

# REALITIES

TWELFTH ISSUE



A Cross-Cultural Publication from  
North Hennepin Community College

# Realities

A North Hennepin Community College Publication  
of Student Writing for Sharing of Cross-Cultural Experiences

Twelfth Issue, Academic Year 2019 – 2020

North Hennepin Community College  
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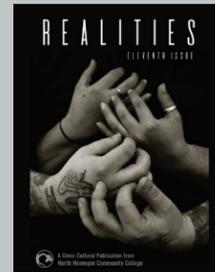
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Founders

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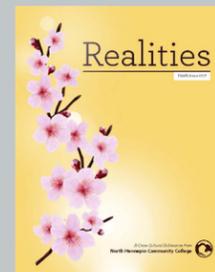
Realities is dedicated to all people who have had the  
courage to cross over their boundaries, thereby enriching  
their lives by seeing how other lives are lived.



Eleventh Issue 2019



Tenth Issue 2018



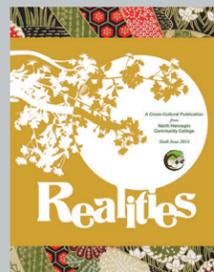
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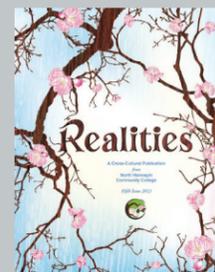
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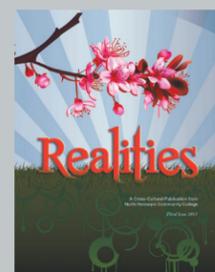
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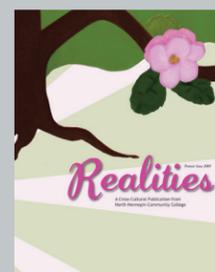
Fourth Issue 2012



Third Issue 2011



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All the students who submitted writings  
All others who promoted the mission of this publication

# I N T R O D U C T I O N

Every year, we're granted the opportunity—the privilege—to read submissions from the students at North Hennepin Community College in our mission to assemble and create what, eventually, becomes Realities, although it's a little silly to think that we, the editors, are creating reality—it's already there, in the stories our writers grant us. And every year, we're both enlightened and heartbroken by the work we get to share with you, our readers—this year is no different. In these eight pieces of writing, we see a breadth of human experience, coming to us in different forms, from poetry to personal essays to interviews crafted into story to research and analysis. These are all nonfiction, which implies both accuracy (often to the best that memory serves) and truth—and there is unimaginable truth in these works as the writers explore themes of family and cultural divide, hope and survival, loneliness, trust and betrayal, education and sacrifice. In "Lost in Translation," Beatrice Ogeh writes, "We communicate with each other / in a clumsy...tongue," and though our tongues may be clumsy, they still speak—and, now, more than ever, it's important to listen.

Sincerely,  
Brian Baumgart and Karen Carr

## KARINA

By Artem Kovrikov

The light of the pale moon seeps through the windows making frost on the glass visible. I can clearly see bright stars shining through the frosty air from inside of my office. Old folk music quietly comes from the radio followed by weather forecast: "This night is going to be the snowiest night of the entire winter in Karaganda. Expect the snowstorm to continue overnight with temperatures ranging around minus 10 degrees Celsius..."

I am an anesthesiologist and an emergency medicine doctor (it is "two-in-one" profession in my country) of cardiac surgery hospital in Karaganda, Kazakhstan. I am sitting on the couch almost falling asleep, but my mind fills with thoughts about my "special" little patient. It's 2:04 am on the clock... "6 hours left until the end of the shift." I'm privileged to be able to unwind in my doctor's office, far away from noisy ventilator machines and beeping monitors. But, this night I cannot afford to sit here for so long. My thoughts focused on a little 4-year-old patient Karina, who was brought to ICU after heart surgery. I have been giving her anesthesia during surgery that day, and the surgery went very bad with brain complications. A team of international surgeons from Poland, who were sharing their experience in our hospital, conducted the surgery. Right after the operation she was transported to the ICU unit where my shift is supposed to be tonight.

My department chief told me, "That is going to be a nightmarish shift, so you have to rest a little before you start."

"Well, it's not a big deal. I am already used to it, for every shift there is something special," I said.

She is in a deep coma, breathing with support of a ventilator machine. Her pale exhausted body is studded with catheters, lines, and cords entwined with her long brown hairs. The Barbie doll, her lovely toy from home, is next to her on a pillow and reminds me of Karina with her expressionless face and tangled hair. Her bedside monitor is alarming off the reel, showing threatening digits of blood pressure and oxygen levels. Her lab results were not a

characteristic of a living person either, so I immediately started the treatment administering essential medications first. Besides her, I had 5 other little patients, but they were stable and did not cause any concerns.

"Tomorrow morning expect minus 6-8 degrees Celsius with snow continuing till late afternoon. We are wishing you a good night, and stay safe on the roads..." still boringly came from the radio.

God, please, help this kid to stay alive and return to her mother soon, please let my future kids be healthy, flashed in my mind. Seeing sick kids in the ICU always triggered my fear of having my own kid having a serious pathology. It is just impossible to convey in words how newborn babies can suffer from a congenital cardiac pathology. Sometimes surgery was just to prolong their life for one or two months, knowing that they wouldn't survive even after the surgery. That time I didn't know that my wife was already pregnant with our first kid and that we were expecting a girl.

Suddenly, my prayers are interrupted by the nurse knocking on the ajar door and saying, "Excuse me. Karina's mother wants to talk to you."

"Ok, please let her in,"- I say. The girl's mother quietly and shyly enters my office and sits on a chair opposite me.

"How is she?" whispers from her trembling lips.

"Well, she is in serious condition now, but we will..."

"Will she live?" she interrupts.

"I don't know, but we will certainly do all we can and cannot to help her," I answer. A drop of tears silently roll down her cheeks.

