

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hey, everybody, I am so lucky to be joined today by Mayder Lor, MSCR High School Recreation Specialist at Madison East High School. Thanks for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

**Mayder Lor**

Absolutely.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah. So first of all, great if you could just give us a general overview of your educational and linguistic background and how you arrived at your current position.

**Mayder Lor**

Yeah, so for me after I got done with high school, I graduated from Hartford Union High School. And then I actually went to UW-Milwaukee. So I went there for a little bit. And then I moved to Madison, where I continued my education at Madison College. And it was during that time where I realized that I didn't want to go to school anymore. So what I did was, I was working for MSCR at East High School. And at the same time, I was also traveling a lot, because that's what I wanted to do. So I was touring, I was traveling nationwide all over America. And I also go to Laos in Thailand every year. And so that's what I decided to do, and then basically after the supervisor, like I got a different job still within MSCR, but a different director position, I applied for his job. And that was what I wanted to do with my life anyway, so it was just perfect. So I just never finished school because I continued to learn through all of my trainings, and just you know, other other things that just come like my way. I'm looking at pursuing and always looking forward to learning, because I always tell everybody, we're always going to be students all the time. So in whatever kind of education form and whatnot.

**Claire Darmstadter**

And you have a background with languages or any experiences in high school, or what was that like for you?

**Mayder Lor**

with languages. Like when I was in high school, God forbid, I took a German class, I didn't do so well. But my background is actually Hmong, I'm American. I was born here, in America. But I did take at UW--Milwaukee a Hmong class, which really helped me enhance my reading, writing and speaking because I could only speak Hmong, but I wasn't able to read it or write it. And now I do all three fluently. And I also help translate and interpret, don't interpret Hmong into English in English into Hmong. So that's my background.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, well, I think it's really important that you mentioned that, you know, there are ways to work in schools where you don't need a teacher license. And there's a lot of different routes, because I think people think like, Oh, my gosh, I need this four year program and this specific license. And that's not necessarily true. So you mentioned that you've done some translating work, and you feel very comfortable in that space. And many of our listeners may already know this, but I

was not very familiar with the structure of the Hmong language and I understand it's pretty circular and not super direct. And there's a lot of terminology where like, you know, seventh grade science or like medical terms where there just isn't that vocabulary. So how do you go about translating something? Is it super hard? Is it a really long process? What does that look like?

### **Mayder Lor**

Yeah, it's hard. Like, if I were to translate, like, I'm not the best, like I can get by with, like, the general stuff, but absolutely, like when it comes like medical terms, and all those things, like, I don't do so well. So that's where I actually turn to my parents, because my parents also read and write and speak Hmong very fluently. Like, they're proficient. I'm just, you know, fluent, but they're, they're really, really, really good. And so that's where I turned for, like, my resources where I get help is from them. But yeah, there's so many words in Hmong that do not exist. Like in English, it exists, but in Hmong it doesn't. Like for example, internet, we say internet. There's no other words for it. Or even sometimes, like different emotions, or expressions and stuff, like, it just doesn't exist in the Hmong language. And so you kind of have to play around and find words that are closely related to what you're talking about. So sometimes you might not have the word, but you. But I think like when you explain it, it starts to make sense. And then people are like, Oh, I get what you're saying. So I think that's the difficult part is not having the words that exist. And then and then when you have to find the hard terms, like the medical terms of stuff, because you can't mess up on those kinds of things. Because this is the medical world like we're talking about, right? So you have to be like, absolutely 100% on point otherwise, like that could really ruin like, you know, a patient or anything else that's like out there.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

And so I think sometimes when we talk about English compared to other languages, it's often like, well, English has all these words, but these other languages don't, so we just have to kind of like make it up or use the English word. But conversely, are there any words in Hmong that don't translate to English or there's not like a one to one comparison or any like concepts that are more expansive in that language?

