

## **Pete Vang, Vang Dental Clinic/Hmong Professional Building**

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Olivet Congregational Church, St. Paul, January 26, 2012

Q I know that your family owns the Hmong Professional Building and your father's a dentist. Give me a little family history – when did your family move to St Paul?

A We came to United States in 1976 and we were sponsored by a Lutheran church in a small town called Belvedere, Illinois; northern Illinois, probably a little over an hour west of Chicago. So we were sponsored by the Lutheran church there and we actually stayed in that town for ten years and we moved up to Minnesota in 1986. And basically came up here because a couple of his brothers had already moved up here so you kind of just follow the family.

Q Where did your dad get his dental training?

A My father, when we were in Illinois – when we first lived there – all he did was assembly jobs, you know? Two, three jobs at a time just to get by. And we had a home down there, my parents bought a house – a really small, little ranch 3 bedroom. We lived there, we saw many people come through, you know, that were coming over. We'd host them for a while and they'd stay with us and then eventually they would move on. So he got his GED while we were down in Illinois and then when we moved up here he started college – community college; he went to Lakewood Community College first, which is now Century College. Then he transferred over to the U of M and eventually got into the University of Minnesota dental school and that's where he got his schooling completed. Graduated in I think '95.

Q Then how did your family come to be associated with University Avenue area?

A We moved up here and we lived with my dad's brother – my uncle – and he lived on Edmund Avenue, which is 3 blocks north of University. So we've been familiar with the area ever since. At one point, we moved into a small apartment right on Sherburne, which was like half a block from where our building is right now. That home has since been demolished.

Q What are your earliest memories of University Avenue?

A I grew up in a small town of maybe 12, 13,000 people only. When we wanted to go to shopping we'd have to go to the next town, which was Rockford, Illinois, which was bigger, would have a shopping mall and things like that. I just know that when we came up here and even before we moved up here, when we came to visit them - visit my uncle and my cousins - I was always kind of semi-amazed with the Midway Shopping Center and Montgomery Wards. Those were...it was pretty amazing that such big stores were around and were so close to where they lived and everything. So that's probably my earliest memories. I even remember going to a Hmong party at the Prom Center, the Prom Center on University Avenue and I remember a lot of hardwood floors, dark, dark wood, there was booths and things like that. I remember things like that.

Q That's a great story because that was a real institution in the Twin Cities for about 50 years. So your family came here....was that because there was a church organization that was willing to sponsor you?

A Up until Minnesota there was no one. The only reason we came to Minnesota was to follow the family. There was a lot more brothers that were already up here so he basically wanted to follow his brothers so he came up here to be close to them. The way our culture works is we're very family centered, family oriented so it's the brothers finding support with each other and things like that. So it was a chance to come up here, be close to his brothers and also my dad's father – my grandfather – had already moved up here as well so it just kind of keeps the family together and the possibility of maybe starting something, new opportunities.

Q How have you seen University Avenue change during your lifetime in St Paul?

A It's changed a lot. Like I said, we've been here since '86 so even back then there was still - at the corner of Dale and University - the Faust was still there, the Belmont Club was still there. And those are all gone now, replaced by newer buildings and things like that. So I still remember all these things. Lots of stuff has changed, a lot of businesses have come and gone but the thing with University Avenue is it's kind of like a stepping-stone or almost like an opportunity. It's rents are reasonable, it allows people who have dreams or who have ideas to start businesses. The homes around here are not that expensive so you can either rent something fairly reasonable or you can buy your first home, starter homes are reasonable. So it's a good kind of like a first step for a lot of people. It's always been a first step for anyone who's come to Minnesota, to this region to start out. That's how it's always been.

Q Go back to the first part....it sounds like a lot of people were inspired to come here because of opportunities. Talk about why University Avenue seemed to offer opportunities.

A Obviously Minnesota itself drew a lot of immigrants throughout its history. It's always drawn immigrants with a promise of opportunities and maybe land. For us, for the Hmong, it's different. It's kind of just once you draw some, you're gonna keep drawing some more and the Hmong are very community-centric as apparent by all of the businesses and flea markets and things like that. So it creates a level of community and comfort, you know, where there's a lot of your own people there. And that's kind of what it draws and like I said, opportunities. I think a lot of Hmong people, their dream really is to be their own business owner and that's why you see such places as Hmong Town Marketplace or the Hmong Village because there's a high level of entrepreneurial spirit. But whether or not there's any training or background to it, who knows? But for all they care, they just want to have a chance to own their own business, be their own boss and kind of control their own destiny.

