

## Choua and Suni Lee

### Adaptation Rooted in Survival and Hope

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE

THIS IS THE STORY OF TWO REMARKABLE women of different generations who single-handedly broke through years of history to shine a light on a cultural community that no longer had a place to call home. And yes, they both are ballroom dancers.

They are members of the Lee clan of the Hmong community in St. Paul, Minnesota. Choua Lee, now 52, was the first Hmong person ever elected to public office in the United States, and she accomplished that at the tender age of 23. She served on the St. Paul School Board for six years. Suni Lee, just 18 years old, made “Hmong” the single most searched word on global social media the day she won the Olympic gold medal for all-around gymnastics in Tokyo. The world wanted to know more. Both shone a light on a Southeast Asian culture nearly forgotten.

That light is still shining. Choua and her husband Cheu commissioned a mural in Suni’s honor on a building they own in St. Paul, and helped produce the song “Suni Lee” by artist Lil’ Crush. Both were incorporated into a five-minute video production they released in October. Choua designed a special Suni jacket and patch for the three Hmong hip hop dancers featured in the video. All of this took place while Suni excelled as a celebrity dancer in the Fall 2021 season of the popular television show *Dancing with the Stars*.

Hmong women and families are shaped by their dramatic history. Choua still has “vivid memories” of leaving Laos in 1976 at age seven,

along with her parents and older sister. As American allies, they had to leave Southeast Asia after the fall of Saigon and end of the Vietnam war. Her family traveled on foot for weeks to get out of the country. They slept outdoors without shelter, even during pouring rain.

“We learned to adapt,” began Choua. “We learned to survive. That’s

what shaped my generation. Any aspiration comes from the need to survive, to work hard, and excel. You must do whatever it takes to adapt to your environment. There are no other options. You *have* to do it.”

But along the way, she says, there is always hope.



*Choua and Cheu Lee perform for a community event in 2016.*

*Photo provided by Choua and Cheu Lee.*

“That’s the resiliency,” Choua continued. “My mom never wasted time trying to calm us down. She told us we would do well—that we would go to America where we would have enough food and water and basic necessities. How did she know? She just knew. She was a woman beyond her time.”

Choua was raised in Chicago and St. Paul, eventually attending Mankato State University where she met Cheu and married him in 1989. She left college as a junior to be director of a Hmong women’s organization for two years. Through that advocacy work, she witnessed first-hand the struggles Hmong and other immigrant parents were having with the school district. She brought that to the attention of then Minnesota State Senator Randy Kelly, who urged her to run city-wide for the St. Paul School Board. Two weeks after Choua jumped into the race, she learned she was pregnant. That didn’t stop her. The 23-year-old gave birth seven days after being sworn into office in 1991: talk about

adaptability, survival, and resiliency! Minnesota and the nation took notice of this new Hmong official who had just been elected by the people of St. Paul.

Those same qualities drove Choua into ballroom dance many years later. Dance was her passion since the age of two. She found ways to learn classical Tai dance, including observing dance classes standing outside an open-air school classroom in Laos when she was only 4 years old. Later, at age 10 in Chicago, she bartered English lessons for classical Tai dance lessons with a nursing student who was also a Tai dancer. Tai dance was all Choua knew because Hmong culture does not recognize ballroom dance. In traditional Laos dance, partners dance side by side with no contact; there is no lead and follow.

That all changed when Choua was part of a youth dance group arising from a nonprofit created by her parents to support refugee resettlement. Her group performed at a community

center where she saw ballroom dancers for the first time.

“The moment I saw the ballroom costumes and the rhinestones and the flowing of the gowns, my world turned upside down,” she recalled. “I knew deep inside that I’m going to do that one day. I promised myself, but I didn’t know how. I fell in love with ballroom.”

It was only years later when her then tenth-grade son left for Thailand to attend boarding school that Choua saw an opportunity to revisit her dream. She and Cheu had been so involved with work and family they knew little else.

“I remember we were both alone at home. We were in different rooms watching different programs. We have to do something!” Choua said.

Ballroom dance? Not for Cheu. He couldn’t dance, he said, and he thought ballroom was for girls. But for Choua, there was “no other option.” She reserved two free sessions with instructor Dustin Donelan at Cinema Ballroom and repeated over and over to Cheu, “We are dancing Thursday.” She wore him out, she said.

“Cheu was so nervous, he couldn’t breathe,” recalled Choua. “My assertive side kept coming out to ‘rescue’ both of us. I wanted to lead and take charge, like everything else. Dustin was so good. He told me, ‘You can’t do that. Close your eyes, feel it, don’t take control.’ Finally, Dustin threatened to blindfold me. Cheu couldn’t lead because I was so controlling. I wouldn’t let him grow. So for a few weeks I danced with my eyes closed. Then I let go. Cheu’s skills just grew. He started loving it.”

