

COMMUNITY → LED

When Xuem Siu first arrived in the U.S. as a 24-year-old in 2008, he barely spoke any English. He could count to ten and exchange basic greetings, but that was about it. Now the master's student in public health considers English his fourth language, behind Jarai, Bahnar, and Vietnamese.

Siu is part of Greensboro's Montagnard community, which at about 7,000 members is the largest gathering of the people outside of Vietnam. Many Montagnards, who come from several ethnic groups in the Vietnamese highlands, were resettled here after supporting U.S. troops during the Vietnam War. Siu is working to address the challenges faced by his and other local refugee communities, particularly when it comes to the pandemic.



Morrison and Siu (top photo, left to right) assist at a vaccine clinic co-hosted by the Montagnard Dega Association and the Sudanese and Congolese communities. At the same event, volunteers put together and distribute PPE bags.

Already a UNCG graduate with a master's in peace and conflict studies, Siu returned to the University last year to become the first community health scholar directly supported by the Montagnard Dega Association, a local nonprofit. "This job is so important, that's why I took this role," he says. "I wanted to contribute to the community."

Siu's work is part of research his mentor Dr. Sharon Morrison has conducted with refugee communities in Greensboro for more than 15 years. This community-based participatory research, she says, involves working alongside communities to identify problems and implement solutions together. "The community identifies the issue and we get the data to inform strategies."



When Al Amin (photo below) came to the U.S. from Bangladesh in 2018, he was drawn to UNCG's reputation for community-engaged research: "Working for the community has always been the preference for me."



Her team attends community meetings, talks to local leaders, develops and offers suggestions, and actively takes part in community efforts. At the beginning of the pandemic, Morrison's then-graduate students – Saif Al Amin and Fatima-Ezzahra Salmi – worked with the Montagnard, Bhutanese, and Congolese communities to build systems that would help them weather the storm.

That included observing how younger Montagnards were using social media to increase COVID-19 awareness and building on their efforts, creating translated infographics and videos, and helping distribute materials to families in need.

Now, Siu and Morrison are helping locals adapt to new challenges like getting vaccines and boosters and avoiding variants. Morrison's team and the Montagnard Dega Association have been able to assist close to 200 families and have helped vaccinate more than 500 individuals. Since the fall of 2020, 40 adults have received food on a monthly basis.

Al Amin's focus was social media and digital assets to increase awareness of COVID-19. Salmi (lower left photo), who also has a bachelor's from UNCG, focused on infographics and distributing food and PPE to families in need. Al Amin and Salmi both graduated with MPH degrees in 2021. Salmi now works for UNICEF, while Al Amin is entering the epidemiology PhD program at UNC Chapel Hill.



The team has also documented the Montagnard nonprofit's response to the pandemic, with a resulting publication in the North Carolina Medical Journal. Publications, they say, will help others see how community-based participatory research can work to directly help underserved communities.

"When we talk about community engagement, we take our lead from the community and that's how work gets done," says Morrison. "Whatever we find, we then give back to the community."

And their efforts are working. Community members are accessing the information they need more readily now, Siu says, because of social media efforts, and community leaders are more aware of how to engage. The Montagnard nonprofit is growing, and new generations of community leaders are feeling empowered to create positive change, tapping into resources like the Kate B. Reynolds grant that's supporting Siu's work.

Now, Morrison's research group is assisting as the Montagnard Dega Association trains Cambodian and Bhutanese community leaders in emergency preparedness and responses.

And while Siu may not admit it himself, he too, has emerged as a leader within his community.

"I see a lot of smiles," he says. "They're working together. We have more resources, more networks. What I see is really successful."

by Sayaka Matsuoka • learn more at hhs.uncg.edu/phe