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From war refugees to proud parents -- a Stockton success story

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THIS WEEK'S MOST VIEWED

- Girl, 16, tells Stockton police she was raped by 3 men
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THIS MONTH'S MOST VIEWED

- Doctor accused in theft of Rolex appears in court
- 4-month investigation leads to major meth bust
- Girl, 16, tells Stockton police she was raped by 3 men
- Two dead in shooting

By **Lori Gilbert**
Record Staff Writer
July 28, 2009 12:00 AM

It was billed as a celebration to commemorate the off-the-charts achievements of four children in one family.

A doctor. A nurse. A California State University, Sacramento, graduate about to embark on a credential program and the most recent Edison High School graduate. All were the guests of honor.

The gathering was about great achievement, and served as a nice tribute to the educational foundation they received from Edison, a school whose qualities are often buried underneath its creaking buildings and Charter Way location.

Mostly though, the Vang family party of more than 300 relatives and friends at the Scottish Rite Temple was a tribute to Bria Vang and his wife, Kia Xiong, who arrived in the United States in 1979 without a possession to call their own or even a remote understanding of English.

Driven from their homeland by war, the Hmong couple landed in a Thailand refugee camp and after the birth of two daughters there, they took a leap of faith as great as any you can imagine when they decided to come to the United States.

"I didn't know what to expect," a smiling Bria Vang said as his eldest child, Sa, translated. "I didn't know what the future would hold. I just came and hoped for the best."

Settling first in Minnesota, they were introduced to objects many Americans take for granted: a flushing toilet, a stove, an electric washing machine.

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The family moved to Stockton, where it was greeted by a burgeoning Hmong community, but work was sporadic. The growing family subsisted on welfare, clothes donated to St. Mary's Interfaith Dining Hall and the vegetables Kia could grow in the small patch of dirt outside the front door of their home.

"We had to interpret for them," said Chao Vang, 21, the recent Sacramento State graduate who wants to become a teacher at Edison. "We were going to the doctors with them as kids. We didn't understand half the things they were saying. We were just shaking our head yes to all these medical terms."

Bound to their Hmong culture, in which girls learned to sew and cook and clean to prepare them to be good daughters-in-law, Vang and Xiong didn't understand their daughters' desires to excel at school.

When Mang, their second-eldest who is now a 30-year-old nurse in St. Petersburg, Fla., joined the Edison tennis team, they wouldn't pick her up after practice because she shouldn't have been on the team in the first place.

"My mom called me her rebel," Mang said.

She wasn't the classic American rebel, loitering outside liquor stores or drag racing down Pacific Avenue. She was a rebel to her Hmong parents because she was participating in such activities as the Science Olympiad.

She learned about that from Sa, now 32, a mother of two and a family physician in Modesto.

The eldest child of the family, Sa didn't set out to establish a tradition of academic excellence and professional achievement for her siblings.

"I just wanted to do something with myself with my life," Sa Vang said. "I just wanted, in my mind at the time, to be able to lift my parents out of the poverty they were in and to change their minds about girls and women."

She knew education was the key and teachers at Victory Elementary, Marshall Middle School and Edison High inspired her as she progressed.

A mother at 16, married and living with her in-laws before her junior year of high school, Sa Vang managed to keep up her schoolwork, took honors classes and was Edison's 1995 valedictorian. She graduated from Sacramento State and University of California, Davis, School of Medicine.

"They did discourage us initially," Sa Vang recalled of her parents. "When I told my mom I wanted to be a doctor she said, 'Don't set your standards too high. You may not reach them.' My dad was always more quiet and didn't say much. In his silence, I took that as his support. He never said 'no, you can't do it.' He never said 'you must do this.' I took that as a green light for me to continue."

As they watched their children succeed as a result of education, the old traditions began to give way to a new way of thinking.

"Now that we all have a career, they're more open to and now encourage the younger siblings," Mang Vang said. "I saw, firsthand, the change. When I was a (high school) sophomore we went to meet one of the counselors to talk about college, and my mom was really resistant. Now, she's telling the younger siblings, 'You have to go to school so you can have a career.' "

Sa Vang calls her parents' transformation amazing.

"It's been hard," she said. "They realize their children live in America, and we're very independent. Instead of trying to fight us,

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they learned to take a position of guiding us.

"As we walk through life with blinders on, they're our eyes to stop us from running into the wall, rather than trying to stop us from hitting the wall at all."

The walls these offspring scaled are mighty, but no more so than the circumstances from which the attempt was made.

"You don't have to be middle class," Chao Vang said. "You do not have to be born in the United States. Your parents don't have to have that \$150,000-a-year salary. It's all about passion and motivation and dedication."

It's also about daring to dream.

Bria and Kia Vang passed along to their children the courage to follow their dreams. The road to the medical degree, nursing certificate and teaching credential started with those first brave steps by a couple of refugees who boarded a plane with nothing but hope and each other.

Nothing their children learn will ever be quite as valuable as that lesson, or more worthy of being honored.

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