

## A Mustard Seed Story

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In 1976 members of First Baptist Church of Midland decided to sponsor a refugee family from Laos for resettlement in the United States. Little did the church realize what impact their reaching out in Christ's name would have. Now, twenty-five years later<sup>1</sup>, a truly amazing story can be told.

Once the congregation had committed to sponsorship things unfolded quickly. Very late on a cold, rainy April night in 1976 church member Larry Williams and I, at that time pastor of First Baptist Church, drove to Tri-City Airport (now MBS) to welcome a family of five to the United States. Here they were, husband, wife, a two-year-old son, a baby daughter, and the husband's mother. Everything in the world they could call their own was in a suitcase and three enormous bags piled on the floor of the terminal. Clothed for living in the warm clime of a Thailand refugee camp, the new arrivals shivered in Michigan's early spring weather. We greeted them awkwardly, immediately relieved to find that Kao Chiem Chao spoke English fluently. He and his family, having come straight from Bangkok via Seattle<sup>2</sup>, were very tired and hungry. We stuffed them and their belongings into Larry's big van, drove into Midland, and stopped at the 24 hour Lil' Chef restaurant for hamburgers. By 1:30 or 2:00 a.m. we settled them into temporary quarters in one room of -- appropriately enough -- the Gateway Motel on North Saginaw Road (long since torn down).

Within a short time church members located an apartment on Carpenter St. The Chao family moved in and began something approaching normal life. Church members provided assistance of all kinds: transportation, shopping, friendship, household goods, and funds to get them started. A little later on the family moved to a more suitable apartment at Tek Circle.

Kao joined the church staff as a custodian. The job provided both income and health insurance. He quickly proved a good worker. His wife Chua began to learn how to shop and started English lessons. Kao's mother Koy had the hardest time of any of the family adjusting to life in Midland. She bore the marks of tribal life with her filed teeth and traditional garb. Outside her family she had no one to talk to. It was a very strange, lonely existence for her.

About fifteen months after coming to Midland Kao told me that members of his clan (the Mien or Lu-Mien people) had settled in Portland, OR, and wondered if he could drive to Portland for the weekend to check on this. He was not the first to underestimate distances in the US. I offered to help him and his mother fly to Portland so they could see for themselves. They made the trip, but for his mother it was one-way. She never returned to Midland. Kao, of course, did and began to plan to move his family.

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<sup>1</sup> The first draft of this story was written in 2001. Edited and updated Friday, June 12, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> The representative from Lutheran Refugee Services, who called me from Seattle to let me know the family was coming, said, "These folks are gems." We soon came to realize that.

During this period a member of the church had died. His widow did not drive and wondered what to do with the Chevy Nova she had on her hands. It became the answer to transporting the Chaos to Portland. She donated the car to the church, and the church gave it to Kao and Chua. So in September, 1977, they set out for the five plus day trip to Portland, full of regret at leaving good friends but looking forward to being with a community of Mien people. On their way west they stayed overnight with my parents in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

After that we heard from Kao from time to time. He wrote or called to tell us how things were for them. We were delighted to hear that he and Chua had become Christians, been baptized, and joined a church.<sup>3</sup> They let us know that they had good jobs and were doing well. As the months and years passed, contact became less and less frequent, although we always received a Christmas card.

Then in January of 2001 I received an email from Kao, inviting my wife Kathy and me to Portland at the end of April to help celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of their coming to the United States. He had also invited former Midlanders Jim and Marcia Pierce, members of First Baptist Church, and dear friends. It didn't take long for us to decide to go. In his email Kao said he had invited three to five hundred people, including some of the US military people he had worked with in Laos during the Viet Nam war.

Even before we left for Portland the surprises in this story would begin. We were to be lodged there in a motel owned by Kao and Chua. I thought to myself, "Well, I guess they've done pretty well." Little did I know. When we arrived in Portland Kao greeted us at the airport. Although it was very late he took us to a Chinese restaurant where others waited for us, including Chua, no longer the girl in her early twenties (at most) we had scarcely known, but a confident woman speaking English like a native-born American.

