

SPECIAL REPORT: The Leftover People

Profile: Mee Moua From the mountains of Laos to halls of state government

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During her maverick campaign for Minnesota's state Senate in 2001, Mee Moua often introduced herself as "this little Hmong girl from the mountains of Laos."

Residents of the blue-collar district knew her mostly as the underdog opponent of state Rep. Tim Mahoney, a pipe fitter and local boy anointed by the mayor.

Nobody gave her much of a chance except her Hmong loyalists, who knocked on every door in the district, then got 500 Hmong to register and vote in the same day - a special practice allowed in Minnesota.

Moua made history, becoming the first Hmong in America elected to state legislative office and establishing the Hmong as serious players in the electoral process.

Today, Moua, 34, is majority whip in the Minnesota Senate and one of the best-known Asian American politicians in the country. California Hmong even offered to gather signatures so she could run for governor during last year's recall election.

Moua was 5 when she and her family fled Laos. They spent 10 years in Appleton, Wis., where Moua's parents worked as janitors, then moved to St. Paul in 1988 for factory jobs.

Moua has always had her eye on politics. She persuaded her parents to let her go to Brown University because former President Carter's daughter had gone there, then got her master's degree in public policy at the University of Texas, where she was mentored by former Texas Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, who was then a professor.

Moua returned to Minnesota, got her law degree and practiced immigration and business law. Her chance to run for office came in a special election to fill St. Paul's east side Senate seat, vacated by a three-term senator who had been elected mayor.

Though Moua had never run for office, she'd helped her uncle, Neal Thao, get elected to the St. Paul school board in 1995 and has raised money for Democratic candidates ever since.

But when Moua announced her candidacy, "We were shown the door by Democratic Party leaders," she said. Mahoney looked unbeatable. No one returned her calls.

So, with the election six weeks away, Moua turned to her extended Hmong clan. She drafted Pakou Hang, one of her 70 closest cousins, as campaign manager. "She called me up and said, 'Will you steer my ship?' " said Hang, 27, a Yale graduate working for a social investment company in St. Paul.

Another cousin, television reporter and producer LouAnne Moua, 28, gave Mee a makeover: "We took her shopping and bought eight new suits in bright colors and new makeup, because she was kind of drab," LouAnne said. "We got her hair cut short so it looks more professional, and then we accessorized with rings, jewelry, scarves, shoes. I was going for the Hillary Clinton/Jackie Kennedy look."

Mee Moua's husband, Yee Chang, a journalist-turned Realtor, became her bodyguard, driver

and chief of staff - and showed Hmong men that it was OK to let a woman lead.

The first setback came when Mahoney was formally nominated by a Hmong. But Moua built a "dream team" led by comedian Tou Ger Xiong and other young Hmong professionals. They, in turn, drafted an army of 250 volunteers - 210 of them Hmong.

They hit all 30,000 homes in the district - twice - in freezing weather, talking to residents and dropping off voter registration pamphlets in English, Hmong and Spanish.

"If they were Hmong, we asked, 'Who in your home is a citizen?' " Hang said. "Then we'd have elder Hmong men call the homes and ask, 'Who are the citizens (in your family) who live in the district?'"

The campaign identified 1,208 Hmong citizens who had never voted, political kindling in Minnesota where people can register and vote in the same day.

"The weekend before the election, we called them and said, 'Hey, what time can you go and vote?' " Hang said. "If he said 9 a.m., we'd call him at 8:30 on Election Day and say, 'Don't forget to bring your driver's license and utility bill, and do you need a ride?'"

"Then we'd call him again at 10 o'clock and ask, 'What was your voting experience? Oh? You haven't voted yet? Are you sure you don't need anybody to pick you up?'" Hang said. "And then we'd call them again at 11 a.m."

On that bitter cold January day, Moua beat Mahoney by 170 votes, pushed over the top by 500 first-time Hmong voters. "She ran a better race," conceded Mahoney. "She got her people to the polls."

She also reached out to African Americans, Somalis, Latinos and American Indians in the district and beat four rivals in the general election.

Today, exquisite Hmong embroidery can be found all over the Minnesota Capitol - and so can Moua, dressed in one of her new suits, open-toed shoes and a pearl necklace.

Moua's desk chair was too big for her - she's barely 5 feet tall - "so they allowed me to bring in an extra pillow and foot stool," she said.

On the wall is a picture of Moua with state Rep. John Lesch, who's wearing a traditional Hmong outfit he bought from Moua's mother-in-law. Moua's team mobilized 400 Hmong voters in the projects on St. Paul's north end to provide Lesch's margin of victory.

Since her election, Moua has been busy. She has worked to create special tax districts to entice businesses, supported gay marriages (drawing flak from 30 Hmong pastors), and taken on those who have criticized the new Hmong now arriving from Thailand.

Moua, who registered another 1,200 Hmong for her successful re-election, has helped open the door for other Hmong, including state Rep. Cy Thao, a teacher and artist elected in November 2002.

She's also inspired the next generation of Hmong leaders. Hmong historian Yuepheng Xiong said his daughter Mena, a 17-year-old Young Democrat, told him, "Don't buy a foreign car - otherwise, when I run for office, people will say we don't support American-made products."

GRAPHIC: Sacramento Bee photographs / Manny Crisostomo
Minnesota Senate Majority Whip Mee Moua, right, attends a meeting of African American political leaders at the Capitol in St. Paul. She fled Laos with her family at age 5.
Sen. Mee Moua confers with St. Paul Police Chief William Finney at a meeting of African American leaders in the Minnesota Capitol. Moua is one of the most prominent Asian American politicians in the nation.

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