

Justice and Equity

WE'RE COMING FOR IT ALL

Christine Her

Christine Her is the daughter of Hmong refugee parents from Laos. She graduated from East High School in Des Moines, Iowa, and pursued her BA at Drake University, majoring in creative writing, philosophy, and political science. She is highly motivated to interrupt social and systemic injustices with hope and opportunity while helping others rise in their own power and lean into their purpose.

My dad was a teenage soldier.

Between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, his responsibilities were to protect the thousands of Hmongs who sought refuge in the jungles of Laos to escape genocide. The Hmong were recruited and trained by the United States to fight against communism in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War.¹ My grandfather, Cher Kao Her, was a US army recruiter. When the war ended, Hmong people were persecuted and murdered. My grandfather, fearing for his life because of the role he played in the war, fled to the jungles with my dad.

My dad's uncle who made the journey to Thailand learned his son was left behind in the jungles with my dad. Because of this, my dad's uncle came back to Laos to find his son. Luckily, they were reunited, and my dad's uncle told my dad and grandfather to join them on the trip back to Thailand so they could start over again in America. Then something changed, and my dad's uncle left without saying a word. In the Hmong culture, family is everything. My grandfather was heartbroken and believed starting over again in America without family wasn't worth the dangerous journey. Even though he felt this way, he wanted more for his son. He encouraged my dad

to leave the jungles because he was too young to die. He needed to fall in love. Become a father. Grow old. Cher Kao wanted his son to live.

In the middle of the night while protecting the community with other young men, my dad kept thinking about his dad's words. He knew his dad was right. He wanted to live. My dad, at the age of sixteen, encouraged twenty other young men between the ages of fourteen and twenty to join him in finding a way to Thailand.

They all left without the opportunity to tell their families, "Goodbye. I love you. I will come back for you." The young men made promises to each other to return and take their families with them to Thailand after finding a safe passage. The journey wasn't easy, but they eventually made it to Thailand. Through word of mouth, my dad's mother, who had made it earlier to the camps, heard he was in jail. When she arrived in Thailand, she filed documents in his name in hopes that if he did make it, he would be able to start a new life in a new place away from the war. When he finally arrived, together, they made the long journey to their new home: Des Moines, Iowa.²

Some of my earliest childhood memories are my parents explicitly introducing me as their "fat daughter." Other memories involve my parents telling me to quiet down, not cause trouble, or to put my guitar away because I needed to study. It felt like I could do no right even though I was a straight-A student. When they vocalized their disappointment in my job choice after graduating, it hurt. After years of feeling like I wasn't enough and the relentless criticism by my parents, I started to believe I was the problem. Life wasn't going to get better, because I was never going to get better. I spent almost a year not talking to my parents. When I did, it was to be spiteful and cause harm. I couldn't regulate what I was feeling. I didn't have the words to explain what was going on because we didn't talk about it. Suicide. Mental health. Depression. Beyond the stigma and shame, I faced barriers with translation and access.

In February 2013, I called my older brother, who was living in Texas, and said, "I want to die." He listened. He asked, "What can I do? What do you need?" It was the first conversation I had where I felt like I could breathe again. That same month, my aunt passed away from cancer. My brother came to Iowa for the funeral. After we said our goodbyes to her, I said goodbye to Iowa. Two months after I moved, my great-aunt passed away. She was one of the few people who loved me for me. She's the reason why I love runny scrambled eggs over freshly cooked rice. She was the first person I ever made a meaningful promise to and the first person in my life whose promise I will never be able to keep.

After living in Texas for six months, I moved back to Iowa for a job. None of them worked out. Then in July 2016, I accepted a position with ArtForce Iowa to manage their arts program for refugee and immigrant youth, called the DSM Heroes program, now called the Heroes program.³

After a year, I was asked by the board to serve as executive director. Each leadership transition came with highs and lows. What was consistent was the trauma of starting over again with unstable financials, issues surrounding trust between staff and the board of directors, the trauma our youth faced in their schools and homes, the racial disparities leading our youth to be fed into the school-to-prison pipeline. As a team, we were struggling with our own trauma from the transitions at ArtForce Iowa. As humans, we were dealing with our own personal and historical traumas. Serving young people who face traumas and disclose them to us meant we were also struggling with secondary trauma.