"Ok, I understand." She gets up heading for the door, and then she turns around halfway, adding, "Can she at least stand this night?"

I couldn't sleep a wink that night and can't remember how many times I was changing her treatment plan in order to stabilize her condition at least a little. Luckily, by the end of the shift, in the morning, my little patient's blood pressure, EKG, and lab results were a little bit stabilized and looked promising.

It is 7th day since the girl was in ICU. The surgeon's team told her mother that it is probably unlikely that she will regain consciousness. Her vital signs are stabilized but she is still in deep coma on a ventilator support. Recent brain activity records show that she is in vegetative state; she can open her eyes, feel pain, and have basic reflexes but nothing more. She cannot think, enjoy company or show emotions. It is painful to see she cannot recognize her mother, who is bent over by her bed, gently touching her arms, and asking God for help. The young girl's chances of a normal life diminish with every single day, and the more she is in a coma, the less chances she has. Usually, it is unlikely a patient will recover from a vegetative state after being in it for one month.

It is two months later, and I'm on my night shift again. A week ago, in the morning meeting, we discussed the possibility of withdrawing treatment and nutritional support, and according to the law, we have to provide her mother with a special form of whether she wants to proceed with treatment or not. In other words, we had to give her the form that states – give up or keep fighting. One day I am sitting in the ICU room printing her chart when I notice she starts moving her fingers. I am shocked and excited at the same time. I call my nurse, and she confirms that it isn't just my imagination. I immediately call the chief surgeon to share this great news.

This day is a pivotal moment in my little patient's story. In the next two weeks, she is trying to turn her head and is consciously moving her lips as if trying to say something. It seems that consciousness gradually, day by day, is returning to her. I see how she is fighting for life every day, every minute. Soon, I start noticing her emotions. Although she isn't able to speak because of the tracheostomy, I see silent tears appearing in her eyes, especially when her mother is around her. These are tears of happiness for all of us because it means only one thing – she has regained consciousness.

Karina is discharged from our hospital after 5 months. She is overjoyed to be going back home, as was her mother and our entire department. We became really used to her presence. She was not just our regular little patient; she became a symbol of hope for all of us. When Karina leaves, she is the same kid as before, happy, smiley, and holding her lovely Barbie in her hand while sitting in her wheelchair. She is still weak and in need of prolonged rehabilitation therapy, but it's just a matter of time. She survived, and that's the main point.

This is one of the most impressive moments of my work. This is why I love medicine. Even if the hope is slipping away quickly, as long as you are breathing, you still have a chance. We

should never give up our hope, and fight till the end. We should fight nonstop, for the life, for love, for dreams, for a warm place under the sun.

This case from my practice made me think a lot about hope, and it has changed me. I began to value life more, knowing how thin the line could be between the life and death. Yes, I knew it before, but I look at it a bit differently, not as I used to. With my work, I often ignored these stupid treatment guidelines regarding how long you have to do a CPR. "You have to think about ending CPR after 20 minutes if no signs of EKG activity are present, pupils are dilated, nonreactive.... blah blah blah" is usually stated in guidelines. No, no way! I had a patient who returned to life after 38 minutes of being in cardiac arrest! I don't give without a fight. Period.

"You are listening 101.2 FM radio, thanks for being with us tonight! Tomorrow is going to be a nice warm and sunny weather highs up to 30, no precipitation expected, enjoy plenty of sunshine and don't forget to use your sunscreen..." I am sitting in my office on my night shift printing patients' charts. A hot cup of coffee is waiting in the wings; its invigorating aroma fills the entire office and helps me to stay awake throughout the entire night. A nice picture of my beloved wife and my 2-year-old daughter takes a place of pride on my desk. Luckily, my daughter is a healthy and happy kid, and thank God for that! Suddenly, the peace is interrupted by the sound of a Facebook message. I open it up and it is about Karina. Her mother sent me a message along with her picture of Karina playing as a usual kid would, without a wheelchair, and smiling. She has matured a little since I last saw her 2 years ago. The message says, "Thank you for not giving up and giving her a new life."

*Artem Kovrikov is a 36-year-old immigrant from Kazakhstan, a husband and a father of two beloved kids. Artem moved to the U.S. 5 years ago with his wife and a daughter, hoping to realize himself in the medical field here in the U.S. All his previous life in Kazakhstan was dedicated to medicine – anesthesiologist, emergency medicine doctor, paramedic. He worked in cardiac surgery hospital dealing with life-threatening conditions mostly, with patients ranging in age from newborns to seniors. He saved many lives during his job and is proud of this. In 2014 his wife (also a doctor) and he decided to accept a challenge (they won Green card) and moved to the U.S. with their then 6 month old daughter. Artem speaks Russian, Kazakh, and has learned English. 2019-2020 is his first year at NHCC and is pursuing an MLT major, although his long-term goals are to get Bachelor's in MLT or even specialize in pathology.*

## LOST IN TRANSLATION

By Beatrice Ogeh

My parents speak a language I don't understand  
and every day we drift further apart.

They fed me

*garri with egusi soup*

nearly every dinner of my childhood

and I'm still not Ibgo enough

for them to make sense to me.

I speak a language my parents don't understand.

It contains phrases like "*fall in love*" and "*pursue your passions*"

and other frivolous American phenomena

I've been fooled into wanting;

my parents are not so gullible.

We communicate with each other

in a clumsy, fractured pidgin tongue

that allows us to skim only the top of a depth

we have accepted will never be explored.

*Beatrice Ogeh likes to write sometimes, and sometimes that writing is surprisingly good. Ogeh's writing is forthcoming in Under Construction, and she read her original work "Joyriding" as part of NHCC's 2019 Winter Choir Concert.*

## THE PARK

By Carissa Yang

There's a park that's near my house. If you walked along the black trail on the left, you'd find yourself there in five minutes at the most. As you stepped off the trail and through the grass after passing the house across the street—we called that route the shortcut—you'd be able to hear other families in the neighborhood laughing. I mostly enjoyed looking at the dogs through the wire fences; they barricaded every house's backyard. After returning onto the trail and walking straight, you'd get to the park. Once you did, there'd be a handful of trees west of you, standing there as if protecting the playground. On the farther side of the playground was a soccer field. The net on the goal post, however, was partially torn off.

