

'Coming to America' a king-sized job for Kong



Song K. Kong fits the part of the happy and easy-going mailman as he makes his daily rounds through the Capitol complex as the assistant postmaster for the House.

But life wasn't always so easy for Kong, 35, who grew up on a farm in Laos and later worked, beginning at age 14, as a military policeman for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

Like many southeast Asians who worked for the U.S. government, Kong was a marked man following the North Vietnamese takeover of Laos in 1975.

"Whoever served in the CIA had no chance to survive because the communists didn't like them," says Kong.

And like most refugees, Kong has quite a story to tell.

Although the U.S. pledged to help Kong and his wife, Lee Her, relocate in America, space was limited on the evacuation flights from Laos and they were forced to stay behind.

The communist government knew Kong's name and was looking for him, so he and Lee Her took to the jungle, where they lived for four years. They slept under large banana leaves and subsisted on roots, leaves, berries and whatever animals and birds they could kill.

But in 1979, tired of their fugitive life in the jungle, Song and Lee Her joined a group of more than 70 others to flee southward in an attempt to reach the refugee camps in Thailand.

Kong says he became ill during the journey and would have been left behind because he was one of the smallest men in the group. But he had one indispensable skill that the others lacked: he knew the Thai language.

It took 21 days to reach the powerful Mekong River, which forms the border between Laos and Thailand. They waited until nightfall before entering the swift currents of the Mekong, which were made even more severe by a thunderstorm that night.

He says it took six hours to reach the other side. When they emerged, only 47 of the 72 people in the group remained; 25 had drowned as soldiers fired at them



Song Kong has found a niche in the House of Representatives post office, where he has worked since 1987.

from Laos as they fled. But the swim was only one of the obstacles they faced as they entered Thailand.

They were immediately robbed of everything they owned by a group of armed men. Kong, however, was lucky. He had relatives living in Thailand who sent them money. But their odyssey was still far from over.

While their paperwork for refugee status was being processed, Kong and his wife spent one month in a jail where they ate just once a day, had to buy water, and where there were no bathrooms.

Several months later, with the help of the United Nations, Song and Lee Her arrived in New York in February 1980. Although the U.N. provided food and shelter, it didn't provide clothing.

"Can you believe I was walking outside in the snow without shoes when I just arrived?" he asks.

Kong worked for awhile at a manufacturing company in Woodbury, Conn., but a year later moved to Minnesota where his brother lived.

Kong worked as a custodian for two years, then later as kitchen attendant for Northwest Airlines before being laid off. That's when Song's neighbor, Rep. Steve Trimble (DFL-St. Paul), noticed Kong was out of work.

Trimble helped Kong get a job as a House page, a position he held for 1-1/2

years before becoming assistant postmaster in 1987. Kong also serves as a member of the Dayton's Bluff Community Council on St. Paul's east side.

Furthermore, Kong passed his U.S. citizenship exam last March. Lee Her and their five children will be with him when he takes the oath of citizenship this summer.

Although Kong says he's happy to be in America, there are many things he misses from his native land, including a brother he fears he will never see again.

He says America may be the land of the free, but in Laos you are free to hunt and fish whenever you like. Not only does he miss the wildlife; he longs for the way of life as well.

People in Laos, he says, tell time and plant and harvest crops by the singing of the birds and insects.

—Marty Johnson

Sending a cultural message

Kong is a leader in the Hmong community

By RUTH DUNN

Solving Kong, who works with representatives every day in his position as assistant postmaster for the House, is also a representative, of a different kind.

Kong is among 18 Hmong clan leaders in Minnesota, being selected by 70 families with the last name of Kong, to represent their clan. In Hmong culture, clans are organized by last name.

Clan leaders are selected based on knowledge and experience. They tend to be well-known. "My job is to represent men, women and children," said Kong. His leadership philosophy is, "Respect others if you want to get respect."

As Kong clan leader, he also is a member of the Clan Council, which meets monthly and

hunters in Wisconsin last November.

While holding press conferences are not normally a part of the Hmong culture, the group has recently done so. It's a case of when in Minnesota, do as Minnesotans do. Kong and two other clan leaders also recently appeared on "Almanac," the public affairs program on public television, and they've installed a hotline phone at the council office so people can call with questions or concerns.

Kong hopes people realize that just because one or two Hmong men might have done bad things, not all Hmong are bad. "We hope people understand these are individuals; not the group," said Kong. "There may be one or two bad apples but the rest of the apples are still good."

Kong estimates there are about 60,000 to

"I tell refugees, 'You are so lucky. We are here to do everything we can to help you.' It's a lot easier for them than it was for us," he said.

Kong, 49, was forced to flee Laos in 1975 when Americans left Southeast Asia because his ties with the CIA put his life at risk. He arrived in Minnesota in 1980 and saw his first snow. In 1986, his neighbor, former Rep. Steve Trimble, recommended him for work at the Capitol and he's been here ever since, including 17 years as assistant postmaster.

As clan leader, Kong helps newcomers adjust to life in Minnesota — and it's a huge adjustment to learn to live in this country successfully, he said. "When you arrive, you don't know the language and everything you hear sounds like mumbo jumbo." The hardest part for him was homesickness — missing his country and the family left behind.

Another part of his role as clan leader is to help people live together and learn from each other and other cultures.

"You think of this as a free country but there are so many rules and regulations here," said Kong. "My country (Laos) was a free country. We could do anything we wanted to there."

