

Claire Darmstadter

Hey everybody, I'm so lucky to be joined today by Pem Lo who works as a security supervisor at Meriter Hospital. Thank you so much for taking a couple minutes to chat with me!

Pem Lo

Thanks for having me.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah so first to start us off would you be willing to share as much as you're comfortable of your background with where you grew up, what your childhood was like, and kind of what languages you interacted with whether it be at home or at school or anything like that?

Pem Lo

Yeah so I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania for about roughly I want to say half my childhood life and then moved into Wisconsin in I want to say 2002 started my high school year here eventually went to college got married had four kids four beautiful kids join the Army National Guard and eventually graduated from college. I was a police officer at one point in time, and now currently a supervisor over at Meriter Hospital where I try to assist as much as I can with the Hmong language too as well.

Claire Darmstadter

And would you say that the Hmong language was something that you acquired from hearing it being spoken at home, did you ever have formal literacy instruction, what was that like in the language?

Pem Lo

You know I won't say I was very fortunate because growing up I have a very very big family too. My grandparents were full on just Hmong only, they have very minimal of, they can't speak English let's just say that so I had a lot of practice with them. So growing up with them was very challenging at times, but you know it's also I guess I would say I don't know it has ups and downs I guess.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah and you mentioned that at work you can use your language to help the people you're working with a little bit obviously when you're working in like medicine for example those medical terms there's more of a legal aspect where you need to be certified and there's a lot higher stakes perhaps, but in your position since you're not directly working with medicine, I don't believe, what does that kind of like for you? Are you able to just kind of translate whenever you want, are there certain types of scenarios that you're commonly dealing with? I know that Hmong is a pretty indirect or like circular language and so it's not always like a one to one translation with English, so that can be kind of tricky. So how do you navigate that space when there's a term that you don't know how to describe in the Hmong language or English?

Pem Lo

Yeah so a lot of times you know if the doctor or the nurse or is giving a specific medication and obviously there's no name for that in the Hmong language, so a lot of the times I asked what does that medication do, how does it work, what's it for specifically? And then I just kind of tell the patients or the visitors that this is what the medication is for, this is how it works, how to use it and that sort of thing.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah and so I'm pretty embarrassed to admit it, but up until probably maybe like 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 fortunately not the only one in that boat here in the state so can you kind of speak a little bit about the visibility of the hmong population in wisconsin do you think there's always a negative, or a positive, or kind of a neutral reception of your population or what is it kind of like to be Hmong American in Wisconsin?

Pem Lo

Sure so I can tell you that you know growing up and you know there's the way I see there's two generations of the population and within the community so basically the older generations have the where they're a little more sheltered, they don't come out as much mainly because you know they're afraid of interacting with people in general versus just within themselves, so they'll interact within the community themselves, versus where the younger generations nowadays where you know they're a little more educated and they have the opportunity to do sightseeing more right so they have the opportunity to kind of just see things and interact with people more so the older generations that's where they're a little more shy about learning new things like just learning how to speak english in general that's a challenge for a lot of the older generations so but at a point in time you know the the older generation is they're slowly adapting to to the younger generation but that's ways to go still.

Claire Darmstadter

And I think you mentioned that you did go to college. did you feel like when you were in that environment was it something where you had student groups that you can join Hmong individuals. Do you feel included on the campus there was a kind of like I'm not so sure that I feel welcome here, I feel like I'm kind of the only one with my background?

Pem Lo

I definitely felt welcome. Yes I can tell you that during my time growing up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania that's where I was a little more secluded because the Hmong population there wasn't as much versus compared to like Wisconsin here. I want to say that, you know, there's probably a couple a few thousand Hmong families in Pennsylvania versus here. There's tons here. So.

Claire Darmstadter

And you also mentioned that you're a father and you have four beautiful children. Can you talk a little bit about how you're approaching language with them? So are you speaking only in Hmong

at home? English? It's a mix of both? Is it super structured or super fluid? What is your approach there?

Pem Lo

You know, I want to say it's a challenge at times, because you know, what, I tried to speak Hmong only to them. They'll kind of get it. But then when I try to speak in English, you know, they'll get it at times too, but for them to speak completely in one language, one blank one sentence, it's kind of like, it's a challenge because they can't pick up everything. So especially the Hmong language, it is very difficult for them to comprehend, versus the English language, you know, they could, they'll be able to say, speak to me within a few sentences, but the pronunciation for the Hmong language is, so it's difficult for them. So it's a challenge.

Claire Darmstadter

Yes I was trying to learn a little bit of Hmong myself. And it's very difficult because it's a tonal language, so I was very in over my head. So language can often really closely be connected to culture. So can you just kind of share with us any important cultural practices or traditions or holidays that you celebrate?

Pem Lo

Yeah, so, one that we commonly celebrate every year is the Hmong New Year, you know, that's kind of where the families get together. And they what they typically do is, you know, what's the best way to describe this, you know, they'll have in the old ways they sacrifice an animal of how they would say is they cleanse the bad luck out of the previous year, and welcoming the new through the new year with new luck, new fortune, that sort of thing. So other practices, which would be the funerals, which could be very time consuming, because that's also one of those difficult moments for the family. So from what I was told back in the old times, like in Laos, funerals were held for over roughly a month, compared to now it's only a weekend. How that was dealt with was where the, you know, the families would have the deceased person in the home for a month, which was kind of, you know, unusual, compared to today. So, yeah.

Claire Darmstadter

Thank you for sharing those with us. And so the last question to kind of end on a positive note, we tell little kids all the time that it's a superpower to speak more than one language. So can you give me one reason, in English, in Hmong, a mix of both, whatever you want, why it's a superpower to speak more than one language?

Pem Lo

The way I see it, you know, if you're able to speak more than one language, whether it's just Hmong, English, or you know, any other language in general, the more you can speak, the more knowledge you can comprehend, and utilize for yourself. The way how I also see it, it kind of gives you a better potential of being hired or working in a field that you're interested in later on in life really, you know, versus just being able to speak one language, you know, I'm just saying this for not just for one person or one culture or ethnic group, but for everybody as a whole. I mean, if you can speak more than one or two languages, even, that's a benefit for everybody.

Because I know that a lot of times, you know, I can see the struggle where, you know, other groups, they, you know, they want to acquire resources, but they don't know how to. If you can assist with that and make a positive impact for somebody, that's a plus. That's how I see it. That's the one thing I like about working in healthcare too myself, or as a prior law enforcement officer too. I like to dedicate my time to try to help dedicate those resources for those who need it. So I'm hoping that you know that people will see that too, as well.

Claire Darmstadter

Yes, for sure. And I know right now, during COVID, it's even harder to work in your position. So I really appreciate you taking a couple minutes to chat with me out of your very busy day I would assume. So thank you so much, and hope you have a great rest of your day.

Pem Lo

Thanks. Thanks for having me.