Until I turned 13 years old, I would go to the park regularly with my younger brother. At one point in our lives, we went every week. I enjoyed swinging the most. I liked to go super high to the point where I could feel my body being lifted off of the seat. Along with swinging, I mainly sat on the singular metal slide that stood across the playground. There were three bigger slides next to it, and they were connected by a structure that you could rock climb up.

At age 14, I went there one day with my brother again. We had brought along our cousins. The three girls around my age also have younger brothers, and they were all born around the same year. Us girls were born a year apart except for the youngest who's two years younger than me. We've always been very close.

It was just another day for our family. The boys were sticking together on the grass and playing "Ships Across the Ocean" with one of the older guys. The rest of us watched over the little kids, attempting to win over their affection. However, it was always pointless to try since the children wouldn't recognize us the next time we met. Nonetheless, we enjoyed trying anyways.

The sky was becoming orange, and I remember the other girls saying we should take pictures because the sunset always gives off great lighting that makes you glow. I didn't think I looked good, though, since the wind had ruffled my hair into a mess. It's likely that I took one with them and stopped there.

When they were done taking pictures, us four along with another older cousin began to talk while standing on the wooden chips that lie on the bottom of the playground. This was until a little kid ran up to us, smiling. He had short brown hair with eyes of the same color. His skin was light, and his height reached around where a doorknob would be. I beamed upon seeing him, thinking that maybe he wanted to hang out with us.

I leaned down closer and spoke.

"Hi!" I exclaimed.

However, my predictions were wrong. No later than a second after I greeted him did I feel my glasses get whipped off of my face, and before I knew it the child decided to run away with a big grin. My cousins were frozen in place at first, astonished, but soon after that they helped me look for my glasses. They had landed on the ground without any damage. I would've helped them search, but I couldn't. As my eyes grew hot, I knew it; if I inched forward even a bit, I might've just started sobbing.

I've always been sensitive to a fault, and to shake me up doesn't take much effort. Even the simple raising of a voice — unless I'm equally irritated — can make me tear up. In that situation with the kid, I felt betrayed. I can still feel the shock given to me when that boy ripped off my glasses after I was happy to see him. It was almost as if watching your favorite character in a movie die when the possibility of it had never occurred to you. I thought he'd be harmless. I believed that he was just another kid that got over-excited and wanted to talk to everyone around him. So, though it may be a bit foolish, I felt hurt when that wasn't the case.

Earlier in that same year, a close friend of mine, Taylor, told me something that made the moment worse. We were in the orchestra room during our fourth hour of the day. Orchestra was my favorite class because it was when I got to see all of my friends in one period. The students were talking, waiting for the bell to ring. I approached Taylor, someone I walked to multiple classes with and spoke to until I got picked up at the end of the day. With his glasses off, he was talking to another friend of mine named Kelly.

"You look different. Kind of like a different person," she commented. I was surprised she thought so because to me, Taylor looked the same with and without his glasses. Whenever he forgot to bring them to school, it took me a long time to notice.

"Really? Carissa, you take off *your* glasses," Taylor said. Since it was never a big deal for me until then, I did.

"You look so weird!" Taylor nearly shouted. He was known for being considerate when it came to others, so the fact that he instinctively commented on how strange I looked hit hard. It was like he'd just witnessed an alien. I laughed it off, but inside I felt disturbed. Before that, nobody had ever brought up how abnormal I appeared due to such a small difference.

Ever since then, I haven't been able to take them off in front of people unless necessary. Whenever I remove and clean my glasses, I look down and away from others. So to know that this kid just took my glasses, threw them, and that now everyone was seeing me without them made my throat burn. Piles of endless thoughts and worries swirled around my mind as I stood while facing the ground.

My older cousin went to go find the kid with a frown and furrowed eyebrows. Once I got my spectacles back, I spotted her talking to the child and his mom. We walked towards them, and as we did I could feel my hands start to go cold. I was afraid because tears still weighed down my eyes as they threatened to fall, and I had a feeling that they'd prevail. They did.

When we reached my older cousin, the kid, and his mom, his mom apologized to me. I looked down at my shoes the entire time, knowing what'd happen if I faced her.

"Tell her you're sorry," she firmly told her son. She slightly pushed her hand against his back so that he stepped closer to me.

"I'm sorry," he said, though it was clearly with reluctance. His voice was quiet and he didn't make any effort to look up at me just as I didn't for him.

"It's okay."

That's what I *tried* to say. However, I couldn't even let out two syllables before my voice broke and my face crinkled as a wave of droplets finally slid down my face. My heart ached. My older cousin wrapped her arms around me, and even though I don't think I ever looked at the mom, I could tell she felt regretful for her son's misbehavior. Then again, maybe she thought it was ridiculous that someone so much older than her kid would cry over what he'd done. I'll never be able to know how she felt in that moment, but I'd like to believe that she felt bad because that's what I sensed from her.

*Carissa Yang is a Hmong PSEO student at North Hennepin Community College. She's 16 years old and loves writing, music, art, and math. Carissa was born with a slight hearing loss in both ears, but it doesn't really affect her daily life. She wore hearing aids until eighth grade.*

After that, my family and I left the park and went back home with a solemn air. I have rarely been there since then.

Though we had only just encountered each other, I trusted that boy in a way. I trusted him because he was a kid and because I believed he had good intentions. Though it was the briefest trust in the world, it was enough to hurt me when it was let down. At times I think of myself as someone who's doubtful, and yet more often than not I find myself naturally having no guards up against anyone. There have been a good amount of moments in my life where someone has approached me and I welcomed them as they did so. This one was the only time in which I cried, but all of them end the same; it always ends with me asking myself one question:

Why did I fall for something like that *again*?

