

## Orphans of History Hmong Teen Builds Future in Two Conflicting Worlds

By Stephen Magagnini  
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Julie Chang showed off her moves at her first-ever teen dance, causing her first-ever breakup -- all on the same wild night.

"This was the first time I went to a party in my whole life," says Chang, 16, her fingers combing raven locks that flow past her waist. "It was so fun."

She boogied to "Larger Than Life" by the Backstreet Boys that fateful May night, then was confronted by her jealous boyfriend, who didn't know how to fast dance.

"He said it's over. His friend was saying that I was dancing with other guys -- those were my girlfriends! I was so mad, too. I didn't cry -- I'm not the one who broke up, I didn't do anything wrong ... I was saying forget it, he's too old anyway. He's 21."

Her words pour out like a mountain stream in May. It's all part of Julie Chang's grand American adventure. She's 4-foot-11 without her high-heeled Soda shoes, but larger than life -- a diminutive dynamo who honors her ancient culture while embracing the raft of opportunities that have come her way in Sacramento.

Things other American teens take for granted are landmarks in Julie's life: She recently saw her first movie and dined at her first all-you-can-eat buffet.

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Balancing those worlds will challenge Julie in ways she can't imagine.

It's 5:30 a.m. in her family's mildewed Meadowview apartment. The aroma of fried hot dogs, green beans and fresh-steamed rice wafts from the kitchen. Even her father's prize fighting cock is asleep, but Julie has already showered, dressed and made breakfast for her family -- 14 in all, including nine younger brothers and a baby sister.



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For her grandmother, afflicted with dizzy spells and high blood pressure, she has prepared a medicinal chicken soup. "It's part of my job," she says. "I'm proud of it."

She was up past midnight studying for a history test, but there's not a crease on her eager face, not a shadow under her mahogany eyes. She hems her black bell bottoms while a parade of bleary-eyed brothers emerges from the bedroom.

One by one, they hop onto giant 50-gallon water jars -- left over from Y2K, when many Hmong thought the world would end -- surrounding a small oval kitchen table, and devour breakfast.

Also in the kitchen are two 40-pound bags of rice, a neatly stacked pile of clean dishes Julie washed the night before, and a list of 50 phone numbers -- all for members of the Chang clan.

Soon, the three-bedroom house returns to its normal chaos: children bouncing on the sofa and chasing one another around the living room, babies bawling, the phone ringing.

Gliding through this kinetic sea is Julie Chang, Burbank High sophomore, big sister, chief cook and wok washer, laundress, textile artist, tutor, interpreter and the shining hope of the Chang family.

"Sometimes I have so much to do, I don't have time to go to sleep," says Julie, who shares a bedroom with her five oldest brothers. "Last night, I slept on the sofa."

**"I love my life and I'm very happy, but I wish I was a boy. Girls do so much more work. I've been cooking since I was a little girl in the refugee camp." -- Julie Chang**

At 7:20 a.m., Julie's mom begins ferrying children to school in her red pickup. She drops Julie and her brother Meng, 15, at Luther Burbank High School. More than 500 Hmong attend Burbank, making them the school's largest ethnic group. They shine on the chess team, the volleyball team, in student government and the math/science engineering academy. Burbank has its share of ethnic tension, but most Hmong mix easily with other kids.

Miraculously, Julie is managing a 3.5 GPA. She's also president of an Asian American girls club, a regular at the Friday afternoon Hmong forum and the star of Xavier Young's "All Hmong, All The Time" language class.

A few months ago her father, who earns \$900 a month washing rental cars at Sacramento International Airport, paid her the ultimate compliment: He bought her a computer.

The computer, now squeezed into her bedroom, "is helping a lot," Julie says. But she still has to wait for her brothers to fall asleep before she can concentrate. "They're so annoying, talking talking talking ..."

"I love my life and I'm very happy, but I wish I was a boy," she confides. "Girls do so much more work. I've been cooking since I was a little girl in the refugee camp."

### **Culture Shock**

Until she came to Sacramento six years ago, Julie had never been beyond the barbed wire of the Thai refugee camp where she was born.

From the time she was 6, she and her mom embroidered Hmong story cloths known as pa ndao that tell the Hmong odyssey through pictures. Julie stitched stories of a war she'd never seen in a country she'd never visited, then sold them in the camp.

Her family was among the last wave of Hmong refugees to leave the camps. Her grandparents held out hope of returning to Laos to the last.

In 1994, armed only with her ABCs and 1-2-3's, she was thrust into the fifth grade at Freeport Elementary School. Her initial excitement turned to sorrow when the other Hmong girls in her class tired of translating for her. "I understood what they were talking about, but I couldn't say it back."

Her parents were struggling, too. They felt abandoned by her aunt, who had sponsored them in Sacramento, then moved to Minnesota. "My parents said, 'Why is she going over there? We came over here because of her.'"

