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By Ly Vang and Susan E. Stokes

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If you walk through the emerging bounty of your local farmers' market this weekend – the season's first local strawberries seem to be arriving ahead of schedule – we would ask that you also remember this: The two of us have spent much of the last week in police stations and in district court processing orders of protection for Hmong American fruit and vegetable farmers who were threatened by a neighbor.

We make that request because it is important for our region to know that the many Hmong American farmers who bring so much wonderful, fresh food to our markets are living enormously challenging lives. Most people know the basic story of the Hmong – people who fought on the side of the U.S. in Vietnam; survived squalid jungle refugee camps; immigrated by the thousands to places such as Minnesota, Michigan, and California; built productive new lives for themselves and their families; and, in huge numbers, reclaimed their traditions in farming. Probably half of the vegetable and fruit vendors at the main Minneapolis and St. Paul farmers' markets are now Hmong Americans.

It is a well-known and inspiring history that also happens to be true. But there is a more complex and less idyllic story about our new Minnesotans, one that those of us who work with or among Hmong American farmers have not done enough to share. Hmong American farmers – bountiful producers, icons of the enlivening impact of immigration in our state – nonetheless live every day with misunderstandings, suspicions, and even dangers.

An incident last week in Eagan is an extreme example. A man confronted a Hmong American couple working in their field, which is adjacent to his land. He was agitated; their English wasn't great. He said he was going to kill them, and then left and returned with a loaded shotgun, according to the farmers. The farmers called us; we called the police. The man was arrested and charged with a felony, making terroristic threats, and we ultimately acquired an order for protection for 43 Hmong American farmers who are growing vegetables on the farmland that borders that man's neighborhood.

In less dramatic ways, Hmong American farmers often feel unsafe as they farm in their fields on the edges of the metro region. They get suspicious looks or a slow drive-by on the road. Police officers – sometimes on patrol, and sometimes in response to neighbors' calls – visit Hmong American farmers to ask if they are legally working their land. "Do you

belong here?” seems to be the most common question. Such moments are difficult for immigrants who fled a country where the police were genuinely feared, and who, in any case, almost always lack a signed lease. (Like most farmers in Minnesota, they rent their land based on a handshake.)

The fresh fruits and vegetables lining the tables of our farmers’ markets do not arrive by magic. Many of them are raised by Hmong American people from the Twin Cities who commute out to fragmented plots of rental land they’ve cobbled together on the edges of the metro region. Farming is almost always a second or even third job. Many Hmong American people work on the land late into the evening, and before dawn, before or after they go to their day jobs. It is not uncommon for Hmong American farmers to sleep on their rented land overnight – not because they don’t have a home, but because they don’t have the time to return to their homes between their jobs and their farming.

This information is not offered by way of complaint. Most people who are new to this country – and many who have been here for years – work extraordinarily hard in difficult circumstances to raise their families and launch their kids into the world. But we should know where our food comes from and how it gets to us. And we want more people to know that those Asian people working at dusk among the tomatoes, basil, raspberries, beets, potatoes, melons, peppers, and zucchini are getting ready for your local market. And they wouldn’t mind if you waved hello, rather than calling the police.

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