a role and the Laotian government has to take an active role and have the human rights organizations monitor."

Though there have been different groups working on the issue of the jungle Hmong, Sen. Moua concluded that, "We have to come together and send a statement to them and not just be one of many voices...we need to send one story and for us to use this as a testament. This resolution conveys the message that the leadership of Minnesota helps and this is a just a beginning."

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COMMUNITY

THE HMONG MIGRATION PAINTINGS BY CY THAO

The Minneapolis Institute Of Arts May 21–July 11, 2004

Minneapolis—The Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program (MAEP) at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts presents an epic journey in the exhibition "The Hmong Migration." Opening May 21, the exhibition features a series of fifty oil paintings by artist and political leader Cy Thao. The paintings recount five thousand years of Hmong history, from life in southern China and the mountains of Laos to refugee camps in Thailand and resettlement in the United States. Expressing the artist's underlying hope for healing and closure, these unique paintings portray the stories of his family and others who have experienced the atrocities of war.

Thao paints in a very consistent pictorial style that evokes Hmong story quilts. The detailed visual cues he uses are straightforward, almost schematic. Meanwhile, his images always reveal some form of interaction between figures. The two-dimensional quality of his landscapes belies an often harrowing and tragic episode, such as the massacre of Hmong villages by communist soldiers during the "Secret War" in Laos.

Born in 1972, Thao is an artist, teacher, and political leader currently serving as a representative in the Minnesota State Legislature. Thao was awarded a Bush Artist Fellowship in 2000. The fellowship allowed him to visit China, Laos, and Thailand, where he interviewed other Hmong who experienced war in Laos. The fellowship and research made it possible for Thao to complete his series of oil paintings on the Hmong migration. Brief commentaries by the artist help to provide a context for his telling of the story.

With his most prominent venue to date, Thao views this exhibition as an opportunity to share the Hmong story with a broader audience. "The more we know about each other, the more we will not be afraid," says Thao, who has lived in St. Paul since 1980. Some have inquired about purchasing individual pieces, yet the artist chooses to keep the series intact. Thao's purpose in doing this is to secure a permanent home for the

series so that it will be available to view in its entirety for years to come.

"The Hmong Migration" opening reception will be held Thursday, May 20, from 7 to 9 p.m. An artist-led public tour will take place on Sunday, June 6, at 3 p.m., in the Minnesota Artists Gallery at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts. On Sunday, June 27, at 3 p.m., the Critics' Trialogue will feature art critic Tom O'Sullivan. Co-sponsored by the Visual Art Critics Union of Minnesota (V.A.C.U.M.), the Critics' Trialogue series is designed to bring together critics, artists, and the public in a gallery setting for a three-way conversation about the creative possibilities of criticism. The exhibition, the reception, and the Trialogue are free and open to the public.



Photo Courtesy of The Minneapolis Institute of Arts

Cy Thao's oil on canvas painting, #14, will be showing at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts along with many of his other paintings.