

## DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP AND POLITICAL CAPACITY AMONG LAOTIAN REFUGEES

Laotian Organizing Project  
Richmond, CA

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**SUMMARY:** Formed in 1995, the Laotian Organizing Project **builds trust and leadership** among Laotian refugees in Richmond, California. Richmond is home to a growing number of Laotian refugees from tribal groups that do not have a history of interacting and for whom getting involved is both new and scary. But, faced with over 350 industrial facilities and issues such as a lack of affordable housing or living-wage jobs, community members are speaking out and **challenging traditional tribal conflicts and beliefs**. The Laotian Organizing Project’s significant **political victories** include a warning system to alert citizens, in their own languages, of industrial pollution accidents. The organization successfully uses the following strategies:

- **Establish Trust:** Organizers first invite people to get involved by taking what they characterize as “baby steps,” such as driving someone else to a meeting. The Laotian Organizing Project also makes all decisions on its actions and policies openly, including all interested parties in the discussion.
- **Build Inclusive Leadership:** According to lead organizer, Grace Kong, building inclusive leadership is “an integral step to being able to achieve what we want to do.” This means bringing members of various tribes to the decision-making table, including women, young people, and the elderly.
- **Prioritize Crossing Generational Boundaries:** Youth and elder groups meet separately to discuss issues, then come together to share ideas. In the case of affordable housing, for example, both groups found they had similar concerns. Organizer Torm Normpraseurt says, “So the youth appreciate that they come and have meetings with adults, and adults also appreciate that, ‘Hey, our own children are doing the work like we do.’” Developing leaders across genders, tribal groups, and generations cultivates new blood and ideas while creating an alternate view of community from what many Laotians experienced in their homeland.

In the following case example, May Phan, Grace Kong, and Torm Normpraseurt describe their organizing process and some key political victories:

## **HEALING A CULTURE, BUILDING A COMMUNITY**

### **The Laotian Organizing Project**

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“Some people might think that the refugee immigrant is the one who creates the problem, is the one who caused the problem. They need to look at the hearts of the refugee and colored people and what we contribute to society, and to understand that we have the interest and the stake of the community here, and everyone has a basic pride in the community. We are here in America. We cannot go back to our home. And this is our home. This is our community. We should have the opportunity to participate in the decision making for what we think is the best for all people in this community”

- Torm Nompraseurt, Community Organizer  
Laotian Organizing Project

**R**ichmond, California is considered to be one of the most polluted cities in the country. With over 350 industrial facilities, many of which are located close to homes and schools, community health should be considered a major issue. Yet for years, local officials essentially ignored the matter, in significant part because a large bloc of Richmond's citizens consisted of newly arrived refugee immigrants, who were not at all used to being politically active. In fact, for some, being politically active in the countries they had fled was considered downright dangerous and sometimes life threatening.

But the refugees' long-standing silence would break in 1999, after a major oil refinery spill which directly impacted community members. A fledgling organization called the Laotian Organizing Project (LOP) stepped forward after the spill and demanded action. The LOP organizers wanted the city to set up a system whereby refugee immigrants would be notified in their native language in the event of another catastrophic industrial accident. Richmond officials agreed to establish a city-wide phone alert system that would provide immigrants information on accidents—the nature of the incident and what residents should do in response.

“I think that the warning system campaign was, for LOP, very significant,” says Grace Kong, lead organizer for the group. “The way that it brought people together to show that there is a different way we can be, and there are different outcomes that are possible if we take action and do things together. It’s seeing that and being part of it. You saw Mien at the same table with Khmu. Back in Laos, separate tribes really don’t interact or have a history of interacting.”

More than a win for the community, it was a win in the eyes of business and political leaders because it helped create a bridge to a new community. But mostly it was a clear win for LOP, which since the spill has gradually won increasing respect throughout Richmond, not just among the city's leadership, but also among those that LOP first formed to represent—the disenfranchised for whom getting involved and speaking out was a new, and for some, scary proposition.

## **Creating Courage by Building Trust**

The Laotian Organizing Project was formed in 1995 by another activist organization, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN). The Network was formed as an umbrella group to encourage a broad range of Asian Pacific refugees to get organized and active in their communities in the name of environmental and social justice. The LOP's primary mission is to build political and activist capacity and leadership among Laotian refugees living in Richmond. Having become home over the last 25 years to a growing refugee Laotian population from a variety of tribal groups, including Lao, Khmu, and Mien, representing multiple generations, Richmond was a natural target area for such an organizing effort.

To build such capacity, though, LOP's early activists realized they needed to groom additional leaders from within the Laotian community and in addition, build trust with and among the factions represented by that community. For LOP, that was a particularly tough proposition because so many members of that community had suffered under ruthless leaders who evinced little respect for human rights or human life. To draw potential activists into the new movement, LOP realized it had to tread very carefully. "These are the people who came from war country," says May Phan, an organizer with LOP. "And they have been torn between their own government and the leaders in many ways. So, it has been difficult for them; who they feel they can trust and can work with, and can talk openly with."

To defuse the mistrust—to assure community members, for example, that signing their name to a postcard petition wouldn't result in some sort of retribution—LOP activists and organizers have always taken a go-slow approach to drawing people in. Such "baby steps," as LOP activists characterize their approach, might include simply asking someone to call five people that they know and invite them to a meeting or simply asking a community member to drive someone else to a meeting.