In bits and pieces we began to learn the astounding story of Kao and Chua's journey from refugee camp to the United States. The Mien people viewed the United States as a dangerous, even deadly place where they dare not go. Americans, they believed, were hairy giants, cannibals, who would pickle the Mien and eat them. Kao, however, had known some Americans, CIA and USAID advisers he had worked with in the battle against the Communist Pathet Lao. One of these Americans, by then working at the U.S. Embassy in Thailand, urged Kao to move to the States. Life in Thailand held little promise for the Mien. They were outsiders and always would be. They could hope for nothing more than the hardest and most menial work with little reward. They dare not return to Laos because of Kao's work for the U.S. Jack Huxtable, one of the Americans (whom we met), told Kao that even starting at the bottom, sweeping floors, he could make far more than ever he could dream. Kao was fluent in English.<sup>4</sup> He did the math and awaited word that there was a place for him and his family in the United States.

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<sup>3</sup> Early on Larry Williams asked Kao about God. Kao said, "We left God in the mountains."

<sup>4</sup> As I recall, the tribal chief had encouraged him to learn. This made him valuable to the U.S. in the war.

The word came. They could go, but they had to do it immediately. Chua had gone off for the day to do some sewing work, so Kao tried without success to borrow a car or a bike to find her and tell her the news. When she returned he told her to pack. They had to leave -- now -- no questions, no discussion, no waiting.

Kao said, as he bid goodbye to his people in Thailand, "If you don't hear from me, you'll know we are dead." Six months after arriving in Midland he sent a cassette tape to his friends back in the refugee camp in Thailand. He told them how he and Chua and their family had been welcomed, how people had been so good to them, "treated like family."

Until we went to Portland in 2001 we did not know the singular importance of their move to the U.S. Kao and Chua were the very first Mien to leave everything and everybody to come to the U.S., the first of some forty-thousand Mien to immigrate.<sup>5</sup> We also learned that there was no "community" of Mien people in Portland when the Chaos moved there. There was one other family, the second to come to the U.S. All of the Mien people here came because of the Chaos' faith and courage. No wonder the Mien community in the United States likens Kao and Chua to Christopher Columbus and holds them in such high regard. As one of those who followed them put it to us, "Kao is king." At the big celebration in Portland -- there were indeed 500 there, including a half dozen former CIA and USAID men who had worked with the Mien -- Kao and Chua were repeatedly honored for having taken the risk and showing the way.

Like many other immigrants who've come to the United States, the Mien have worked hard and prospered. Five days after arriving in Portland Kao had two job offers. He took one at Tektronix. Chua later found work there. They also supplemented their income by doing landscaping. Their hard work paid off. We went to the Chaos' lovely spacious suburban home for a dinner. They have truly realized the American Dream.

Many Mien have furthered their education and entered the professions. Children of the immigrants are thoroughly Americanized. Pao-choy Chao, the two-year-old who arrived in Midland in 1976, is now David, a tall, handsome web page designer and graduate student married to a Japanese girl. Nging-choy, the babe in arms we greeted that night at the airport, is now Wendy, a tall, lovely young woman studying communications. Two younger daughters, Angela and Pham, both born in Portland, round out the family. Kao's mother, now in her seventies, greeted us profusely and poured over copies of snapshots I had taken in 1976.

The lay pastor of the church where Kao is a deacon told us that of the 2,000 Mien people in Oregon about half are Christians, distributed among five congregations in several cities. Kathy and I both made the connection to Jesus' parable of the mustard seed, God's way of getting God's work done in the world: from a small, almost unnoticed beginning, an outcome beyond our wildest imagination.

The big celebration party -- it began at 3:00 p.m. and went on well past midnight -- featured many speeches, interspersed with music and cultural presentations, mostly

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<sup>5</sup> Some present sources put the figure much higher, as much as 60,000. Most are on the West Coast.

dances. Most of the Mien women wore traditional dress. The tribal chief spoke in Mien, especially warning the youth about the importance of hard work and staying away from drugs, Kathy and I, representing First Baptist Church as refugee sponsors, received one undeserved accolade after another. We felt quite overwhelmed and humbled when the man first to follow Kao said to us, "If it had not been for you, I would be plowing behind a buffalo in Thailand." Kao presented us with a plaque, signed by him and Chua, acknowledging the role of the Midland congregation: "in recognition of your deep commitment and generosity in sponsoring our first lu-Mien, the Chao family, from Laos to the USA in 1976. Because of your sponsorship, today we can all enjoy our freedom and opportunity. We thank you very much for all your help and support. May God bless you." Many people came to us individually to thank us for what we had done. "We" had not done much. People of the congregation did far more than they knew. And Kao and Chua's daring and determination mattered most.