At the end of 2017, as an organization we chose to pivot. We wanted to change the oppressive systems, knowing our youth didn't always feel safe or welcomed, and learned about the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACES).⁴ Those with significant trauma are more likely to have heart disease or diabetes, be depressed or suicidal, have substance addiction problems, and have financial problems. Recognizing that our youth artists were living through their adverse childhood experiences, we made it our priority to educate those who worked with young people. ArtForce Iowa is the only arts organization to provide trauma-informed care arts-based workshops utilizing the healing-centered engagement approach for young people in the state of Iowa.⁵ We are also the only arts organization doing this work in Iowa's juvenile detention center.

As I learned more about historical and intergenerational trauma along with ACES, I began to understand young Christine. I grew up believing my parents didn't love me, and it was the story I told myself until a few years ago. Doing trauma work meant facing my own trauma in the process of healing. It led me to reflect on my childhood with empathy for my parents, who experienced significant trauma as young people fleeing genocide. My parents were still healing too. I had the comfort of playing guitar, singing, and writing poetry and short stories, whereas my parents had the stress of learning a new language and supporting their families by being adult teenagers.

To me, art was liberating. It was a way to overcome the pain I felt internally without hurting myself physically. Art was a language I understood. Through my songs and stories, I could be authentically myself. Now as an adult on my healing journey, I'm learning my parents didn't have the same opportunity.

My dad never made it back to the jungles of Laos. None of the young men kept their promise to each other. Each was forced to “move on” and start over again without the ones left behind. My grandfather died alone with no family around him, in the jungles with no proper burial because he fought for a country that never fought for his liberation.

It’s taken my dad over forty years to share his complete story, holding onto survivor’s guilt and the shame of not going back to save his dad. In 2019, I sat down with him to talk. I never imagined I would have this experience with my dad where we could talk about hard things, cry together, and hold each other. He shared what sixteen-year-old Meng Her felt when deciding if he should leave his dad. He shared that he silently cried every night on the journey to Thailand. He shared that he had two sisters who died by suicide and how sad he was to be the only living son carrying his father’s name. He shared with me how a handful of the young men who fled the jungles with him died from strokes or heart attacks. My dad survived a heart attack in 2008. He ran every day, had a healthy diet, and still does to this day.

In 2021, ArtForce Iowa moved into Mainframe Studios, one of the nation’s largest nonprofit creative workspaces. We built a video production studio to continue collecting stories of community members, recording workshops for our youth to have our content on demand with the purpose of preserving and sharing our communities’ stories through curricula and various art mediums. Through every traumatic event, our youth artists have shown and taught us how to adapt, how to remain true to ourselves, and how to stay humble. Our youth artists continue to remind us how art changes us for the better and how art connects us when we feel alone and isolated. We’ve witnessed how it takes a community to build resiliency and how it requires community for our collective healing.

We each hold the power to make the change needed to have a more kind and equitable society by humanizing and empathizing our individual experiences that make up the collective. We cannot demand one without it impacting the other. We want justice and equity in schools, in the workplace, in the arts, in social services and in the doctor’s office, in politics and policies, in housing, in the disbursement of wealth. We want true liberation where everyone has the opportunity and access to thrive and embrace their purpose without systemic oppression. And that’s why we are coming for it all.

Notes

1. “The Split Horn: The Journey,” Public Broadcasting Service, accessed November 30, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/splithorn/story1.html>.

2. In July 1975, President Gerald Ford wrote to every governor asking them to help find new homes for the Southeast Asian refugees. Iowa Governor Robert D. Ray was the first governor to respond to his call. Clare McCarthy, “Resources for Refugees Change over Decades,” *Des Moines Register*, August 9, 2015, <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/2015/08/09/burmese-refugee-history-iowa/31388507/>.

3. ArtForce Iowa was conceived by a man convicted of attempted murder in a drive-by shooting in the summer of 1999 in Des Moines. After his release from jail, he met Yvette Hermann, and through their mentor-mentee relationship, he shared with her how he wanted to be the last Black kid to recognize he was an artist while serving time.

4. Adverse childhood experiences are traumatic events that can dramatically upset a child’s sense of safety and well-being. These events create a toxic level of stress for a child and can lead to lifelong problems with school, work, health, and mental health. For more information, see Iowa ACES 360, accessed August 20, 2021, <https://www.iowaaces360.org/>.

5. To learn more, see Shawn Ginwright, *Hope and Healing in Urban Education: How Urban Activists and Teachers Are Reclaiming Matters of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 2015).