

## Who's the Hero?

In re-hab following back surgery, my wife was hurting. The doctor for our wing had left for the day, but the nurse said she would send a doctor from another wing.

Within a few minutes, a doctor entered the room, and when he saw us, he exclaimed, "Mr. Jackson! You saved my life!" I thought it might have been a slight exaggeration since I did not know how to swim and did not recognize him immediately.

I had seen him years earlier through my classroom window in the library of the junior high where I taught but had never met him personally. He came to my school to prepare for his college entrance exam by memorizing 20 words each day. He was Hmong. His name was Tha (silent h) Cha. His sister Mee was my student. I had met his parents and little sister Shelley in their apartment on Clay.

At the Citadel, Tha graduated with honors but was unable to find an American school where he could pursue a career in medicine. He found an opening on Dominique, an island in the Caribbean, which accepted him.

Aware Tha was far from home, my wife and I decided to send him a check to encourage him on his journey. We sent him a check each month for several months and forgot about it.

Now, in the room, here's Tha, a doctor, specializing in pain management, ready and willing to give my wife relief.

Then, nine years later, in June 2023 following a hip replacement, I found myself in the same re-hab facility. Tha was still there.

One day when I had visitors, Tha happened by. He repeated to them, "Mr. Jackson saved my life," and added, "when I was in medical school, I had run out of funds and was surviving on sugar cane from the fields as I went to and from school each day. Mr. Jackson and his wife sent me a check for \$100 each month for six months." I didn't recall the amount.

Were Betty and I heroes? We helped Tha. But how about a small boy carried on someone's back from a primitive mountain home, through the jungles of Laos infested with Communist soldiers who job it was to kill him, stealing across one of the world's great rivers to a foreign country, housed in a refugee camp where families had to build their own shelter, after years of confinement, then to be vaulted 12,000 miles to a new continent and a new culture where almost nothing was familiar, thrust into a social order with small assistance--and left to survive? Then to rise like the Phoenix to master everything you touched: the culture, the language, the social order, society— winning, among other honors, Employee of the Year where he worked. I am proud to know him. Who's the hero? I nominate Dr. Tha Cha.



Tha, at my right side and wearing a red vest, and his brothers at my 95th birthday party given by the Cha clan.