

Cy Thao

**State Representative, Minnesota House of Representatives;
Artist;
and Owner, Sunlight Services, LLC
Alumnus, TRiO Upward Bound, University of Minnesota**



Representative Cy Thao received a National TRiO Achiever

Award in September 2009 at the Council for Opportunity in Education conference in San Antonio, TX. In his acceptance speech, Cy talks about his educational and life journey.

My father was one of five provincial Governors in Xieng Khouang province, appointed by the Governor. He was also a farmer who had never gone to school. We lived in a small village high in the mountains in northern Laos. Because he had sided with the U.S. during the Vietnam War, after the war, my father had to leave the country or be killed. When I was three, we were smuggled out of Laos in the middle of the night and lived in a refugee camp in Thailand for the next five years. We came to the U.S. when I was eight. Growing up was difficult: I had a late start; had to learn a new language; we were poor and different, so we were easy targets for the school bullies.

I was a sophomore at North Community High School when I heard about Upward Bound, a TRiO program. I learned about the program through my friends in the program. The program helped steer my interest towards college through afterschool support, summer college preparatory classes, college visits, and preparing for the college entrance exams. Basic information on how to apply for student financial aid and how to fill out a college application were difficult tasks if no one in your family knew how to do it.

With the help of the TRiO Upward Bound counselors, I was able to start thinking about the real possibility of college but more importantly, they showed me how to get to college and stay in college. They provided me with the knowledge on how to manage my time so I could be successful once I got into college. They helped connect the dots for me. Not going to college after high school was not an option for me anymore. Upward Bound not only showed me that I could go to college, but it prepared me to be successful.

Through TRiO Upward Bound I was also able to learn about civic engagement. I had the opportunity to spend a week at the State Capitol and learn about state government and the political process. At the time I didn't think much about the experience, but after reflecting on it later, now I think that experience led me to want to run for public office, and now I am a member of the Minnesota State Legislature.

Today, I am not just a member of the State Legislature; I am an award-winning artist who has created many opportunities for other artists through the Center for Hmong Arts and Talent (which I co-founded). So far, I am the only Hmong American artist to have a solo exhibition of my paintings at the world-renowned Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the largest art museum in Minnesota. In 2002 I ran a successful political campaign and became the first Hmong American in the Minnesota House of Representatives.

I am particularly pleased that once I learned how to navigate the college preparation and admissions process through TRiO Upward Bound, I was able to help my six brothers and sisters to go beyond high school. My parents had never even been to a school until they came to this country. My family now has five college and three technical college graduates.

I can honestly say that my life and the life of my family could have turned out much differently if I had not had the opportunities TRiO Upward Bound provided. Thanks to TRiO Upward Bound; their investment has paid off. The cycle of poverty for our family has been broken.