

OPTIONS FOR ALL

SUBMITTED BY NELSIE YANG

I love the work that I do as an organizer and union steward at TakeAction Minnesota, because I'm a part of a larger movement. I am one droplet of water within a river of leaders and allies that are working together to achieve a community where everyone is in, and no one is out.

I believe in a vision where we live in communities united across race, class, gender, and age. In this vision, the deeply oppressive forces of sexism, racism, and corporate greed are dismantled so that everyone can live a dignified life.

I care about many issues that we all know too well — from protecting health care, to raising the minimum wage, and securing a woman's right to choose. I also work to ensure that people with felony records have access to housing, jobs, and more.

Now, I am charging forward with my vision and running for office, to ensure that we move in a progressive direction in the future. Never in a million years would I have imagined being where I am today.

A Childhood in Poverty

I was in a low-income family growing up, as the daughter of Hmong refugees. After the covert war — in which the CIA and Hmong people fought against communist troops — my parents left family, traveled through jungles, and crossed the Mekong River to reach a refugee camp. They eventually arrived in Duluth in March 1989. There they settled and gave birth to my four older siblings and me.

I have vivid memories of the mid-1990s. My mother took care of us while my father worked and earned \$4/hour at a bakery. We were poor, but our hearts were filled with love and compassion. We then moved to

North Minneapolis and stayed until my parents saved enough money for a home in Brooklyn Park in 2004. Our lives changed completely during the recession when our home mortgage was foreclosed just two days before my high school graduation. It was hard for me, but I know it was harder for my parents who felt they had failed their children.

For many years, I internalized that poverty and the loss of our home was our own fault. Organizing opened my eyes to see beyond the future in front of me, and for that I am incredibly grateful.

All across the country, predatory lending from banks took advantage of families like mine and drove many homes into foreclosure. Thousands of workers do not earn livable wages, while CEOs walk away with millions. Our society is seriously stuck in the hands of greed. We have a lot of work to do to dismantle this.

Being a Young Hmong Organizer

A lot of people are surprised when they find out I am “only” 24. There seems to be a narrative that young people are not credible and that we do not get things done. Those narratives are rooted in ageism. I love being a leader who breaks that stereotype.

We live in a society that trains us to believe certain things about our identities. We get to choose whether or not to accept those limitations.

As a woman of color, I was socialized to believe that I should not go out of the house and talk to strangers. I organize because that's how I get to live outside that box. Deciding what relationships I want to build — and who I want to build them with — has been liberating.

I want everyone to be able to live outside the boxes imposed on them.



PHOTO SARAH WHITING

Nelsie Yang receives strings to signify good luck from supporters, which are tied around her wrists.

Thurman Blevins

After I learned about the killing of Thurman Blevins on June 23, 2018, I knew I had to return to my North Minneapolis neighborhood to speak out.

My brother was a victim of gun violence at a young age. Thankfully, he is alive and with us today. I know how easily he could have been Thurman Blevins, Phumee Lee, or Jamar Clark. It is painful that the list of dead men of color, killed by police officers, continues.

The police, in general, target men of color and people from marginalized communities. That is what the historical system of policing has set them up to do. That should concern everyone.

The pain from one person trickles down to everyone. We might look different, but we all feel pain.

We need to heal together in public. We need to share our stories and share our experiences. That is how we get the world we want to live in — a world without systemic oppression. A world where all people can live a fulfilled life.

That is the world I organize for.

Nelsie Yang is running for City Council in St. Paul Ward 6. Parts of this essay are adapted from an interview that originally appeared on Turtleroad.org, authored by Anne Winkler-Morey. Details: nelsieyang.com