

I am an American We are One Nation SEEKING EQUALITY USING DIALOGUE

Hmong woman's group forms to heal community divided after stabbing

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Each week, this series will introduce you to an exceptional American who unites, rather than divides, our communities. To read more about the American profiled here and more average Americans doing exceptional things, visit onenation.usatoday.com.



Maysee Herr is one of the founders of Toward One Wausau, a project to encourage people in her community to talk about racial and ethnic differences.

Maysee Herr

Location: Wausau, Wis. **Age:** 40 **Profession:** Associate professor of education at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

Mission: To bring together community members from all walks of life to talk openly, and act in unity, so that Wausau is a safe, welcoming and attractive place for everyone.

WAUSAU, Wis. - Maysee Herr saw a need to bring people together. A summer of racial tensions threatened to divide her hometown, and she felt her voice could make a difference.

She became a founding member of a new community dialogue project called Toward One Wausau, which sprang up in the wake of heated debate over the treatment of a Southeast Asian teenager convicted of stabbing another boy to death in a street fight. Dylan Yang, who was 15 when he killed 13-yearold Isaiah Powell, shares a Hmong heritage with Herr.

The Hmong are an ethnic group that fled persecution in their homeland after aiding American troops in the Vietnam War era. Thousands have settled in the central Wisconsin community of Wausau, which had been almost all white prior to the arrival of Hmong and Laotian refugees starting in the late 1970s.

Dylan Yang's conviction in adult court stirred Hmong Americans across the nation to protest on social media, in letters to authorities and finally in a march in Wausau. The protest was to promote peace and justice, and to call for leniency, but it elicited fear

and anger among those who believed marchers had unjustly targeted police and prosecutors.

Herr, who grew up in Wausau and went on to become a college professor, was torn between her own concerns about injustice and her desire to teach and heal. She and others formed Toward One Wausau to encourage people of all backgrounds to “talk openly, listen earnestly” and know their neighbors.

She knew it wouldn’t be easy. “It is in our discomfort that learning takes place,” Herr told residents who gathered for the first Toward One Wausau public forum in October. “That dialogue, the discussions you have are powerful.”

Toward One Wausau has grown to include local police and school administrators, the local newspaper and public radio affiliate, the nonprofit Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service and representatives of African-American, Hispanic, Hmong and Native American groups. The group plans a series of public deliberations in the spring to involve more people in the community.

Q&A WITH MAYSEE HERR

Maysee Herr grew up the daughter of refugees from war-torn Laos. She has a doctoral degree in curriculum studies and early childhood education from Indiana University and taught in Indianapolis before returning to her hometown of Wausau, Wisconsin. She is now an associate professor of education and a founding member of the Toward One Wausau unity project.

What does it mean to be an American?

To be an American means being able to express my thoughts and ideas freely but responsibly. It means having the right to stand tall and being able to pursue whatever dreams I wish even when the path isn’t always easy.

What moment touched and motivated you to take part in this effort?

I’ve always felt that this type of effort was needed. However, there have been many national and local challenges related to race that have made me realize there is an urgency for this type of effort.

What gives you hope and what concerns you?

Efforts such as the Toward One Wausau project are giving me hope for a more open and equitable community. What is most concerning to me is when people aren’t willing to try putting themselves in the shoes of someone else to try understanding their experiences. When we aren’t open to listening to one another, we remain static as a community and not much changes.

What do you hope to accomplish through your efforts?

If something I say or do can encourage someone to also take a stand for understanding and equity in the community, I will have done my job. As an American, we all have a responsibility to help build a better community for every one of its members and to spread hope where there is none.