

The Hmong Initiative

Summary

The goal of the Hmong Initiative is to invite the Sheboygan Hmong community to enroll their high school age children at Sheboygan County Christian High School, by strengthening relationships with the Hmong community, offering new marketing strategies and providing significant financial assistance.

Project Results

This year, extensive headway has been made in the relationship between the Hmong churches and Sheboygan County Christian High School. A formal grant has been written and presented to local foundations and businesses. An overture has been written and will be formally proposed to the Wisconsin Christian Reformed Church Classis, seeking denominational support for Hmong students to attend Sheboygan County Christian High School. A team of school officials, consultants and Hmong leaders has been formed. Our school promotional materials have been translated into the Hmong language.

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Written Outcome

Project Focus

Today, the city of Sheboygan, with a population of 51,000, is home to over 5000 Hmong people. Approximately, 19% of the students in the Sheboygan Area School District are Hmong. Currently, we have no Hmong students enrolled at Sheboygan County Christian High School. The focus of my project is to increase the Hmong enrollment at Sheboygan County Christian High School.

The Hmong people are post Vietnam War refugees to the United States. According to University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee professor Dr. Ron Podeschi in his publication, *The Hmong and American Education*, the Hmong people have no particular national home, or official symbol. The word Hmong is translated as “free people”. Large concentrations of the Hmong people were and are found in Southeast Asia in countries like Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam.

Many Hmong people who resided in Vietnam and surrounding countries supported US forces during the Vietnam War. Following the departure of US forces in 1975, a brutal period of persecution took place against the Hmong people. Communist forces slaughtered and arrested many Hmong people. In response to their loyalty to US forces, they were welcomed in the United States as political refugees. Many communities and specifically, churches played a role in acclimating Hmong families to American culture.

The Hmong community has been heavily sponsored by local Sheboygan churches in the past 25-30 years. Their American experience since the 70's has been largely connected with the Christian church. Specific families were adopted into local churches. Efforts were made to introduce these families not only to church, but job opportunities and community relationships. Friendships have been formed between the Hmong and traditional multi-generational families of Sheboygan.

Due to the strong relationship between the local Sheboygan church and Hmong immigrant families, several Hmong churches were formed as sister churches to existing churches. The Hmong Christian Reformed Church and the Hmong Missionary Alliance Church are two such churches. Interestingly two sponsor churches, Southside Alliance and the local Christian Reformed Churches have a strong commitment to Christian education.

Efforts to introduce the Hmong people to Sheboygan County Christian High School have occurred in the past. An effort was made in the early 1990's. At the time, language barriers were strong for the high school age students and parents. ESL (English as a Second Language) services drove the operating costs skyward. Marketing the school was a challenge due to language barriers. Also, many of the Hmong community was still sponsoring existing family members to move to the United States in the early 90's. Hmong families who were interested in Sheboygan

County Christian High School made a choice to invest their income from paying tuition to sponsoring family members to move to the USA.

Many believe, for a variety of reasons, that the time is right for the Hmong community to be part of Sheboygan County Christian High School. ESL services are no longer needed since the Hmong community is establishing 2nd generation families in the community. Many members of the Hmong community are receiving post secondary degrees and are establishing themselves in the business community. But most importantly Sheboygan County Christian High School is a good fit because the Hmong community is facing a cultural crossroad. Maintaining their Hmong cultural identity is a growing concern for Hmong parents as they see their children and now grandchildren acclimate to positive and negative aspects of American culture. Hmong teenagers need to discover that a biblical Christian world and life view integrated throughout a high school curriculum provides a foundation for life. Finally, Sheboygan County Christian High School also needs to broaden its' multi-cultural constituency. Integration of the Hmong community would be a tremendous blessing to our school family. Our school would be blessed to be home to a broader cultural diversity of Hmong and other minority students.

Description of the Method/Process

The first step in the project involved meeting John Yang, a professor of Education at Lakeland University. John taught at Sheboygan County Christian High School in the early 90's. I asked a veteran staff member, Art De Jong, to facilitate this first meeting. John Yang then introduced me to Pastor Cheng Her, youth pastor at the Hmong Missionary Alliance Church. Pastor Kou Vang was also introduced to me through John Yang as well.

Mrs. Georgia Smies joined this project as a grant writer. Georgia spent time with both John Yang and I to determine needs, dreams and desires for both Sheboygan County Christian High School and the Hmong community.

We quickly discovered that the need to build a sustainable project was crucial. We spent several visits discussing what a realistic goal should look like. It was decided that funding for up to 8 Hmong students was both realistic and manageable. The grant spelled out that process in detail.

The process of connecting with members of the Hmong community continues to unfold. With each contact made, I have met enthusiasm for this project. Supporters of Sheboygan County Christian High School are excited and the Hmong community mirrors that same excitement.

I have a group of school supporters praying specifically for this project.

Project's Results

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The greatest volume of work to date has been writing the grant. Our grant is seeking \$24,000 annually for tuition assistance for the Hmong community. It is being presented to area business leaders and local county and state foundations. Letters of support for the grant are included in the grant. We are confident that we will be successful in raising funds.

First Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in Oostburg, WI has sponsored an overture to their denominational classis. This overture is requesting that the members of the Christian Reformed Churches in Wisconsin fund the Hmong Initiative through church offerings twice a year. We will build a case that the Sheboygan Hmong CRC and Sheboygan County Christian High School can form an alliance that will strengthen families within that church. We will also describe how this project can allow the Hmong CRC to strengthen ties to local CRC churches that support Christian education.

Our school promotional materials have been translated into the Hmong language. It is important to communicate to all members of the Hmong community and we are pleased to have this project completed.

Analysis and Commentary

This project has taught me that a strategic plan requires key people, the right number of people, a realistic timeline and extensive leadership time.

The right people were dropped into my path this year. One of my Board members, a builder, recently worked for Dr. Ron Podeschi, a retired university professor. It turned out this professor was very connected with the Hmong community in Southeastern Wisconsin. He is now a consultant in our task force. Georgia Smies, an educator and professionally trained grant writer recently moved to the community. In a matter of two months she was elected to our school board. It was determined that Georgia's best service to the Board would be in the form of grant writing. She has spent many hours perfecting our grant. John Yang, is a former teacher at Sheboygan County Christian High School, a community leader, a church leader and a college professor. He is very active and respected in the Hmong community. The right people arrived not because of coincidence, but because of the providence of God.

The right number of people involved in the project has also been a matter of discovery. The opinions of many have certainly slowed down the grant writing process. I have learned to ask people to be involved in this project for a specific task, as an editor, a consultant, or a facilitator to meeting a new contact.

A realistic timeline has been a point of discovery. Proponents of the plan have asked, "So, any Hmong students yet?" The answer today is "no". I can respect that people want immediate results, and I have reminded others and myself that this is not a one year wonder, but the forging of a partnership that will last for many years. This project is crucial and results will not be immediate. I know that much of this project hinges on building relationships and trust. In terms of success and completion, I know we have made headway into a relationship between the Hmong community and Sheboygan County Christian High School.

Leadership of this project has required me think more strategically about how I spend my time. It is tempting to react to the immediate needs of a school day and to postpone actions on strategic projects like the Hmong Initiative. In conclusion the Hmong Initiative and the Van Lunen experience as a whole has made me recognize the importance of being strategic in the day to day tasks I address.