

Alumni Pride: Couple helps Hmong feel at home

by Amanda Munger - Wednesday, March 17, 2010

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When Chungyia Thao '01, was a senior at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, he helped translate for Hmong community members at doctor's visits, hospitals and county offices as an intern with the Oshkosh Hmong Association.

After his internship, the association suffered budget cuts, but there was still a high demand for services. Chungyia and his wife, Maiyoua Thao '01 and MSE '09, decided to continue the work on their own.

"I saw a need, and I had been helping the community for years, so I decided to turn service into a business," he said.

They started their first business, which is now Universal Translation & Staffing Inc., in his basement in Appleton. It has grown to a service that translates and interprets more than 50 different languages for clients as close as the Fox Valley and as far away as California and Florida.

Chungyia and Maiyoua have tried to continue his mission of helping the Hmong community by opening other businesses in addition to the translation service. The couple owns four Appleton companies, including Universal Translation, Tongxeng Personal Homecare, Wisconsin Hmong Directory and Harmony Counseling Center.

Harmony Counseling Center, opened in September 2009, is their newest business and fills a need that Maiyoua saw in the mental health field.

She said counseling is a new concept in the Hmong community because the Hmong usually prefer to communicate with family members and clan leaders and to try to keep mental health issues to themselves.

"It's traditional and cultural, but it's not enough sometimes," Maiyoua said. "This is a new community, and times have changed, so we have to adjust."

Maiyoua sees 16 clients at the center for problems like anxiety, depression, grief and anger management.

The Thaos manage more than 250 employees. That, along with raising four children, keeps Maiyoua and Chungyia constantly busy.

"I like to be challenged," Maiyoua said. "I see new things come up and meet new people every day."

Chungyia is a board member for the Hmong American Partnership in the Fox Valley, the Hmong Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce and the Department of Transportation. He recently was appointed to work as a city-planning commissioner in Appleton.

Chungyia said his goal is to continue to recognize the needs of the community and meet them.

“All of my businesses are my favorite,” he said. “They all give me challenges and they are all working with people and helping the community.”