

enrollment at Sac State jumped from 153 to 1,075, making them the second-largest Asian group on campus, said President Robert Nelsen.

But only about 2 percent of Hmong students graduate from Sac State in four years; 97 percent grew up speaking Hmong, 79 percent are first-generation college students.

Sac State has one of the largest Hmong student populations in the nation, said one of the gala's co-chairpersons, Kaying Hang of the Sierra Health Foundation.

"There is much to learn from the Hmong diaspora and their journey," Nelsen said. "It's a legacy of the Vietnam War ... but it is also a legacy of what our future will be."

More than 350 people attended the gala, including Hmong educators and administrators, police and sheriffs, health care professionals, entrepreneurs and public officials. The theme: "Threading the Needle of Hope Through Education."

During the program, event co-chairmen Danny Chao Vang of Sac State and Sac State student Andrew Yang noted that the median age of the Sacramento region's Hmong is 19, many of them college-bound.

"While we serve as cultural brokers and straddlers, we as the children of refugees are reminded of the journey our parents or grandparents took. It was not easy and their generations may never fully transition to life in America," said a Project HMONG statement in the gala program.

"However, thanks to their efforts ... we are hopeful that one day a cadre of Hmong professionals will actively participate on issues impacting our community and successfully negotiate a path for positive change."

The audience gave a standing ovation to the family who started it all, represented by Nhia Khang, whose dad and brother fought in Vang Pao's guerilla army. The family escaped to a Thai refugee camp and then became the first Hmong to resettle in Sacramento in 1976, when Khang was 13.

"My dad found a job as a dishwasher, and we were living on \$20 a week," Khang recalled. He spoke no English and had almost no education. He told Sacramento State senior writer Cynthia Hubert he'd carry a Hmong-English dictionary with him so he could learn his new language a few words at a time. But he went straight from middle school to American River College, got his associate degree and enrolled at Sac State.

In 1985, he became the first of thousands of Hmong students to graduate from Sac State. Khang also earned his master's degree in social work at Sac State and worked for San Joaquin County children's services until he retired in 2017. His mother, a shaman in the mountains of Laos, inspired him to pursue a career in public service. Three of his children also have graduated from Sac State.

He advised the dozens of Hmong students in attendance to "know what you want in life

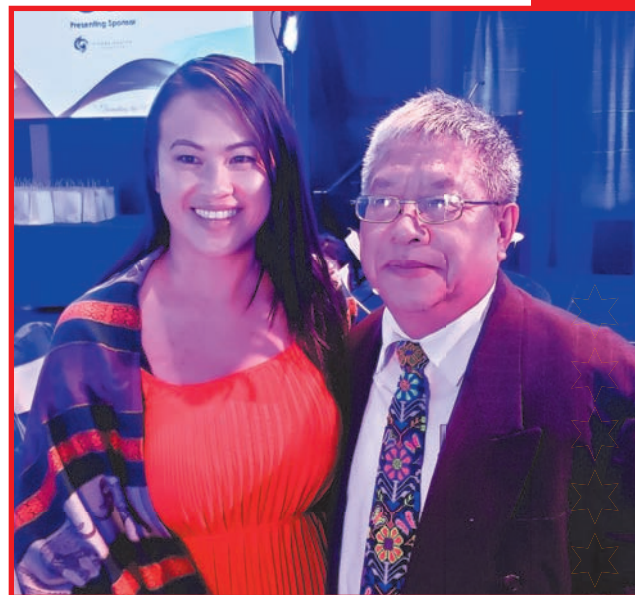
and work as hard as you can for it. Do it as quickly as you can! Anyone can do it, but you need to put your heart into it."

While members of the younger generation appreciate the sacrifices made by their elders, they are making their own music, starting their own businesses and winning on the academic front instead of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Between fall 2008 and 2016 at Sac State, 2,950 Hmong graduated in health and human services; 2,091 in social sciences and interdisciplinary studies; 1,723 in natural sciences and math; 1,701 in business; and 1,177 in engineering and computer science, according to numbers compiled by Vang.

A gala scholarship winner, Mai Xiong, told a familiar story: "We moved to America in 1996 and me and my siblings missed classes to translate at my parents' doctor's appointments after my mother suffered a stroke at 34.

"My dad, a nurse's assistant who worked for the Chao Fa [Hmong freedom fighters], got a job in construction. We lived in Willows, Chico and Sacramento. For years, there were 11 of us crammed into a two-bedroom apartment infested with rodents."

Now treasurer of the Sac State Hmong student association, she said her parents always



Nhia Khang, right, the first Hmong to graduate from Sacramento State University, poses with Oakland City Councilwoman Sheng Tao at a gala on June 7.

put their education first.

"My dad walked through three villages in Laos to go to school," she said. "He wanted me to be able to use my voice to help others." Before her mom had a stroke, she would drive to her cousin's house in the middle of the night so he could help her and her siblings with their homework.

"My parents taught me something very important—resilience," she said. "Failure paralyzes you. If you remember your motivation, you will bounce back stronger and better." □

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