

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hey everybody, I'm joined today by Christina Thao, nurse here in Madison and Hmong speaker. Thanks so much for taking a couple of minutes to chat with me!

**Christina Thao**

No problem.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, so it'd be great if you could first just give us a really general overview of your language background and why you decided to pursue a career in nursing.

**Christina Thao**

So I'm an American, I grew up in the states here in Madison, Wisconsin. And how I chose nursing was I just always grew up caring about people liking to take care of them. And I think not going to school for a long time. You know, it's weird, because I just kind of woke up knowing that I should return back to school because I, I guess I wasn't really, I didn't understand the path of how to go to college. I just, I didn't know the difference between an Associates and a Bachelor's. And but I think the good thing about not going right away, that allowed me to realize that I wanted to pursue nursing, with more experience in life and working. And so I ended up going back to get my associates and yeah, here I am in nursing.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, so I'm pretty embarrassed to admit it. But up until probably about six months ago, I did not know much at all about the Hmong population in Wisconsin, and correct me if I'm wrong, but I get the feeling that I'm unfortunately not the only person in that boat here in the state. So can you speak a little bit about the visibility of the Hmong population here in Wisconsin, and if you think there's been positive reactions or negative reactions or neutral to people that belong to your ethnic or language group?

**Christina Thao**

I would say Wisconsin holds a fair amount of the Hmong population. As far as I know, when my parents came here, they first foremost went to Texas, and then within the Thao community, there's a large, close knit community here in Madison. So when in general, when somebody like refers to someone who is a Thao, then it kind of like, oh, if I don't know them, I'm sure I'm related to them somehow. So because the Hmong community is very big, like to have that community, we kind of tend to know each other, even if they're a different last name, you can kind of tell when they let us know by their last name, who their parents are, because everybody just kind of gets to know each other. So it's a pretty small community. And yeah, the Midwest is known to have a good amount of Hmong population.

**Claire Darmstadter**

And so when you were growing up, how were your language abilities or skills viewed or supported by your school? Was it something where they were recognizing and validating your language abilities with supportive classes? Was it something where the goal was English

entirely and we don't want you to speak Hmong? How did that kind of work in schools growing up?

**Christina Thao**

So for me, the only way I was exposed to I guess, like speaking in Hmong was through my parents. So when they first came, you know, like, again, we were a close knit family. So we lived in — so all my relatives lived from like, you know, house to house. And then eventually, we all just slowly moved out and dispersed. And then to continue to grow and speak in Hmong, it was mainly through my parents or through dubbed movies. I find it interesting because I do find myself speaking more English at this point? I don't know if it's because it's easier for me to articulate myself. Because I do know a lot of the same or younger Hmong generations that are very fluent in Hmong. So I feel like I speak more Hmonglish, and especially to my parents, like when I want to express myself more, I can speak English better. So English is my main language, unfortunately. Yeah. And so I don't really know what happened, because I kind of, you know, when I thought about it, and I compared it with friends, some of them are just very fluent in Hmong. And for me, it's just like, I still struggle with the forms. And I've added myself speaking more Hmong when I speak to my elderlies, just because it's more respectful. But other than that, I generally carry most of my conversations in English, which is, I don't really know why I think like I said, I think it's because I feel more comfortable to myself, and it's just different ways to express yourself.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah. And so growing up most Wisconsin high schoolers are encouraged or are required to take another language class, in addition to whatever languages they speak at home or English. So it's very difficult to validate languages that aren't like English, French, Spanish, German, those commonly taught in school. So growing up in high school, did you take a Spanish class or a French class or German or another language, or was that not part of your experience?

**Christina Thao**

Yeah, I did. So I ended up taking Spanish and I enjoyed it very much, but I think I didn't hold on to it as well, I think because I'm not very good at studying. I probably slacked on stuff. Then I kind of wanted to like, explore the French language. And I found it very similar to Spanish. So then I ended up just dropping out. And so yes, it's like, speak a little bit of Spanish, but like, you know, I would say, English comes first Hmong and then Spanish. But again, I can't translate, I wouldn't be confident in translating long, you know, if I just kind of had conversations, I could kind of like, gauge it. But I, myself a translator.

**Claire Darmstadter**

And so in medicine, there's of course, a very big need for people who are translators. And obviously, you talked about how that's probably not something in your wheelhouse at this moment. But do you ever experience at work you're working with Hmong speaking families, and you can kind of casually communicate with them? Is that something that's frowned upon, especially if it kind of gets into that medical territory, and you don't want to give medical advice in a language that you're not fully licensed in? Are you ever able to use your skills at work?

