



BECAUSE I GOT THE HELP I NEEDED TO LEARN ENGLISH, NOW I CAN LOOK FOR WORK AND HELP MY FAMILY. I HAVE ALWAYS WORKED FOR MY LIVING, NOW I HAVE A CHANCE TO GET A NEW JOB.

## Tong Vu

The Hubbs Center for Lifelong Learning, a program of the St. Paul public schools, is located on a busy avenue lined with fast food restaurants, shops catering to the multicultural neighborhood and light industry. The Center – the first of its kind – is an airy building with skylights that let in as much natural light as possible. The lobby and common areas are full of students from all walks of life – from recent immigrants to lifelong Minnesotans.

The Hubbs Center has over 12 Minnesota FastTRAC programs. These programs provide students with both the foundation in academic learning and the hands-on skills they need to get jobs that pay a family sustaining wage. Like many states in the Great Lakes region, Minnesota has been hit hard by the recession. In the fall of 2010, unemployment in the Twin Cities hovers around 7% and many sectors that previously employed many Minnesotans, such as construction and manufacturing, are still shedding jobs.

Tong Vu knows first-hand how the recession has affected people in her community. Tong immigrated to the United States from Laos with her mother in 1980. A teenager then, she took classes in English at a church-funded school, but had to go to work as a dishwasher after a few months to help support her family. In 1987, she got married and over the course of the next several years, had eight children.

Tong was always a hard worker, and knew she didn't have the luxury of being able to stay home. She went to work at a greeting card factory and stayed there for 13 years while her children were in school. Tong was laid off from that job in the fall of 2008 and without formal instruction in English, she found it impossible to find a new job.

"I never learned English in my country, so it was hard for me," Tong said. "I think one of the reasons I was laid off was that they had updated the equipment and you needed to be able to read English quickly to operate the computers."

Tong knew that she had to improve her English skills. Although she is a youthful 47, she also knew that another job in

manufacturing was not feasible at her age. She considered college courses, but her family's finances didn't permit her to pay for courses herself while also putting her children through college. Then, through a public listing in her neighborhood, she discovered the Hubbs Center.

"The program [at the Hubbs Center] helps us," she said. "It helps because if you want to work but you don't have the money to pay tuition, it allows you to go for free."

While free classes were the initial draw, they were not the only benefit to the Hubbs Center. There, Tong received ESL courses, as well as the practical training in medical coding. In the Saint Paul area, medical coders can earn around \$40,000 a year, a significant increase from factory and manufacturing positions.

"I liked the courses here," said Tong. "The medical coding courses were a hands-on experience, which I needed to learn. The courses also allowed me to work from home."

Tong found that another key benefit at the Hubbs Center was that her instructors were experienced working with student still learning English as their second language.

"In my head, I still have to translate what I read into my language to make sure I understand," explained Tong. "My teachers made sure I have the time I need to do that. They know that bilingual students need extra time to study."

Tong completed the medical coding program at the Hubbs Center this past summer and is now preparing for her state certification exam. She's found that her enthusiasm has rubbed off into other areas of her life.

"My children ask me why I'm going to school, when I'm so old," she said with a smile. "I tell them I still have 25 years to work! Because I got the help I needed to learn English, now I can look for work and help my family. I have always worked for my living, now I have a chance to get a new job."