

# Sonya Baccam Streit



Sonya & her mother

Sonya Baccam Streit is a first generation immigrant and came to the United States in 1976 when she was six years old with her parents because they sought asylum from the Civil War that was waging in Laos, a country in southeast Asia.

Sonya's country of birth is Laos, but she isn't Laotian; she is part of an ethnic group that lives in Vietnam called Tai Dam, whose ancestors came from China. The Tai Dam are known as "people without a country". Sonya's parents were originally living in Vietnam, but fled to Laos when the Vietnam War hit. The family had to flee again when Laos fell to the communist system. The family escaped to Thailand and lived in refugee camps there. Under Iowa Governor Robert Ray's resettlement program, Sonya and her parents came to Iowa in 1976. A church sponsored her family's move to Iowa and was a huge help when Sonya's family was rebuilding their lives.

Sonya speaks Tai Dam, Laotian, and English. She uses Tai Dam when she speaks with the elders. As the elders grow older, Tai Dam is being spoken less and the culture is less preserved with the younger generation, and this saddens Sonya.

When discussing how Sonya identifies herself, she feels conflicted. She was raised mostly in the United States, but she still feels a strong connection to her Tai Dam ethnic roots. She described feeling "caught between the Asian World and the Western World." Her value for her ethnic roots, heritage and culture often conflict with the American way of life. This creates a daily struggle, trying to find the balance of respecting where you came from, but also living in the Western World. She says she still doesn't know if she has found a balance.

There are some large differences between Western culture and her culture. One of the biggest is the way you show respect in both cultures. For example, in American culture eye contact when speaking to someone is very important, and if you aren't looking at the person you are talking to in the eyes, you are seen as disrespectful. In her culture, eye contact is considered rude and disrespectful. You are also not expected to talk back to your parents or husband, and you give elders the utmost respect. The American culture fosters independence and communication, but in Sonya's culture, you put others before yourself.

Sonya recognizes that there are definitely more opportunities for her in the United States and moving here was great for her life. If she still lived in Laos she probably would not have received an education and wouldn't have attended law school, as she did here. She received her juris doctor from Drake University Law School and her bachelor's degree from William Penn University.

Sonya decided to go to law school because she wanted to help people understand their rights and teach people how to navigate the complicated court system. She currently works for the Iowa Department of Human Rights and enjoys being part of a state agency that advocates for underrepresented Iowans.