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**2021 Payette Sho-Ping Chin Memorial Academic Scholarship Recipient**  
**Application Essay**

He took a final fleeting look over his shoulder at the shore of the Mekong River, at his home, at the guns of border control pointed at his back, and he put his head down and swam.

My dad was thirteen years old when he fled his war-torn home of Luang Prabang, Laos. It was sink or swim my dad recalls, narrating this story for another countless time. This is the story that built me. It would be many years before my dad made it to a new home; It was years of surviving refugee camp in Thailand, coming to the United States, watching Sesame Street at age 16 to learn English, landing a full-ride soccer scholarship to community college, and moving across cities until he and his family he left behind in Laos were reunited to settle into the Kansas City suburbs. There, he met my mother, a fellow Lao refugee, and together they slowly built a new home. Their bold and unrelenting pursuit to build a safe and healthy home is the foundation of my drive, my sense of duty, and my belief in the innate role of the built environment to shape the human condition.

As a first-generation Lao American daughter of refugees growing up in Kansas - I am deeply aware of the fundamental needs for safety, home, community, and access to opportunity. The influence of architecture in fulfilling these needs first registered with me when I was 9 years old. I was reading the book *Gracie's Girl* - a story about a young girl and her friendship with a homeless woman she meets at a soup kitchen, when I became inspired by their chance meeting in a space dedicated towards serving the community and human interaction. The story resonated somewhere in my youthful psyche alongside my parents' story and I found myself building Lego soup kitchens when I decided I wanted to become an architect. I wanted to design spaces to serve and connect people.

Moving forward through the rest of my life, there are two seemingly disparate parts to my journey that until only recently have I begun to discover the intricacies of their relationship. On one path, I proceeded from that 9-year-old moment to seek out architecture in as many opportunities as possible. When I left the Kansas suburbs for the urban campus of Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. The influence of architecture on the quality of life became a living example as I straddled complex relationship of the historic halls of Yale's campus and the grittier downtown city of New Haven. The pace of life, the scale of proximity, the culture of interactions shook me to explore architecture as it relates to community building and city shaping. Each summer I sought a new city and new opportunity to explore the influence of architecture in the city: Quito, Ecuador; Louisville, Kentucky; Brooklyn, New York. Each summer presenting a new way of living directly shaped from its built environment.

Professionally, my years in Washington DC with a commercial interior architecture firm challenged my understanding of design and its influence to a more intimate level. Interior architecture drew me into a scale of design that impacts people daily - the door handle, the proximity of the egress stair, the amount of natural light. In learning my client's needs and goals, I created office space communities that enabled not only productivity but the daily well-being of the people who worked there. My work sparked a light in me as I saw the tangible impacts of design to shape the quality of one employee's workday. I re-grounded myself with this belief in the power of architecture to genuinely affect people's lives.

It was in these recent years of professional work that I began to draw connections to this other half of my life: gymnastics. I had been a competitive gymnast for 20 years, practicing 30 hours per week, holding an award-winning NCAA collegiate career before retiring after college. My passion was always split down these two parts: one towards architecture and the other towards gymnastics. In the years that followed my

retirement, I struggled in many ways to process this loss in my identity as a gymnast and the trauma imprinted from the discipline of the sport. My mental health and well-being became a critical focal point for me personally in these years. As I gained more space from gymnastics and with the help of a therapist, I began to undo the emotional trauma of the sport and process the positive ways in which I still can relate with my body in space. Body awareness: developed from years of familiarity with the width of the beam in relation to my toes or the spring of the wood on the bars - this awareness came to play in designing interior architecture. I have since grown in my career to become invested in the ways in which design and architecture impact the human condition specifically with regards to mental- health and well- being.

As I learned more about this relationship, I sought out my WELL AP credential this summer and am finding refined drive in this application of architecture. Thus, architecture and my gymnastics career became meaningfully intertwined with my purpose.

The influence of architecture from the grand civic scale to the minute interior scale on the quality of life and the human condition has never been more critical than now during this COVID- 19 pandemic. This pandemic has showcased the all- encompassing power of the built environment to alter public health, safety, well-being, and a sense of home or public space. On the foundation of my dad's legacy and personal journey through the influences of architecture on my growth, I feel a conviction that architecture has an inescapable duty to create safe, healthy, and connected spaces to serve the improved quality of life for people and their community.