

“First Things First”
St. Paul Pioneer Press July 25, 2004
By John Welbes

After arriving in the Twin Cities this month from a refugee camp in Thailand, brothers Keng and Chue Lee put off their own education to get their children registered for public school in St. Paul. Keng Lee’s young daughters clung to his legs for a moment after finishing their vision and hearing tests. Keng and Chue filled out many forms at the St. Paul Public Schools’ Student Placement Center. When they are finished, Keng Lee is asked about his new life in the Twin Cities.

He said through an interpreter that he’s feeling a bit sad because he is older. He feels that if he had come here earlier in his life, he could have had a better life.

The Lee families are among 5000 Hmong expected to arrive in Minnesota in the coming months from the What Tam Krabok refugee camp in Thailand. They will rely on the school district to find a way to teach their children and help them move toward grade-level work. The children had little or no schooling in Thailand and don’t speak English.

The St. Paul schools that have been chosen to work with the children of the new immigrants are Como Park, Phalen Lake and Hayden Heights Elementary school. They were chosen because they are in or near neighborhoods with large Hmong populations.

“The biggest problem is getting transportation to the schools for the children.” says Jill Carey, assistant director of the Student Placement Center.

Keng and Chue Lee both plan to start adult education classes soon to learn English and help them develop skills to find work. But for now, they will work to make sure their children get into school first.

What do you think?

1. Why do you think Keng Lee felt sad about not coming to the United States when he was younger?

2. The story said that children sometimes have a hard time getting to school. What are some things that make it hard for you to go to school?

3. What can you do to make it easier for you to go to school?

4. Write about a time you went somewhere for the first time. How did you feel? What was easy about going there and what was hard?

Vocabulary

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|---------------------|---|
| 1. put off_____ | a. hold onto |
| 2. registered_____ | b. not do now |
| 3. clung____ | c. someone who can help you talk to people who only speak English |
| 4. vision _____ | d. to pick something |
| 5. interpreter_____ | e. your eyes, how you see |
| 6. rely_____ | f. to learn or make something |
| 7. chosen_____ | g. need help for another person or a thing |
| 8. develop_____ | i. to sign up for something |

True/False

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| 1. Keng and Chue Lee started school before their children. | T F |
| 2. The Lee brothers filled out forms to help get their children into school. | T F |
| 3. Keng Lee relied on an interpreter to talk to the people at the school. | T F |
| 4. The children went to school in Thailand. | T F |
| 5. The Student Placement Center is the school the children will go to. | T F |
| 6. Keng Lee is sad that he didn't come to the United States when he was younger. | T F |
| 7. Keng and Chue Lee are going to find a job after getting their children in school. | T F |

