

VALLEY VOICES JANUARY 14, 2016 1:23 PM

# Nu Vang and Sher Moua: Remembering the Sunnyside Village Apartments



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Tenants of Sunnyside Village Apartments line up for lunch offered by area church volunteers at a tent operated by the American Red Cross and the Southern Baptist Convention Disaster Relief group Nov. 30, 2015. **ERIC PAUL ZAMORA** - ezamora@fresnobee.com

BY NU VANG AND SHER MOUA

The Hmong New Year is a time to reflect on the past year as well as a time to look forward to the upcoming months.

We sweep away the bad of the old year lest it stifle a fresh, hopeful start to the new year. As we reflect, we have reason to despair, but more importantly we have reason to hope.

Sunnyside Village Apartments and the people who live there remain fresh on our minds. As members of the Hmong community and as Fresnoans, Sher Moua and I want to make sure that what happened to these families should never happen to anyone – no matter where they live in Fresno.

At the same time, we are heartened by the response of the people of Fresno and organizations like Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministries and the Red Cross to the crisis there created by natural gas pipeline leaks. But there's work yet to be done so that all residents can live in safe, clean homes.



Nu Vang, left, and Sher Moua

## **Nu Vang: Summerset was my home**

I grew up at Summerset Village Apartments. I laughed there; I cried there. I lived there. It was my home.

I was the child of Hmong refugees who found themselves in the new world of America, not knowing a word of English, and my family found a sense of belonging there where many Hmong families came to live.

What happened at Summerset was shocking but not surprising to me. I lived in the apartments for more than 10 years. I remember the cockroaches crawling on the walls during the day and hearing the rats late at night, but that was the normal way of life. I didn't think to question the status quo because everyone's home had the same problems.

But the situation took a deadly turn in 1997, when, as a little girl, I woke up late one night to the sounds and sights of fire and fear. An apartment was engulfed in flames, and there were people inside. Bounchanh Kouantaamath, 47, and his son, Richard, 2, died in that fire. Rin Hiev Meas, Kouantaamath's wife and Richard's mother, escaped the blaze with the couple's four other children.

The Fresno Bee reported that a Fresno fire captain said there was only one smoke detector in that six-apartment unit of the complex, and it was not in the apartment where the fire started. Said the captain: "Usually, when you go in to put the fire out, the smoke detectors are bugging the heck out of you. It was quiet in here."

Many people wonder why the current tenants live in what some have called "Third World conditions" when they can choose to live in other areas of the city. But it's not that simple. Living at the apartments is not just about housing; it's about being close to your community and being connected to others who share your same experiences of resettlement and know how hard it is to assimilate to the American way of life.

At the heart of this issue is that people have the right to live wherever they choose to live in Fresno, and that we all deserve to live in a safe home and a healthy city.

Growing up in those conditions was normal for me, but it shouldn't be normal for anyone. The city of Fresno needs to make sure there are no more Summersets.

So when the residents of Summerset speak, city leaders need to respect their voices, to listen. According to a Fresno Bee editorial, since 1992 there have been at least three major fires at Summerset. Fires that take lives and displace families and children speak louder than any words.

## **Sher Moua: Canvassing the residents**

Like Nu, I have a direct connection to Summerset. While canvassing there to learn about issues in our community, I was invited into many homes. On more than one occasion, we have broken bread together.

In these living rooms, they have shared their hopes and concerns with me. Having safe, clean homes and crosswalks and signals on the adjacent street (where their children could cross safely) were among their top issues.

Yet, beyond the manager and me, they were either afraid or didn't know where to voice these concerns. Some even asked me not to share these concerns with the manager for fear of retaliation. But there were others who asked me to speak out because they saw me as someone who is educated and who understands English.

There are no two young people who love our culture and our community more than we do. We serve our community. We love and respect our elders. It is because we love and respect our elders that we must speak on their behalf and continue to work with organizations like Fresno Building Healthy Communities, Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministries and Fresno Center for New Americans to help create one healthy Fresno.

*Nu Vang and Sher Moua are residents of Fresno.*

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**Nu Vang**

Thank you for posting this piece. Let's not forget what happened at the Summerset Village Apartments. The work has just begun. Remember there are even more apartments in Fresno that have these conditions and even worse.

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Moving and truthful, thank you Nu and Sher

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