**Narrator: Mai Chao**

Hello, this is Mai Chao reading “Two Rivers,” the honorable mention poem in the 2017 *Hear, Here* Poetry Contest. This poem was inspired by true events that contrasted my experience in America with my mother’s experience from Laos. I am forever grateful to my brave mother, Chia Vue, who brought her family to Wisconsin after escaping the Vietnam War.

“Two Rivers”

Mississippi, oh, Mississippi,

timeless beauty,

you have carried countless stories

without judgement.

Your serene wisdom

inspires curiosity in young and old.

Today,

I sit before you as he asks for my hand,

how can I not accept such a kind-hearted man to be mine?

When his West melts into my East,

we become stronger as one.

Mississippi, oh, Mississippi,

you have done it again,

witnessing a new history

with prudence.

Watching your heartbeat,

in front of

“A Simpler Time”

overlooking the Julia Belle Swain,

I think of Mother.

Back then,

she once sat before the Mekong,

10,000 miles away.

Death asking for her hand,

how can she accept to go at such a young age?

When escaping certain death becomes a second chance,

she grows stronger with others.

Mekong, oh, Mekong,

you have done it again,

witnessing a new history

With prudence.

Watching your heartbeat,

in front of

fear

overlooking “The Land of Smiles.”

She thinks of her future.

Two daughters

before

two rivers.

Each with hopes and dreams,

like the moon and the sun

intertwining as one.

Mekong, oh, Mekong.

Mississippi, oh, Mississippi.

Two daughters

standing before the shores of the past,

the crossroads of the present

by two rivers.

**Narrator: ChongCher Lee**

My name is ChongCher Lee. C-H-O-N-G-C-H-E-R all one word and last name Lee. I’m the business owner here at Hmong Golden Egg Roll and I am also very active in the community.

Every restaurant tend to have a picture. One of these pictures is of the Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, Thailand 1975-1992. During the war in Laos when the Hmoob become a refugee and that’s the camp the Ban Vinai was the camp in Thailand when the Hmoob refugee when they escaped from Laos was the place of the refugee camp. And this picture brings back great memory that one day, one time, somewhere, back then, you just don’t see where is your future can be like. And like today, you know, only the picture is still there. You know, everything had been gone but the memory and somebody makes a picture nice like that, it just freezes there, the frame just freezes there, and the memory is there. So, that kind of reminding us that, you know, that one time we were somebody who had no future, you don’t know where you are going to go...

This picture has a very meaningful and brings back great value to us so we have a couple pictures of those in there. So, over the years from childhood to now, lots of change. Changing from the war to a refugee camp. We see many things happening many in great poverty, hungry, and all this change. And to come to America also the culture change, you know, when I came to America. This is not something that we expected or we anticipated that you planned for on to go to America. So everyone is learning language. It’s like one day you’re here the next day you are over there...

**Narrator: Nauhoua (Tony) Yang**

I am Tony Yang. I am standing at the corner of 10th St. and State St. close to downtown La Crosse. You know, this is where my life began in the United States. My family came here in 1987. We were fortunate enough to find an apartment close to this area to stay in. This is where we lived for almost six years. And this is where I went to school. I had to get on a bus to go to school. And my mom had to walk to go to work and everyday I would catch the bus.

My father was recruited by the United States CIA to work for the United States CIA fighting the north Communists, North Vietnam, and so after the war ended in 1975 and because of fears of persecution that’s how our family had to move through the jungle and then, you know, escape to Thailand and eventually came here in 1987.

The refugee camps and houses are in grasses and, you know, the houses were built with wood and bamboos and stuff like that. And when we got here, there’s like, you know, electricity, there’s running cars, there’s like buildings, you know, like two to three stories tall, you know, and there are doors and locks everywhere, and everything is so, you know, it was pretty shocking to us.

I started with the La Crosse School District and then hired as a community outreach to work with at-risk youth especially Hmoob students for many years. And this is who I am and this is how I connected to the wider community.

**Narrator: Xiong Xong**

My name is Xong Xiong. We were involved in this nonviolent protest. It happened at Kind's office. There were a lot of us, I would say probably like around 25 to 30 people.

We were refusing to leave, and then they called an officer and he came in and then he gave us citations for trespassing. The war had nothing to do with Iraqis or Afghanis. We were there basically because of capitalist greed and the oil companies, and it had nothing to do with 9/11 or Saddam Hussein or whatever. But I think the jurors, I think they found us guilty because they thought that we were just like a bunch of troublemakers, and that it had nothing to do with Ron Kind so why were we in his office even though he supported the war and you know, but it was all based on a bunch of lies.

I think that people who have never been through war or lived through war or are associated with a family or a group of people who have been through war, really fantasizes about war because they watch too many movies. But when you live with people and when your family and like everything about who you are as a person is attached to a war, it's a real thing. And you know, I lived in a refugee camp, you know, and I can, like, that is a result of a war, you know. Like you can't even imagine what it means to have a third or like half of your family gone. And so, I think that, well, you know, what motivated me was that I didn't want that to happen to other people, and the little that I could do to, to stop that, you know, I was gonna do it, because I see people who live it and who still suffer from it.