

Wellness in Color: 1.5 Generation Immigrant

Interview Guest: Vang Xor Xiong

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Vang Xor: I think how similar to how like my parents talk about their traumas is being transferred to me in the context of war stories. I think it's very important to understand. In order to help someone first you have to understand who you are.

Intro – Brian: Welcome to Wellness in Color on the Mental Health in Minnesota podcast produced by NAMI Minnesota, The National Alliance on Mental Illness. Wellness in Color is a podcast series that explores perspectives on mental health to reshape the cultural language of mental illness. On this episode you will hear your host, NAMI Minnesota staff member, Caroline Ludy, interviewing Vang Xor Xiong. Being a 1.5 generation immigrant and mental health advocate, Xor for short, is at a unique intersection that enables him to bridge both worlds in a unique way. With this vision, his dream is to push for an intentional movement of mental health acceptance within his community so that mental health check-ins become the norm within everyday conversation. Within his role as Partnership Organizer for the Minnesota based Asian American Organizing Project, his plans include expanding on his current work to open up opportunity for voices from other marginalized communities such as the Asian American and Pacific Islander queer population.

A note on sponsorship, efforts related to Wellness in Color podcast episodes were supported by the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences of the National Institutes of Health Award Number UL1TR002494. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health. Visit NAMI Minnesota online at namimn.org. Subscribe to the podcast and listen to more episodes where ever you get your podcasts. Now here's your host, NAMI Minnesota staff member Caroline Ludy.

Caroline: So Xor, you are also part of our multicultural advisory board. Can you just tell me more about yourself?

Vang Xor: Yeah, so some background information about me. Being a 1.5 generation immigrant, that means I was not born in the United States. I was actually born in a refugee camp in Thailand. Me and my family we moved to the United States in 2006. It's a really interesting experience to go from living in a refugee camp to like this United States where there are a lot of opportunities. So that's a little about where I come from. But in terms of my experience with mental health I didn't really knew a lot about mental health until the later half of my life. Which is not that long (laughs) But I think my first experience seeing mental health was definitely with my mom. She definitely had symptoms of depression and anxiety. There wasn't any language to talk about it and my parents didn't talk about it. So that was my earlier experience around mental health and whatnot. Yeah, that's a little bit about my background and my first interaction with mental health. But my first interaction with mental health within my own experience

specifically wasn't until my highschool year. I feel like I always had like symptoms of depression but because I never really talked about it the conversation around mental health was never talked about with my family and so it's really hard to identify whether or not these are the norms or not. But it wasn't really until, I believe, junior year of high school I had an anxiety attack and I had a really helpful teacher. She was my French teacher. Actually you know she brought me down to my school clinic, within the highschool I was in. Within that clinic there is a psych department. So I was really fortunate to have that resource available at my high school. Where she brought me down there and I had a two hour session with the psychologist there. And from there she was able to pinpoint information about what was going on. Give me clarity around the experience that I was having. The emotions that I was having. So that was my you know myself and interaction around mental health and what not.

Caroline: So throughout this whole journey because you said that you originally moved here from Thailand, in 1996. Currently how old are you?

Vang Xor: I'm currently twenty one right now. I moved to the United States when I was like eight or nine.

Caroline: And so can you tell me a little bit more about your experience back in the refugee camp in Thailand and then from there how your mental health journey kinda shaped.

Vang Xor: Yeah so I think you know growing up in the refugee camp there, it is a third world, right, that's the reality that it is. I definitely feel like that has a huge impact on my parent's mental health and I believe that's also transferred to my mental health too, right? You know, growing up in the refugee camp my parents always warned us about being safe and being secure. The way that they did that, the only way they knew how, was to tell stories of their experience, right? My parents are survivors of the Secret War, and so you know they are survivors of that war and so the only way that they give us lessons around safety and security was through war stories. I believe those were their way of addressing their own mental health without knowing. And so, you know, growing up there those are the stories or spaces that I remember and I believe those stories have also transferred into my mental health as well. And then moving to United States I believe it's still very similar in terms of the context of being in a survival mode. Being someone who moves to a whole completely different country where they don't have the knowledge, the language, the access that most people who are born here have. My parents, you know we were sponsored by my uncle, who was able to bring us to the United States. And so it was a really hard transition for me and my family.