### **Mayder Lor**

You know, off the top of my head, I can't think of anything. But I will say that like, like, you know, in the English dictionary, let's just say medical terms, right? If you're talking about like body parts and stuff like that, when we refer to like body parts and everything, it's very, because like, you know, like the different bones and everything in our whole body, like English terms, you we have like a specific word for every single bone or whatever, right? Whether it's your thumb or your toes or whatever, but in like the Hmong language, we don't have that, we just refer to your thumb or your hand or your feet or, you know, pob txha, which is just your bones. Right, but what part of the bones? So I would say that's a good example. We don't have anything like very, very specific when it comes to those things.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah. And so looking at the Hmong community, more in general outside of linguistics, so I'm pretty embarrassed to admit it. But up until probably like six or seven months ago, I did not know much 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 the boat. So can you just kind of speak a little bit about the visibility of the Hmong population, how it's been received? How different communities have responded? And yeah, is the interaction generally positive? Are there any misconceptions that people typically have? Or what is it like to be Hmong American in Wisconsin?

### **Mayder Lor**

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, there are quite a few of us that do live here. Like, obviously, Madison and Milwaukee, Wausau, Eau Claire, La Crosse, like kind of some of the bigger cities and even like smaller cities, the Fox Cities, there's a lot too in Green Bay, Menasha and stuff, Appleton. And I would say, like, a lot of us, we do get put into, like, you know just a lot of the stereotypes and stuff like, they think that we're Chinese or you know, like Japanese or Korean or whatever, but we're not, you know, or they'll ask, are you guys from like Mongolia, but we're not, you know, because we're Hmong. The thing about Hmong people is most people say that our ancestors are from China. And then we kind of like, you know, migrated and stuff like that, like, you know, Southeast Asia to like, to around like Laos, and then the whole Vietnam War thing happened. So we had to, you know, kind of move and, and like, some of us went to Thailand to be a part of like, the refugee camps and stuff and then came here in America. But that's what was the deal with my parents is my dad was actually a soldier in the war. And that's how my family got to come to America because of that. But it's not. It's not easy, because people don't really know what we're from. And so like, if you're, let's say, for example, if you're from Australia, you're Australian, right? If you're from if you're American, you're from America, if you're French, you come from France, right? But Hmong, you don't come from a country, that's, we don't have our own country. It's very unfortunate. It's sad. And that's why like, I can't say speak for everybody else. But I think that's hard when we have to explain to people that we don't have a country, because then it keeps them still thinking and guessing like what are you then, right, but yeah, we are Asian, we're just kind of scattered, like, everywhere. And I will say that's like, the biggest thing is like, as far as like being like, Hmong, and like how people perceive us, I would say it's been great growing up in Wisconsin, as you know, Hmong American, our community here, I feel like, it's not as big and connected like the Twin Cities like in Minnesota, because like I said, I travel a lot for a living. I am a huge, like, community activist. And I work very closely with the Hmong community here, in California and Minnesota. And so like, part of my job and what I also do as a volunteer is I run all of the United Asian clubs here in Dane County. So you're looking at, like, Sun Prairie, East High School, Memorial High School, West High School, and like many other schools, and so it's, it's not easy, because you know, if we don't have anyone to have and run these clubs, like, that's where our Asian cultural like identity, like the kids, the youth, they won't have something to hold on to when they're going to school. So I figured if I picked it up, bam, then the kids can have something to look forward to. So we've done a lot of big projects. For example, two years ago, we did a showcase. And we raised a lot of money where we were able to build a school in Laos, and that was combined with other partnerships with like, other you know, other friends and like, you know, friends and families and whatnot. And when we do

those showcases, we actually have a multicultural fashion show. They sing in whatever culture that they want to, whether it's Korean or Hmong, or in Lao and stuff. And then like Hmong dancers. It's a variety of stuff. So I feel like that's something that's super important to me. And I wish I had that when I was going to school in Hartford. But I was the minority. I was the minority. So I didn't have that. So I wanted us to have that here in Madison, because we are very diverse here in Madison. And so I think that's like, it's a blessing to me to be working with our youth here or Asian like youth.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

I remember a couple weeks, or maybe it was a month ago, I opened the newspaper, and there's like a picture of your face. And you were in over gardens kind of giving a performance. So I know, obviously, with COVID, it's a little bit more difficult. And you guys had masks and everything. But have you had to kind of shut down programming, has it modified how that kind of affected your programming?