In some cases, the job of reassuring potential activists and partners is made a bit simpler due to their shared past. For example, Phan says it is not uncommon for her to meet people with whom she served while in Thai prison camp. "I lived with them in the refugee camps, so I've worked with them for a long time. So, the trust is there. I would say if they are somebody outside, not from the old community, it can be difficult." Similarly, Torm Normpraseurt, also an LOP organizer, notes that he and his family were among the first refugee families to settle in Richmond. He says he now knows almost every family in the community, and has assisted most with their transition in becoming U.S. citizens.

Most fundamentally, though, LOP has hewed to a simple prime directive when it comes to how it operates: never make decisions behind closed doors; to always include all interested parties in open and free discussion before deciding on any action or setting any policy.

## **The Power of Inclusion**

LOP's basic operating philosophy is that the entire community must work together. "Building inclusive leadership is one of our missions. We see that as an integral step to being able to achieve what we want to do," says Grace Kong. They put this belief into action by bringing Khmu, Mien, and

Lao tribal members, women, young, and elderly all to the same table to make decisions about the community and possible community action. Such an approach is not only a challenge because of the residual fear that some might have when it comes to being active, it also challenges tribal traditions and Laotian beliefs that males are leaders, while women and children's voices should remain largely silent. As such, running a meeting with such a diverse group of people can make for interesting dynamics. Meetings are sometimes conducted in three languages, with visual images and metaphors used to clarify points

But this open approach to embracing potential new leaders and an inclusive strategy for pushing specific initiatives has, in and of itself, proved a powerful way to bring new blood and new ideas into the movement, according to LOP activists. For example, when LOP joined forces with the Central Labor Council and staged a rally at the City Council's Office to fight for increased working wages, LOP leaders who were there decided spontaneously to ask two girls from LOP's youth group to speak on behalf of LOP. "And, so the two girls went up and gave this really moving testimony," says Normpraseurt. "They talked about the importance of a living wage, about how their parents were working so much that the girls never saw them. And that this isn't just an issue affecting adults. They told the city council, 'We want to have families that we can see. We want to spend time together. We want parents that are present in our lives.'" Grace Kong described the feeling in the wake of the girls' moving testimony. "It really was a poignant example of our membership and community--the younger and older generations--coming together in a positive way. And, the adults thinking 'Oh, the youth are so great', and the youth feeling, 'We feel so backed up by our adults.'"

In fact, LOP has made finding mechanisms for crossing generational boundaries a high priority. According to activists, such mechanisms can be particularly helpful in the case of bridging the gap between refugees and their American-born children. For example, LOP has special youth and elder groups who meet separately to brainstorm and discuss issues of interest. Later, both groups convene to discuss and share their ideas. Frequently, say LOP activists, the two camps find that they share much more in common than they expected. They also find that the concerns expressed by the youth group can frequently be quite adult. For example, the youth and adult groups came together at one point to share ideas about an upcoming housing campaign. To the surprise of some LOP activists, both groups expressed similar concerns about housing; it wasn't viewed as only an issue that ought to be dealt with by adults. "So the youth appreciate that they come and have meetings with adults," says Normpraseurt. "And adults also appreciate that, 'Hey our own children are doing the work like we do.'"

Ultimately, says Normpraseurt, such an inclusive leadership approach helps to create an alternative vision of community for people who may still be caught between the experiences of their homeland and American cultural values.

### **Embracing the Old and the New**

Developing leaders across generations and tribal groups is a process of shifting culture, shifting perspective, and shifting roles. As one female community leader observes, "In the old days a woman pretty much would just sit in the back and serve the man, with no right to sit at the table." She added that she has never had this experience before, and it is very important for her to be included in decisions affecting her. Yet, LOP realizes that it is important that not all traditions be rejected as it works to build community cohesion; that the goal isn't to do away with homeland traditions in favor of American values. To the contrary, LOP insists on honoring cultural traditions, including weddings,

funerals, and other traditional gatherings and celebrations that pay homage to their cultural traditions. However, embracing new community and culture while holding on to important aspects of tradition can make for an interesting balancing act, says Nompraseurt. "When you gather at someone's house, a lot of women still cluster in the kitchen area, and then all the men eat first; the women eat later. I mean, that is their scene even though they are in America. But when we make decisions for a community, we don't believe that only men making decisions for a community is always a good thing. Because we feel like, either man or woman, or if you're older, should make decisions together as a community."

LOP also successfully campaigned for counseling resources in neighborhood high schools. Through a community-wide process of issue exploration, LOP recently launched a housing campaign for affordable housing to address displacement due to widespread gentrification in the Bay Area. Additional areas of concern for its members are: improving neighborhood schools, securing health insurance, increasing living-wage jobs, addressing child-parent conflict, and identifying interpreters to ease language challenges.

### **A New "Story" in the Story Cloth**

Grace Kong says that seeing those in her community come together to push key initiatives and participate in and influence decisions that impact them, has been an enriching and encouraging experience for all those involved. "To see Mien grandmas meeting at the same table with Khmu men and elders. This is key, because back in Laos separate tribes really don't interact or have a history of interacting."

It is a new chapter in the history of Laotians, a history that Kong says is crucial to rebuilding cultural connections and grounding new generations of Laos immigrants and their children. It is a history powerfully captured, she says, by the youth in her community who began creating a "story cloth," a traditional art form where people do embroidery that depicts historic events. In Laos, says Kong, many story cloths have embroidery with farming scenes and domestic village scenes. In the United States, the story cloths often reflect the experiences of immigrating, including airplanes and war. The LOP youths' story cloth told the story of a Laotian girl in her village in Laos being bombed, then coming to the refugee camps, and then arriving in the United States, including a panel on the future, a future made much brighter, says Kong, by the powerful new intermingling of tribes, generations and Laotian and American cultures.

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