JOE BEE XIONG
War to Peace
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Joe Bee Xiong (sh-ih-aw-ng) worked hard to serve people.

He was a **Hmong (mong) American**. Joe Bee taught others about his culture. He taught Hmong Americans about American culture in the United States (US). Joe Bee served as a role model who helped others.
Early Life

His parents named him Bee when he was born in 1961. Bee was the oldest of eight brothers and one sister.

Home was a mountain village in Laos. Bee’s family lived in a wood house with dirt floors. They had no electric power or plumbing.

Going to School

Bee attended school for several years until he was about 10 years old. He did not own a clock. When the sun hit a specific tree on a mountain, he knew it was time to go to school.
Each person in a Hmong family worked. Boys gathered wood for cooking. Girls helped cook and carried water. Both worked in the fields when they were old enough.

Water buffalo plowed rice fields. Bee sometimes stood on the animal’s back. He was one of the best water buffalo riders in the area.
East of Laos is a country called Vietnam. North Vietnam was at war with South Vietnam. Some Hmong and the US wanted the South to win.

The US trained Hmong soldiers who supported the South in secret and gave them weapons. The soldiers blocked supplies and rescued US pilots. People in the US did not know this. This is why the Hmong fought what would be known as the Secret War.

Bee became a soldier at age 12. He fought about three years.

General Vang Pao (left) poses with an American. Pao was the leader of the Hmong soldiers in Laos during the Vietnam War.
North Vietnam won the war in 1975. The Hmong who worked with the US against the North had to escape Laos. They risked being killed or taken prisoner if they did not.

Bee and other soldiers led about 1,000 Hmong west to Thailand. The group walked 150 miles to a river. Thailand was on the other side.

Bee and other leaders crossed first. They were not allowed to go back for the rest of the group. Many drowned or were shot as they crossed. Bee’s family crossed safely.

The family became refugees in Thailand. Families stayed in the refugee camp for varied lengths of time. Bee’s family stayed for eight months, and Bee learned some English there. Others stayed for years.
Bee and his family flew to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, as refugees on July 17, 1979.

Life was hard for the Hmong Americans. Daily tasks like cooking changed. They now used electric power and running water. Not knowing much English made life harder.

Not everyone in the US knew why the Hmong Americans came. Some people told the Hmong Americans to return to Laos.

Bee met Ta Moua (moo-ah) there. They later married. Philadelphia did not feel like home to Bee. He had no garden and could not camp or fish.

Photo credit: WPT Education.

Ta Moua loves dancing, especially line dancing. She has worked at the same company for 30 years (2018).
His family chose to move to Eau Claire (oh klair), Wisconsin, in August 1980. There Bee fished, hunted, and grew produce. Bee felt happy.

Bee took high school classes. He finished at age 21. Bee then earned three college degrees.

Bee and Ta had two sons and six daughters. Hmong custom gives a man an elder name when he marries and has children. Bee’s family chose Joua (jh-oo-a) Bee as his elder name. He used Joe Bee. It was easy for others who spoke English.
Serving the Community

Joe Bee was the first Hmong police officer in Wisconsin. He later became a social worker. Joe Bee also worked at the Eau Claire Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association. It provides support to the area’s Hmong Americans.

Joe Bee bought homes and rented to Hmong Americans who were unable to find a place to live.

Joe Bee won a seat on the Eau Claire City Council in 1996. He was the first Hmong American to hold public office in Wisconsin.

He learned how the US government worked. He shared that information with Hmong Americans so they would understand too.
Meet Genie Lor

Fifth grader Genie Lor attends school in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. She is a member of her school’s Hmong Club, where she learns about Hmong culture and language.

Genie shared with us a little about herself and her Hmong heritage.

What do you like to do for fun?

I like to read. My favorite books are comics, and sometimes I like scary ones.

What is your favorite subject in school?

I enjoy math because I like numbers.

What are some things others should know about Hmong people or culture?

They should know about Hmong food. I really like Hmong food. My mom sometimes makes these Hmong sausages. I like them because they have peppers inside.

Tell about a Hmong tradition you enjoy.

I like Hmong New Year because you can celebrate it with a lot of other people. You can see people sing and dance there. People wear Hmong clothes, but sometimes they don’t want to, so they just wear normal clothes. I also like that there are toy shops at Hmong New Year.

Genie is a Hmong American, and she enjoys learning about and sharing her Hmong heritage.
In Laos, Joe Bee had learned to play qeej (g-eng). He kept playing in Eau Claire. He taught his sons to play. He also played Hmong flutes and the jaw harp.

Joe Bee also taught others to play Hmong games. This taught them about Hmong culture.

Joe Bee and Ta taught their children to speak Hmong. The children also learned Shamanism, the traditional Hmong beliefs.

Lar Zeng and Lar Kong, Joe Bee’s sons, played children’s sized qeej at the Hmong Music Festival in 1994.
Joe Bee returned to Laos as often as he could. He died there March 30, 2007, possibly of a heart attack.

His body was sent back to Eau Claire. A three-day Hmong funeral was held for him.

Joe Bee was a leader and served others in both Laos and the US. He taught Hmong Americans about US culture and others about Hmong culture. Joe Bee was a role model.

Photo credit: WPT Education.

Joe Bee was a role model not only for his family but for others in his community and throughout Wisconsin. How can you be a role model for others?
Glossary

elder name (n): ........ name given to a Hmong man after he is married and has children

Hmong American (n): ... a Hmong person who relocated to the US from Southeast Asia

public office (n): ........ a government job to which a person is appointed or elected

qeej (n): ............... a Hmong instrument made of reed pipes used in funerals and rituals to communicate with the spiritual world

refugee (n): ............ someone who leaves their country, especially because of war or other threatening events

refugee camp (n): ...... a temporary place people live after fleeing their home country

Shamanism (n): ........ a belief system led by a shaman who communicates with the spiritual world to help heal and guide people