

UROP Final Report  
*Transitions: University Avenue*  
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The Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program gave me the chance to change something in society and the opportunity to raise awareness about social issues. I really wanted to shine a light on how misleading the media is when portraying minorities. My initial intent with my UROP project was to focus on construction of the Central Corridor Light Rail, particularly analyzing how it would affect Hmong businesses and the Hmong community as a whole. I wanted to provide an outlet for real people to tell their stories instead of having it told for them by a reporter on TV who looked nothing like them.

My project additionally aimed to deal with the concept of change and I ended up dealing with it in many unforeseen ways. As I continued my work on *Transitions* and the light rail, I began to see my work parallel with the light rail construction. There were a lot of unexpected incidences. Just as businesses had to deal with unforeseen facility shut-offs, my project dealt with a lot of miscommunication. My original plan was faced with many obstructions.

The first blow came when I realized I could not work with the Hmong business I wanted to. Initially, I planned to work with the Center for Hmong Arts and Talent (CHAT), specifically the director, Katie Ka Vang. I attempted to contact CHAT and Vang about possible interviews but received no reply. Unfortunately, I later learned that Vang had been diagnosed with Cancer and was going through an excruciatingly arduous time. Out of respect, I decided to seek another business to work with.

While my mentor, Professor Catherine Squires and I worked on finding another business to work with, we met several times during spring semester. From here I learned all necessary coding, digital software editing, and journalistic skills. This included familiarizing myself with iMovie and Garageband and learning how to generate an effective interview formula. In January I began commuting to Gordon Parks High School (GPHS) every week to work with students and faculty there. This is where the magic

really began. With the help of the Curriculum Director, Paul Creager and teacher, Tom Davies, I was able to work on other Transition projects. I transcribed many interviews in order to prepare myself for those I would be conducting. I worked alongside student producers on these projects making editing choices.

Working with teenagers on this project really made me remember why I decided to fight for social change in the first place. I have always believed that the voice of youth is a very powerful one. The students I worked with all had something incredible to offer. I discovered that many of them had hopes to make it in the creative industry one day. These kids were talented, smart, and had acquired amazing skills. The editing choices of these students also taught me that they see the world in a different way. Their perspective is one that contains valuable details that most people fail to notice. My experience working with these students taught me so much about the power of perspective, determination, art, and left me feeling very empowered.

Additionally, since GPHS was located right on University Avenue I truly got to see how construction of the light rail affected the community week by week. In January students were still able to get to school fairly easily. After March, the road the GPHS was barricaded with cement blocks and students and faculty had to take back roads just to get an education and to get to their jobs. This deterrence was shared by customers who struggled to get to local stores and civilians who stood in the middle of a busy street to catch the bus.

Eventually, Professor Squires was able to connect me with the Asian Economic Development Association (AEDA). AEDA is an organization which focuses on businesses in low-income Asian communities in Minnesota and offers them advocacy and business resources. AEDA agreed to have me partner with them to survey local Asian businesses. Later on, they later decided against it. AEDA also agreed to connect me with business owners for interviews however despite many attempts from Professor Squires and I, we never received contact information. Eventually, AEDA staff stopped replying to our emails. It was a very confusing situation for me as I had no idea what caused these discrepancies.

Professor Squires and I concluded that it would be best to use Little Mekong as the focus of my UROP project due to the inability to interview an Asian business.

Little Mekong is a district consisting of over 100 Asian business located along a five block radius on University Avenue. The goal of Little Mekong is to sustain a thriving cultural destination. The launch on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012 included a tasting tour and entertainment and drew in over 100 visitors. Myself and one student from GPHS were able to interview every day civilians about their thoughts on the light rail construction. All interviewees expressed concern about construction but it was evident that supporting Asian businesses meant more. Their statements and the turn out of the Little Mekong launch really made me realize that support for Asian business in Minnesota is incredibly strong. These interviews resulted in a digital documentation video which serves as the product of my UROP project.

In the end, my project did stray from my original intent. I was not effective in telling the light rail story from a Hmong perspective but I was able to focus on Asian businesses. The failure to partner with Hmong businesses was a really devastating blow for me and the fact that I did not have the opportunity to interview any Asian business owners was disappointing. I am very proud of what I did accomplish however. I may not have presented a Hmong point of view but I was able to showcase the need to support Asian businesses. I learned a lot about journalism through these triumphs and tragedies. I learned that sometimes things do not go accordingly to plan and adaptability is vital.

UROP was a very eye opening experience. I am very thankful for the independence and free reign it gave me to really make a difference. Additionally, I gained such valuable knowledge from working with a professor outside of a typical classroom setting. UROP allowed me to make so many valuable connections with numerous professionals including GPHS staff. What I gained from this experience as far exceeded my expectations. Not only did I learn a lot about journalism and the community, I learned a lot about myself and for that I am forever grateful to UROP. It truly is a wonderful program.