Caroline: And you talk about, you say that you know the transition to the United States, for you did not have the same context or experience that native, maybe, born individuals have here. But really what do you mean by that because when you experienced you said that first bout of anxiety in your junior year of high school, how were you able to frame that?

Vang Xor: I think at the time it was really hard for me to understand what was going on, right. I don't know if any of you all have ever experienced an anxiety attack or whatnot, but to me what it felt like was just this wave of fear and emotions that I didn't know why it was happening, right. I remember I was talking to my teacher 'cause she noticed that my grades were dropping and generally in French class I have a pretty solid grade, right, but you know toward the later half of the year she noticed that my grade went from like an A to a C and D and so there was a huge difference within a semester change. So she was addressing to me about her concern about my grades and whatnot and I don't know what happened but that triggered my anxiety. I just remembered this immense fear of my environment and

fear of what was going on. It was real hard to understand why I was afraid cause this wasn't the first conversation I'd had with a teacher about getting supports and whatnot. But that specific moment was so filled with fear that I was essentially petrified, I didn't know what to do. She was, you know a really, I was really glad she was experiencing, you know maybe I actually don't know if she had experienced mental health or not, but the way that she approached me and led me down to our nurse's was really helpful.

Caroline: And so from that experience, were you able at all to tell your parents, or like how did that kind of draw out in terms of you telling people that you know your own anxiety?

(9:03): Vang Xor: Yeah so from that experience I was, after that I started having sessions with our psychiatrist. We started unpacking what was going on with me and we started unpacking my experience. It was really hard to tell my parents because there was no way of telling, there's already a language barrier, right? The way that I was talking about my mental health in the psychiatrist was, you know, in a very western way of talking and it was real hard to, like, how do you unpack, you know, western ideas in words in a language that doesn't have a translation for those words and those ideas. How do you transfer the talk about mental health into, like, Hmong where, you know, there isn't, you know, language around, like, mental health, and it took me a while to really figure out, like, how do I do that, how do I transfer this thoughts and this idea of, like, wellness into my own culture that has a different set of infrastructure, different set of language nuance. I'm still trying to figure that out today. I think one of my biggest learned lessons is really understanding that, you know, where- looking at the culture, and what kind of support system that exists within the culture already and how do we utilize that support system, right. For example, in the Hmong community, there's this wellness ceremony called "soul calling." What it does is that we will have a shamen to come into a household and like, do a ritual or ceremony that brings back the soul of the families, right. And what it does is just essentially a way of securing your soul to your body, and it was really interesting to look at that perspective, like ok, that itself is a form of wellness. Essentially if you look at it from a, for lack of a better word, like an A to B comparison, the spiritualists, the shamen, is a psychiatrist where they're bringing in these language that the community understands and the idea of a soul is the idea of wellness, right, cause in our community we associate the wellbeing of your soul is equivalent to the wellbeing of your overall experience, right. So, for example, in my- someone in my community could be experiencing a lot of, like, illness, and there was this one specific memory where my dad was actually kind of ill, and the shamen was like "oh, his soul is sad," right. So what ended up happening was we did a ceremony to honor the soul and what happened was we called on a lot of our neighbors, our family members, extended family members to come in a share words of wellness with my dad, to really talk to my dad and also talk to my dad's soul to like, essentially welcome the soul and let the soul know there are people that care for him. So that was a really interesting way of having the community support someone who may be experiencing wellness in a different way. So yeah, that's my experience from having my first anxiety attack to where I am where I'm trying to figure out how to navigate these conversations within the home community.

Caroline: (12:13) So do you fuse a western tradition as well within your own mental health journey, or is it kind of- what else does it look like?

