



Special beads, embroidery and silver work make the Iu-Mien's ceremonial attire stand out.

make sure the Iu-Mien could find their place in the American melting pot without losing the unique parts of their identity.

He started working with other Iu-Mien professionals, including Chiem Seng Yaangh at the Sacramento City Unified School District, to turn a small organization called Iu-Mien Community Services into a larger nonprofit. In 2002, he became its first official board president. One of the initial programs he and Yaangh launched was the Iu-Mien Student Conference to prepare teenagers for career success while also helping parents support them, even if they didn't speak English.

Stacy Saechao, when she was a high school student in Antelope, ditched class to attend the conference. "The [Iu-Mien] kids around North Highlands were in a different school district and weren't set up to go," she recalls with smile. "We lied and said everybody's aunt had a funeral, which got us all an excused absence."

The conference, preparing to celebrate its 20th anniversary this year, showed students that there could be real opportunities ahead of them.

Iu-Mien Community Services also runs a program for seniors to promote health and combat isolation. Board president Nai Sio Saechao, a registered nurse, says the program sometimes helps get the elders counseling for the trauma that lingers from their war and refugee experience.

"A lot of them do have isolation and depression, because they're really just at home by themselves, especially since they used to live in villages where they were all connected," Nai says.

But the nonprofit's initiative with perhaps the highest stakes is its Iu-Mien language class. Very few in Sacramento under the age of 40 can speak fluently, though many special nuances of the culture are embedded in its language. The group offers free Iu-Mien classes for all ages every Monday and Tuesday in South Sacramento.

Saechao said that is a good start, but says the only real chance for the language to survive is for younger parents like herself to prioritize teaching it to their kids,

insisting it be at least one of the languages spoke inside their homes.

"The classes alone can't save it," she said.

Saephan agrees, but is encouraged by a rising new genre of music attracting some of Sacramento's Iu-Mien teenagers. It fuses American dance music with Iu-Mien lyrics and has inspired a number of teens to check out the language class.

For Koy Saeteurn, these concerns about the language—or where the next generation of shaman will come from—are serious issues for the community.

But, she says, these questions also show that the hardships endured by elders allowed their children and grandchildren to have new, meaningful lives in America. They're now seizing opportunities, building rewarding careers and finding ways to save the Iu-Mien culture.

"If you think about it," she says, "it's literally the American dream." □

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