**Christina Thao**

I have, if you know if it comes down to because obviously, sometimes, you know, there's errors within the language line, you know, when the plugs don't work, and you can't really use that, so I just have to be the one who translates it. And again, the Hmong language is very complex, it's very tonal, and we don't have, you know, specific terms for certain things medically. And, like, again, pharmacology, it was just really interesting for me, because, you know, I only grew up taking Tylenol. And then I was like, wow, like, a lot of my classmates came in, with like, a good basic foundation of pharmacology, you know, medications now that, you know, we just grew up drinking herbs, roots, and I don't even know the name of them, you know, and that was a big shock to me, it kind of made me feel like I was a little inferior in the understanding, and, but I think it allowed me to realize, like, Hey, you know, this is where making our way here. And, you know, I feel like, for me, I'm that bridge to gap, the difference between, you know, the Hmong, the, you know, as a Hmong American, you know, and that's all I can do, you know, and in order for me to help them, you know, sometimes I just can only describe it. And that's all we do, there's technically really no term for certain things. I think that's something we are still working on as well, even though I feel like I struggle with it. I think, being in the Hmong community, we're all still learning about that. And, you know, as long as I'm learning it, I, you know, we're, as a community, are still learning about it as well. So I think we just kind of learned to balance that out and make our way through it. Because again, it's very hard to translate.

**Claire Darmstadter**

I can imagine how much of a comfort that is for individuals in a medical setting, when they might be scared, they might not know what's going on. And even if it's not a perfect translation, I can imagine that that's a really great thing to have, and just maybe unexpected, and I would imagine that's a great comfort. Are there any myths or common misconceptions you hear people say about the Hmong ethnicity or the language that you can maybe debunk? Or you could kind of talk us through why it might not be an accurate portrayal?

**Christina Thao**

That's a good question. I don't think there is, you know, I think a lot of that comes, you know, down to the language barrier, you know, again, like I said, even just going to school, it was really hard for me, for me, like to take the exams, you know, it's just because we're so tonal that if you change the tone, it can mean different things. So what I realized when I was taking my exams was that, you know, like, it could mean, maybe the question means one thing, and, but then it's saying the other. And so I think, for me, growing up with that perspective, of like, it could mean, two, three different ways. I've always had that mindset, like, speaking English could be, it could be interpreted different ways. But, again, that is common, too, because everybody can misinterpret conversations. So I think that's, it's been kind of confusing for me, too. So I think you just have to learn to articulate and work on your communication skills, overall, and understanding each other's personalities. It's from what I understand, overall, I don't think there's any stereotypes or anything like that. I think, if, you know, obviously, if you never walked in my footsteps, and I haven't walked in yours, then obviously, we're not going to have the same perspectives. And I think as long as you're open to listening and understanding each other, then

you know, that's all you can do. You know, I think you shouldn't assume that people don't know what they're saying, because they're probably just seeing a different perspective. And that's something I've learned as growing up, you know, it's still something I'm going through right now.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, it's so true. Finally, we tell little kids all the time that speaking more than one language is a superpower. So can you give me one reason if you can boil it down to one you can answer in Hmong, in English, a mix of both, whatever you prefer, why it's a superpower to speak more than one language.

**Christina Thao**

I think, like I said, I think again, it goes back to perspective, and it just allows you to have to bring a different perspective to the table. And, you know, again, it's just about sharing that, because in the end, we're all just trying to communicate, to understand and, you know, we shouldn't have that barrier language, because, again, we're just trying to understand each other in the end, you know, and I think it's in itself superpower in a sense, where it's a challenge, because it makes you step out of your comfort zone, you know, and coming with an open mindset allows you to understand that, and if you're more accepting to that, you know, because I think it can be frustrating, because it takes a lot of time. And it takes a lot of patience. You know, even just like, if you have a child, it takes, you know, if you have an infant who doesn't speak to you, it's kind of like, I see, it's kind of like that, you know, you, you can't speak to them, you can't understand them, but you know, you with time and patience, you start to understand and you can speak different ways, like sign language pointing. And I think that's, you know, the five senses give us another way to speak to each other. And I think we're always growing, adapting in that way. And that's beautiful.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yes, so Well said, thank you so much for chatting with me. I really appreciate all you had to share in your time today. And I hope you have a great rest of your day.

**Christina Thao**

Yeah, no problem. Thank you.