

A historic figure in Minnesota': Kao Ly Ilean Her, a Hmong pioneer in education, law, and culture

[Tiffany Bui](#) May 19, 2021 1:25 p.m.



Family portraits. Top left: Ilean (at right) with her sisters Sharon and Kristen in 1987. Top center: Ilean portrait. Top right: Ilean (second from left) holding her baby brother, James around 1981. Bottom right: In 1977, the Her family appeared in an article in their local Iowa newspaper about their first Thanksgiving in America. Bottom center: Ilean, in an immigration clearance document in 1976. Bottom left: sisters Sharon and Ilean. Images Courtesy of Sharon Her

This story comes to you from Sahan Journal, a nonprofit newsroom dedicated to providing authentic news reporting about Minnesota's new immigrants and refugees. MPR News is a partner with Sahan Journal and will be sharing stories between [SahanJournal.com](https://www.sahanjournal.com) and [MPRNews.org](https://www.mprnews.org).

Kao Ly Ilean Her shattered barriers as a woman of many firsts: the first Hmong woman to pass the bar exam in Minnesota, the first Hmong woman to be appointed a University of Minnesota Regent.

Her died May 13 due to COVID-19 complications. She was 52 years old. Known to many as Ilean, she won respect and gratitude as a lifelong leader dedicated to the Asian American and Pacific Islander community. Her led the government agency

Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans (CAPM) for more than a decade and founded multiple nonprofits serving Asian Americans.

A passionate advocate for the arts, Her held a central role in starting the [Dragon Festival](#), an annual gathering which celebrates pan-Asian identities across Minnesota. Thanks to her work—at Hnub Tshiab: Hmong Women Achieving Together, Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans, and other organizations—friends and family say her legacy lives on.

Longtime friend Pa Der Vang said people of color and refugees often feel pressure to tell a positive story about success, after arriving in the U.S. with just “the clothes on your back.” Her embodied such a success story, growing up in a refugee camp to become an attorney. But she didn’t buy into the myth of meritocracy.

“She recognized that there were structural barriers that resulted in social injustices faced by many communities of color,” Vang said. Her concentrated on helping other community members “break down those barriers,” Vang added, “even though she had the resilience, the hard work, the fortitude and intelligence to really make it in her own life.”

Becoming a community leader—in high school

Her was born in Long Cheng, Laos. Her family fled the country following her father’s involvement with U.S. forces during the Secret War, according to a press release from the University of Minnesota after her death. They arrived in America in 1976, settling first in Iowa before moving to Minnesota.

Sharon Her said her sister expressed an early interest in politics, often sitting in on their father’s community meetings. According to her sister, Ilean Her wasn’t afraid to speak her mind, with her parents’ encouragement.

Ilean Her enjoyed a close relationship with her father, Chad Vua Her, a respected community leader. Formerly a school superintendent in Laos, Chad instilled into his children the importance of education and civic work.

“My dad really believed in her and trusted her. And he knew that Ilean was smart,” Sharon said. “My dad was very adamant, ‘Ilean has her own will.’”

Despite cultural expectations, Ilean never married or had kids. Her primary focus was her education and career: She graduated from Hamline University with a degree in political science and went on to obtain her law degree at the University of Minnesota in 1994.

Pa Der Vang recognized how her friend ignored some social expectations. “Women our age, in our 40s and 50s, were taught to marry early and give up education,” Vang said. “For her, her path was different. Her father protected her.”

As the oldest of four siblings, Ilean became a leader in many aspects of her life.

Sharon said her sister often did things without being asked, whether taking care of her siblings or co-founding the Asian student club at Johnson Senior High School, in St. Paul. Given the popularity of soccer in the Hmong community, Sharon said Ilean even helped create the first high school soccer teams in St. Paul.

“She doesn’t talk about these things,” Sharon said “In her day-to-day life, she just sees a need and then she fills it.”