Sometimes I don't tell anyone about those moments as I feel or know that I'll be derided. I'll be blamed for trusting others effortlessly. Each time I'm deceived, it becomes increasingly difficult to have faith in everyone else. Lending my trust to people is not a weakness, though. I know it. To be able to believe in someone is such a happy thing. More than a weakness, it's a risk to take in a world that consists of many inauthentic people. Perhaps it's even brave to do so despite all of the wrongdoings one witnesses in a lifetime. I'd like to trust in that.

## MAKING SACRIFICES

By Emmanuel Ezendiokwere

Looking at the hundreds of students waiting outside the really huge gate that enclosed about four different three-story buildings, just like a beat studio, my heart started making beats. If someone had screamed my name at that moment, I probably would have ended up in the hospital with my heart out of my body as a result of shock.

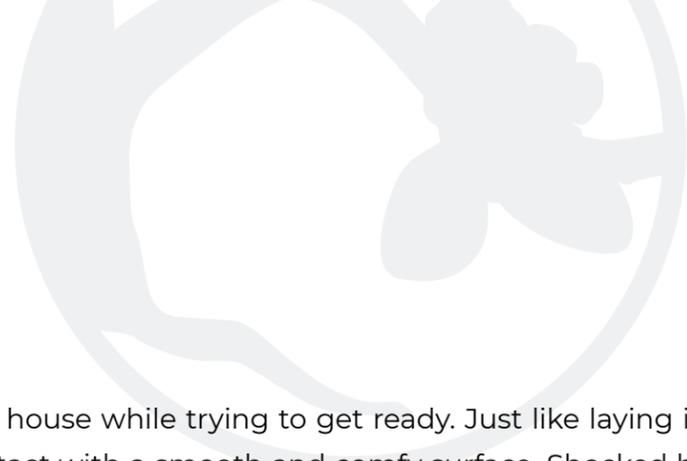
Before graduation, every high school student is required to take an exam commonly referred to as final High school exam WASSCE; it is a review made by the West African Examination Council for all 12th graders. For this exam, all students are required to submit a total of nine different subjects of their choice for which they would have to take an exam on each. Another vital examination students take to get into colleges was JAMB, for the Federal University of Technology Owerri, the University I decided to go to considering I was an engineering major.

The entrance exam didn't go so well; I was 4 points away from their point of cutoff. Considering it used to be written with the question paper and Scantron, but recently changed to a computer-based exam, and 40% percent of the low score on the exam was as a result of computer malfunction, which I would consider myself part. On the day of the exam, there was first a massive line of people waiting to get into the exam, which took about 20 extra minutes of the exam time to get everyone to where they were meant to be. Unfortunately for me, I was assigned to one of the computers with the screen of a cherry lemonade. As if that wasn't enough, the mouse (controller) decided to take a 1 minute break after every 5 minutes. Despite all this torment, the monitor screen which I could barely see tipped off about an hour into the exam. Sitting down, confused, mad, and scared, knowing that my getting into college was dependent on the review, I cried for help. One of the IT people came to me then I explained my misfortune to him. With his large, strong hands, he slapped the computer into order (which is the first thing most Nigerians would do to any faulty electronics) and just like magic, it came back to life. The exam for me was a combination of math, English, physics, and chemistry. I had to hurry my way through the exam, and, considering the stops I had, I wasn't able to finish before time.

A week later, I got my result, which was more of a confirmation that I would be staying home an extra year. In a couple of months, I got my WASSCE result, the type my family would call "result worth seeing." I had an A and 8 B's, one of the best results in my school. At this point, I wasn't as happy as I ought to since I still wasn't going to college that year. My mom, who cared less about that, with over-excitement, called my uncle, who lived in the United States to tell him about my result. (This exam happens to be a huge deal in many families, for this is how most parents get compensated for the money they have laid down for their child's education. Anyone who fails the exam is considered a disgrace and a waste; in most cases, their parents don't bother having them try the next year again; instead, they put them into trading that is working as a salesperson for prominent businesspeople. Other times, they are giving a plot of land to start farming and selling produce from the farm). My uncle was so surprised and proud of me he sent me \$100 as a gift and asked me to go get an international passport and get ready, saying, "You just earned yourself a ticket to the US." Still confused as at what was going on, for everything was happening so fast and I needed time to process it slowly. I ran to my room and fell face down on my bed with two things in my mind: "OMG! I hope I didn't just destroy my bad frame" and "Is this happening? Am I going to study abroad? How is this even possible?" And in no time, just like a Walmart plastic bag filled with water that has just been pierced with a pin, I started shedding what we call "tears of joy." I was supposed to be spending an extra year, and I never imagined continuing my education abroad; all these were strange. I said to myself, "You really don't know what life has in store for you, just keeping doing the good things you do, you surely would be rewarded one day."

In no time, my passport was ready. I took the TOEFL exam, which happened to be just English, my weakness; surprisingly, I passed it. A few weeks later, my uncle called to tell me that I've been accepted at NHCC. The joy just kept coming, one good news after the other. I applied for an American visa, and I was given an appointment date and time; in no time, my appointment was here! Not knowing what to expect, I wore a well-ironed peach long sleeve shirt and plain black pants with black shoes. All I remember my uncle saying was "Answer whatever questions you're asked honestly, and if you don't understand any of the questions being asked, tell your interviewer you don't understand; don't try to make stuff you know nothing about up."

On the day of my interview, a Monday morning, waking up, which happened to be a test with the same question I keep failing over and over again, my little sister had to pull me on my right leg till I smacked my face on the hard concrete floor. (Yes! Don't worry about it. That was the usual way my family woke me if there is a special occasion that I needed to get ready early for.



