Asian Student Organization Attends Hmong National Development Conference

Asian Student Organization Members

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On April 17-19, 2015 students in the Asian Student Organization had the opportunity to go to the Hmong National Development Conference (HNDC) in St. Paul, MN. The conference’s mission and goal was bringing together community members, professionals, politicians, scholars, youth, business owners and more to network, dialogue, and celebrate the community’s accomplishments. The theme was “Honoring our Legacy, Onward to Prosperity because 2015 marks the 40th year that Hmong have been in the United States since the first refugees came in 1975.

The conference had many workshops to choose from in the following categories: Economic Development & Entrepreneurship, Education, Healthy & Wellness, Advocacy & Civic Participation, Arts & Culture, Leadership & Professional Development. There was a concert held on Friday night and an awards banquet on Saturday night. There were opportunities for attendees to visit and tour Hmong charter schools here in the twin cities and also go to the We Are Hmong exhibit at the Minnesota History Center.

The conference gave students of the Asian Student Organization opportunity to network with leaders and learn about the community. Here are what students who attended have to say about their experience at the conference.

**Ploua Yang**

One of the workshops that I attended was Kabzaug Vang’s session on the International Marriage Abuse. Through her passion and work, I wanted to learn more about the organization, Building Our Future. Her work is based in Wisconsin. However, every state with Hmong populations has their own community of Building Our Future. She has spent many years working in the field and is clearly very knowledgeable.

She spoke a lot about “accountability.” In the Hmong culture, we are a patriarchal system. Women are viewed as property. They belong to their father, then their husband, then their son. Some husbands break away from their marriage to marry another international person, who is perhaps 20 or younger.

Where do we hold our husbands or men accountable? We go to our fathers who are doing to same thing, we go to the clan leaders who are doing the same thing, or we go to the 18 clans who are doing to same thing. Are the women just stuck then? “If the men cannot be held accountable, then it is the time where the women will lead,” said Vang.

At one point during the session, Vang opened the discussion to others in the audience. I was disappointed that few of the younger men spoke. There was an elder man who spoke and I was disappointed with his questions. He had told us that the information provided is wrong in that it only gave a women’s view. He asked, “What about the women who does go and marry younger men?” Also, “I do not know anyone who is younger than 18 who has come here, everyone women who came here through marriage is 18.” Everyone is the room held their lips because we knew Vang would respond appropriately. Vang told the elderly man, per the US embassy, only three percent of women marry younger international men. Which tells us that 97 percent of the Hmong American men marries internationally. Vang choose to focus on the 97 percent. As for their age, they lie in their documents. While they claim to be 18 years old, in reality, they are only 13 or 16 years old. In my head, I kept thinking “denial, denial, denial.” Hopefully, the elderly man will see these words across my forehead. It is disappointing that we do not have majority of the Hmong men’s support in this endeavor who can speak up. So, the Hmong women will lead now.

**Sheng Yang**

My overall impression and experience attending Hmong National Development (HND) conference this past weekend is that it was beneficial. HND provided a safe and constructive space for professionals, students, and community members to come together to speak about the Hmong identity from when we first came here (40 years ago) to where we are headed in the future. I especially liked how there were numerous workshops we were able to attend, with different topics and categories to choose from. I was highly interested in the leadership and education workshops they provided, and that was where I was for most of the conference. Furthermore, I was able to be able to connect and network with the professionals presenting the workshops. They were intellectual individuals who gave me advice and tips on how to work toward the issues and problems I am passionate about. Overall, I would recommend this conference to others in the future.

**Yeng Houa Xiong Thao**

I somewhat enjoyed this conference. Many of the workshops that I attended were amazing and I learned a lot. The workshops that I attended were mainly related to my major so I enjoyed them. These are a few workshops that caught my attention: Shamanism and Folktale Storytelling, Youth Leadership, and Middle School teaching about Linux. These workshops were entertaining and engaging. The speakers have the audience participate instead of just talking to us.

**Ghao Yang**

This was my first time attending Hmong National Development. I had always heard great reviews from classmates. I always want to know a little bit more on my culture and history. The plenaries are always so intriguing. Topics on education, community and the history really opened my eyes. These topics gave us the opportunities to discuss and review on the community and our stories.

**Sandy Yang**

I attended the leadership workshop and got to meet our local Hmong Bush Leadership fellows and learned about the work they are currently doing in the community. It was very interesting and inspiring to hear their stories and professional achievements. I liked that Dr. Kalc Vang from 3M talked about the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programs. I am a biology major here at MSU and I do believe this is where innovation starts.

**Well Worth It**

Overall, we all agreed that HND was a good conference to go to, especially for people who want to know more the Hmong Community. It gave us an inside sight on education, community, history and leaders who want to work with the Hmong. We were able to network with other colleges, as well as talk to leaders who want to work on the issues to make a better future, and talk to professionals.