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Editorial notebook: Drive to succeed led him to MIT

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Doua Yang, born behind the barbed wire of a refugee camp in Thailand, has come a long way to achieve the American dream. He's another of Sacramento's Hmong success stories.

Now beginning his sophomore year at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he is majoring in electrical engineering. He's currently the only Hmong student at this No. 1-ranked undergraduate engineering school in the country, where the first Hmong student graduated only the year before he arrived.

I sat down with him and talked about his journey.

He is a little shy and circumspect. Still, it doesn't take long to see his ethic of self-reliance and hard work – and willingness to take risks. His success also is a clear tribute to his family's high expectations and to teachers and schools that recognized his talent and nurtured it.

And it serves as an inspiration to others – not least to his younger sister and three younger brothers born in this country.

Too often we hear stories of the difficult transition of Hmong immigrants to America (including poverty, high dropout rates and gang activity).

The Hmong in America came from rural villages in Laos with no electricity, running water or schooling – living as farmers and herdsman. They also suffered the trauma of war. In the strategic mountain border region between North Vietnam and Laos, the United States recruited the Hmong to fight in the Vietnam conflict in the 1960s.

Communist-backed forces took over Laos after the United States left in 1975 and targeted the Hmong for retribution. Many fled to Thailand, where they languished in refugee camps, often for years, awaiting resettlement.

By the mid-1990s, more than 100,000 Hmong had been admitted to the United States – including Doua and his family.

Doua arrived in Sacramento at age 2 in 1992 with his mother and five sisters. None spoke English. An uncle had come a few years earlier. Doua doesn't know what happened to his father. His mother has struggled to support the household, which remains poor.

Doua's older sisters pursued a traditional life for themselves, marrying young, but they drummed into him that "education is what makes someone successful."

His mother, too, put pressure on the eldest male in the family to achieve.

"They expect a lot out of you as the son," Doua says. "And I was not wanting to disappoint them."

He was the go-to fix-it guy in the household and began tinkering with electronic devices at a young age. In elementary school, Doua says, teachers told him he was good at math. So off he went.

His interest in engineering and computer electronics was sparked at Sacramento Charter High School when he took the introduction to engineering course and then did an internship with the information technology department.

Children of college-educated parents often take navigating the college entrance process for granted. For kids whose parents had no schooling and don't speak English, the process is daunting at best – preparing for college entrance exams, deciphering applications, writing essays.

Here, again, high schools can make a difference. Sacramento High paid for Doua's college entrance exam prep class – and he earned 700s on the SAT II science and chemistry tests. He also got the highest mark possible on the advanced placement calculus test.

The school also organizes college visits for students, and Doua did a number of them. Seniors take a class where they learn how to complete college applications, and they write and rewrite personal essays. The school also has a full-time college counselor who builds personal relationships with students and is able to write strong, individualized letters of recommendation.

What about the cost of an MIT education, which tops \$50,000 a year? MIT tells students that if they get accepted, they will get the money they need to come. Doua has all expenses paid.

So how is he doing? In his first year, he took chemistry, biology, calculus, physics and writing. He did best at math. Physics was hard, he says. And he struggled with biology, which he will take again.

MIT was the "right choice," he says. "It's hard but good."

As he looks to the future, Doua says he wants to have his own life and, at the same time, to be a good sibling, "somebody to look up to."

His mantra is, "Work hard. Study hard. This is a land of opportunity. Try your best."

Doua is yet another example of how individual discipline and drive, plus family ambition and concerted school efforts, provide a winning combination to succeed in this country.

Postscript: The hardships of life in a tough neighborhood don't disappear for a student going away to college. Doua noted in parting that "someone broke into our home on Aug. 10" and took a box that contained his high school diploma.