Still being sleepy and lazy walking about the house while trying to get ready. Just like laying in a waterbed, my foot made really satisfying contact with a smooth and comfy surface. Shocked by a loud cry, my eyes were wide open in search for what was going on; when I realized I had my foot on my 120lb Nigerian Shepherd dog, Ekuke, who was at this time ready to square up with me. I ran for my dear legs knowing that that was his favorite place for taking people down. But, being the sweet understanding dog he is, he forgave me. In no time I was ready to leave the house, I and my dad, who was at the time ready to leave headed out at 5:00 AM for my appointment that happened to be at 10:30 AM. Getting to the place of my interview (American embassy) with a well-combed hair and my “banking dress code,” I handed my documents to my interviewer, a really good looking white guy (considering all white people are like a gem to me; he wasn’t any different), he had his hair jelled to the right and had a long blue sleeves just like me, who was right in front of me. He asked me questions that I thought were obvious since it was in the document I handed to him, then I realized what was going on. Just as I was told, I was honest with all the answer I gave.

While heading out of the place of interview, walking was like pulling a dog to the vet. I could barely move my legs. At the gate, my eye caught my dad’s who took me for the interview; he asked me, “How far?” (It’s interesting because “How far” could mean anything like what’s going on? How have you been? And so many more.) I thought of pulling a quick prank on him, but my excitement couldn’t handle it. I gave him a big smile that soon turned into laughter, then he started singing and praising God and called my mom immediately. When I got home, my mom already prepared my favorite dish (Oha soup and Akpu). The dinner was a memorable one; my siblings and parents kept teasing me, calling me exciting names like “Americana” and “Trump.”

Days turned into weeks, weeks turned into months. My time of departure was getting closer and closer. Soon my joy and excitement to leave changed to sadness. As much as I wanted to leave, I still wanted to stay. But I kept telling myself, “To be successful, you’ve got to make sacrifices,” and at that point, leaving home was my sacrifice. I really hope it pays at the end of the day.



*Emmanuel Ezendiokwere and their parents originated from Anambra State in Nigeria; Emmanuel speaks Igbo and English. Emmanuel has been at NHCC for two years now, and spring of 2020 is their last semester. Emmanuel is currently majoring in Pre-Engineering at North Hennepin Community College and planning on transferring to St Cloud State University to pursue a degree in Manufacturing Engineering and Mathematics. Aside from classes, Emmanuel tutors at the tutoring center, is a Bio Foundation Mentor, and an Upward Bound tutor for science. Emmanuel also the president of the Phi Theta Kappa Chapter here at NHCC. Interests include hanging out with friends and family, learning about engineering, watching movies, cooking, and trying out new food. Emmanuel loves every flavor of ice-cream as long as it doesn't have mint. Writing and sprinting are their devices for shaking off stress and worries.*

## CULTURAL CLASHES BETWEEN ELDERS & YOUTH IN THE SOMALI DIASPORA

By Abdalla Hassan

I would like to present to you the cultural conflicts and issues that arise from linguistic, religious, and behavioral differences between children of the Somali Diaspora and their elders including their mothers, fathers, grandparents, and even uncles. This is the cliché issue of modernism versus traditionalism.

The children of the Somali Diaspora have grown up in a country and culture that is alien to their parents. They have accustomed to the languages, behaviors, and sometimes religions of their new countries. The parents are upset to see their children morph into something foreign and unfamiliar, and the children are only fueling their need to fit in with their surroundings and to modernize. Who is to blame? And what are the roots of this problem?

We as humans were created as social beings. We love connecting, arguing, laughing, crying, and relating with our fellow man. It is said that a human cannot survive without human contact for more than a few days to weeks. The point is, we humans need each other. But what is it that makes these strong bonds so strong, and why are they possible in the first place?

We connect and relate to one another because we are similar! We have been through the same societal issues, we speak the same languages, we wear the same clothing, we eat the same foods, and we listen to the same music or poetry. We converse, discuss, debate, and gossip in our language while eating similar food and listening to music or poetry we both understand while wearing similar clothes.

When we humans differ on these fundamental aspects of our daily lives, we miss out on the opportunity to understand and connect with one another. What arises from a mother and her son not speaking the same language? What happens when a son wears clothing that his father finds insulting to their culture? What will come of a grandchild who may never hear the stories and wisdom of his grandparents due to them speaking different languages? These are the cultural issues that have plagued the Somali Diaspora, and I would like to further present to you examples and solutions to these issues.

Somali parents face multiple issues with their children as they grow older. They may have to deal with adjusting to cultural differences, dealing with behavioral issues, providing children with quality general and religious educations, and so on. In London, my cousins complained of the lack of positive mentoring and role models within the Somali community. As one of my cousins who grew up without a father put it: "There is a shortage of emotional support and encouragement in the community." In order to protect young Somalis from becoming the victim of violence or radicalization, community leaders should help to foster links with their traditional culture. This could include meetings with moderate sheikhs with religious legitimacy and the development of specific services for the community. Somali communities should also demonstrate leadership and confront all kinds of violence.

Minnesota is home to the largest Somali population in the United States. According to the 2013 American Community Survey, over 40,000 Somalis live in the state [estimated at 69,000 in 2019]. These issues are not just present in Europe and the UK, but they are present right outside our doors, here in Minneapolis. Since December 2007, eight Somali men, all 30 and under, have been killed in the Twin Cities. These murders are ironic because our community came here to escape the bloodshed and clan warfare of its home country, just to be greeted by gang violence and misunderstanding. The shootings have cooled off in recent months, but police say they've picked up on a surprising new trend: Somali gangs are beginning to divide themselves across the same clan lines that destroyed their homeland.

Somali gangs are more fluid than traditional African American gangs, which are known for adopting specific rules and codes. Somali gang members may change alliances and join different gangs. One of the earliest Somali gangs, the Somali Hot Boyz, started as a singing group, then started to commit small crimes. There were rumors in the community about them, so they started to commit more crimes to protect their reputation. Shukri Adan has conducted an amazing report on Somali Youth Issue released in 2006. The article is well known in the Somali Community, and it is considered one of the most accurate descriptions of the Somali community's problems. While doing her research, Adan remembers seeing groups of Somali kids idly hanging out in Cedar-Riverside.