The couple dived in. They would clear kitchen space and practice at least two hours every night while they were cooking. Class at 7:00, home by 8:30, practice until midnight. They took a lesson or group class nearly every day.



*Choua and Cheu Lee perform at the Minnesota State Fair Hmong Day in 2017. Photos provided by Choua and Cheu Lee.*

“After two years, I decided this was something for which the Hmong community needs exposure,” continued Choua. “So I made it my mission; I researched how ballroom came to be, and I brought in other Hmong. I learned how to lead and follow. We were able to generate interest in the community of empty nesters and at one point, we had about 20 couples coming weekly. The group created the Hmong American Ballroom Society in 2010, which influenced Hmong dance groups in other states.”

So, did Choua’s love of ballroom dancing influence Suni Lee to compete on *Dancing with the Stars*? No. Though Choua and Cheu are designated as grandparents of Suni within the Hmong clan, they do not have a biological relationship with her. They have, of course, supported her gymnastic efforts over the years financially and as cheerleaders.

“Dancing with the Stars was really her decision,” said Choua. “Fellow gymnast Simone Biles, a past dancer on the show, was a big influence; they spent a lot of time together. Suni didn’t have a social life. This has been grueling training for Suni since age 5 or 6. She has no life. She is always in the gym, always traveling. She just wanted to take some time off and not compete in gymnastics for a time. I was surprised when she decided to compete on *Dancing with the Stars*. She insisted on having some fun.”

So how is Suni doing, in the eyes of her ballroom-trained grandparents?

“I think she is doing a great job since she didn’t have formal training in ballroom,” smiled Choua. “She has stamina, flexibility and gymnastics prowess. The first few weeks she struggled with the rhythm of the dance, not the gymnastics side. She was new to the format and because of the pace of the dance, she tended to catch up

on timing and forget the rhythm. But she showed great improvement as the weeks progressed.”

Another hurdle is that self-expression is hard for Suni. It was hard for Choua, too, when she competed in ballroom competitions.

“Hmong society tends to be more introverted. We don’t like to be too loud or too extraverted; that is frowned upon. Girls don’t want to be too flamboyant. Hmong girls are demur and proper. Body language is proper. Gymnastics fit right into that,” Choua said.

“It’s hard for us to show external expression. I remember the first year I competed in ballroom: my instructor Shane Haggerty told me I needed more expression. He told me ‘to triple-time my expression’ for the audience to see it. I think Suni has had a hard time with that too.”

Whatever the outcome of Suni’s ballroom dance venture, her impact is already rippling through world cultures on multiple levels.

“Suni has reached a pivotal point in excellency,” said Choua. “I think her achievement is going to change



*Choua Lee showcases the special jacket she made to honor Suni Lee’s Hmong heritage and Olympic success. Photo by Ember Reichgott Junge.*

the younger generation for years to come. I already hear things in the Hmong community like, 'I'm so happy. She looked like me. I can do it now.' Isn't that great? I also hear from non-Hmong girls. 'I'm so happy! I want to be like Suni Lee!' It's just amazing to hear something like this. I don't think we will realize the impact of her winning or the impact of her achievement on the community until the next 50 years. I don't think Suni herself fully understands the impact or significance of her win."

Fifty years? Really?

"I didn't think I would see this in my lifetime," continued Choua. "From the time of the war and struggle in Laos, we experienced trauma. What's all of that for? For the betterment of our society, of being recognized, of being on the world stage. It took thousands of lives, soldiers, family sacrifices, the ultimate sacrifice, and we haven't even achieved that level. And here's this little girl who went to Tokyo, and she has overcome that. The world wants to know who the Hmong people are. That is such an achievement. You talk about

General Vang Pao, the sacrifices he and others made for 50-60 years, they haven't even come close to what Suni did. Suni elevated the Hmong people to the world stage. That's something we should all celebrate. It's amazing. It's that power, that power alone."

It's not only a cultural breakthrough, but a gender breakthrough, according to Choua.

"A little girl rose to that level even when women are being so oppressed in society. You talk with any Hmong woman and they can tell you stories about personal suffering through years of abuse, oppression, you name it. Now Hmong women are telling their stories. They had to be the strong one, raise a family, be a role model for their children, make sure their children had shelter and food on the table every single day."

Talk about resilience. Two extraordinary women driven by excellence and hard work, adapting to whatever stands in their way. Adaptation is their inspiration, rooted in a need to survive. And rooted in hope. These are values that served them well—and would serve all of us well—as ballroom dancers of any level.

*Ember Reichgott Junge is an amateur ballroom dancer and retired co-founder of Heart of Dance. She welcomes your inspiring stories at [ember.reichgott@gmail.com](mailto:ember.reichgott@gmail.com) for her book-in-progress, "Stories of Resilience from the Ballroom Dancer's Heart." **E***



*Choua and Cheu Lee join Suni Lee during a 2018 fundraiser event hosted for her by the Lee family, celebrating Suni's success in a national competition. Photo provided by Choua and Cheu Lee.*