

Christopher Lao Yang, East & West Beauty Salon

Interviewed by Laurie Stern at East & West Beauty Salon, St. Paul,
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Q Please introduce yourself.

A My name is Christopher Lao Yang. I think it's really interesting that we're one of the first people that kind of came to Minnesota here, way back in the 80s. So I grew up here in the Twin Cities and we used to live in North Minneapolis and we started a shop over there but the location that we decided to move to in St. Paul here was because of all the minority and all the shops around here. It seems like people from out of state, from all over, seems to be magnet ties into this area here, so that's why we're here.

Q Where are you from originally?

A I'm from Laos. I'm actually Hmong from Laos and first we came to Illinois. We were down there for a couple months and then my family – not just my family, but my whole family - the clan, the Yang family – moved up here. So about five, six families. We came up here and my uncle, my cousin came up here so we all just followed him up here and we've been here ever since. It's a good place. It's a really great place to be, to grow up in.

Q So the beginnings of your business – do you own this building and how did you come to University Avenue?

A Started out with my wife going to school for cosmetology and she seemed to like it. It's her hobby. That's what she wants to do and it's kind of like a dream when she's young. So we got married. We got married younger. We decided to get into the beauty business and we opened a shop in north Minneapolis like I mentioned earlier and we got really busy so I decided that I should get my license so that I could help out. So we both went to school, went to cosmetology, opened a shop in Minneapolis and were there for three years. Decided that we want to do this kind of work for a longer term so we were looking for a place to settle, a place to start the business. We looked all over north Minneapolis and couldn't really find a place that we both agreed on or didn't have any place at the time. So a cousin told me about this place here and we came by looking for it. First time we looked for it, we couldn't find it. But the second time around we came by and we saw it so we decided that this is the place we want to be. Actually this place has a lot of history within the Hmong community. It is, I believe, the first Hmong restaurant and gift shop in Minnesota. So I'm happy to be here. So we bought the building in 2001 and we moved in here and the business has been pretty well for us since then. So hopefully we'll keep the building as good history for our community and stuff like that, too.

Q So who are your clients?

A We have a combination of Asian, Caucasians right now, but I think eventually with the light rail coming in we might want to change our menu a little bit. So right now mainly it's about 90% Asians, through word-of-mouth.

Q What do you like about being on University Avenue?

A At the beginning when we moved in here there were a lot of Hmong businesses right on University Avenue here. Since then they opened up the Hmong farmer's market or the Hmong Town Market over there and everybody seems to kind of just move into those two buildings, two places. So along the University it's slowed down a little bit but mainly it's where everybody comes to do their shopping. People from out of state, from St. Paul-Minneapolis are coming here to do their shopping. It's a gathering place for a lot of Asians at this time. So that's why we're here.

Q What's been the impact of construction on your business?

A It's really slow. Our business has been down about 50, 60%. Like today we should be really busy because next week is a big event for us. It's the 4th of July for Hmong. It's the main event that we have in the Twin Cities here. And normally - as you can see we're really empty, but normally - we're like lines and lines of people; it's like two, three-hour waits. But now, today, we're so slow. So basically that's how much the construction has affected our business.

Q And what about after? Are you going to be able to survive as a business until it's done and the trains are running?

A I don't know. I think time will tell that. But I am kind of optimistic but at the same time I'm kind of worried about the business also. Just surviving the construction. I'm also in the advertising business so getting people into the shop is really hard. And once you lose that person or lose that customer, if they go somewhere else and find a place that they like, it's ten times harder to get that person back into your business. So being in this kind of construction, holding for a whole summer, a whole year and losing as many customers as I have, I don't know how that's going to affect us long-term. Hopefully most of my customers doesn't take the light rail. So with the light rail coming in it probably doesn't bring a lot of customers to me so I might do different kind of advertising or different kind of outreach but that's the kind of money that I don't have right now to do the outreaching so....

Q I suppose if you're training, your wife could work for somebody else if it came to that.

A We don't want to do that. Actually we really like to...the mom's and pop's business - that's what we are here and we're trying to serve the community. We could. We could do that, but we prefer ourselves to run the business, be in business here.

Q Well good luck. I hope that works out. Is there anything else you want to say about University.....

A It's interesting how I live here, I grew up here and I see the changes within the University here. So I am pretty sure different people came through here and they see the changes too, so it's going to be ongoing changes, different phases within this Midway area here. It's always going to be like that so it's going to be interesting to see in the future.

Q Do you think it will be as culturally diverse and welcoming?

A You know, that's one thing that I like about this area here is that there are so many different ethnicities in this area here. Frogtown seems to fit the description quite a bit for me. And hopefully what the light rail and with the city I'd like to see they put a bigger plan into this area here, with the name Little Mekong or I hope we attract people from different parts of the city to come in here to visit as far as from different part of states – just like Chicago or maybe California where people actually just go there to taste the food, just to become attraction, tourist attraction for this area here with the Asian community, with different nationalities from all over the world that are here. We have Mexican, we have Mexican food, we've got Thai, Laos, Vietnamese, Hmong and all kinds of ethnicity that are here. We've got African and Caucasian so it's a nice place to be at this time.