"You could see that they had nothing to do, and there was all this tension that something was going to happen. You just didn't know when," said Adan. Many of those kids quit school and formed cliques because they wanted to belong to something, Adan said. "They didn't have jobs. But they took care of one another. The cliques eventually evolved into gangs, with their own initiation rites. They carried guns and robbed Somali-owned businesses. What really got me concerned was that they had attachments to each other above anyone else," said Adan. She said some gang members have since cleaned themselves up and spend their days at local mosques.

Most of the Somalis living in the western world are under the age of 24 and this fact has a major impact on current challenges for youth, like increasing dropouts, misunderstandings between parents and youth (generation gap), violence, and lack of hope. This is the reality of many of the Somali Youth living in western countries. Gang activity and violence are the norm.

However, this is not the most common cultural issue between the youth and their elders; it is the westernization of the youth. In other words, many of the Somali youth are leaving the Somali culture and adopting western clothing, music, and attitudes. This is where most of the misunderstanding begins. This difference in culture, dress, and language is paired with the violence and gang activity that Somali Youth mixing with, causing that cultural clash.

There is often a generation gap between younger immigrants and older generations once they settle in the U.S. Young people adapt to American culture more easily, while older immigrants try to hold onto their traditional culture. Young people generally speak English more quickly and fluently, while elders often struggle to learn a new language. Somali young people are surrounded by other American students at school and are quick to pick up on how Americans, talk, act, and think. Elders might work outside the home, but are usually more isolated and tend to stick to their traditional ways.

Sometimes parents are dismayed when their own children start to ignore Somali beliefs and culture, and instead behave in ways that would be unacceptable in Somalia. Young people are more likely to see themselves as Americans, while elders are generally more hopeful that they will be able to return to Somalia someday. How can this be solved? What must be done to heal these wounds?

*Abdalla Hassan is the second oldest of six children: three girls and three boys. Abdalla and their parents are from Somalia, located in the Horn of Africa. Abdalla has been there on a summer vacation once in 2013 and spent 3 months experiencing life as Abdalla's parents had in their youth. Abdalla is fluent in Somali and English. Abdalla is a PSEO student, and Fall 2019 was their first semester at NHCC and in college. Abdalla's favorite subject is English because it lets them express their views on topics. Abdalla like cookies, donuts, reading books, playing soccer, and spending time with family.*

## PORTRAIT OF MY FATHER

By PaDa Vang

*“Growing up in Laos for most Hmong people was devastating. Many families lived in a hut with dirt floors and with no running water. Children were with their parents from morning until sun down in the field, farming or in the forest harvesting edible vegetables. Meat came scarcely, but when there was even just a piece of chicken breast, the whole entire family shared it. I was one of the very few children who did not live that life. I was fortunate to get an education and became who I am today.”*

- Pao Vang

My father, Pao Vang, was born into a Military family, on March 6th, 1957, in Xieng Khouang, Laos. His life was very different from what I imagined. I'm shocked at almost every turn of his story. As I picked up a photo of my father dressed in his Bruce Lee, Kung Fu clothes, and his arms crossed like he was Mr. Hot Stuff, I asked if he was the most wanted bachelor. He chuckled and asked, "What do you think?" I've never seen this side of him as he told his story... so funny, sarcastic, and he definitely thinks he's Mr. Hot Stuff. On top of being the handsome man he was, his academics are what he believes shaped him into the man who he is today.

Hmong people lived in small villages outside the cities in the rural areas of Laos. Education is something every Hmong child dreamed to have, but like my mother's family, most families couldn't afford to send their children to the cities to board and receive an education. Their everyday life is to help the family survive. Girls were groomed to learn how to be the perfect wife and farm with the mothers. Boys were raised to hunt for meat to feed the family and even harvest for edible greens in the forests. Vang's life was far from this. He lived a life many children of his time dreamed of having, especially with the Vietnam War and The Secret War happening so close to home.

The Americans started recruiting Hmong soldiers around 1960 to fight in The Secret War of Laos, which began in 1965. This war was related to the Vietnam War, and had been kept in secret for so many years; it only surfaced in the last 10 years. The purpose of the war was to have the American soldiers and their Hmong soldiers support the South Vietnamese to interdict the traffic against the Viet Cong (North Vietnamese) and the Pathet Lao (Laos Communist) along

the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which ran through Laos ("Secret"). This is where the Viet Cong stationed themselves to supply corridor and staging area for offensives into South Vietnam. There are still some politicians that will argue that this war never happened and evidences to such statements are now destroyed; however, there are video footages and articles supporting The Secret War. A brutal time in history where the Americans dropped bombs every eight minutes for ten years and, by 1975, Laos had been the most bombed country on earth ("Secret War"). With the aftermath of physical proof of many villages destroyed, Channapha Khamvongsa argued, "The American public needs to know what's happening here. That this is what their country, now my country, has done and left behind" (Diaz). I can say confidently that it did, as Vang's father, Chia Vang, who fought in the frontline along many of my great uncles. My grandpa's service to the United States' military came with many benefits including a ticket to freedom in America after the war ended, a salary, and my father's education.



PHOTO OF MY FATHER, PAO VANG  
Center. Taken in 1972, at 15 years old  
by unknown photographer.

At six years old, my father was sent away to the city of Samthong to start elementary school where he also board with his Uncle Dr. Chertzong Vang, a very well-respected figure in education. Txongpao Lee, executive director of Hmong Cultural Center in St. Paul, said, "Dr. Vang was one of the few Hmong of his generation to be able to achieve a high level of education... He was well known to many young Hmong men during his service as a teacher back in Laos" ("Hmong"). Dr. Vang and his wife also had a few male students living with them. My father felt the pressure to live up to his uncle's high standards and status. The competition with the other boys in the house brought the pressure on. *Failing* or even being *average* was not an option.

