

The Channel

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by KimOahn Nguyen-Lam

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A LETTER FROM NAFEA's PRESIDENT:

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

Please join me in welcoming our new NAFEA 1998-2000 Executive Board. We need your continuing support and commitment as we carry out our association's mission of working toward advancing and expanding the educational opportunities and social services for the well being of our Southeast Asian American students, families and communities into the 21st Century.

We have had a highly successful NAFEA's Annual Conference last May in Houston with strong collaboration from the Houston Independent School District on many levels. The transitional board meeting was held on the last day of the Conference. We have several

new board members who are bringing in renewed energy, dedication and expertise. We are looking forward to co-inspiring one another to serve you.

I am especially proud and honored to have the opportunity to work with this group of dedicated people on our new board, who share many similar characteristics as you, a majority of our current NAFEA's members. As young Southeast Asian professionals that were born and raised in our home countries, but educated and have made our place in the U.S. mainstream society, I believe we are in a unique position. We can serve as bridges to reconnect the traditional values and wisdom from our cultural heritage with the new way of life and patterns that exist in this country. In doing so, we may create a truly democratic citizenry that is based on individual commitment and responsibility toward collective well being.

Warmly,

KimOanh Nguyen-Lam

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**NAFEA's 18th ANNUAL CONFERENCE**  
**May 8-9, 1998 - Houston - Texas**  
**BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND THE MAKING OF RELATIVES**

A dear friend and colleague of mine from the Latino culture once told me that the most effective collaboration is one that resulted in the "making of relatives". It is a kind of relationship building that survived even after the project or event was long gone. In this sense, I felt that our recent successful NAFEA's 18th Annual Conference in Houston was due to this kind of relationship. Through prior connection established by Bouy Te, our current Executive Vice-President, members from the Houston Independent School District and the Research and Development Institute were key people in the local planning committee and became NAFEA's relatives while working side by side with our NAFEA's board in putting together this conference. Houston Independent School District is home to a large number of Southeast Asian American students surrounded by a strong and vital Vietnamese American economic and cultural community.

In the past, NAFEA's conferences often reflected the coziness and familiarity of a network of Southeast Asian professionals from the fields of educational and social services. It is always important for us to have an occasion to gather and re-inspire one another but at times, it also felt as if we were "preaching to the choir". The success of the Houston Conference was due to the synergy brought by a large attendance of non-Southeast Asian professionals who worked closely with our Southeast Asian students, families and communities. They were most appreciative of the learning opportunities presented in the various strands of workshops. We, in turn became more in-tune with their struggles and efforts in providing quality services to our communities. It became a two-way learning and partnership for us all. As relatives, we believe that the people from Houston Independent

School District as well as all conference participants from other areas will continue to support us and remain in touch with us in the coming years.

## **CONFERENCE'S HIGHLIGHTS**

### **Dr. David Ramirez's Opening Keynote Speech:**

To be empowered, we must have:

- \* Identity: sense of competence
- \* Belonging: sense of place
- \* Direction: sense of values
- \* Future: sense of possibilities

Our sources of risk are also our sources of strength. Our challenge is to provide our children with an education that will empower by strengthening our

- \* Children
- \* Family
- \* School
- \* Community

By turning our sources of risk into strength, we can prepare ourselves and our children to become the ideal 21st Century Citizens which are:

- \* multilingual
- \* multicultural
- \* information literate
- \* technological literate
- \* democratic citizen

### **Dr. Delia Pompas, Executive Director of OBEMLA, shared the good news of President Clinton's proclamation of May as the Asian and Pacific American Heritage Month.**

"Like millions of others who left their homelands to come to America, the first Asian and Pacific Island immigrants who arrived here in the 19th century were seeking a better life than the one they left behind. Many were poor; many had suffered oppression; but all were strengthened by a rich culture, an ancient heritage, a belief in freedom's promise, and a willingness to work for their share of the American Dream...."

"...Today, Asian and Pacific Americans are helping to build a vibrant America. They are leaders in medical and scientific research, in the halls of Congress, in the classrooms of our educational institutions, in business, labor, the arts, and every other human endeavor. They are building economic and technological bridges across the Pacific and beyond, which will ensure America's leadership well into the next millennium. These sons and daughters of Cambodia, China, Indonesia, India, Japan, Korea, Laos, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and so many other Asian and Pacific lands have enriched our national life and culture with their energy and talents, with their commitment to family and community, and with their enduring reverence for freedom. "

"As we approach the 21st century, Asian and Pacific Americans are playing an increasingly important role in the life of our Nation, helping us to maintain our leadership in the global economy," the President said. "More important, they are inspiring us to embrace the wider world, to recognize and appreciate the blessing of our great diversity, and to become one America."