Julie's a fast learner. She taught herself to read and write Hmong in two months and she's steadily mastering English. When her grandmother had surgery to remove a fist-sized growth on her back, Julie went to the hospital -- a place she'd never been before -- to translate. "I cannot really translate from English to Hmong," she says. "There's no word for 'complicated' in Hmong."

And that, in a word, describes the Hmong predicament: America is a land of many belief systems, cultures and lifestyles, confusing newcomers who have lived by the same rules for centuries.

As the eldest daughter in a Hmong family, Julie rarely has time for fun.

**In six years here, she has seen one movie, "Godzilla," and then only on a field trip. She does watch Hmong videos and catches snatches of "Friends" on TV.**

"Fun?" she does a double take. "I never have time to go play my sport, volleyball." In six years here, she has seen one movie, "Godzilla," and then only on a field trip. She does watch Hmong videos and catches snatches of "Friends" on TV.

The other night, she awoke at 4 a.m. to finish "Sweet Valley High," the latest in her diet of teen romance novels.

Even then, the house isn't always peaceful. Sometimes Julie can hear her 75-year-old grandmother, recently widowed, crying in the next room or listening to sad Hmong songs. Sometimes Julie reads while brushing her teeth.

Julie's brains, looks and work ethic have already generated several marriage proposals, including one from the guy who broke up with her at the dance.

"He still calls me every day," she says. "He says he's sorry, he wants another chance because it's hard to find a girl like me."

He comes over Saturday nights and talks of love, "but I'm not taking it seriously," she says. "I don't have time to date. Education is more important."

Her mother, Cheng Thao, begs Julie, "Don't get married early. You're the only one who can help me." It's Julie who helps her mom shop, Julie who helps her grandmother cash her SSI (Supplemental Security Income) check, Julie who explains the notes from school, Julie who plans her siblings' birthday parties.

But Julie and her mom both know that when a traditional Hmong girl marries is often beyond her control.

## **Orphans Reborn**

Cheng Thao, 33, met her husband in the refugee camp in 1983. She was brushing her teeth when he claimed her. He softened her up with love talk, and three weeks later, they married.

She still waits for him to come home at 11:30 p.m. after eight hours of washing cars.

At 34, Chang Lor is a handsome, practical man in a black Nike cap. His family adores him. "My dad caught a sturgeon in the river," brags son Meng. "He can wash 30 cars in an hour."

Chang's a firm believer in shamanism, but he allows his sons to hedge their spiritual bets: They go to Christian Sunday school.

Still, he values his Hmong heritage enough to set aside \$15 a week for flute lessons for his eldest sons, Meng and Tou. Meng finds it boring, but Tou, 13, enjoys feeling the music vibrate through him. He takes his flute off the wall and plays one of the 11 tunes he's mastered, a song about orphans being reborn. It's a fitting metaphor for the Hmong, orphans of history being reborn in America.

Chang also has enrolled Meng and Tou in Hmong 2000, a paramilitary youth group that meets Tuesday and Thursday nights. He sent Julie, too, but she quit to concentrate on school.

Chang's father, Choua Neng Chang, was a soldier for 20 years and mayor of a mountaintop county of 20,000. He was renowned as a mediator, investigator and judge.

After Laos fell to the communists in 1975, Choua Neng Chang moved his family into the highlands and fought with the Hmong guerrillas.

In April 1981, the Changs and about 1,000 other Hmong lashed bamboo trees into rafts and fled across the Mekong River into Thailand. About half drowned in the crossing.

Julie's dad studied English for two years in Sacramento but still finds the language frustrating. He dreams of buying a home and seeing his children through college. He expects Julie to lead the way.

### **Hmong Girls Doing Well**

Like Julie, half of the Hmong girls at Burbank have B averages or better, compared with 40 percent of the boys, says Principal Kathleen Whelan. Only 25 girls -- 10 percent -- have less than C averages, compared with 23 percent of the boys.

The disparity can be traced to the culture -- while boys are often allowed to go out and play with their friends and roam the streets, Hmong parents keep a much tighter rein on their daughters, says Mai Xi Lee, a Hmong counselor at Burbank. "For a lot of girls, school is their only outlet."

Still, the girls' success is remarkable given their responsibilities at home, Lee says.

Julie's brother Meng, who also maintains a B-plus average, does vacuum, wash some dishes and make a few meals. But little is expected of their younger brothers.

Lee calls Julie "your typical Hmong girl but more so. Not only is she an obedient daughter who knows her duties quite well, she also knows American culture well enough to do well in school so she can be successful at whatever she wants to do."

Julie handles her many roles with grace and pride, partly because she was raised in an all-Hmong environment that offered no choice, and because her parents are wise enough to nourish her dreams.

But some of Julie's Hmong peers at Burbank, especially those born in America, find it harder to balance both worlds.

"I'm going through the struggle right now," says Mary Xiong, a freckle-faced senior who won a scholarship to St. Mary's College in Moraga. She says that when she becomes the Hmong Oprah, her first talk show topic will be "Double Lives of Hmong Youth."

Sometimes her parents support her desire to pursue a career.

