



NEWS RELEASE

Contacts

[Abbey Goers](#), Marketing Communications, 715-232-2565

[Marketing Communications](#), 715-232-2381

[News Center](#)



Preserving tradition: UW-Stout professional communication student brings digital display to life for community

Thao's exhibit celebrates history, culture behind traditional Hmong clothing

[Story Link](#)

Photos attached

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Feb. 24, 2025

Menomonie, Wis. – A collaboration across academic disciplines and interstate universities helped to bring a University of Wisconsin-Stout [professional and technical communication](#) student's project to life.

Pakou Thao, of Eau Claire, created a virtual Hmong clothing exhibit for her Digital Humanities Capstone course last fall, displaying a treasured aspect of her culture in the digital realm.

Thao, a grant specialist with the [Eau Claire Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association, Inc.](#), was later awarded a grant through [Wisconsin Humanities](#) to support the Eau Claire Hmong New Year Celebration in October, through which she brought her virtual exhibit to reality.

She worked closely with UW-Stout's [fashion design and development program](#) and Bee Vang-Moua, director of Hmong language instruction in the Asian and Middle Eastern studies department at the University of Minnesota.

"I love my culture, and I'm a big collector of traditional Hmong clothing," Thao said. "Our clothing matters. It identifies who we are, where our families are from, and our language and dialect."

She noted that during the pandemic, there was a rise in young Hmong girls buying traditional Hmong clothing, without necessarily understanding the vast history and culture behind the garments.

“I wanted to inspire younger Hmong individuals to know who we are, especially to help them understand that traditional, authentic clothing has a purpose,” she added.

For general viewers, Thao wanted to help them understand the intricacies of the hand-stitched designs and to inspire the preservation of the clothing.

“As we move to modern technology, my hope is that we all appreciate the artistry behind traditional Hmong clothing, to collect it and hold on to it,” she said.

To create her digital exhibit, Thao met with Lee Pao Xiong, founding director of the Center for Hmong Studies at Concordia University, St. Paul, who gave her access to his collection.

“Doing something for school that I enjoy and am passionate about – it made it more fun,” she said.

The live exhibit, “Discovering Hmong Roots Through Traditional Clothing: Reminiscing the Diaspora from Laos to the United States,” at the New Year’s celebration, was curated by Vang-Moua, a collector of traditional Hmong textiles and clothing. The exhibit consisted of 22 outfits from her collection.

“Bee has an extensive knowledge of traditional Hmong clothing from China to today. To have her serve as curator was such an honor,” Thao said.

Learning about fashion through a different lens

Thao collaborated with UW-Stout fashion design Lecturer Sarah Eileen Smith to procure mannequins for the display.

“Fashion can be inspired by anything, but history and culture are two huge points of inspiration for many fashion designers. We emphasize the importance of looking outside of ourselves and our personal experience for inspiration when it comes to building a fashion collection,” Smith said.

“Projects like Pakou's exhibition offer everyone the opportunity to engage with beautiful garments that are so important to the Hmong community and learn about fashion through a different lens. We were thrilled to be able to participate by lending out our mannequins to support Pakou's work,” Smith added.

Thao is thankful to Wisconsin Humanities for seeing the importance of preserving arts and culture, to Vang-Moua for sharing her extensive knowledge, and to Smith for her kindness in providing the mannequins, she said.

“This project would not have been successful if it weren’t for my managers, professors, colleagues, the grantor and the humanities expert. Writing the grant, collaborating with partners and seeing the vision I had on display made me truly appreciate all the course materials I learned at UW-Stout,” she said.

Thao earned her professional communication degree in December 2024. She has been at ECAHMAA for three years. She has her paralegal associate’s degree from Chippewa Valley Technical College. When looking for a bachelor’s in English degree to improve her writing skills, she was able to transfer all of her credits into UW-Stout’s program.

The [professional and technical communication degree](#), formerly called professional communications and emerging media, is offered through the [English, philosophy and communication studies](#)

[department](#). The department also offers a new [bachelor's in game and media studies](#) for students interested in leadership, research and project management in gaming and media.

UW-Stout hosts several community-based events throughout the year, including the [Citizen Journalism Workshop series](#), led by PCT Program Director Kate Roberts Edenborg. The final session of the series will be held on Tuesday, March 4. Future sessions will be posted on the [Continuing Education](#) page. No experience is needed.

About a dozen participants will connect with local media representatives, including from the Leader-Telegram, Volume One, WEAU, WPR, Menomonie Minute, Menomonie News Net, Eye on Dunn County and the Colfax Messenger.

UW-Stout, a member of the [Universities of Wisconsin](#), is [Wisconsin's Polytechnic University](#), with a focus on applied learning, collaboration with business and industry, and career outcomes. Learn more via the [FOCUS2030](#) strategic plan.

###

Photos

UW-Stout professional communication student Pakou Thao's Hmong clothing exhibit, curated by Bee Vang-Moua (pictured), was on display at the Eau Claire Hmong New Year Celebration in October. Photo contributed by Bee Vang-Moua.

The exhibit included 22 outfits, part of Bee Vang-Moua's personal collection. Photo contributed by Bee Vang-Moua.

Pakou Thao's exhibit spoke to the importance of preserving the hand-made clothing and informing viewers of its cultural significance. Photo by Meghan Duddle from Wisconsin Humanities.