"To honor the accomplishments of Asian and Pacific Americans and to recognize their many contributions to our Nation, the Congress, by Public Law 102-450, has designated the month of May as "Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month." ( for full text, go to <http://www.usia.gov/abtusia/posts/HK1>)

**Dr. Neil Thao, Illinois School Board Member, offered his wise words:**

“When my children asked ‘Why do you and grandparents always told us to study hard and become a doctor, lawyer or engineer as if that’s all we could be?’ I replied to them, “You’ve got to understand and translate it into what it really means. To us, that’s all the careers we know that provide a good living and helping others. That’s all we’ve been exposed to. But, you, young people like you, know of other professions that you enjoy doing which also provide a decent life and opportunities to help others. You don’t have to take it literally. What we meant to say is that you must study hard to contribute back to the society, supporting your family and serving others, too.”

**Regina Lee, Senior Advisor to the President on the President’s Race Initiative:**

The President's Initiative on Race is America's initiative on race. President Clinton is asking all Americans to take part in this important opportunity by participating in efforts that foster constructive dialogue and positive action. At the same time, the President's plan is:

- \* Continuing to develop policies that ensure opportunity and fairness for all Americans
  - \* Engaging Americans in a broad and constructive dialogue on race
  - \* Highlighting Promising Practices that are working
  - \* Recruiting Leaders
  - \* Focusing on the youth of America
  - \* Working with the Race Advisory Board
  - \* Preparing a report including an assessment of the growing diversity of our nation
- (for more information, please go to: <http://www2.whitehouse.gov/Initiatives/OneAmerica>)

And finally, our Multinational/Multiethnic/Multicultural Banquet that included fabulous foods, traditional music and dances, showcased of our traditional and national outfits, dresses and their background histories. The most enjoyable aspect of this event was that it was organized and participated actively by conference attendees.

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SOUTHEAST ASIAN CORNER

A long-standing tradition of NAFEA's annual conferences has been to include ethnic studies sessions in our primary languages and extend invitation to members from local ethnic communities and organizations free-of-charge on the last day of our conference. Often local issues were highlighted and reframed through a national and international perspective. Below are reports from each of our ethnic study sessions.

The Vietnamese Ethnic Studies Report

by KimOanh Nguyen-Lam

The Houston Vietnamese Ethnic Studies was well attended by not only conference attendees but also joined by large group of Houston Vietnamese community members organized primarily by the effort of Mr. Martin Quach Huynh Ha, the Executive Director of the Research and Development Institute in Houston. The Vietnamese Ethnic Studies consisted of two separate panel discussions on a wide range of issues from maintaining good physical and mental health to parental involvement in the education of Vietnamese American students. Close to one hundred people participated.

The main message of several speakers in the Vietnamese Ethnic Studies session centered on the need to balance the focus on the home country politic and the politics at the State and Federal levels concerning the educational and social advancement opportunities for the Vietnamese living in the U.S. An observation was made of the fact that Vietnamese community members were often more willing to take time participating in an anti-Communist demonstration or protest on violation of human rights in Vietnam than attending a school function such as open house or parenting in-service offered by their children's school. A heated discussion erupted as several community members and leaders loudly and repeatedly protested any effort to lessen the significance of their position and role in their anti-Communist activities. Like many older generation members of the Vietnamese American communities all over the United States, the Vietnamese expatriates in Houston held on to a strong belief of a possibility of reclaiming and regaining a Vietnam free of communism. The younger Vietnamese Americans, on the other hand, perceived this political stance as a hindrance to full participation in the social and educational governance and policy making process on issues relating to Vietnamese American students, families, and community members. Although strong emotions were flying high, some key common issues did emerge as the session moved on:

- * the need to provide opportunities for younger Vietnamese Americans, especially those who were born here or immigrated at a very young age to acquire knowledge of the country's history and culture as well as the mother tongue;
- * the challenge of establishing bilingual education programs in K-12 schools and ethnic studies at the college and university levels for the above purpose amidst the anti-immigrant attitude sweeping across the U.S. resulting in several state and federal legislative limiting the language and educational rights and services of minority and immigrant groups;
- * the barriers created by racial, linguistic, and cultural differences that minimized efforts to create a more empowering relationship between schools and immigrant and minority parents and community members; and

* the need to create more opportunities for open dialogue to improve communication and understanding between the younger and older Vietnamese American generations.