Supporting Hmong women

One of these community needs? Supporting young women—particularly Hmong women. This led her to co-found Hnub Tshiab, in 2006, alongside college friend MayKao Hang.

“Because we grew up in a generation where there weren’t a lot of Asian women in leadership, we often were a support for each other,” said Hang, who is the vice president and founding dean of the St. Thomas College of Health. “I can’t count the hundreds, if not thousands, of young women and young people who really owe her.” Hnub Tshiab, a St. Paul nonprofit helps young Hmong women develop leadership skills while tackling sexism and gender-based violence in the community. The organization offers several retreats and leadership institutes with the mission to improve the lives of Hmong women. Over 150 women have graduated from Hnub Tshiab’s leadership institute, according to board member Vang.

“So many times, I could tell that she was the smartest person in the room. She was the person who had done the most, led the most, had the most experience. But she never let it show.”

~ MayKao Hang

While Her became widely known in the Hmong community and across the Twin Cities, Hang remembers her friend of over 30 years as a warm and quirky personality. Her had a knack for directly yet politely telling people when they were talking too long, which came in handy for keeping events on schedule. She was also a notorious procrastinator.

“The deadline would come and everybody would be really scared that things wouldn’t happen,” Hang recalled. “And then 30 minutes before, Ilean would show up like the Tasmanian Devil. Everything would get done, and everything would just be very organized.”

Using theater to collect stories from Hmong elders

Beyond her work in law and social justice advocacy, Her also nurtured an enthusiasm for the arts, which she brought to her work at the Hmong Elders Center, an adult day center in St. Paul. As executive director of that group, writer and performer May Lee-Yang said Her opened the center’s doors to theater and crafts.

With Her’s support, Yang launched “Letters to Our Grandchildren” in 2014, an initiative to preserve the stories and knowledge that elders wanted to leave for the next generation. The project gave the elders leading roles in a theater show and documentary, and allowed the wider public to see their talents.

“Every performance we did was packed because people said they’d never seen Hmong elders perform before,” Lee-Yang said.

At the time of her death, Her was in the second year of a six-year term serving on the Board of Regents at the University of Minnesota. Her 2019 election marked the first time a Hmong person served as a University regent.

She told the Star Tribune after her election that she appreciated the selection process, when she convinced legislators she was a good fit for the position. “I earned this position, vs. an appointment,” she said at the time. She told the Minnesota Daily last year that her priorities as regent were “affordability, accessibility, and an equitable, quality education.”

‘She was not able to get the vaccine’

Her died during a pandemic that has disproportionately impacted the Hmong community. According to a [report released by the Coalition of Asian American Leaders \(CAAL\), 49 percent of all Asian COVID-19 deaths occurred in the Hmong community.](#)

Sharon said her sister was dedicated to healthcare equity, and encouraged everyone in the family to get vaccinated. However, Ilean was unable to get the vaccine due to a chronic lung disease.

“The tragedy of it is that she was not able to get the vaccine,” Sharon said. “As the country is kind of opening back up, it became clear that the risk was getting higher and higher for her.”

Nonetheless, Sharon added, “Ilean still wanted to be engaged, and she still had a lot of work to do. And she felt like she needed to be in the community.”

To many, Her was a leader from behind the scenes. She threw her support behind other trailblazing Hmong leaders like Fawj Her and Mee Moua during their successful campaigns for the state Legislature.

“So many times, I could tell that she was the smartest person in the room,” Hang said “She was the person who had done the most, led the most, had the most experience. But she never let it show. She was able to create an environment where young women, older women, women with a lot of experience, they were just all equal in the eyes of Ilean. And everybody felt special in her presence.”

Hang added, “I think she’ll be remembered as a historic figure in Minnesota.”

The funeral for Kao Ly Ilean Her will be held on June 5–6 at the Legacy Funeral Home.

The Hmong women’s leadership development group Hnub Tshiab has started a [GoFundMe for a scholarship in her honor.](#)