THINGS TO DO ➤ ARTS

St. Paul museum gets unsolicited $50,000 boost from Google

A qeej class as the Hmong Cultural Center. (Courtesy of Hmong Cultural Center)

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PUBLISHED: May 4, 2021 at 3:49 p.m. | UPDATED: May 4, 2021 at 4:08 p.m.

In his 21 years with the Hmong Cultural Center, program director Mark Pfeifer has chased grants large and small to help keep the St. Paul-based center and its small University Avenue teaching space, library and museum afloat.

He’s enjoyed his share of successes, most recently from national funding groups, but nothing like the surprise email he received two weeks ago.
“A guy fairly high up in Google, from Omaha, originally from Minnesota, said ‘Can you do a Zoom call later in the morning? Google wants to give some donations to the Asian community,’” said Pfeifer, who had not applied to or reached out to Google for support. “‘Could you use $50,000?’”

Pfeifer was floored.

“I’ve been doing this for 21 years, and we’ve never had one quite like this,” he said.

MUSEUM TO OPEN THIS SUMMER AFTER EXPANSION PROJECT

The unsolicited donation from the Google Community Grants Fund will make up a sizable chunk of the funding for the expansion of the Hmong Cultural Center Museum, which will open this summer in a ground-level storefront next door to the cultural center at University and Western avenues. Sometime around July 1, Pfeifer hopes to debut the new-and-improved museum in a 1,200 square foot space previously occupied by the Liberty Tax Service, which departed some three years ago.

Contractors are readying the one-level storefront to debut Hmong culture at street level, something that’s been missing from the second-floor cultural center next door at 375 University Ave. W.

Even before completion, church groups, schools and youth associations have been calling throughout the pandemic, eager to reserve guided tours of the new space, which will be double the size of the current museum. A second contractor is readying expanded exhibits about the CIA “Secret War” that took place in Laos during the Vietnam War era, among other key turning points in Hmong-American history.

“It’s really coming along,” said Pfeifer, who holds a doctorate in the social sciences. “It’s going to be really dynamic — a big screen TV, a lot more artwork, and we’re expanding our current exhibits.”

The existing space at 375 University Ave. W. will continue to provide English-as-a-Second-Language and U.S. citizenship courses, arts and music classes, a library and reading room and other offerings. The Hmong Cultural Center is also
The Twin Cities are home to the largest concentration of Hmong in America — more than 70,000 Hmong residents — with the largest group living in and around St. Paul.

NATIONAL FUNDERS TAKE NOTICE

The Hmong Cultural Center, which debuted in 1992, suffered some window damage a year ago during the riots that followed the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

Rather than permanently shutter the center, the combination of pandemic, vandalism and anti-Asian sentiment seemed to have drawn the attention of national and regional arts foundations, helping to boost funding for the new museum up to $250,000 or more. Backed by the National Endowment for the Arts, Minneapolis-based Arts Midwest contributed $50,000 from its United States Regional Arts Resilience Fund. The Henry Luce Foundation in Manhattan donated an additional $50,000.

Pfeifer is keeping his fingers crossed about a $75,000 per year, two-year request to the Minnesota Legislature for funding from the Clean Water and Legacy Amendment, a state sales tax dedicated to the preservation of arts, culture, land and water. His request survived a House version of the Legacy bill but does not appear in the Senate version. The two bills are now being reconciled.

“It’s really up in the air,” he said.

If enough funding comes through, he’s hoping that the center can expand beyond its 10 employees to perhaps add a second museum tour guide.

“It’s really going to add to Frogtown,” Pfeifer said. “It’s going to be a unique cultural amenity.”

Tags: Museums, Nonprofits, St. Paul
County courts before switching focus to the St. Paul mayor's office, city council, and all things neighborhood-related, from the city's churches to its parks and light rail. A resident of Hamline-Midway, he is married to a Frogtown woman. He Tweets with manic intensity at @FrederickMelo.

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