The session ended with the facilitator reminding people to think globally and act locally. In order for Vietnamese American expatriates to have a real chance of returning and rebuilding a country based on true democracy, we must prepare our children well. We must be able to assure that their education in the U.S. not only will give them academic and technical knowledge and skills but also opportunities to preserve their primary language and culture. Language and culture are “twin-skin” to ethnic identity. Without the younger generations of Vietnamese American’s identification and affiliation with their mother tongue and cultural heritage, the connection to the ancestral land will be severed. The action today’s Vietnamese Americans will have a deep impact on the tomorrow of the next generation.

Hmong Studies Report

by KaYing Yang

The Lao Studies session began with the acknowledgement of the ethnic diversity that existed within the country of Laos. We started with everyone gathered as a general session and engaged in a dialogue to discuss on the needs and the challenges to identify common issues as well as issues unique to each community. After much discussion, exploring the advantages and disadvantages as well as the myriad of issues bombarding our community, it was decided that each ethnic group should have the opportunity to explore the issues that is most pertinent in their community. Once the groups had that opportunity, all would meet to share the information and brainstorm next steps. The Lao Studies was then divided into two main groups: the Hmong and Lao -Lum. There was one Thai Dam. He divided his time between both groups.

In the Hmong group, we discussed the need to organize. Organizing and mobilizing among parents, teachers, and diverse communities who share similar experiences. We understood that no matter how different our background is, our present condition is the same. Recognizing that the Hmong community's strength lies in its family structure, and in the community support system, we wanted to explore "Western" ways of organizing. Although, it has been difficult for many parents to attend and actively participate in Parent Teacher Organizations (PTOs), this type of organization appear to receive credibility from schools. It is important to integrate this and other methods of community mobilization into our culture. Also, we emphasized that we must take leadership at critical stages of our community. Waiting for consensus and community-wide approval may delay the progress of our community.

Another critical issue is the lack of sufficient and well-trained bi-lingual and bi-cultural Hmong teachers. There are many support staff, but few full time teachers who understand their students' struggles. Our goal should be to encourage more professions in this field and to seek funds that will support and initiate such programs. Neal Thao, professor at Metro State University brought to our attention the endowment at Concordia University in MN. This endowment is specifically set up to ensure that Hmong students interested in the

field of education have the opportunity to receive training. It was suggested that this program be replicated in other areas of the country to help the SEA community.

One main issue that surfaced is the role of NAFEA. Everyone was impressed by the conference. NAFEA's role as convenor and organizer of educators focusing on the SEA learner is very important. At this stage, its network needs to grow. Limited funds will prevent the potential to advocate for our large student population. One way of strengthening the work of NAFEA is to involve and engage the following:

- * School districts with large numbers of SEA students should become due-paying members of NAFEA. They should underwrite or co-sponsor future conferences whether or not the conference site is in their area.
- * Compile and recruit SEA teachers to be members of NAFEA. Their educational institution/employers should pay their membership fees.
- * Engage post-secondary student services employees in the work of NAFEA, both on an organizational level as well as at membership level.
- * Encourage community organizers and social service people to actively participate at the board and staff level. These individuals will pass the information to other arenas beyond the realm of education. The scope and breadth of this central issue, which everyone believes to be the key to the future will be, broaden into homes and other professions.
- * NAFEA must be the advocate for our students. NAFEA should set an agenda to lead the community towards improved curriculum and learning environment that competently serves SEA students at every level.
- * Working in collaboration and partnership with other similar organization will be mutually enriching and strengthen NAFEA's mission.

While the discussion was in-depth and we all had many ideas, we also raised many questions. Below are some of the questions that circulated among our group.

- * How can communities work with NAFEA to make local issues more visible?
- * What kind of partnership can local members develop?
- * How can we strengthen NAFEA's network so that it can be more effective in their response to educational needs of our community?

In the second half of the meeting, we joined the Lao-Lum group. Close to 20 of us crammed into the small meeting space. We were a diverse group, both in age and ethnicity. Each group was eager to share our discussion. But most importantly, we were eager to explore ways to come together to look at our community as one. Although, we acknowledge that our ethnic identity must be respected, we also felt the need to join voices because we share one homeland. After hearing many voices and seeing that we were reaching a unanimous agreement that no matter what, there must be an organization of a national Lao entity, the energy level in the room increased. It was late, past suppertime, but no one wanted to leave the discussion. Once everyone had an opportunity to share their vision, we decided to organize an ad hoc committee to explore the possibility of organizing a national Lao group. The purpose of this group would be to facilitate forums for us to gather to share and exchange ideas on critical issues that impact our community.