

Interview with By Khang

May 31, 1995

By Khang arrived in Sacramento on October 13, 1976 with his wife, one-year-old son, Kham, and unmarried younger brother, Nhia Khang, after having spent one year in Nong Hai refugee camp in Thailand. By's wife's cousin and uncle lived in Hawaii and applied to sponsor By and his family, but they did not go through the correct procedures. So, By found himself in Sacramento even though he thought he was flying to Hawaii. When they emerged from the plane, By looked around for his wife's relatives, but no one was there. He was approached by a South Vietnamese man whose words were entirely unintelligible to By except for his own name.

The sponsor, who had assumed that By would speak French, took the family to his home for dinner. Then he took them to a motel room with a kitchen on Stockton Blvd where the family stayed for two weeks, never going outside. They watched the world go by from their window, confused by the variety of people and the cold windy weather. They had seen some white people in Laos, pilots in the army, but they had never seen black people before.

Their sponsor came to visit them once each week, bringing them a little food. They were very hungry, only having enough food to eat one meal a day. **"We eat one time a day and I cry three times a day."** By claimed that their sponsor did not care about the family, he just wanted the money that he got for their food and care. **"The sponsor spend only twenty dollars a week for food for all four people. He buy furniture for himself and turn in receipts to USSE(refugee resettlement agency?)."**

By's son became very ill, and they could not communicate to their sponsor that they needed medicine for him. This made By very angry. Finally, the sponsor brought another Vietnamese man who spoke Lao to see about the baby. He took the family to the UCD medical center where Kham remained for two weeks. He was very sick, and the doctors had to tie his hands to keep him still while they gave him medicine. By and his wife were not permitted to stay with their son, and did not know what was happening to him.

After they had lived in the motel for two weeks, the sponsor moved them to an apartment on 12th street in the north area. After a month they moved to Lemon Hill where there was one Vietnamese man who spoke Lao. They still had very little food, and **"nothing else."**

By decided to go to school. The Vietnamese Lao man went to Fremont Adult School, so By went with him. They took two buses to get to the school. By attempted to return home alone, and got lost by getting on the wrong second bus. Finally, after hours of wandering around, he recognized a police officer and showed him his identification. The policeman took him to the right bus. When By returned to school the next day, he got lost again.

By was favorably impressed with Fremont Adult School. He remembers Mrs. White as one of his favorite teachers. There were students from many different countries, including two Thai women who were married to Americans. They invited By to the cafeteria to eat with them, but he admitted that he had not money. They were appalled, and one of the women who spoke Vietnamese, called his sponsor and complained vehemently about his neglect of By and his family. She then took By to the welfare department where he was immediately given food stamps. By was extremely grateful and relieved after having eaten almost no food for more than two months, he still felt the strain of not having a car to get around the city.

By's wife became pregnant, but the fetus lodged in the fallopian tube and she had to have an operation to remove it. A Mexican woman at Fremont who was married to an American took them to the hospital.

By wanted to work while he was going to school, so his sponsor put an ad in the newspaper which claimed that By could **"do anything"**, but could not speak English. This resulted in a \$2.59 an hour job as a bus boy in a restaurant on Watt Avenue called Candle Rock. The owner was a World War II veteran who refused to let By go to school claiming that you **"have to work in America, you can't go to school and live on welfare."** By bused tables for six months, and then worked at a paper recycling place for one year. This was very hard work, and he was not able to return to school. **"For myself I could not have any chance to go to school until now."**

By does not know how old he was when he came to Sacramento, but he stated that his brother was about twenty. A welfare worker took his brother, Nhia, to a catholic middle school, where his small stature kept him from standing out too much from the young children. He learned English and was able to go straight on to Sacramento City College where he could be around people his own age. He spent four years at the community college before moving on to CSUS where he completed his bachelor and masters degrees. He now works for Child Protective Services in Stockton.

