

**NINA MOINI:** Minnesota Hmong artists are collectively organizing a benefit concert this weekend for families and businesses impacted by the ice surge in Minnesota. They'll share music, poetry, and stories about their lives Saturday night at the Pan Asian Center in Maplewood.

Here to share more about the artists and who they're organizing for is Tou SaiK Lee, a local artist and organizer of the event called Interwoven-- A Tapestry of Resilience and Resistance. Thank you so much for being here with us, Tou SaiK.

**TOU SAIKO LEE:**Hi, thank you for having me.

**NINA MOINI:** The last few months have been challenging for a lot of people. I'd love to learn about how you decided in community that it was time for an event like this.

**TOU SAIKO LEE:**Yeah, so for us, some of us were already activated and wanting to help out in different ways, and then there were those who wanted to help out, but they weren't sure how. And for us, we are-- I mean, just speaking for myself, I'm very inspired by what's happening in our Twin Cities community with the activism, with the organizing and with the artists.

And so when I saw Guante-- he's a spoken word artist-- Kyle, he created an arts engagement or response through a workshop. I really wanted to activate my community, too and create a workshop inspired by his.

And his, it was full and it was amazing. And so with Guante to gather artists because me as an artist, I had an experience addressing different issues in the past through my art with music and spoken word.

So for us, I just thought it was natural to bring artists together and do a workshop, and then within that workshop where we were creating in response to the immigration rates that were affecting families, we thought of this idea of a collective of artists of creating a benefit show and bringing artists together.

**NINA MOINI:** I think that we have seen so much a beautiful and powerful art that has been created in so many different mediums the past few months. And we've talked about a lot on this show, some of the ripple effects that some families and individuals experience, whether they were at home because they were afraid to go to work or they're missing out on paychecks or they're fearing for their safety.

And I just think that a lot of people are just now beginning to process some of what has been happening. Are you hearing from people who are feeling like they're kind of ready to make art at this point or ready to put everything that they've been feeling into some kind of an art form?

**TOU SAIKO LEE:**Yeah, I believe for some artists speaking for myself, sometimes when we feel like we're like we don't have a voice or where we are unable to do something, one of our only ways of reaching for air is to create, to express ourselves.

And I would say sometimes I just speak through my poetry. And so for me, I think that creativity is there. And I think by creating spaces where artists could gather or have an opportunity to create art, such as workshops, such as events.

I think that that's where we do create, and this also includes a lot of the visual artists because we're showcasing a lot of music and poets-- musicians and poets. But a lot of the visual artists have been very active creating visual art to raise awareness and to put out messages of what they feel about what's going on with the immigration raids and how it's affecting their families. Yeah.

**NINA MOINI:** Yeah. So building on that, I understand there are 12 artists involved in this performance. How is everybody interacting because I understand there's also a visual art component to the event?

**TOU SAIKO LEE:** Yeah, there's a visual arts gallery where visual artists who had created a digital art are having their post. They're donating-- to have prints of their posters of their visual arts for fundraising. And then there's also an interactive art where one of the installation artists, Ibé, is having butterflies that represent-- that we accept immigrants as origami in a collage display so people that go to the concert can also participate in that art.

And the other artists are-- the 12 artists are poets and musicians. Oh, they're doing a collaboration where they came together, like we are the world type collaboration. But it's a bunch of artists that basically-- there was a few songwriters and producers that came together and then asked various artists from the community to help sing on the song. So that's going to be the final performance.

**NINA MOINI:** Wow. OK. So that'll be a coming together of everybody. There has been so much just mutual aid and community, very grassroots, organic work that has been coming together the past few months too, and a lot of that infrastructure already existed.

But people are really coming together now to see if they can directly help their neighbors. So that's part of the benefit concert aspect of this. I understand you're trying to reach \$30,000. Some of that will go directly to some impacted families. How are you identifying who needs help and who you can most be helpful to right now?

**TOU SAIKO LEE:** Right, and I definitely wanted to-- that we're connected to organizations, such as Minnesota 8, who have been working with Southeast Asian families to help support them in resources and legal support and everything. So that's one of the organizations we identified.

So the families are some of them were connected through that network of Minnesota 8, because they're already helping families directly. And some of the families were families that we-- because a lot of our artists are actually also organizers that are doing mutual aid, that are helping business owners apply for relief funds that have lost a lot of their fund businesses.

So through our work on the ground and interacting with families, we identified a few families, and then Minnesota 8 helped us identify a few families that we could support. But I would also say it's very more symbolic. We hope that this could inspire not just artists but people to come together and support those families that are in need. And so these families are just families that we have identified specifically for this concert, but we hope that it will go beyond this.

**NINA MOINI:** Mm-hmm. I'm reading here that there have been other events over time that have been really significant events that have happened, and then you've come together. You've done these types of performances and concerts. But I do wonder if this ICE surge that Minnesota experienced in the past few months, has that changed the way that you think about just organizing and mutual aid and your art?

**TOU SAIKO LEE:** Yeah, I think, for me, I've always believed, as in arts and music, as a way to whether it's raise awareness or protest music, because I've been inspired by artists in history who have addressed music from Bob Marley to Bob Dylan.

And so I do feel that it's important. I think that artists have come together in different iterations in the past, whether it's human rights issues or police brutality. But in this case, I think it's interesting because there's somewhat of a division too within our community, meaning that some do understand and are connected to the movement of resistance against what's going on.

And then there are some in our community who are more supportive of it, and I think that when we think about historically, our people and our history-- and this is where we adapt the workshop to really talk about the history of resistance. And I think that that's where we feel like it's an interesting dynamic because we feel we can bring people together, even to transcend those differences because yeah, so--

**NINA MOINI:** I get what you're saying. Yeah.

**TOU SAIKO LEE:** Yeah, yeah.

**NINA MOINI:** What you're saying, I think, is that even though people have various takes on what is going on, there's still a moment to be together and perhaps a moment for that coming together. I wish we had more time. Thank you so much, Tou SaiK Lee, for coming and sharing about A Tapestry of Resilience and Resistance, Interwoven.