

A Heart for Healing



Phua Xiong '91 defied the expectations for girls in her Hmong culture by going to college and becoming a physician. Now she runs a St. Paul medical practice that takes an insider approach to the health needs of her community.

BY ELIZABETH FOY LARSEN



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Dr. Xiong examines five-day-old Sean Yang. She credits her husband, Blong Thao, a former teacher who now does administration for her medical practice, with providing the support that allowed her to raise five children, work long hours and leave home in the middle of the night to deliver babies.

FROM THE MOMENT YOU WALK INTO THE ST. PAUL FAMILY Medical Center, it's clear that this inner-city clinic just off a busy intersection on the east side of St. Paul, Minn., is proud of the community it serves. Dolls dressed in intricately embroidered and beaded Hmong costumes look out from atop the receptionist's desk. Story cloths with appliqué maps of Laos, Vietnam and Thailand hang on the walls. The tones of the Hmong language mix with American slang and the nasal accents of the upper Midwest.

The clinic, founded in 2002, is the solo practice and life's work of family practitioner **Phua Xiong** (*pronounced PU-a Shong*) '91. More than 90 percent of the clinic's clients are, like Xiong, Hmong, an ethnic group from the mountainous regions that straddle China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. Tens of thousands of Hmong fled their homeland when the Communist Party took over the Laotian government in 1975, after a brutal civil war.

Among those escaping Laos was Xiong's family, who arrived in Philadelphia by way of a Thai refugee camp in 1976. The fourth of nine children, Xiong was only 7 years old when she came to America. But by the time she could piece

together English phrases, she was accompanying her parents and other Hmong adults to doctors' appointments and acting as an interpreter. "I'm sure I didn't do a good job, but it was the best thing that was available at the time, since interpreters weren't required by law," says the smartly dressed Xiong, who comes across as both warm and earnest. Her interest in becoming a doctor, she says, started with those glimpses into the medical world.

By high school, that interest had steered her into volunteer jobs as a candy striper in hospitals and nursing homes. "I liked being a helping hand to someone who needed it," Xiong says. "It really touched my heart. Even as a 13- and 14-

year-old, I felt that connection. Many of the patients weren't Asian, but I found it didn't matter who I helped. It was just about being there for them."

Xiong's passion for helping people found an unexpected ally in her father. "In high school, my dad said, 'If you like it, you should go into medicine and be a doctor,'" she remembers. "It surprised me, because of my background, culture and upbringing. In the Hmong culture, girls aren't given opportunities to do things outside the home. Instead, they are expected to get married, be a housewife and take care of the kids. To hear that coming from my dad surprised me. I took it to heart."

As a high school student at the rigorous Julia R. Masterman Laboratory and Demonstration School in Philadelphia, Xiong set her sights on going to college, with the goal of one day making it to medical school. It was an ambitious plan for any student, but Xiong's dreams of college were further complicated by the expectations of her family and the local Hmong community.

Xiong's older brothers had already gone to college and didn't want their sister living on campus. "The biggest fear in the Hmong community for families is losing face," says Xiong. "So if a daughter gets pregnant, it reflects on the family. They have a bad reputation within the community, and the daughter's future is wounded."

That opposition only spurred the young woman who as a girl made sure her mother and father attended all of her parent-teacher conferences. When Xiong matriculated at Haverford—and lived on campus—she was the first Hmong girl in Philadelphia to go to college.

Haverford's Quaker values spoke to Xiong. "I wasn't into partying," she says. "I was at Haverford for a purpose. I took in all the good things of Haverford, and I carry the intrinsic values of the college with me to this day. Having an honor code and hearing how the faculty handles those issues and how the community responds matures you. I valued that greatly, and I still live my life that way."

