Night at the Museum

JUST AS THE HMONG CULTURAL CENTER STAFF WERE ABOUT TO DEBUT THEIR EXPANDED MUSEUM, WHITE SUPREMACISTS VANDALIZED THE BUILDING. NOW, WITH THE COMMUNITY RALLYING BEHIND THEM AND THE VANDALISM A DISTANT MEMORY, THEY'RE finally READY TO REOPEN THEIR DOORS.

BY JUSTINE JONES

At 3:40 am on September 8, the Hmong Cultural Center was vandalized by three white supremacists who hid their faces with baseball caps and neck gaiters. The vandals sprayed the museum's façade with thick white paint, covering up anti-racist verses from local poet Tish Jones that were painted on the window boards. They left a tag—"life, liberty, victory"—associated with the white nationalist hate group Patriot Front.

But on this warm Sunday a little more than a month later, with the vandalism long gone and a low sun saturating the 300 block of University Avenue in St. Paul's Frogtown neighborhood, you'd be hard-pressed to know anything unsavory happened here.

The street-level museum is an expansion of what had just been a collection on the second floor prior to the Hmong Cultural Center landing an unsolicited $50,000 Google Grant. Director of programs Mark Pfeifer tells me a high-level public affairs guy emailed him last spring after the wave of anti-Asian hate crimes to say that the company wanted to donate. Could the museum use $50,000—no strings attached? The answer was yes! "It's been indispensable," says Pfeifer as we tour the museum. "It's the general operating grant for the museum to cover things that other grants don't cover."

The museum is dedicated to Hmong folk arts and history with an emphasis on education, not rare artifacts. "We're not trying to be the Hmong Smithsonian," laughs Pfeifer. The space has two alcoves dedicated to musical instruments: the free-reed pipe, the mouth harp, the flute, the two-string violin, and the quej (pronounced like "keng"), a graceful crescent-shaped instrument made of bamboo pipes. And there are touch screens where visitors can watch videos of Hmong sung poetry and hear the quej's melodic drone. On the walls are traditional embroidered fabrics and story cloths, which depict the Hmong people's village life in Laos in colorful hand-stitched narratives. These displays are supplemented by informational panels and a flat-screen TV for showing documentaries.

The Hmong Cultural Center itself...
The new mural-less boards are set to come off the Hmong Cultural Center as it prepares to reopen to the public.

was founded in 1992 in the basement of a Hmong funeral home at Dale and Lafond. Back then, the center taught lessons in traditional wedding and funeral songs and qeej. In 1996, the HCC started offering ESL and citizenship classes—these now include Somali, Oromo, Central American, Karen, and Vietnamese students. Likewise, the museum, added in 2014, emphasizes multicultural education.

"Many people didn’t know who the Hmong were," says HCC executive director Txongpao Lee, who came to St. Paul in 1984. "They thought we were Vietnamese or Chinese."

And those people definitely didn’t know about things like the Secret War, which saw more than 30,000 Hmong soldiers die fighting the communist Pathet Lao as part of a covert CIA operation during Vietnam, which is something that the museum highlights. In fact, Lee once met a military commander who told him he was thankful to the Hmong people who served in the Vietnam War as a key ally to the U.S.

Maybe if those vandals had actually come inside the museum instead of defacing it, they would have seen photos of Hmong soldiers dressed in American military fatigues, pushing tanks through the jungle mountains of Laos, and changed their minds about them.

Regardless, the vandals’ plan backfired. Lee says the community’s response has been tremendous. The HCC has received donations, postcards, and calls of support from everyone from the governor to passersby on University Avenue bringing flowers.

"Myself, Mark, and the rest of the Hmong Cultural Center are not alone in this problem," says Lee. "They all stand behind us."

And, thanks to all that, those vandalized boards are finally coming off the windows so sunlight can once again flood into the center.

The Hmong Cultural Center’s official relaunch date is December 2.

DOUBLE CHEESEBURGER, SIDE OF PODCAST

RESTAURANT OWNERS HEAR A LOT ABOUT WHAT PEOPLE THINK OF HOW THEY’RE DOING. TIM NIVER JUST CREATED A WAY TO TELL THE WORLD HOW HE’S ACTUALLY DOING.

BY STEPHANIE MARCH

It’s an early fall morning, and Tim Niver sits with me in his Lowertown St. Paul restaurant, Saint Dinette. The restaurant is closed, and Niver’s not there to mix drinks or make a cheesy cheeseburger. In fact, the accomplished restaurateur is there to make something like he’s never made before: a podcast.

Yep, Tim Niver, one of the Twin Cities’ most storied hospitalitarians, is sitting at a dining table, microphones splayed atop it, ready to interview me, a food journalist. Welcome to Niver Niver Land.

The J. M. Barrie–inspired name of his podcast is apropos of a man who has spent his entire career facilitating whimsical culinary escapes. He was general manager of Marcus Samuelsson’s Aquavit. His first solo restaurant, Town Talk Diner, birthed a generation of cocktail makers and cooks. And these days, Niver’s Peter Fan is transporting diners to the wondrous worlds of Mucci’s and Saint Dinette.

As prolific a restaurant guy as Niver is, he might be an even more prolific Twitter provocateur. And it’s that penchant for pulling no punches that has him talking to me and, for subsequent episodes, a cast of other local food personalities, ranging from Justin Sutherland to Jason Delushia, for your entertainment pleasure. He’s doing it with the help of food podcaster vet Matt Gundrum, whose podcast Food Under Fire is what got Niver interested in the medium in the first place.

“When Matt mailed his podcast, which I enjoyed being on, we both thought that maybe we could do something cool together,” says Niver.

Niver Niver Land aspires to get into some of the massive challenges and stark realities facing the restaurant industry. Niver is a serious guy, but he doesn’t take things too seriously, and the topics for each episode will be loaded with stories and tangents, which should make it all the more entertaining.

His first episode, the one I’m in, is about feedback—something people like Tim Niver get a lot of. We talked about everything from guests giving feedback and how restaurants handle that to what kind of feedback you get from a James Beard Award—in our opinions. Hey, in the whimsical world of Niver Niver Land, the restaurant owner gets to give the diner his feedback for a change.