

SPECIAL REPORT: The Leftover People

Profile: Wameng Moua 'Can't' wasn't in his vocabulary

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The Hmong here believe if they work hard enough, they can do anything - especially if somebody suggests they can't.

Take Wameng Moua, who graduated from high school with a 1.3 grade-point average, then talked his way into Macalester College.

In 2002, while working nights and weekends for a fruit company, he began writing for the Hmong Times, a biweekly newspaper where his wife worked as a graphic designer. "I got 70 bucks an article," he said.

The Hmong Times was founded in 1998 by Cheu Lee, a Hmong refugee who's been in business for himself since 10th grade, when he did tax returns for other Hmong refugees at \$20 a pop.

Lee founded the paper with two local businessmen, Steve and Dick Wetzler. Last year, the Wetzlers offered to sell Moua their half-interest in the 15,000-circulation newspaper for \$200,000.

Moua asked, "What if another Hmong newspaper comes along - won't that drive down the value?"

Steve Wetzler, business manager for the Hmong Times, said he replied, "There hasn't been one that's made it yet, except for ours."

What Moua heard was, "The Hmong won't ever be able to run a newspaper without white people."

"My lip was quivering, I bit my tongue and I decided, 'I'm going to start my own newspaper,' " said Moua, who'd been listening to tapes of Thomas Stanley's "The Millionaire Mind" while driving a forklift at the fruit factory.

"He interviewed 1,000 millionaires - they've all failed, they've all struggled, they've had people pointing fingers and saying, 'You're not good enough,' " said Moua, 34.

Thus inspired, he took \$6,000 of his own money and started a biweekly paper, Hmong Today. His wife does the layout, his sister covers arts and entertainment, and his brother, a doctor, writes a medical column.

Moua still works nights and weekends at the fruit company, then covers stories and puts out the paper with his wife during the day, while their baby sleeps in a crib in the office.

Hmong Today's circulation now rivals that of the Hmong Times.

GRAPHIC: Sacramento Bee / Manny Crisostomo Publisher Wameng Moua checks on baby Isaac as wife Zeng works on a layout for Hmong Today. Moua graduated from high school with a 1.3 GPA, talked his way into college, and eventually started his biweekly paper after he felt a white businessman implied Hmong couldn't run a paper without white help.

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