Advocacy in Action: Mai-Eng Lee

In the early 1990s a single mother with three children under eight years of age, moved to Minneapolis from a Thailand refugee camp. The mother spoke no English, had no employment skills and relied on public assistance for housing, food and medical care for her and her children. These experiences motivated her children, including Mai-Eng Lee, to work hard in school and to strive for lives of financial independence and a commitment to community service.

“My mom is an independent and strong Hmong woman. No matter the struggles my family encountered along the way, she never let anything get in her way and has always supported me and my siblings. She always reminded my siblings and me by saying, ‘we may not have the education you do, but we will do everything we can for you’.” Of the now five children, three are college graduates, one is currently in college and the youngest is currently planning for college.

When Mai-Eng (the second oldest of the five children) reflects on the experience of living in public housing with her mom and the challenges they had to face with the community she says, “We knew we didn’t want that life for our mom, ourselves, or the next generations, but there were just somethings we couldn’t control.” Mai-Eng believes that many of the challenges they faced arose as a result of poverty, lack of affordable housing and/or job opportunities and very few activities for children. “As a refugee kid...I found myself being treated differently, but I never knew the community to be any different.” Mai-Eng chose to embrace those differences and channeled her experiences to focus on plans for her future career. The first step was graduating with a Masters in Social Work (at age 23!) with a focus on policy work. “When I came back [after college] I found that nothing had really changed and it needs to change. I wanted to come back and contribute to my community.”

It isn’t surprising that Mai-Eng’s career in policy work is both personal and professional. Growing up relying entirely on public assistance for all her family’s medical needs, she became a firm believer in quality healthcare with access to everyone. After graduate school her first job was with a local nonprofit as a MNsure navigator in assisting households to find affordable healthcare coverage and care. “One thing I’ve learned is that our healthcare is complicated and challenging and really hard for people to navigate...We are trying to set up a healthcare system that is super-easy but instead it’s super-complex.” Mai-Eng now works as a Community Health Worker for Hennepin County where her focus is on advocating for racial and health equity among young children and families. “We know there are structural racism and health inequities so we are striving to eliminate the barriers that people face when accessing preventative care such as early childhood screening. I envision our community to be inclusive and available [to our clients] so they feel they are part of the process. I want to make sure everyone has access to the opportunities and resources they need.”

In 2016, her advocacy work took a new turn; her brother, Fue Lee, decided to run for a seat in the Minnesota House of Representatives. “It says so much about the life that we lived and where we’re living that influenced my brother to run for public office. These issues and the struggles, the challenges and the sacrifices are what motivated him to...”
Thank you to our members, sponsors, funders, partners, friends and families for a wonderful and successful year.

Happy holidays!

~Staci, Jenn, Glennis, Kevin, Sheng and Kris

2016 Year in Review

2016 Annual Meeting Recap

Thank you to all our members, partners, homeowners and buyers who came out on October 17 for our Annual Meeting. For those unable to attend, below is a brief recap of the evening:

CLCIT Award Winners
• Homeowner Award – Darian Ziegler for her advocacy work on behalf of the organization to highlight the importance of CLCIT homeownership with the City of Minneapolis and the Minnesota State Capitol;
• Partner Award – Hennepin County STS for their continued work in rehabilitating tax-forfeit homes into new CLCIT homeownership opportunities (four properties to-date with another 3 planned for 2017) and their continued support of the organization’s mission;
• Organizational Commitment Award – Lynn Ogren for her valued volunteer activities including her participation in the conversations leading up to the NHSM-CLCIT merger, and for continuing her service as a member of the CLCIT Board of Directors.

Board member elections were held and re-elected board members Matt Lasley and David Higgins. The CLCIT would like to welcome our new board members:

Mai-Eng Lee is a CLCIT homeowner and first generation Hmong American from North Minneapolis. Mai-Eng works as a social worker at Hennepin County to promote individual and community capacity through a range of activities such as outreach, community education, program development and advocacy and is passionate about promoting community empowerment and social justice in marginalized communities. Mai-Eng also dedicates her time to ensure every child in the community receives early childhood screening, educational resources, and opportunities they need to succeed.

Christina Jennings is the Executive Director of Shared Capital Cooperative, a national CDFI loan fund (formerly Northcountry Cooperator Development Fund) specializing in financing cooperatively owned businesses and housing.

Mai-Eng says she was Fue’s everything; door-knocker, cook, treasurer, lit-drop, and money collector. She was a part of “…a collective effort to turn our people who don’t traditionally vote or those often overlooked by political campaigns.” Their advocacy work included educating their community about how to hold a caucus, how to become delegates and how to go to the convention to be able to vote. Mai-Eng’s hope is that people will be more involved and more inclusive in the political process and that new people will want to go to the convention every year.

Now that the campaign is over, Mai-Eng says she wants to continue to focus on health equity and use her knowledge and experience to work towards making equitable healthcare policies. “Our demographics are changing and I am on the front-line with the families from ethnic minorities and new refugee communities. I have lived through the challenges as a newcomer myself and it is my hope to be a voice in closing the existing gaps in our system.”

“My entire life story tells a narrative that is oftentimes left out from mainstream media. Even with nothing, from the beginning, our family never lost hope to rebuild a new life filled with prosperity and rich cultural diversity. My family has made significant progress within our own personal lives and in the community. Life’s challenges and despair strengthened my family’s resiliency. I don’t live my life by default – something I think everyone wants but don’t always get.”

Last Chance for 2016 Tax Donation!

December 31 is your last chance to donate for the 2016 tax year. All donations made to the CLCIT are fully tax deductible and go towards creating community ownership that preserves affordability and inclusivity.