Kong mediates conflicts among spouses, parents and children. A huge generation gap can develop when tightly-knit family-oriented Hmong move to America.

"Hmong of my generation think of themselves as Hmong-Americans while our children, who were born here, think of themselves as American-Hmong," said Kong.

Tension has developed at times in Kong's own family. He and his wife, a professional seamstress, have four grown sons and a daughter. "Sometimes parents have no choice. The children grow up and have their own choices," admits Kong. Kong estimates that Hmong people lose about 75 percent of their culture when they come to the United States so they want to tightly hold on to the remaining 25 percent.

Kong sees the progress Hmong people have made in Minnesota. "We only arrived 30 years ago, but we have improved our lives," he said, adding that more Hmong are going on to higher education and going into professional careers, and there is a Hmong-American in the House, Rep. Cy Thao (DFL-St. Paul), and another in the Senate, Sen. Mee Moua (DFL-St. Paul). Kong would like to see more Hmong-Americans elected to city councils, school boards and county boards.

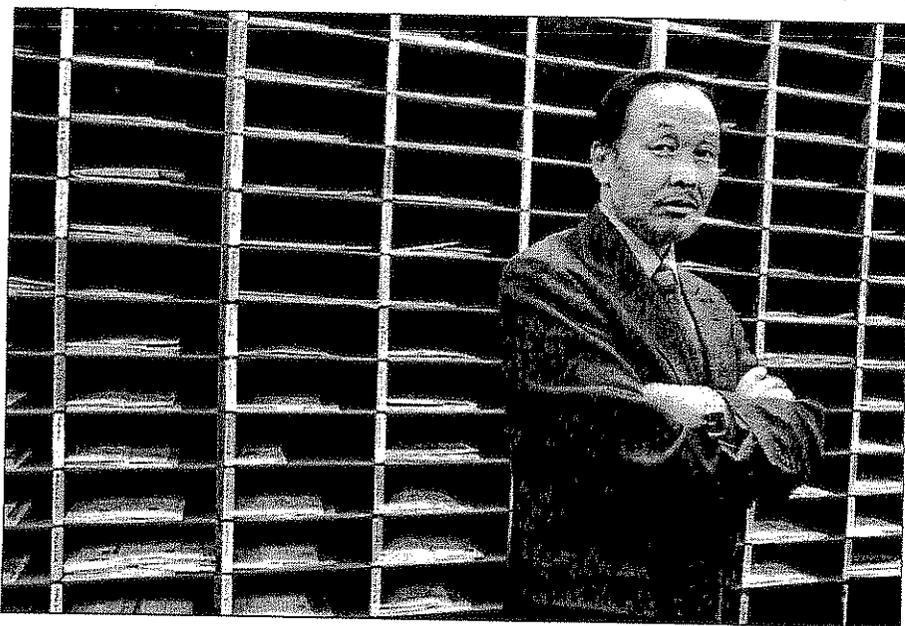


PHOTO BY TOM OLMSCHIED

House Assistant Postmaster Soliving Kong stands in the House post office. Kong, who was forced to flee Laos in 1975, is now a Hmong elder in the Twin Cities.

has an office in St. Paul. The council recently launched an effort to counteract negative publicity after a Hmong-American working for the city of St. Paul was allegedly involved in financial mismanagement and another has been charged in the shooting deaths of six

80,000 Hmong in Minnesota, a number that increases every year. He's a board member of the Hmong American Partnership, a Hmong refugee agency, which sponsors a lot of new arrivals. He understands how newly arrived immigrants feel and what they are going through.

Solving Kao Kong: the 'happy mailman'

by Briana Bierschbach

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Ed Burdick was not the only longtime staffer memorialized on the House floor last week. The chamber also lost 25-year assistant postmaster Soliving Kao Kong, who was known as the "happy mailman" around the Capitol.

"You saw him around the halls every day when he delivered our mail. He was there; he was part of the place; he was part of us," GOP Rep. Joe Hoppe said on the floor. "He was a part of our family."

But while everyone knew Kong's face, Hoppe remarked on how little he - and likely other legislators - knew about Kong's background and role as a Hmong community leader.

Kong grew up on a farm in Laos and later worked as a military policeman for the CIA. Kong and his wife escaped and eventually landed in Minnesota sometime after the North Vietnamese takeover of Laos in 1975. In 1986, former House Rep. Steve Trimble, who was Kong's neighbor, recommended him for a page job at the Capitol. He worked as a page for just more than a year before becoming assistant postmaster in 1987.

In the community, Kong was elected as one of 18 Hmong clan leaders in Minnesota. It was his job to help mediate disputes within his community while reaching out for new opportunities for clan members.

Former House Chief Sergeant-at-Arms Sandra Dicke, who worked with Kong for more than 20 years, said Kong was a "proud" and "private" man, but would occasionally open up and talk with her about the Hmong culture and his journey from Laos to the United States. The current chief sergeant-at-arms, Troy Olsen, called Kong "Sullivan" at his request. "He said I should call him that, as though he were Irish."

"He was so efficient and extremely dedicated. You could always depend on him, even toward the end when he was very sick," Olsen said. "On his last day at work he looked ill, so we said something to him, and just to prove us wrong, he picked up a big box of mail and walked out to deliver it. He had a stubborn streak in him."

Kong's death at 55 surprised those who worked with him. He died suddenly in the hospital on March 5 after developing an infection in his leg.

"We are really going to miss him," Olsen said.

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