From Haverford, Xiong moved west to the University of Minnesota for medical school. Located in Minneapolis, the

highly regarded school appealed to her in part because she knew the Twin Cities have one of the largest Hmong communities in the United States. When she graduated in 1996, she was among the first female Hmong physicians in the United States. In 1999, Xiong was named Family Practice Resident of the Year by the Minnesota Academy of Family Physicians.

After completing her residency,

Xiong worked at a community clinic. But even though she enjoyed it, she wanted to do more. “I have always had a heart for the Hmong people,” she says, wiping away tears. “I wouldn’t be myself if I went to medical school and left the community and didn’t come back and do [something] for them. The purpose of me coming to America wouldn’t have been fulfilled.”

Still, starting a solo practice was a daunting task, and Xiong’s colleagues and mentors warned her of the difficulties. In typical fashion, their naysaying galvanized her to prove them wrong. While Xiong admits she’s not making the kind of money one would expect of a doctor, the St. Paul Family Medical Center is a cornerstone of the community she holds so dear. In the nine years since it was started, the practice has grown to serve 5,000 patients. And while she is the only doctor, Xiong recently hired a certified nurse practitioner. In addition, a Hmong- and Spanish-speaking pharmacy opened in the medical center’s building early in 2011, largely because of the presence of Xiong’s clinic, whose patients can now get their prescriptions filled at the same location.

The clinic has succeeded in large part because Xiong can address her patients’ health needs as an insider. When patients are suffering from diabetes, Xiong doesn’t talk to them about counting carbs. “That’s not something they can conceptualize,” she says. “I know that rice is the main culprit when it comes to diabetes in my patients. I may ask them to cut down to one cup per meal or cut rice in half or eat rice only with dinner instead of every meal.”

Xiong also doesn’t shy away from bringing religion—from animism and



Dr. Xiong (center), who is the sole doctor at the St. Paul Family Medical Center, talks with staff members Stephanie Xiong (right), her sister, and Janie Thao.

shamanism to Christianity—into her examination room. “A lot of doctors don’t like talking about religion, but in this community it’s interwoven into people’s lives and the decisions they make.”

That understanding of her community’s needs has given Xiong a reputation as someone her patients can trust; she brings an expertise that is highlighted in the 2003 book *Healing by Heart: Clinical and Ethical Case Stories of Hmong Elders and Western Providers* (Vanderbilt University Press), which she co-edited. “Hmong elders have a lot of chronic health problems,” says Deu Yang, a nurse educator in St. Paul who is also Hmong and has known Xiong for more than 20 years. “With a regular doctor, they will take the medicine home and put it away because they don’t understand how it works, and they’ll take an herbal medication instead. Dr. Xiong helps them understand why they need to be on that medicine, so they are more likely to take

it. She’ll spend 45 minutes with a patient if that’s what’s needed.”

For female patients, Yang says, Xiong is a trusted confidant when it comes to anything from a pregnancy test to being treated for sexually transmitted diseases. “The Hmong community is very small,” says Yang. “If there are rumors about you, you lose your reputation. Hmong women know they can go to her and she won’t tell anyone.”

Aside from her strong sense of ethics, Xiong believes that her patients trust her because she personally shares values that are important to Hmong culture, including family. She has five children between the ages of 19 and 9 and credits her husband, Blong Thao—a former teacher who now works at the clinic doing general administration and technology support—with giving her the necessary backup and encouragement to allow her to raise a large family, work long hours, and leave home in the middle of the night to deliver babies.

Even though her life is hectic, Xiong wouldn’t have it any other way. “Succeeding in Hmong terms is being a mom, raising kids, having a family and carrying on the line,” she says. “Success in American terms is to succeed in your profession. If I was a Hmong doctor and was single and had no kids, the respect wouldn’t be there in my community. So if I was successful in American terms but not Hmong terms, I wouldn’t be happy. I’ve always wanted to blend the two so that I would be myself and also be a little bit of both.”



The walls of the Center’s reception area are decorated with story cloths, including this one from Laos, where the majority of the Hmong in the U.S. come from.

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