Vang Xor: I think for me, what I do is essentially bridging the two, cause I feel like those- the two concepts are very- can be, not necessary fuse, but create a pathway where both are able to travel in-between the two ideas, so that's what I try to do. When I talk about mental wellness in the western context, I talk about checking in system. I focus more around on, like, the interpersonal relationship building as opposed to the medications and what not. I do believe that is a pathway that works for some

people, but I think, in terms of the pathways that work for my community, medication is not necessarily the way to go, and so I focus more on like the interpersonal relationship because those are extremely prevalent in the Hmong community. And so what I try to do is think about, like ok, if I'm talking about wellness and check-in, what way does wellness and check-in already exist in my community and how can I bridge the two ideas, how can I let my parents know that I am doing a wellness check-in, being intentional about it, but doing it in a way that they understand in their cultural contexts. I just recently started doing this with my friend but I remember the only way my parents knew how to do a check-in with us was constantly asking us "have we've eaten," whether that's at the beginning of the day, two hours later after they just asked that question or in the middle of the night, they are always constantly asking us have we eaten, are we fed. And I believe that stems from the fact that that's the environment they grew up in, the refugee camps, being survivors of war, the only way to check in on someone is to make sure that they're fed, they have the energy to continue moving forward. And so, I've been recently tapping into that idea with my friends, and I- every night when I call them and ask "hey, have you eaten yet," and I think they understand where that's coming from, it's like my form of check in. And what I do to make it clear is, "hey, just calling in to check in, how are you doing." And then, I immediately follow with "have you eaten yet." So bridging the idea with "have you eaten yet" but using it in a western context of checking in. So that's what I try to do in terms of how do I connect the western idea of wellness or my cultural idea of wellness.

Caroline: (14:55) in terms of other forms of wellness for you, in terms of supporting your mental health journey, how are you able to support your friends within your own understanding of mental health and wellness, beyond that.

Vang Xor: I think that- it's really hard to- it's really hard because I feel like each individual person has specific needs, right, it really takes time to build that trust and that relationship to be able to really understand what kind of support system they need, and also being able to do it in a healthy way that you are not affected. I think in the past, I have supported people in a way that was definitely not healthy, I have talked to people about their issues and how they're struggling with it and I could feel like that secondary effect, where I feel like "oh crap, I feel what you're feeling and I don't know if this is necessarily how I genuinely feel or if this is because I am supporting you and you're experiencing your- your stories are transferring, like the effect of transferring." And I think about, similar to how my parents talk about their traumas and how that is being transferred to me in the context of war stories. And so I think it's very important to understand- I think, in order to help someone first you really have to understand who you are and how your emotions operate. I think, for me, if I am able to understand how my emotions operate and I'm checking in with someone and I notice that there is a dramatic change after the check ins, that's when I check in with myself, "ok, am I feeling this way because I talked to this person? Or am I feeling this way because I genuinely feel this way?" and being able to differentiate your feelings and your feelings of empathy with someone. I think if you consistently support people and have the secondary effect, it could have a negative effect on your own wellness, and so, I take time to take care of myself in order to take care of others.

Caroline: (17:10) I continue to hear you use the word "transference," and talking about how it's either going to be a positive or negative effect depending on the who individually you talk to, but specifically, because you say you identify as Hmong, how do you think then that services could be improved for people within the Hmong community as well?

Vang Xor: I really do think that- so for me, in the Hmong community, one of the core culture infrastructures is bloodlines. We value our bloodline very highly, and the reason for that is because our