Q Perfect. And that describes immigrants pretty much back through time.... Talk about some of the other professionals who occupy your buildings.

A In our building we have a Chinese doctor who's an anesthesiologist and he runs a pain clinic and he's been in our building for I'd say 3-1/2 years now and he's pretty happy. He re-signed a new lease after his first lease was over so he's pretty happy. When he first came in, his clients were mostly elderly American folks but now he's

starting to transition to accepting more Hmong patients as well. He says eventually that's probably the way he's going to go because he does still go back to China and he does some business with some folks back there, too, and he said eventually he wants to transition to all Hmong just because when he's gone the Hmong patients – they may want to still come see him and if he's not there they don't get overly upset versus some of the other American, the Caucasian patients get a little upset when they come to see him and he's not there. So that's one office. We have a foot doctor and he has a foot clinic there in our building as well and he's kind of a close family friend too. And then we have a life insurance office, Western and Southern Life Insurance and they're a national company based out of Cincinnati and that office is actually all Hmong and they're doing really well. They're one of the top producing offices for Western Southern nationwide. So the manager is Hmong and all the agents are Hmong. So overall, I'd say even our dental clinic we probably serve 85% of our patients are Hmong. We draw them from everywhere – not just from St. Paul or Frogtown. We draw them from the whole metro and my dad would like to boast that people come to see him from out of state, you know? North Carolina, California, things like that. Even the General when he used to come up here my dad was his personal dentist. General Vang Pao. So we've seen him many times in our clinic. We have a Chinese buffet in our building as well and that's something that my parents really wanted to have – a restaurant in the building. The gentleman who owns it, he's a buffet guy so he knows what he's doing, he's owned buffets before, started buffets, originally from Rochester but now he has one here. He still owns one I think in Grand Forks, ND. So he knows what he's doing and they're doing a really good job.

Q For most of the people starting these businesses, do you think it's their intent to eventually turn them over to their kids to operate?

A I know for us, for the dental clinic, definitely that is one of my father's dreams is for one of us – because there's three of us, there's three sons – for one of us to continue that dream and kind of take over. That's definitely in there. Unfortunately, that's not going to be me. It's pretty difficult. Dental school, getting in, is super selective, ultra competitive and my numbers just weren't good enough. So I'm crossed off but I have a younger brother, the youngest of us, he's still in school and he still has a shot. And even I have kids now and I proposed that idea to my son the other day, who's a junior in high school, and he's kind of somewhat open to that too so.... Obviously that's his dream and for the other one's, I'm not sure because I know the foot doctor, he just had a young son less than a year old, so.... I think as a parent if you can create some kind of legacy that you can pass down, I think that it's....it's no different than a typical Caucasian type. If you have some kind of a legacy or business you would want to pass it down because that ensures that your children will have something.

Q Talk about the broader community in your region...community involvement....

A My father, ever since he's been in dental school he's been a part of the St. Paul District Dental Society. He's been associated with them ever since in school because they gave him some scholarships when he was in dental school to help pay for school. He's still with...he's on a couple of committees. I think he's with one of the department of healths, oral health committee, things like that. I've tried to be involved with AEDA – Asian Economic Development Association – I try to help them out. I just try to be somewhat involved in...just kind of give input to things. I was on the business community resource with the Met Council with the light rail thing, too, but I don't know,

it's really hard to go to meetings like that because we're so used to just always...if there's something that needs to be accomplished, you know, we do it. Versus sitting around and talking about what can and can't be done. It's really hard to go to meetings and theorize that we want this but how do we get it? I just found it really frustrating going to meetings, public hearings, things like that and you hear the elected officials say, yeah we support you. We support everything you're saying. But if they, if you guys, if the public officials support what we're saying and support our plight, why do we still need to have all these public hearings and have so many people have to give testimonies if they're already on the same page with us. But it's kind of frustrating. I think in a perfect world, if we didn't have real responsibilities then yeah, we could go to meetings all day and be in as many committees as possible. But there's a real world and things need to get done and it's tough to have time to be involved like that.

Q Talk about your dad....