After By and his family had been in Sacramento for about six months, other Hmong families began arriving. By took many of them to get welfare, and went on assistance himself for one year while he went on a course that trained him to do electronic repairs on televisions and radios. He also worked part-time around 1980 at Hiram Johnson High School and in Rancho Cordova as a teacher's aid for the Hmong pupils.

In 1977/78 By sponsored his two nephews and their families from the Nom Hai camp. One year later he sponsored his uncle. In 1979/80, his nephew's baby daughter died in the hospital. The family felt that something had been done wrong, but they had no way to find out. They went to the coroner's office and to the welfare department to get help with the funeral which took one week to secure. But then they felt like they had lost all rights in the funeral and burial as they were shut out of almost the entire process. They went to take the baby to the cemetery, but were not allowed to open the casket. At the cemetery, they were requested to leave before

the casket was buried. They were left feeling that the body was not really buried. The horror of this incident led By and his friends to start the Hmong funeral organization, which still exists today. Each family contributes twenty dollars when someone dies so that the funeral costs can be covered, so that the person can receive a proper Hmong funeral.

In 1980, By participated in organizing the United Lao Community Organization, where he served as vice-president for two years with Ly Seng, a Lao Vietnamese as president. Also in 1980, By was hired by the Indo-Chinese Assistance Center to work as an interpreter and facilitator for the growing Lao Hmong community. He worked there until 1983 when he left the United Lao Community organization because they wanted to join Lao Lan Xang (million elephants), the Lao resistance group. Instead, he joined with Lue Vang to organize the local Lao Family agency with some funding from Sacramento county for the purpose of assessing health and social services to refugees as well as some state funds. They recruited eleven board members, who named Lue president, while By served as the director of the agency. He kept his position until 1987 when the opposing political faction maneuvered his dismissal.

In 1987 By left Lao Family and began working for the International Rescue Committee, assisting refugee Laotian families in the resettlement process. He also helped people prepare and file sponsorship papers. Because the camps have closed, and there are only one thousand refugees reported as waiting to immigrate, including all Southeast Asian groups, By's office has very little to do any more. Only one family is due to arrive in Sacramento this month. By and his co-worker, Pao, are expecting to receive notice that one of them will be laid off in June.

By is planning, at last, to go back to school. He is tired of refugee work and would like **"to do something to help our kids; there are too many gangs around."** First he wants to get his high school diploma by attending American River College, and then go on to a four-year college. He holds United States citizenship and owns his own house on two acres in Rio Linda, where he grows vegetables and raises animals. He has seven children, and his eldest, Kham, is nineteen, while his youngest, also a boy is ten months. He has five boys and two girls, and they are all American citizens except Kham and By's wife. By also owns an apartment building that will be paid for when he is sixty-five.

He explained that in Laos **"if have enough food, then you're happy."** But, in America people want more from life. He explained the large numbers of Hmong families on welfare by noting that if people work they don't qualify for the benefits that they get on welfare such as housing, legal services and medi-cal. On welfare they also have time to go fishing. He stated that there are 9,170 Hmong people on cash assistance in Sacramento.

When I asked him about discrimination, he commented that **"some (Americans) are against, but they don't understand (our history)."**

By reflected on how he felt when he first arrived in Sacramento. He said that he felt **"lonely, very strange--there were no mountains, no animals."** He went

on a field trip to San Francisco with the Fremont School. On the bus journey he **“cried and cried, I miss my country when I saw animals and mountains for the first time.”** He continued attempting to convey to me the strangeness that he felt, and in many ways continues to feel. **“Everything is different here; the squirrels are different, the bird song is different, the air is different.”**

By Khang would like to visit Laos. In fact, he would like **“to teach them something.”** He would like to spend part of each year in Laos helping the Hmong there to know how to live better. But, he would not want to move back to Laos. He spoke of a friend, Tou Doua Kou, who had worked for the United Nations in Laos for two months and missed America very much. By completed our conversation by stating **“if you work hard it makes your brain happy.”**