"Then, they'll give me lectures: 'You're getting old; You'll be 18 soon; When are you going to marry your boyfriend?'"

Traditional Hmong girls aren't allowed to date, partly because some Hmong parents believe their daughters will be kidnapped into marriage or their suitors will spike their drinks with a magic potion to turn them into love slaves.

If a Hmong boy breaks up with a Hmong girl after several months, he may have to pay her parents a fine, even if there was no physical contact.

Mary, yearbook editor and president of the Hmong club, says at 13 she was ready to marry her first crush, but thankfully he backed off. She says her aunt wasn't so lucky: "She got married last summer at 18 ... Now she's pregnant and divorced." Mary swears she won't get married until she's 30 or 40.

Julie says she wants to wait at least until she has finished college. But despite the pitfalls of early marriage, counselor Lee estimates as many as 60 Hmong girls at Burbank -- more than one in five -- are already married. Some became wives at 14.



**Mary Xiong, a freckle-faced senior, won a scholarship to St. Mary's College in Moraga. (Photo Credit: Sacramento Bee/Anne Chadwick Williams)**

## Julie's dreams

**At the Friday afternoon Hmong Forum led by Hmong teacher Xavier Young, Julie and other students open up about how hard it is to reconcile their modern American dreams with the expectations of their old world parents.**

"The only time I can talk to my dad is when we're eating dinner," says one girl. "I'd like to talk to him about education, but I'm just embarrassed."

Yee Xiong, 17, lost two older brothers in the secret war in Laos. But when he asks about the war, "My dad just walks away or turns the TV louder ... it's just too painful to talk about."

Young, one of nearly 40 Hmong teachers who have been hired by the Sacramento City Unified School District in recent years, appreciates how hard it is for Hmong kids and parents to know one another.

"A lot of our students are hitting the same wall over and over again," he says, "but at the same time, a lot of these students are going to come back and lead us whether they like it or not."

He's counting on Julie to become one of those leaders.

After a long day of French adjectives, Bolshevik history, probability, anatomy and Hmong language, Julie presides over a meeting of the all-girl She Club.

Today the club, which deals with everything from leadership skills to breast cancer, is preparing a dance performance.

Julie shows a sextet of Asian American girls how to gracefully twirl their hands and move their feet to a haunting Hmong love song. The song is about the first stages of a breakup (moral: You'll feel the heartache later).

At 5 p.m., her mother drives her home, where anarchy reigns. Meng has pulled out a hunk of frozen mystery meat from the freezer. He's hacking it up for dinner, stopping now and then to attend to a crying baby. The other kids draw with colored markers, watch TV or chase one another around the house. Julie takes over, cooking a dinner that's not unlike the breakfast she made 14 hours earlier.

It's not until Saturday afternoon that she's able to steal a few moments for herself in the cool confines of the library a few blocks from her home. She asks the librarians to help her research how to become a registered nurse, a teacher, a scientist.

Tears shine in Julie's eyes when she thinks of Laos, the country that has shaped so much of her life, even though she has never even been there. "We don't have a country of our own," she laments.



Julie and Kou Vue.  
(Photo: Sacramento  
Bee/Anne Chadwick  
Williams)

But she's making America her own and says she's impatient to join the new wave of Hmong leaders. "I feel like I want to be in college, right there, right now," she says. "It seems so incredible to make my dreams come true."

But Julie's blueprint for life in America was about to change dramatically.

"It's too late"

After Julie came home from summer school at the end of July, her cousin showed up to fix her computer. He brought with him Kou Vue, a 17-year-old boy Julie met about a year ago at a meeting of Hmong 2000, the paramilitary youth group.

The computer fixed, the three of them got into Kou's car. But Kou dropped off Julie's cousin first, then told Julie he planned to marry her.

She was shocked: "We never went out; he just came to visit me. We never actually talked about love."

What happened next was even more of a shock.

Kou, a junior at Florin High, took Julie to his home, where all his relatives were waiting for her.

As they walked through the front door, a shaman swirled a live chicken over their heads - a traditional Hmong ceremony marking the start of the marriage.

The next day, Julie's mother called and offered to take her home.

"No," said Julie. "It's too late." In Hmong culture, she knows, leaving once you've been claimed by a boy can ruin your reputation for life.

"He's a nice guy, you'll have a nice future," her mother responded.

Julie felt scared, confused and excited all at once. She likes Kou, and says she went with him of her own free will. Yet she knows little about him except that he gets good grades

and everybody thinks he's nice. And, she says, he has promised to support her dream of going to college.

A bride price was set -- \$6,400 -- and the wedding took place Aug. 4 at her parents' home.

"I feel so bad for myself," Julie said during her third day in Kou's house -- the day the Hmong believe a bride's fate is sealed. "I shouldn't have come with him that day. Before this, I told the whole world I didn't want to get married."

But, like a million Hmong girls before her, she's resigned to her fate: "Everyone regrets it after we get married," she says. "But I think he loves me, so I will stay with him."