

# HEAD AND HEART: AN INTRODUCTION TO ECONOMIC MOBILITY

September 14, 2017

Amherst H. Wilder Foundation Auditorium



**INTERFAITH  
ACTION** OF GREATER  
SAINT PAUL  
OPPORTUNITY SAINT PAUL

## Welcome!

After the cohort shared in a period of food and fellowship, Interfaith Action of Greater St. Paul's executive director, Randi Ilyse Roth, kicked things off by reminding us that while poverty in St. Paul is widespread and too often overlooked, we can still make a difference, both personally and collectively. Poverty robs people of many things, including social connection. And by engaging as volunteers, we're helping to create a new reality for kids and families who need empathetic support systems that engender dignity and endeavor to empower. As people of faith, we say NO to complacency and pessimism, and Yes to that which calls us from deep within.

## A Stirring Life Story

The evening's keynote speaker was Dr. MayKao Hang, President & CEO of Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. An accomplished change-maker, MayKao watches over one of St. Paul's most visible and effective nonprofits, which works to improve people's lives through direct service, research, and capacity building. During her inspirational presentation, the 45-year-old—who was born into chaos in Laos, lived in public housing as a teenager, and earned her way into Brown University—talked about how coming-of-age in poverty still informs her day-to-day work as a celebrated advocate and successful organizational leader.

To read more about MayKao's journey, [click here](#).

## SOME OF THE KEY POINTS IN HER TALK

- Every fifth person you pass on the streets of St. Paul is living in poverty. Every third child you pass counts as poor. Another way to think of it: If you assume the federal definition of poverty, you could fill the Xcel Energy Center four-times over with low-income people living in St. Paul.
- Poverty should not determine our destinies. We must not turn a blind eye. That's not who we are. That's not what America is all about.
- The opposite of poverty is just enough: Enough time, enough money, enough people to love and care about you.
- As you encounter young people in poverty, you have to learn to suspend judgment. You must always believe that everyone has the potential to succeed. Because where you first encounter young people and their families is not always where they're meant to stay.
- Volunteerism is one of the most effective ways for changing society and changing yourself.
- Because we are meant to be in community, social bonding and relationships can heal trauma, both mental and physical.

## Data Dive

Former St. Paul Mayor Jim Scheibel is a professor of practice at Hamline University, where he taps his experience as a policymaker and advocate for social justice to help students engage with the wider community. In his informative talk, he introduced the cohort to [Minnesota Compass](#) and [Opportunity Index](#), two easy-to-use digital tools that help citizens understand how various factors – including race and place – affect economic opportunity and mobility. By understanding the human beings behind the numbers, we become both more empathetic and effective.

## Youth Leaders

Before breaking into an Interfaith dialogue, the audience heard from Yomiyu Gafesu and Adrian Amendariz, two high school participants in the Wilder Foundations Youth Leadership Initiative (YLI). The goal of the program, according to its director, Nou Yang—who led the evening’s conversation—is to help kids understand themselves through the lens of their culture, equip them with leadership skills, and then encourage them to apply what they learn to real-world issue in their communities. There’s no question both Yomiyu and Adrian have benefited from the experience, which depends on volunteer, adult participation.

Yomiyu spoke fondly of a mentor that helped her gain self-confidence. Adrian encouraged volunteers-to-be in the audience to listen intently, without judgment. And Nou reminded everyone that when working with young people, you must bring your whole self, without hesitation. Volunteerism is not about engaging in a transaction, it’s about building relationships.

## Interfaith Dialogue

Rev. David Ostendorf, a United Church of Christ (UCC) minister, led our interfaith dialogue session. We read Ruth 1:7-17 and a commentary, reflecting on the topic of kindness.

## Video

<https://youtu.be/IyabEC4AweU>

## Discussion Questions

What stood out as most interesting about the video?

What stood out as most surprising about the video?

How would you define poverty?

How would you define economic mobility?

In the video MayKao Hang said, “Never, ever, believe that anybody you’re working with doesn’t have the potential to succeed, and that they’re not worth anything to society. Because where you find people” ... “is not where they’re meant to stay.” What do you think she means by this? How does this relate to serving others? How does it relate to economic mobility?

Does one person volunteering their time change anything? If yes, how? If not, what are some other things we can do to make the changes we want to see?

## QUESTIONS FOR FAITH GROUPS

Did anything in the video or in our discussion thus far resonate with you as it relates to our/your faith tradition?

Does engaging in service and/or attempting to improve economic mobility strengthen our faith community? If yes, how? If no, why not?

What values do we espouse when we volunteer our time to help others?