

# As Hmong culture fades, a summer camp fights back

Keith Uhlig, Daily Herald Media 11:27 p.m. CDT August 2, 2014



Sophie Yde of Wausau listens to a Hmong folktale discussion the instructor gives during Wednesday's Camp Phoojywg-Friend at the University of Wisconsin Marathon County in Wausau. The camp teaches Hmong and non-Hmong students cultural lessons and language skills. (Photo: T'xer Zhon Kha/Daily Herald Media )

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WAUSAU – A summer camp designed to teach Hmong students about their own heritage has doubled in size in two years.

About 120 students are enrolled in Camp Phoojywg-Friend, which offers basic Hmong cultural lessons that focus on the ethnic group's history, music, folklore, art and language. Students are mostly Hmong, but several non-Hmong also are attending. About 60 students attended the camp last summer.

The camp opened a week ago and continues through this week at Lincoln Elementary School and at the University of Wisconsin Marathon County. Last summer, the initial camp was a week long.

The camp was designed by Yao Yang of Wausau, a social studies teacher at D.C. Everest Middle School, and Maysee Yang Herr of Wausau, an assistant professor of education at UW-Stevens Point. One purpose for the camp is to help young Hmong children learn about their own culture and history — knowledge that is slowly eroding as the Hmong people as a group become more rooted in America.

"This is important because the Hmong are a people without a country," Herr said. Most people from other cultures "can go back to other countries to discover or find out about your identity. But the Hmong are different. They don't have a country to go back to, or a home country. So once it's gone, it's gone. And research is showing, and we see it every day, with each younger generation, they're losing knowledge of language and culture."

The Hmong community is particularly tight-knit because it has a clan-based culture, a heritage that goes back thousands of years with roots in China and other Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam and Laos. The culture was kept largely intact in Asia until the Vietnam War, when Hmong people in Laos fought on the side of America in the CIA-backed Secret War. When the United States pulled out of Vietnam, the federal government agreed to take in Hmong families who fled the communist government in Laos.

Many of the Hmong people of that era are grandfathers and grandmothers, and their children and grandchildren have become increasingly Americanized as their roots deepen in the United States.

"For me, (the camp) is an investment in the future," Herr said. "Kids growing up today now know more about American culture than Hmong culture. But it's not about one or another. It's about embracing both."

In an arts and crafts class, Chueseng Chang, 10, worked on his version of a "story cloth," which traditionally is a stitch-work that shows through pictures a family's history. Chueseng and his classmates were instructed to do their versions based on who they are. His had pictures of a football, a fishing pole, a television and a video gaming set.

But he said he was learning Hmong language and the history. "I knew some stuff, but some stuff is new," Chueseng said. He likes the camp because "I get to meet new people, new teachers and it's really fun to do new things."

Herr emphasizes that the camp is not only for Hmong students.

Sophie Yde, 12, of Weston wanted to go to the camp because "some of my friends are Hmong. ... I wanted to learn more about the language and the culture."

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