### **Mayder Lor**

Yeah, it was so hard. Because I don't even know where to start, like I think this year by far has to be the most overwhelming, most vulnerable time my life was because when COVID happened, exactly a year ago, I shut down. And I can be honest, you know, with you guys, like I went through a really bad depression, because I was telling myself, how can I support our youth if right now I'm feeling a certain type of way, you know, but like, my depression is not bad. Because I know myself, I'm gonna come out on the other end as a beast. So when I did do that, I got all that. All right, I'm taking all these kids, we're gonna start. So we started an affinity group, right, this Asian youth affinity group. And then, and we're meeting virtually, and talking about, like, what's going on in the Asian community? How can we protect ourselves to be safe and protect our families? And also like, what is it to be Asian American, right? Or, you know, or Hmong American. And when I listened to all the stories, and we all shared stories, my kids were getting bullied left and right. And I know my Asian club at Monona Grove, when they were selling a girls at their basketball, you know, game right before COVID shut down, a bunch of kids harassed them and bullied them and said, don't buy egg rolls because you're going to catch COVID it was most disheartening thing ever. And then my other kids at East High School, they were getting bullied when they would cough. Other kids would walk away and be like, you know, you know, he's got COVID where it's like, and, you know, like, I don't stand for bullying, big time, I have zero tolerance for it. And the next day, when I was going to do something about it, school shut down. So these kids had nowhere to go, no support system, like nothing. And like this whole year, that's why we've been working on. So we created a training, it's called How to Support the Asian Community Through COVID-19. And we said Asian community, not just Asian students, right, we said, because I'm an adult, I'm a staff member, I'm affected, the kids are affected, our families are affected, right. And so we've trained so many schools, like all staff for like East High School for West High School with Sun Prairie, Monona Grove, and, and we're going to keep this going on. Our kids are tired. And honestly, it's really sad, because they're supposed to be kids, but they're here being the teachers, teaching others about what it's like to be on the other side as an Asian American, you know, getting bullied and stuff. And we're providing resources and all these things and discussing with them, like our experiences through

COVID-19. And it's been an eye opener, like people cry during the trainings. And when I say trainings, we have like hundreds of people on one Zoom. And we've been literally like, touring with his training and stuff. And so I'm going to do next week UW-Milwaukee, we're going to be training them. It's a class. And then the week after that, we're going to be doing another like one last open one for anyone who wants to come and get trained. And then we're going to record that. Because like I said, the kids are drained, they're burnt out, I am, and we would love to do like many many more, but like it's just capacity, I want the kids to focus on their you know, their education and stuff too while having fun during their own club time because we've been utilizing this club time to to plan for all of those things and I want them to stay kids you know, to have that like fun balance, but they themselves know that they're so proud. I'm so proud of them. They've been very resilient. And they know how much of an impact they're doing to move like, you know, our community forward. So I'm just like, I'm just speechless because I was like man, I wasn't like that and I was in high school. I wish I had someone to you know, like to teach me how to be confident and to to know that my voice does matter. So I think this has been such a big eye-opener and whatnot. But, you know, I am going to do a youth appreciation like dinner (virtual) and like movie night for them with like goodies. And just so that they know that I value them as students. And that their work, it does matter. Because I told them too, I was like, I can't do this by myself, you guys. And they all know that none of them are ever obligated to do any of those things. But they want to do it because they want to be leaders. And that's something I've always taught them is that when we are leaders, we don't do it for recognition. We don't do it for compensation, we do it because it's the right thing to do. And that clicks with them. And so, you know, I just hope that they continue to do that. And I'm excited for their future because they want to get into Ivy League schools and stuff. I'm like, you do that.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

I imagine that you are so proud of them. And that is so incredible what they're doing. And like you said they shouldn't have to and it is absolutely horrific that this is something that they're having to do. And I think it's also important that you mentioned this isn't like in lieu of recent events like, oh, a couple weeks ago this started. This was a year ago, this was more than a year ago. And I think, you know, initially there was kind of talk about it. And then for about seven or eight months, it wasn't like in the news. It wasn't the headline. So people didn't really talk about it. But you've been enduring this for over a year, more than a year, more than COVID.