A My father's name is Kou Bliaxa Vang and the Bliaxa is from his dad's name, so he took his dad's name as his middle name. One other thing that he does do, besides working 50+ hours a week, Monday through Friday, as a dentist, is he's also in the Minnesota Air National Guard as well. And he joined right after dental school, right after he graduated. He joined to get some help paying school loans, which were significant, and also it's a way for him to kind of give back, too. He's very grateful to this country for everything that's been given to him so one weekend a month he's at the base doing dental exams too. And right now he's currently a Lieutenant Colonel at the Minnesota Air National Guard by the Minneapolis Airport. So he's been doing that for pretty long, now. Like I said ever since about '96. So he went in, he went right in as a Major but now he's a Lieutenant Colonel, so he's pretty happy with that.

Q If you were trying to describe University Avenue to someone who had never seen it, what would you say?

A It's a place to find commerce. There's life. You want to find life, you want to find culture, businesses, you want to find someplace to eat, something to buy – University's a great place to find a little bit of everything. Because that's what it is. It has a little bit of everything, everyone that's in the area has a little bit of their own fingerprint in there. Anything from exotic to non-exotic; not exotic would be Target, Wal-Mart. But there's a little bit of everything. Just about anything you can find on University.

Q The light rail has obviously been a huge issue....what do you think University Avenue will look like five or six years from now?

A I hope it's a positive impact. Like you said we don't really know exactly what's going to happen. Haven't been to Seattle to see what it's done for them; I've only heard what it's done for them. We would hope that it would be something positive. That's what we hope because that's what engineers and architects – they're dreamers, they always hope for the best final outcome, so they come up with these ideas and plans but... I hope it would be good for us, for our building. I don't know if construction will really harm us just because we don't rely on street parking. We have a fairly good size parking lot behind our building and that was one of the draws for my father wanting to purchase it, wanting to own that. Because you have your own city block and we have ample parking and they're not going to shut down Marion so we should be all right, people should still be able to access us fairly well. Some of the other folks who are kind

of landlocked in the middle of a block who do rely on parking, street parking – it might be difficult for them. So in the end, five, six years from now as a business, as a land owner, property owner we would hope that it would help our property values because we purchased our building at a time when values were very high and these days values are not. It's not even close, so we hope that we'll get some kind of return on our investment somewhere down the line. So that's kind of the crossing your fingers and hoping that'll come to fruition. But who knows? You can't tell.

Q Anything else you want to say?

A Our dental clinic has been open since 1998 and we were in the previous location – about three blocks west of where we are right now, in a very small building. On the back of our building they built a little wood frame stairwell, but there's definitely some art on the brick that shows that it used to be an old bar and it's interesting. It's a really small, old building but we had our clinic in there for a good ten years – small, 1600-foot clinic, four operatories and when the chance came for my father to purchase the Saxon property he jumped at it. At first he had a couple guys who were going to be partners with him but they kind of fell through, so in the end we just figured if you can do it by yourself, just do it by yourself. That way later on there's no other issues that can come up. You can make all the decisions yourself as far as what direction you want your building to go in and who you want in there, who you don't want in there. It's easier when there's just one person in charge versus three. So we've gone from a small 1600-foot clinic to a 4000 square foot clinic now. We have 8 operatories and we see a lot of people. Dr. Vang likes to say he's seen 20,000 patients over our short existence. That's quite a big number. He's won a couple of awards. He's won a Minnesota Dental Assn Humanitarian Award. He's won a Minnesota Business Small Business of the Year Award, things like that. So he's gotten very good recognition for the things he does. And he does do quite a bit and he's a remarkable person for sure. For sure. One weekend a month, still, too.

Q One last question....give a little more history of his family before you were born....

A All I know is that his father, my grandfather was a bodyguard for General Vang Pao, so he wasn't...we weren't dirt, they didn't grow up dirt poor. He had some opportunities, I know, he said he went to school when he was a boy. But I know he used to tell me, he told me stories of that they used to go collect shells – bullet casings - and things like that to sell for money. Eventually when he got a little bit older he was an air traffic controller in Laos. And when the time came to flee, we fled and whether or not having my grandfather as a bodyguard helped us get here sooner, I'm not sure. Maybe. I don't know for sure if that had anything to do with it, but we definitely are one of the earlier waves in '76. I rarely still enjoy going back to visit our sponsors. A couple of them are still alive and even just last summer we still went to visit them and we love seeing them. I love introducing...my kids are very familiar – even my kids are very familiar with our sponsors and I think they're almost a kind of forgotten piece of the Hmong journey here to the United States, is the sponsors, those nonprofits and churches. Without them, we wouldn't be here. That's kind of our journey here, basically.