community has been experiencing a lot of, well at least for my own understanding, I feel like our community has been experiencing a lot of death and persecutions, so maintaining our cultural identity through bloodline is extremely important. Carrying the family name, making sure that our family name exists beyond ourselves. And so, I think if you are treating someone that's within that such tight knit community, you really have to understand how your treatment of that individual affects their relationship with the rest of the bloodline. And bloodlines goes beyond us, your immediate family, I think, for us, there is the eighteen clans. There's the eighteen clans and they're like the different eighteen last names, and essentially if you have the same last name as someone that means they're within your bloodlines, they're within your relatives. And so, really understanding how that system works to really treat not just one person but their individual relationships with their extended bloodlines. I can talk a little bit about how the bloodlines system works. It's that, back in the old days, as some people will call it, there's eighteen clans and the reason why bloodlines becomes so important is that a lot of the Hmong community at that time did not live together in like one big nation, we lived in villages that are separate within two to three days foot travel. And so, in order to travel between villages, you really have to rely on your bloodline. Imagine if you are a stranger going to a town. You know no one there. How do you survive within the next three to four days in that town. And so that's where bloodlines come in, because I think we value our bloodlines so much that, if I was- let's say that you were coming to my town and you know no one but you have the same last name as me, you are within my bloodline. You can always ask me for a place to stay, food. And at that time, the way that that worked back in the day is that that's how you rely, how you survive, you rely on your bloodlines. You know, when you go to a different town you can always ask people within your bloodlines "hey, what's your last name, my last name is this and I'm from this clan, you are from this clan, can you support me while I'm here for the next three to four days as I'm making my way to this other destination." So a lot of people use bloodlines as a support system to take rest stops, to get food and shelter as they are on their journey to this destination that they are going to. And going back to modern day, thinking about how important our bloodline is in terms of treatment systems. We've been looking into how does one person's relationship with the rest of the bloodline interact, how does their wellness also affect the wellness of their whole entire family or their extended family and the rest of the clan members. So I think if you are really able to understand the important infrastructure of bloodlines and clan members, you'll have a better, more effective treatment system developed for- especially for someone that's in the Hmong community.

Caroline: (20:57) So then how's your own cultural identity and then mental health journey infused with your larger work at the AAOP as partnership organizer?

Vang Xor: I think, for me, my cultural identity really plays a key role in how I want to do mental health work, because I think there has been a lot of mental health work that talks about medications and developing your support system, but for me, I want to flip, I want to be like, how can we tap into these support systems that already exist, and how do we bring visibility to these support systems and how do we build intentions around it. You know, a lot of the time, our Hmong community, we see these support systems, we use it, but there isn't a lot of understanding of the importance of it. Not saying that they don't know how important bloodline is, but how do we go beyond just like, oh your bloodline is going to take care of you, but how do we go beyond that, like, "hey, I noticed that this person is having these issues," understanding- being able to do check-ins, like "hey, let's say I've noticed that you are having a lot of wellness issues," being able to go to check in like, "hey, are you ok, what is your bloodline and how can I support you?" and really understand that if your bloodline is within my bloodline, then yes I can support you. But also going beyond that, because I feel like right now, people are only really supporting people within their bloodlines. Being able to essentially create some kind of form of communication that

really utilizes the existing infrastructure. I think one of the greatest things we can do, especially in the Hmong community, is understanding that, “hey, this person is from this bloodline and I know people that are within this bloodline, I can connect these two people.” So using our connections through our bloodline as a network of resources essentially to get people from one point to another point for support, and I think that also ties to the western idea that if you don't have a support system, if you cannot support this individual, where else can you lead them to. How I navigate my understanding of mental wellness in a western idea and connecting to my cultural identity in the work that I do is really looking at what is the idea in western society, but how do I implement it in a way that makes sense. Because I think that idea can be very similar concepts and ideas can transfer very easily but the implementation itself has to be very careful and has to be very intentional, cause the way that implements- but, like, medications in the western society is very different from the way that I talk about medications in eastern society. Medication itself, the idea of using natural or substance to cure, its prevalent in both societies but the way we go about it- in western society, we're on pills and concentrated amounts, but not of the western society, how do we use herbs and what not, how do we use roots and natural herbs. Both ideas are still centered around using medication to support but the way you get them is very different. And so, what I do is I think about the idea that mental wellness in western society and how can I implement that with my understanding of my own culture. And I'm always learning about- I'm also learning when to implement this and when is not a good idea to implement this and understand what idea can transfer easily and what idea doesn't, and it's an error and trial, error and trial kind of thing where I'm still learning how to navigate that conversation. So that's present within the work that I do at my organization. My role has shifted to something that is more focused around coalitions and relationship building, and so I think about where is my understanding of wellness and where is my understanding- cultural understanding of cultural identities and how can I implement that in my relationship building with coalitions, in my relationship building with partners, it could just be relationship building with one-on-one individuals. Yes, that is now I navigate between all three identities.

