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Contact

Melissa Weber, Director of Communications
Phone: 320-589-6414, weberm@morris.umn.edu

Jenna Ray, Editor/Writer
Phone: 320-589-6068, jrray@morris.umn.edu

Thao '95 receives Alumni Award

Summary: Artist and Representative Cy Thao '95 (DFL-Minn.), received the 2005 UMM Alumni Association Distinguished Alumni Award during Homecoming gathering. Thao was nominated by professor of studio art, Jenny Nellis.

(November 4, 2005)-Representative Cy Thao '95 (DFL-Minn.) has received a 2005 University of Minnesota, Morris Alumni Association Distinguished Alumni Award. The honor recognizes alumni who have made noteworthy contributions in their professional lives, in public service, or in service to the University of Minnesota. Jenny Nellis, professor of studio art, nominated Thao for the award. She noted Thao's dedication to serving others as exemplary, as a member of the Minnesota House of Representatives, as a member of the Hmong community, and as a member of the UMM community.

Thao graduated from UMM in 1995, receiving a bachelor of arts in political science and studio art. He helped found the Center for Hmong Arts and Talent in St. Paul and served as its first director. In 2000 he received a Bush Artist Fellowship that allowed him to complete a series of 50 oil paintings that he had begun as a student in 1993. The exhibition, "The Hmong Migration: Fifty Paintings" chronicles 5000 years of Hmong history beginning with creation stories and ending with a world map showing the many countries where Hmong people now make their homes. The powerful and moving exhibition was featured at the Minneapolis Institute of Art in 2004.

Nellis describes Thao's efforts on behalf of the Hmong living in Minnesota and studying at UMM as "uplifting and inspirational." In 2002 Thao launched a successful bid as representative for District 65A, the Frogtown neighbor in St. Paul which is home to a large Hmong population. In his service to UMM, the multi-ethnic student population, including the Asian Student Organization, has particularly appreciated Thao's support and guidance. He received the UMM Multi-Ethnic Distinguished Alumni Award in 2004.

During his recent visit to campus, Thao shared comments informally during a reception hosted by the Multi-Ethnic Student Program and also addressed alumni, students, faculty, and staff at the UMM Alumni Association Banquet and Annual Meeting. Thao reflected on his UMM career saying, "It was good for an inner city kid to be in this sort of environment. It was very enjoyable. I got to know the minority students really well, and others, too. We became like a small family. We made sure each other got through our classes."

Thao stated that his UMM experience, the learning and the relationships, shaped his life's path. "When I graduated from UMM, I was committed to being involved in community."

Thao was one of two recipients receiving the Distinguished Alumni Award for 2005. Also honored was Paulette Molin '66, noted author and educator. Molin and Thao were presented their awards by Carol Eckersen '80, chair of the awards committee and Alumni Association past president, during the Alumni Association Banquet and Annual Meeting held on Oct. 21, 2005.

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