



But There Is Hope | Art of Honor and Offerings

**Story by: Ma Vue
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There are many painful facets to the pandemic that befell us all, but one issue in particular was quite hard to come to terms with as a first generation Hmong-American. Between misinformation of the virus among the Hmoob (Hmong) elders, distrust in the healthcare system and historical factors that disproportionately affect minority communities, the Hmoob community was facing a battle during the pandemic we were not equipped for: the handling of death and closure.

It was particularly difficult seeing how adversely the pandemic affected Hmoob funerals. I watched five of my peers lay to rest a parent during the pandemic, three of whom passed from the virus. Funeral rituals and customs are considered most sacred and play a significant role in the traditional Hmoob experience, both before and after death. To illustrate the importance, we need to take a glimpse back at traditional funeral processions.

Back in Laos and Thailand, funeral services could last anywhere from seven to twelve days. It was believed that for the deceased to make the correct journey home, they must trace their path back to their birthplace where they would be laid to rest. With vehicular transportation inaccessible at the time, the processions were led by spiritual leaders on foot with the body being carried on a stretcher, sometimes for miles on end.

After the forced emigration of the Hmoob after aiding the USA during the Vietnam War, many rituals had to be adapted in a way that would require even more collaboration and planning to achieve the proper send off, something that was significantly harder to do during the pandemic. The recently deceased should have been honored with the highest grandeur with loved ones and community members from all over the world flocking in to pay their respects. To see it dwindled down to a handful of immediate family members on social media during the pandemic was heartbreaking considering how much our parents and elders had gone through to get here.

These were individuals who had to survive atrocities many of us had only read about in textbooks. They fought and evaded Vietcong Guerrilla fighters during the Vietnam War—with infants and toddlers strapped to their backs. They sat in refugee camps for years with a glimmer of hope to one day find freedom in a promised land far away, only later to be heartbroken by racism, socio-economic disparities, and alienation by the very countries they aided during the war. Everyone had to rebuild their lives, regardless of previous social standing or prominence. War heroes and leaders were treated as second class citizens for their struggle to assimilate. But they all overcame, and that's the most heartbreaking part of it all. They had prevailed yet didn't have enough time to bask in the glory of their triumphs—the glory of their children and their children's children living happy lives as doctors, business owners, educators and leaders.

But there is hope. For centuries, the Hmoob have overcome many obstacles in life and in death, to not only survive but to thrive. With the pandemic's end in sight, I believe these individuals will be blessed with the grandest of celebrations and releasing of their souls when the time comes. With the love and support of our community, they will find their way back home as we—the living—find ours.

Ma Vue is a Hmong-American, multimedia and visual artist based in Eau Claire. Ma is a proud University of Wisconsin-Madison alumnus and Powers-Knapp Scholar committed to the art of visual storytelling. His work stems from the struggles and triumphs of his communities.

View all the pieces in the *Healing Reflections* [online gallery](#).