



CALIFORNIA REFUGEE HEALTHY MARRIAGE PROJECT

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It's been almost 5 years that the California Refugee Healthy Marriage Project has been helping more than 1700 refugees from Laos, Cambodia, Burma, Ukraine, and Vietnam establish more loving, stable relationships with their spouses, become more socially knowledgeable and empowered individuals in US society, and create strong families that support one another in meeting the challenges of acculturation. Now half way through our fifth and last project year, our final newsletter will celebrate the culture of our clients, highlight what we've accomplished, and as always, share stories about how the Refugee Healthy Marriage program has impacted the lives of the populations we serve. We hope you enjoy this issue.

Communication Is Always the First Step (or Toss!)

Throw, catch. Throw, catch. No, this isn't baseball, or football. This is a traditional courting ritual of the Hmong called pov pob (pronounced pao-po). How did this custom start and what does love have to do with throwing a small cloth ball back and forth between a girl and boy?

Traditionally for the Hmong, it wasn't culturally acceptable for potential lovers to show affection toward one another in public. Girls were expected to be coy so when a boy met a girl it was not appropriate for them to approach each other. However, once a year, during Hmong New Year, young men and women had the opportunity to converse in a socially acceptable venue. The idea is simple: if a girl is interested in a boy, but too shy to talk to him, she can toss the ball to him. If he catches it and tosses it back to the girl a bond is formed and communication begins.

Communication is usually in the form of singing (more like citing poetry), then the two exchange clan names and which village they're from. This process also allows the elders to openly observe prospective in-laws and give counsel to the children about their choice of mate.

Even though in America most Hmong have adopted Western dating methods, young people still like to keep the tradition alive by playing at Hmong New Year festivals, as they did in Sacramento late last year.

And even though most Hmong Americans no longer practice the old way of citing poetry, the courting ritual is a good way for young people to connect from around the country, and interact with those from their own culture...something which often leads to marriage proposals.



Young couples play pov pob at Sacramento's Hmong New Year

For more information on this tradition, check out *An Introduction to Hmong Culture* by Ya Po Cha.

Refugee Healthy Marriage: Looking Back....

An Old Friend with a New Attitude



Nhanh Roeun, a 41-year old Cambodian refugee, attended the Refugee Healthy Marriage workshop five years ago. Married with a 5-year old daughter, Nhanh was having constant misunderstandings with her husband and daughter, and needed help. Her self-esteem and confidence had plummeted

and she often came to the workshops with tears in her eyes. As a result, she gained weight, neglected her appearance and felt a general loss of control over her life.

At the first *Power of Two* session, Nhanh's pessimism was obvious. What could she contribute to others when she couldn't even help herself? However, after the final session, Nhanh had renewed energy and had become open and expressive in a way never seen before. She left Cambodian Association of America's office very happy, and was never seen again.

Fast forward to January 2011. A few days after New Year's, a well-dressed, beautiful woman appeared at CAA.

When she turned to me to say "Hello," I was very surprised to see that it was Nhanh! The transformation was so unbelievable that I kept asking if she was Nhanh and she replied "Yes, sister." I asked what made her change like that?

Nhanh responded that during the workshops she realized that she had been letting others control her. She had never dared to speak up or contradict others, even when she felt she was right. Since applying the lessons she learned, she had become more assertive and a more involved mother. Her husband was also behaving differently – improving his behavior toward her and apologizing where he hadn't before. She realized that before she could change her husband, she had to change herself first, and command respect. Changing the way she spoke, and eliminating toxic words had a lot to do with that.

Today Nhanh is very happy with her life and credits the lessons she learned five years ago with helping her rediscover both her inner and outer beauty.

— *By Dany Man*

Cambodian Association of America



Are you Listening to Me?

Over the past 5 years, Healthy Marriage program leaders have employed a number of ways to advertise their workshops to the broadest audience possible. For the Slavic community in Sacramento, outreach at churches and a radio show dedicated to the topic has been the greatest draw for participants.

The "Healthy Marriage" show, with host and workshop facilitator Ivan Leshchuk, is an open-forum half-hour show airing every Wednesday evening. The show reaches more than 150,000 Slavic refugees in the Greater Sacramento area and Bay Area.

In his show, Ivan discusses topics ranging from useful resources and services for refugees, to how to parent your child, and how to sustain relationships through troubled times. According to Ivan, the show has been very effective in attracting refugees to the workshops since many people can tune-in in the evening and it's one of the few resources provided entirely in Russian.

When questions arise on how to overcome stress, depression or feelings of nostalgia for their former lives, Ivan can draw on his own experience as a refugee experiencing these issues to advise others. In fact, one of the most common questions callers have is about Ivan's personal experience in America and how he has adjusted.

"What I like about the show is the deeper impact it has," Ivan explains. "Even for listeners who are unable to attend the workshops, they can still anonymously obtain useful, even vital, information that can save their marriage. And that's what I'm most concerned about."



Ivan broadcasting his show from KFSG's studio in Sacramento

...and Looking Forward.



Becoming American: RHM in Easing the Path to Citizenship

In our work with refugees, it is important to do anything to help our clients feel like they belong in this country. Many of my Hmong clients have lived in the U.S. for more than 30 years, and are just now applying for citizenship. They are anxious to take this step, but need assistance in building their confidence and feeling at ease during the exam process. I teach them citizenship-specific lessons, but support these with Refugee Healthy Marriage classes to help clients be emotionally prepared throughout this period and to handle stress more effectively in their lives. I feel this is a great example of how our classes are really helping the cultural integration process.



Qu, with recent class of female graduates

One of my clients, Zong Her, recently summed-up his feelings about learning the two topics simultaneously:

“When I come to class I feel stressed but after I go through the workshop I feel relieved. This way the lessons taught in the citizenship class stay in my head. Citizenship classes are taught in many places but I learn best when (the subject) is taught together with Healthy Marriage. When I get home I feel less stressed and don’t forget the lessons. The listening and speaking parts of the classes and working with anger have also helped reduce my anxiety greatly. I didn’t expect this benefit.”

Every Wednesday Zong drives over an hour and a half to attend Healthy Marriage and Citizenship class in our Lao Family Community Development office in Sacramento, so I feel we’re doing something right!

*- Qu Santikham, workshop facilitator
Lao Family (Sacramento)*

Ring in the New Year with A Healthy Marriage



At VCDI’s New Year Celebration in late January, President Trung Nguyen sat down to discuss the Refugee Healthy Marriage program with Mr. Thu Van Do, 68, and wife Tham Huynh, 58, who came to Oakland as refugees two years ago and completed the workshop in December 2010.

What do you want to focus on as a couple in the new year?

The Lunar New Year is a time to celebrate and enjoy the beginning of a new year. It’s a time for joy and happiness to be shared amongst all members of the extended family. We want to stay healthy, improve our English and adapt to the new culture so that we can help each other raise our children.

Is it difficult learning new relationship skills at this stage in life?

Yes, it is difficult to learn new skills since we are used to patterns we’ve fallen into since the day we were married. Through the workshop, we have learned communication techniques, how to manage our anger, and how to raise children in America. However, there is nothing too difficult to adopt because everything just needs time, effort and practice. We will adjust slowly as life goes on.



What advice do you have for young Vietnamese couples today?

We want to let the young Vietnamese couples know that family is the foundation of happiness. In order to keep them together, you have to work at it, and walk through life together. You have to talk things out and let your partner see and respect how you think and feel. Don’t walk away when the problem occurs; always try to solve a problem together, with a calm attitude.



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CRHMP Photo Gallery 2010-2011



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