

## **The Story of Gift for *Ib Hnub Tshiab***

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Hmong Women's Fund – Historical Celebration

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I would like to tell you the story of Nhia (which is not her real name). Nhia is the mother of a Hnub Tshiab volunteer.

Nhia was born in a small village to a loving family over 60 years ago. She married at 15, and gave birth to five wonderful children. Like most Hmong refugees, she fled the war and came to live in the United States. After three decades of working at a manual job and putting all her children through college, her husband no longer wants her. She is old.

If she dies, as a divorced woman, no one will bury her. At great risk to herself and her children, she left an abusive relationship, only to find that she is stigmatized where ever she goes in the Hmong community. Now, she sits at home and takes care of her grandchildren, trying to create value for herself and also fearing that no one will love her.

Her daughters love her, but it isn't enough. She needs her son and her ex-husband to help her. But, in a culture of patriarchy, she is powerless. As an animist, she needs to be tied to a Hmong man, so that when she dies, someone will do her funeral and her spirit can go find her mother and father who died so long ago in Laos.

Nhia's contribution to the world has been the raising of strong daughters who stood by her through the divorce. She is one of dozens of contributors to the Hmong Women's Fund. Even though Nhia could do nothing but stand and watch her life, her memories, and her value as a wife and mother get destroyed, she found the \$100 in her meager pockets to contribute to us. A hundred dollars is a third of her monthly income.

I am so proud of her. The gift, even though small, lifted her spirits in immeasurable ways. She was doing something important – building a legacy that would not diminish. Her daughter, who has never asked her to contribute and has never asked her mother for help of any kind, not even to pay for her college tuition when things were tight and she had to bike a mile to the grocery store so that she could finish school so far away from home.

The story of the Hmong Women's Fund is so much more than the story of this \$25,000; it's the story of our lives, and the story of the legacy we leave and want for this community. Even though Nhia thought herself an unimportant person, she was a very important person in making history.

Hnub Tshiab's mission is to be a catalyst for lasting cultural, institutional and social change to improve the lives of Hmong women.

Today, as I stand here, I know that (U.S. Census in 2000):

- 73% of the Hmong women do not have a high school education versus about 90% of all Minnesotans.

- Only 5% of Hmong women have college degrees versus 25% of all women in Minnesota.
- Only 16% of Hmong women are employed in professional and management jobs compared to 38% of all Minnesota women.

The odds of success seem very low for Hmong women in gain in leadership and status, but that does not have to be. Consider that asset, this small piece of social change built in the real story I just told you.

Do we have what it takes a community inspire a generation of young girls and young women into become more?

We have a huge opportunity in Minnesota. The Twin Cities area has the highest concentration of Hmong in the entire United States. The median age for Hmong females is only 16. Three out of four Hmong women are below the age of 30.

We live in historic times. We make history today.

Thank you for coming, and helping to reshape our Hmong community to celebrate the Hmong Women's Fund.