In 1965-1975, the Laos education system was funded by the French through their colonization (Zeck). Through agreements between Laos and France, students who graduated through their educational system, would go the France for college without any hassles. "Going the France for college is the dream," Vang said with lights in his eyes. As many students struggled to speak so many languages, Vang modestly prides in his ability to fluently speak his native tongue (Hmong), Laos' official language (Laotion), the school's elective language (English), and French as it was Laos'

teaching language. He was also very academically competitive and to ensure he'd pass his major exams to advance to the next school, he studied hard, didn't party, nor even drink on occasions. What motivated him the most to do his best is that the teachers would post everyone's grades publicly on the chalk board. My father couldn't even dream to face the hit on his pride if his grades were anything less than awesome. With a big smile followed by a small chuckle, Vang said, "You know how embarrassing that is?! That was motivation to be my best... I wasn't number one in class, but I was always in the top five. *Always!*"

Before my father was able to graduate from high school in 1975 and go on to college in France, The Secret War ended with the Americans defeated. Many Hmong soldiers and their families were left behind to die as the Pathet declared a Hmong Genocide. All Hmong people, whether involved in The Secret War or not, were to be killed. Even today, Hmong people are still running and hiding in the mountains, fighting for their lives ("The Secret"). Vang said those who were able to flee in 1975 to the refugee camp in Thailand either swam across the Mekong River where the Viet Cong shot down swimmers, or if they were lucky like him, they were air lifted out into safety.

Thailand refugee camp is where my father spent the next four years of his life with some of his cousins and Uncle Chertzong. It was May 14th, 1975, when life had changed dramatically. No more school. No clothes. No money. Nothing. Everything he knew and lived for had been bomb and destroyed back in Laos. With a positive attitude, my father said, "At least they fed us there and I had my own room... not everything was completely lost, I was interpreting for the Hmong people (not that I was getting paid, but it was better than kicking rocks waiting for news) and that's how I met your mom and married her in the camp... and we still had a chance to go to America..." Vang didn't want to talk about the poor living conditions. He explained that focusing on the bad stuff too much will only set the mind for the future and that he needed to stay positive.

The process to come to America wasn't hard, but rather long. Everyone needed to register themselves and their family, get screened, and take a photo. They are then put into category one, two, or three. According to Vang, category one was priority for the American military and personnel, category two are Hmong military families and category three was the rest of the people. These categories determined how soon you'll get to leave the camp and start a new life in America. "I believe your mom and I were in category two, but I really can't remember... Everyday we just wait," said my father.

March 30th, 1979. A day he and my mother had been nervously anticipating on coming. They were finally coming to the United States of America. Where it's the *Land of Freedom and Opportunities*. With so many thoughts running through his head in the almost twenty hours travel from Bangkok to Minneapolis, Minnesota, all he could think about was how much of an upgrade life was going to be... Yes, it was an upgrade, but a very difficult start. The English they spoke in America was different in the way he was taught in Laos. They barely had money, no home, nor clothes. Fortunately, there

were programs for low income housing where my parents' first home was in McDonough Homes. And through a temp agency, my mother found a job at a medical assembly company working full time as my father worked part time and headed to college. They were barely surviving, but this life was better than life in a refugee camp.

Colleges today require proof of high school diploma, G.E.D., or high school transcript before taking Accuplacer exams for college. But my father didn't have anything to prove his French education in Laos. "Everything was destroyed. There were no records of my education. I just went to the University of Minnesota and took some kind of exam and then started college in fall of 1979," said Vang. He expressed that college wasn't something he enjoyed. He didn't pick his major because of his passion. He just wanted to get his college degree and have a solid career to build his life.

College life wasn't easy. He and my mother had their first daughter in May of 1980, bringing on pressure and financial struggles. There were times he felt he may not make it through college. Constantly worried if they'll have enough money for rent, to buy food, for car payment, and most importantly enough to keep their daughter healthy. My mother was half the reason of his success. She'd sometimes work over-time to make ends meet. And through the hardship they shared, she encouraged him to focus on his studies. With a supporting wife behind him, he was determined to finish college. Four long years later, my father proudly walked across the stage on June of 1984, graduating with a bachelors in economics, where he later built the solid career he hoped for, working for Ramsey County Human Services. His academic accomplishments had rebuilt the life he lost in Laos, and even beyond that, it had built his grand dream home by a body of water.

Reflecting on my life as a child and a teenager, I was unappreciative of the grand opportunities I had. As a young adult I worked hard for everything I have with minimal support. I've lived, struggled, made mistakes, had positive experiences then suddenly fallen back to broken again and the cycle repeats. Realizing quickly life isn't easy if you're not educated beyond *street life*. Today, I've had the honor to hear my father's and my mother's stories in depth. It's been such an emotional journey and an eye opener in how I see life moving forward.

It's unreal that my parents came from such different backgrounds of rags and riches, but both lived through a brutal war, escaped the Hmong Genocide, lived in a refugee camp and all of it happened only one generation ago. I think about how different my life would be if my parents never made it to America. Could I compare my broken childhood and abuse to a life in a refugee camp? Would I even exist or would my parents' lives be taken from them before I take my first breath?

We, as Americans, take education and opportunities available to us for granted every day. Life is complicated, that's without a doubt. But, we're not in a third world country without food, where

farming from a young age is our only chance of survival, where our parents pimps us out for money, nor is our country being bombed every day, with our father fighting in the frontline for years so that we may be lucky enough to receive an education. It's a fact that maybe not all of us have the option to go to college nor even finish high school. However, we do have the choice to make something of ourselves. There are programs and resources that can help us grow into someone we never thought possible. We choose where we go for networking, and what type of people we surround ourselves with. Who we become is up to us. In my father's words, "Losing everything in the war and starting over in a different country with less than one hundred American dollars in my pocket, it did not stop me from making a life for myself. I wouldn't be who I am now, if I just let my education die in Laos."

