

A CHILD'S SALUTE

Iowa Project Honors Newcomers

by Gail Matthews-DeNatale, PhD, and Rachelle Saltzman, PhD

I never really looked up to my mother because she was a quiet woman who didn't speak English and didn't do anything outside the home. It was really hard for me to discover anything I thought I could look up to. So I never wrote any of my high school papers on my family. But when I went to college I watched so many Asians become Americanized. A lot of them, third-generation who are born in the U.S., don't even speak the language. And then I realized I don't know any other woman who bore nine children, brought them to the U.S. under horrible, horrible, horrible war circumstances, and survived it. And so to my mother today, I salute all my pride in being female, Asian, and American. —*Vienna Kouangvongthien, Tai Dam refugee and employee of Des Moines Employee & Family Resources*

AS WE LISTENED to Vienna pay this moving tribute to her mother during a panel discussion at the 1998 Iowa Folklife Teacher Institute, we were deeply touched, yet also overwhelmed with confusion. How wonderful that Vienna learned to honor her mother's strength and courage. How perplexing that our educational system was not able to play a role in that growth experience. If Vienna never elected to write about her family for class assignments, how could teachers know about her struggles to find a role model and to reconcile the apparent disconnect between experiences at home and at school?

What role can educators play in helping children of immigration find their place in American society? How can we foster a learning environment in which non-immigrant classmates respect and learn from classmates whose family stories include recent immigration? There are no easy answer to these questions, but an ongoing project called Iowa Traditions in Transition is providing teachers with a range of options for exploring the topic of immigration in a way that is intimate and insightful.

Any folklorist who has worked with immigrant or refugee communities will tell you that documenting and presenting the traditions of recent refugees and immigrants is challenging, frustrating, exhausting, intense, and incredibly rewarding. Language barriers, scheduling difficulties, finding appropriate foods or craft materials, different concepts of time, gender roles, cultural mores, appropriate versus inappropriate questions, fieldworker ignorance about different cultures—all these issues must be negotiated for a successful relationship to be established between folklorists and newcomers. What makes this work particularly rewarding, however, is the almost unstoppable desire most refugees and immigrants have to share their traditions and their overwhelming gratitude that someone has finally taken an interest in helping to preserve and present their folklife.

While this propensity for openness with strangers is certainly a characteristic of nearly everyone in the state, our experience in Iowa of working with Mexicans, Bosnians, Nuer, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Lao, Tai Dam, Hmong, and Somali has been especially intense. It was as if someone had finally given them permission not only to talk about their traditions but also to express them publicly.

Iowa's history of refugee resettlement began in 1975, when then Gov. Robert Ray signed a contract with the U.S. State Department agreeing to take responsibility for the resettlement of 1,200 Tai Dam refugees from Southeast Asia. Since then more than 22,000 people have come to the state from at least 17 countries, with the largest numbers from Vietnam, Laos, Bosnia, and the Sudan. In a state that has traditionally been almost entirely made up of Scandinavian, German, Czech, and Slovak Americans, public awareness and understanding about cultural differences is critical to integrating new residents into Iowa's socioeconomic structure.

For this reason, refugee and immigrant folklife was selected as the theme of the 1998 Iowa Folklife Teacher Institute. Traditional artists from Iowa's immigrant communities gave interactive sessions on traditional music, dance, foodways, crafts, customs, rituals, and holiday practices. There were workshops on interviewing techniques, photographic documentation of traditional culture, using folklife in literacy projects, and how to present folklife in and out of the classroom. Tours of Des Moines' Asian and Latino neighborhoods were a special attraction, including visits to a tortilla factory, food markets, a Buddhist Temple, and restaurants.

Several traditional artists demonstrated and taught conference-goers their music, dance, and song. For example, members of the Des Moines-based Nuer Drum group, who originally fled the South Sudan for refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia, came together for the first time at this conference. Although this sort of western, staged performance style was not one to which they were accustomed, the group members graciously performed several songs—some traditional and some Nuer renditions of Methodist hymns. Participants recognized familiar tunes sung to Nuer words and rhythms. So successful was this first-time performance that the group is now booked regularly in the Des Moines area.

Although it was wonderful to learn about immigrant traditions firsthand, institute participants still had to grapple with the challenge of helping their own students honor the ongoing role that immigration plays in our society. How? By showing interest in local stories of immigration and the people who tell them. By admitting that nobody can be an expert in all cultures, being willing to ask questions, modeling respect and empathy when the answers to those questions reveal painful life stories, and reflecting on what we learn through our conversations with others.

During the institute, groups of educators practiced this process by interviewing recent immigrants. Following interviews, each group wrote responses to the following questions: What did you learn (in general) from the person you interviewed? What did you learn from the interviewing process itself? Responses were

entered into the Keepsakes and Dreams guestbook, a Web site dedicated to immigrant stories: www.carts.org/keepsakes. What did they learn?

Group A: We wanted to ask more questions—the more we asked the more we learned and the more we wanted to learn.

Group B: It seemed like we were a bunch of strangers, but as we talked we found out we have a lot in common.

Group C: Asking the questions and hearing the answers opened avenues to other questions and experiences that we didn't expect.

Group D: We discovered that maybe you have preconceived notions about places, countries, and people—you could say the name of a place and think you know about it. We learned that we have to leave our prejudice and preconceived ideas behind and let the interview have its own life.

On the last day of the institute, Ko-hsing Huang and some fellow employees from Employee & Family Resources in Des Moines facilitated one of the most successful sessions. A panel of Nuer, Bosnian, Tai Dam, Lao, and Russian participants shared their experiences as refugees forced to leave their homelands with little but more than clothing and memories. Each speaker described a different stage in the process: fleeing, living in a refugee camp, applying to come to the U.S., adjusting to life in Iowa, and growing up and living in two cultures.

Although this was a difficult and moving session, it was also incredibly important for participants to speak publicly about their experiences, validating their own history and existence instead of allowing it to be wiped out as their persecutors intended. It was during this session that Vienna shared her moving tribute to her mother. Ironically, the opportunity for Vienna to reconcile divergent personal and family life experiences came only when she was asked to share her story with educators, people just like the teachers she *didn't* write family stories for in high school. But the difference was that this time Vienna was able to speak not as a victim, but as a person whose difficult life experiences make her uniquely qualified to help teachers understand the perspectives of the immigrant students they teach.

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