



Multco commons: Juvenile Services Division’s Sang Dao honored on a national stage

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Every year, the Coalition for Juvenile Justice (CJJ) recognizes a young adult, under the age of 28, who has overcome personal obstacles and continues to make a difference in their community despite involvement with the juvenile justice system. The CJJ’s youth committee sifts through many nominations submitted from across the country, before narrowing down an honoree most deserving of its “Spirit of Youth Award.” This year the national organization chose a Juvenile Services Division employee and RISE (Resource Intervention Services to Empower) Unit member, Sang Dao.

Twenty-six-year-old Dao joined the Juvenile Services Division last year and has played many roles in his division. He has worked as a program aide on a range of assignments from special projects involving system change, youth and gang violence and assessment of our county’s juvenile justice practices. Lately Dao has been working one-on-one with gang-involved/impacted and high-risk young men, a line of work he has life experience with.

At the age of 13, Dao stopped going to school. He became more involved with gangs and a criminal lifestyle. “In 2007, I was 17,” said Dao. “And over the span of two months I was involved in three shootings that ultimately led to my incarceration.”

Dao was convicted of Measure 11 attempted murder, among other charges. He was sentenced to 12 ½ years behind bars and was transferred to Oregon Youth Authority’s (OYA) MacLaren correctional facility. Remorse and the realization of his actions set in. His grandparents also passed away, while he was incarcerated.

“We were a really close-knit family. My grandparents kept us together. They escaped from Vietnam, from the war, with 10 kids, traveling at sea and risking death.



They risked all of that just for the belief that coming to America would provide a better life.”

“So here I am. I’m born -- first generation Vietnamese American -- and I managed to mess it up.”

Dao began to work -- feverishly -- toward rehabilitation and education. He took part in treatment groups, vocational programs, job opportunities and internships while in prison.

With help from community stakeholders and mentors he earned: a degree from Portland State University; clemency granted by Governor John Kitzhaber last year; and forgiveness from victims of his crime.

Last year, he was recruited by the Department of Community Justice and now works to change the paths of young men, just like him not too long ago.

According to the CJJ application, The Spirit of Youth Award provides an important opportunity to learn from

a young person’s direct experience about the hard work and dedication it takes to build a better life, and how those in the juvenile justice system and at the community level can help.

“Nobody better exemplifies this than Sang,” says Juvenile Services Division Senior Manager Deena Corso. “He’s more than deserving of this award and continues to make strides in his professional life.”

Corso, OYA Deputy Director Joe O’Leary and former JSD director Christina McMahan, who nominated Dao, attended the award ceremony at the Washington Hilton Hotel in D.C. last Thursday.

He was also accompanied by his girlfriend Tracy Katigbak.

In front of a crowd of more than 425 people, he gave a powerful speech that received a standing ovation.

Dao sees the recognition of “Spirit of Youth Award” as proof that he is capable of making positive changes.

“The proof is to myself, the system, and to other kids like me. It is possible to turn things around and make a difference.”

“I wouldn’t be here without the people I had in my corner. I owe the credit to them. They believed in me and gave me the strength and courage to believe in myself.”

