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## HAN1517 Yee Leng Xiong

## Marathon County Supervisor On Wausau Hmong Population

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Frederica Freyberg:

Tonight “Here and Now”, from the city of Wausau in the heart of the state, in the heart of the election season where local voters are looking for answers to their top concerns.

Frederica Freyberg:

And if you are just joining us and notice that we are not in our usual studio digs that is because we're coming to you live from Wausau's River District, specifically from the dining room of Thrive Foodery, co-owned and operated by David Lorio and Elizabeth Hinner. And we want to give a shout out to David and Elizabeth for allowing us in tonight. We asked one of them to join us for an interview and they turned us down, but that's not because they're shy or unfriendly but because they say they cannot leave the kitchen on a busy Friday night, and there they are. A Louisiana native, David has grown roots in Wausau and dedicates his kitchen to the mission of sustainability and community outreach. Thrive's menu features produce from Wausau area growers, local dairy and meats and craft beer as well. Even the walls are reclaimed materials including the building's original overhead garage door and other doors and panels reclaimed by the Wausau Habitat for Humanity. Coming up next on our Wisconsin Vote Special Edition of “Here and Now”, a look at the cultural and economic contributions of the Wausau, the Hmong people in Wausau.

Man: It's just seeing how businesses and different fields of study or skills or sharing knowledge with each other, and Wausau seems to cultivate that kind of a community sense.

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**Population**

Member of the Marathon County Board of Supervisors Yee Leng Xiong details the many ways Wausau's Hmong community has become integrated into Central Wisconsin and some of the struggles they still face.

Frederica Freyberg:

Welcome back to Wausau's Thrive Foodery. A prominent part of the Wausau community is the Hmong population in Marathon and surrounding counties. About 9,000 people of Southeast Asian descent now call central Wisconsin home, as allies of the US during the Vietnam War the first to arrive landed here following the US withdrawal from Vietnam. Wisconsin has the third highest Hmong population in the country, and Wausau the second highest in the state. The transition has not always been easy or smooth, but now some 40 years on, new generations of Hmong called the Wausau area the only home they've known and are increasingly leaders in the community. For example, 22-year old Yee Leng Xiong was just elected to the Marathon County board of supervisors and he joins us now. Thanks very much for being here.

Yee Leng Xiong:

I'm glad I could be here.

Frederica Freyberg:

Well tell us about your family and when and why they arrived in Wausau.

Yee Leng Xiong: Sure, my family arrived in the 1980s. You know I was not the first family here, but you know we were one of the ones who arrived in the 1980s so it was fantastic and we chose this as a place of convening and you know it's been a great ever since.

Frederica Freyberg:

How would you describe the transition that came with the arrival both for Hmong families and the Wausau community?

Yee Leng Xiong:

Sure, you know in the past you know in the past Wausau was known as the whitest city in the entire, in the entire country but in the last 40 years there has been a lot of progress that has been done to the point where you know you have elected officials that are Hmong descent, such as me and Mary Thao who you know sits on the Wausau School Board.

Frederica Freyberg:

Is there still work to do integrating Hmong families into the fabric of the Wausau community?

Yee Leng Xiong:

Sure, you know there's always, there can always be improvement and everything. You know the Wausau community here in the colony here, it's been very supportive the progress of the integrating the Hmong community into the, you know, larger community at large. We are booming, we are, we're having businesses. You know we have Hmong teachers, Hmong lawyers and everything you know we're, there's still work to be done but you know there has been a lot of progress that has been done in the last 40 years as well.

Frederica Freyberg:

Has the presidential campaign rhetoric around immigrants brought out lingering racial divisions in this area?

Yee Leng Xiong:

Sure, you know that's a very good question. You know from what I experienced, you know this has been the year where I've seen a lot of Hmong individuals, especially people in the Hmong community who has paid very close attention to the presidential election, you know all of them were refuge, or sorry, children or they are or a product of a refugees and everything, so you know they were a product of immigrants and everything so it makes them look at the election very closely and this, like I said before, this is the first time I seen this, this interested in an election, in politics.

Frederica Freyberg:

As a county supervisor, what are the issues you most want to address on behalf of your Hmong constituents?

Yee Leng Xiong:

You know, I represent the district 19, but a lot of the Hmong individuals kind of see me as the liaison to the Marathon County Court. I've seen many problems and many obstacles actually say it's kind of prohibits and stops the Hmong community from advancing much further. There's been a lot of mental health problems in the Hmong community that I see that's a very big issue. They think of you know the word mental health in Hmong means crazy so you know there needs to be a lot of education. In addition we see that there's not a lot of cultural sensitive programs that are able to help our Hmong youth to be able to help them build confidence, and help and also be sensitive to their culture.

Frederica Freyberg:

Now I know that Wausau now has a Hmong Chamber of Commerce to assist business startups. How needed is that in your mind?

Yee Leng Xiong:

Sure, you know the Hmong community you know we were brought to this country with the hopes of being able to participate with elections, get education, also be able to participate in the you know business field. You know a lot of Hmong individuals in the Hmong community, I know that wants to start business. They're you know they want to pursue the American dream and everything and with the Hmong Chamber of Commerce here, we're providing that resources, providing loans, and that resources to them that allows them to be able to pursue their, you know pursue their American dream.

Frederica Freyberg:

Where do you envision the Hmong community in Wausau being 40 years from now?

Yee Leng Xiong:

That's a very fantastic question. And we ask that question all the time to ourselves you know we, we want to see you know a world where you know where we as the Hmong community that are able to thrive as other race. You know we've only been here 40 years and we made more progress than we have ever had in the last 200 years, and so we want to see us advance even more and be you know just like everybody else.

Frederica Freyberg:

Yee Leng Xiong, thank you very much for being here.

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