



# 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 qeej (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 qeej'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

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