Caroline: (25:16) And then, just a little bit more, just finally, I want to go back to just a phrase you talked about: “have you eaten?” So, is this a phrase that you would just use amongst good friends or is it just kind of a check in for anybody?

Vang Xor: (25:29) I think it varies, I think if its a good friend, I generally use it, and that's because I have already built a relationship with this individual, there is already this mutual understanding of “hey, this is my way of checking in,” but if its a stranger, I like to like- can they understand the context of this phrase. If I were to check in with my white friends, if I just asked “have you eaten,” out of the blue, that seems like I'm prying into their schedule, their daily schedule. But if I asked that specific question to someone within my cultural community, they get the implementation context of like, “oh yeah, this is a check in system.” And that question specifically varies from person to person, depending on- can they understand the cultural implications, or if this is someone I already have a built relationship with then I think it's easier to ask that question.

Caroline: (26:30) We talked earlier, before our conversation for the podcast, you said you wanted to generally help other marginalized communities such as the Asian American, Pacific Islander queer population. Can you speak a little bit more about that?

Vang Xor: Yeah, so I think I'm also coming from an idea of intersectionality, understanding that we just don't have one identity but a multitude of identities and how all of those interact with our daily experience differently. So I think about how can I create opportunities or bring conversations into the

API queer communities, thinking- understanding that it is a really hard to talk about these topics within just the general community. And I think about how I feel like the marginalized community has a bigger impact or- mental health has a bigger impact because they are not just having difficulties talking about mental wellness but also understanding that mental wellness is connected to their identity, their queer identity as well. So understanding that some people may not have that luxury of being able to openly talk about their queer identity in association to their mental health. And so I want to really open up the conversation about mental health in API queer communities. And that's something that I'm still struggling to really find a pathway to do that. Recently, I have done a workshop around trans and queer issues but within Asian communities, (28:06) and this workshop was- the HMSA (Hmong Minnesota Student Association at the U of M where we had a workshop around how do we understand family dynamic power, understanding the majority of the power goes to the head of the family which generally is the dad, and is followed by the sons and daughters. And so looking at sons and daughters and where their power dynamic is, what kind of power they have, and how do they navigate those who have had our conversation on queer identities with their parents. I think the first step for me is to really unpack the concept of queer identities to the Hmong community and then unpack the implications of mental health within those identities. For me it still is really hard to talk about it, especially being someone who identifies as queer too. I feel like I can talk about mental health in the context of heterosexuality and heteronormative and that's like a very western- not necessarily western, but a very generalized approach to mental wellness. And then there is the queer wellness system that is very different from the generalized mental wellness check-ins. And then you have that more close and complicated system where it's like, how do we address mental health and queerness of color, not just Asian queers but also like Black queers and Latinx queers because all of those have different approaches, because you have one aspect of your queer identity but the other aspects is like your cultural identity and those two may clash well but other times those two may not clash really well, and when you add this third layer of mental wellness, you're not only addressing mental wellness in your cultural identity, but you're also addressing mental wellness in your queer identities. Especially within the Hmong community, there isn't language around queers and gays and bis and all of that so really how do you even address something that doesn't have language to address, how do you address mental health that doesn't have a language, but I think what's easier about mental health is that there is a system, there is health infrastructures that you can describe the infrastructure that talks about mental health, like "have you eaten yet," or like the soul calling, all of that are infrastructures to address mental wellness, but there isn't infrastructure or language that exists to address queer identities.

Caroline: (30:45) Now just kind of bringing everything back, how would you describe yourself now, where you're at, you said from the beginning of your course in Thailand to that first bout of anxiety attack you had to here, and now even with your intersectionality with the queer community but where's all this tie in, where are you at right now?