*No biography submitted.*

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## REMEMBER THEN

By Rukayat Lukman

At No.11 Ndubusi street, the street of Sodom and Gomorrah. A very friendly and hustling city filled with wonderful people, very dramatic and yet industrious. The uniqueness of my city is that it never sleeps. Hawkers sell their wares all through the night; they take turns to share spaces and stalls. You can't get hungry if you live in my city regardless of the time and hour food is available to be bought.

A city where dogs will chase you for no reason, and if you don't run for your dear life you might be bitten by rabies-infested hungry and angry dogs. Hustlers are ready to pick your pockets once your wallets or phones are visible to their wandering eyes.

No wonder my dad was always overprotective of us. His baritone voice where he would yell that we shouldn't step out of our compound still echoes on my mind. If only he knew the sweetness we derived from watching all these activities.

Sometimes we would go against his rule and sneak out to play with other kids. I remember the "Touch your Toe" punishment he made us served when we got caught. When his focus was not on us, we would sit down and rest and still cry in pretense that were serving the punishment and begged for leniency.

I remember how we used to fight over the usage of the bathroom every morning. I often hid the sponge case that we used to share in order to shower first. That trick always got my brother mad and I would just giggle and smile each time I saw his angry face.

The day my dad had us to stroke each other five times because my brother mistakenly broke our room door forever lingers in my heart. You gave me five hot strokes of cane and deprived me to reciprocate as you ran away. We have our own share of teenage experiences. I remember how we would stop at the local shop of Iya Suliat, the famous seller of fried yam, plantain and coco yam and would get home late. Oh! My goodness! Those yams and plantains were always hot and delicious. I still salivate the taste till date.

We skipped school on few occasions to play soccer at Alade's field in our neighborhood. And I still remember how we would purposely hike the price of a textbook just to have extra money in hand to play video games. Just like yesterday on my 16th birthday, when those I invited disappointed by not showing up at my party, you surprised me by inviting your friends over to party. You made my 16th birthday a memorable one.

I can't imagine life without you, the sweet and the bitter part.

I remember every day just like yesterday

I hope you remember then.

*No biography submitted.*

## ALONE

By Anonymous

In the year 1999, I was four years old and alone. I am the youngest of the eight. I have seven siblings, but I rarely saw any of them. Felt like I was the only child, I would often play-house. When I did play, I was the father, the mother, the son, and the daughter. I took turns playing other roles because, to me, those roles were vacant in my life. My parents had just gotten a divorce, and my dad moved away. I didn't know it then, I figured he went on a trip like he always did. I remember seeing him packing his things in a suitcase and watching him drive away. Shortly after, my mother left to live in California. All that was in the home now was my seven siblings and me. The oldest was my sister, who was 15 at the time who had dropped out before high school so she could take care of us. She had a job at McDonald's and would often bring home food. My brothers and sisters were at the age of doing what they wanted and were never home, but who wouldn't? No parents around to tell you what to do, no curfew, no bedtime, no chores. I raised myself, watched myself, cleaned myself, and trained myself to use the bathroom. I learned to cook; although it was just noodles and eggs, it was still food. There were times when I went to the corner store to steal a bag of hot Cheetos and eat it with rice as a meal. The first time I ate it, it was like tasting heaven, my two favorite things to eat at the same time.

In the year of 2004, I was a fourth-grader attending Dayton's Bluff Elementary. I still felt very much alone. The rest of my elementary school years were pretty much the same. I didn't have many friends, probably because I only had three outfits that I could wear to school. I walked to school alone, which was 3 blocks away. I ate alone in front of the TV. I would walk myself to the park, hoping someone was there so I wouldn't play alone. When I would get to the park, there are times I would get sad. I would see other kids getting pushed on the swing and playing tag with their parents or siblings. While I sat and watched from a distance, I felt as if my heart turned to stone.

In the year of 2007, I was in seventh grade attending Hazel Park Academy. At this age, I no longer felt alone. My life has gotten better; I made friends, ate school lunch, learned how to get away from my problems. I played baseball, flag football, and soccer. A few of my friends knew how to play musical instruments and were kind enough to teach me on the side. I learned how to play the guitar, piano, and drums. Music became my getaway. I borrowed instruments from school,

and whenever I had issues at home, I would play to my heart's content. When you become passionate about anything, you become very good at it. You teach yourself, you grow, and eventually, you can teach others.

In the year of 2009, I was a freshman in high school. I reached out to the teachers who coached wrestling and football. I played both sports to keep me from home. Home has not changed much; I felt like I was still alone. I didn't have the support to play football or wrestling.

After practice I would walk home every day which was about two and half hour walk. I would lie to my mother that I was studying after school, but it made no difference. She would still discourage me from playing sports and staying after school for reasons that didn't matter to her. Halfway through my freshman year, I didn't know it then, but I hang out with the wrong kids; I ditched school, didn't do my homework. I forgot about my getaway place because I no longer had the tools to help me get there at the time. I stopped all my hobbies: sports, music, after school clubs. When the coaches would approach me, they would ask why I just up and quit. I would pause not knowing how to explain my answer. There would be a long awkward pause; then, I would say that my mother doesn't approve and support me playing sports. Before the coach would get to say anything, I would walk away, just like I did with everything else.

In the year 2011, I was then a junior in high school. It hit me that I was not going to graduate. It hit me that I must change for the better. I did not want to turn out like my older siblings. I canceled out my friends; I chose better friends to be around. I decided to attend all my classes. I decided to engage more with my peers. I realized that I was happier than before. I learned that you couldn't change the people around you, but you can change the people around you.

I've learned that being independent isn't all that bad. It has made me stronger as a person. I learned to grow up at a young age. I know what it feels like to not have people around and to be alone. I know how painful it is to not have physical and or emotional support from anyone. I know that my life is not the worst, but it certainly wasn't the best. Everyone has their battles in life. It is up to each individual to find a way out and control their own outcome. It is not about what you go through in life. It's about the lessons of what you've learned from your life experiences.

*The author of this piece is half Hmong and half Lao. Their parents are from Thailand and Laos. Currently, their language spoken is English but they speak Hmong when home.*



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