### **Mayder Lor**

Yeah, because I had a feeling that oh my gosh, like, I don't think that these are gonna get better. And I told the kids that too. I'm like, and you know, when we do these trainings for all the staff and stuff, I tell them all the time, like I couldn't, I wish I could tell you that things have gotten better. But no, everything has gotten worse. But this is why you're here. So we throw it back into the court. And we said, hey, it's so this is what we're doing as a united Asian consortium and club, right, is, we are training everyone and anyone we're raising awareness and showing, like, as many people as we can, like how we can, you know, support each other, and, you know, stop this hate against like Asian Americans. And then we said, don't just come here and sit here in our training, and just listen to us. Ask us questions. And then what are you and your team or your organization or your school? What are you going to do to make sure that your staff,

families and students are being protected? Like we love and care for all people, but especially during a hard time like this when Asians are being attacked, we want to see you execute it. We want to see things happening. Like we don't want to just see an email, you know, I mean, like, we want to see action steps. And we really, yeah, we want to see all of that, like to me seeing is believing. And yeah, just like I said, one email is just not going to cut it. Because that's what one of the principals did for one of the schools and to us, it was like it was meaningless.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah. And I think one thing that's become very apparent in the past couple months, years, whatever you want to call it, is that the responsibility is not on the community being affected to educate the masses. They might want to and that is incredible. But it is ultimately the people who are not experiencing that, who have a responsibility to go and educate themselves. So for individuals who can't necessarily attend your training, or don't really know where to start, are there any resources that you recommend, or groups to check out or anything that they can use to educate themselves?

**Mayder Lor**

Yeah, you know, it's crazy, because right before you and I jumped out here, I was on YouTube, and I was like, listening, like finding just music to, you know, I just got back from my other site. And I clicked on this link, and it says, Stop Asian Hate and learn more. Like, it's got a whole entire thing about like, why we need to talk about anti-Asian hate. And it just was, like, created on March 25, which was just today. And so it's got like, a whole thing about like, you know, why we should be discussing this. And Google, there's a lot of resources out there right now. Even like, like YouTube videos of like, even big, like Chinese actors or Asian actors and actresses that are talking about it. Like I said, mine is going to be up for grabs for whoever wants to, you know, watch the training too, it's not just for educators, it's for anyone who wants to learn about what is going on. Especially ours is very unique because it's specifically for Dane County, and what has been going on in California and wherever else and stuff like that. So yeah, I think that like I said, that's what makes it unique is I don't think anyone is doing anything in Dane County. I know we are but like, I haven't heard of any other like organizations or whatever that are doing those things like locally.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, for sure. And I will include links to as many of those resources as possible. And I know that the Hmong American Student Association at UW-Madison does a lot of great work, so I'll include links to there as well. So finally, to end us on a happier note, we tell little kids and older kids all the time that it's a superpower to speak more than one language and be a multicultural individual. So can you give us one reason, you can answer in Hmong, you can answer English, in a mix of both, whatever you prefer, why it's a superpower to speak more than one language and have a multicultural background.

**Mayder Lor**

Yeah, absolutely. Like I tell you guys, I travel a lot, right? When I go back to Laos, everybody there speaks Laos. So I speak English, Hmong, and then a little Lao as well too. The benefit of

that is when you go to a different country, you understand what they're talking about. And you can communicate with them, like, what they're saying to you and stuff. Because imagine yourself in a totally different country. If you get lost and stuff and you don't know how to ask for the bathroom or food, like it's gonna be so hard for you guys. So yeah, learn as many languages as you guys can, even even if it's not like you're 100%, little things to help you get by. And also because you can also help other people when you know other languages. So that's why I try to learn like little Spanish and like a little bit of everything. So that's why!

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yes, well thank you so much. I really appreciate you taking a couple minutes to chat. I know like you said the kids are burned out, I'm sure you are very burned out. You're doing really important work. But I think this is really important and people will really benefit and have a lot of great takeaways from this conversation. So I hope you have a great night and a great rest your school year.

**Mayder Lor**

You too and thank you for having me. Have a good night.