Vang Xor: (31:03) So this is something that took me a long time to learn is that, in terms of journey, it's not linear. Everyone has their own path, and they are going at their own pace. And it took me a really long time to really understand that because I see my friends going at a different pace than me, whether that's faster or slower, and I was confused because it was like, "wait, am I supposed to be at the same point as they are in their life, because we are the same age, we are the same generation, we are both one-point-five generation. It took me a really long time to really understand that, "oh yes, everyone has their own path in the way that they go and the speed that they go and within their own path is independent of each other. So where I'm in now, I think I have a better understanding of traumas and mental wellness, and I feel like I am just more attuned to my own identity and my own emotions. I definitely see that change thinking back from being in a refugee camp where the idea of talking about

emotions and talking about wellness was not even prevalent, it was about making sure that you can live to the next day. And moving from that to the United States where there isn't such a huge survival mode but there is still that survival mode of "how do we survive this system that we don't know anything about, how do we as a family move forward, dealing with taxes, dealing with bills and these resources, these papers we have to fill out in order to get access to resources." That's a different kind of stress, and moving from that to in high school where I had my anxiety attack and all of that and just having this wave of knowledge that's being crammed into me because I needed to know, otherwise it was really hard for me to really unpack my identity. I feel like where I'm at now is I'm currently over this bell curve point. I remember someone that was a mentor of mine was talking to me when I was going through all of that in high school, she was like, "hey, I want you to know that you are at this tipping point, whether you let this barrier, this hardship changes you- this is obviously going to change you but how you let it change you is going to be solely on your determination, and there was implication that I'm at this tipping point where I could either let my mental health essentially affect me so much that it was hard for me to understand and see clearly, or I could let this mental health affect me in a way that allows me to do advocacy work. So I got past that tipping point to the point where I have a better understanding of who I am, how my mental health system works, what are my needs and being able to be vocal about these things. But also being able to have a clear understanding around trauma too, because I think during my earlier years, by that I mean the past four, five years ago, I was very angry, being diagnosed with anxiety and depression, I wasn't really understanding where that was coming from, I was just very angry at the world and angry at my parents for essentially having me in that environment. But now I understand that these were factors that were out of my control, but also were out of my parents' control, and when I talk about mental health, the past four or five years, when I talk about mental health I think I talk about it in a way that was coming from a place of anger, a place of injustice and whatnot, and obviously there is still injustice in the world but I think I have a more clear understanding of how can I look at my perspective and also how can I look at the perspective of other, and understand their mental health- how the histories of mental health happen in that way and that's how it's connecting to mine. So now when I talk about mental health, when I think about my parents mental health, I think about how they are essentially victims of wars and that has impacted their mental health and the only way that they knew how to talk about it was to go through these war stories with us and at the time I did not have the understanding but now I understand that that was their way to warn us about wars and trauma by giving us a story that we could remember. And those stories- they didn't know those stories would have implications for my mental wellness but now really understanding when I talk about mental health I think about what happened to my parents and how they are subject to these factors that are out of their control and I think I just have a more empathetic understanding around mental health within my own experience but also when I see others experiencing mental health I think about what are these unknown factors they may not have control over and how do I support them in a way that doesn't contribute to these factors.

Caroline: (36:41) So Sirfs, for our listeners that still want to get in touch with you, learn about what you do at the Asian American Organizing Project, what could they do?

Vang: Yeah, so I have a work email that folks can reach me at: vangxor@aaopmn.org, that's just my full name, Vang Xor at aaopmn.org, in addition to that I am also pretty active on my Instagram as well, that's @Xorr_X, if folks want to reach out to me I think my work email or my Instagram is probably the best option to reach out to me.

Caroline: and we will also have those in the show's line of notes. Thank you so much.

Vang: Thank you so much for having me.

Outro – Brian: For additional resources related to this episode please check the podcast show notes and You've been listening to the Wellness in Color on the Mental Health in Minnesota podcast produced by NAMI Minnesota.