

# Meet Mhonpaj Lee

## Co-owner of Mhonpaj’s Garden, Certified Organic by MCIA

BY BAILEY WEBSTER

MCIA member Mhonpaj Lee (pronounced mhon-PAH) is a mother of 5, realtor, organic farmer, farm advocate, conference organizer, Land Access Navigator, interpreter, and all-around badass.

She has a lifetime of experience growing vegetables with her parents, May and Chue Lee, who are Hmong immigrants. As with many Hmong families in Minnesota, farming was a way of life for the Lee family when Mhonpaj was growing up.

Mhonpaj laughs when she says, she “didn’t really like farming as a kid.” After graduating from high school, she attended Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, where she majored in political science. She also sought out a deeper understanding of her Hmong heritage, learning more about the Hmong genocide that her parents fled by coming to the United States.

As a group, the Hmong people have been through unspeakable horrors, which makes their vibrant presence in Minnesota a testament to their resilience and tenacity as a community. They are largely responsible for the vital farmers market scene in the Twin Cities metro area, and Mhonpaj’s family is a prime example.

Learning about what her family and her people had been through, Mhonpaj was inspired to advocate for her community. She found a calling in activism. When she graduated from Gustavus, she took an AmeriCorps internship with Hennepin County. This eventually led to a 6-year career as a medical interpreter.

She left her work at HCMC feeling that she was unable to continue to support a system that just was not treating the whole person. Having come full circle, Mhonpaj now wanted to help families get out of poverty. She believed that the root of the problem for many families was financial. So, she and her husband began teaching families how to improve their financial situations. They helped families look at their finances holistically, with a cultural sensitivity that took partnership dynamics and personalities into account.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MHONPAJ LEE

Mhonpaj Lee and May Lee at Mill City Market, Minneapolis.

Through it all, she kept her connection with her parents’ farming operation, which is named Mhonpaj’s Garden. In addition to helping with day-to-day operations, she took on responsibility for the marketing and administrative side of the business.

Fifteen years ago, Mhonpaj’s Garden transitioned to organic production, becoming the first Hmong certified organic farm in Minnesota. MCIA is the farm’s certifier. Mhonpaj’s Garden received their organic certification as part of Big River Farms, a nonprofit immigrant farm incubator organization in Marine on St. Croix. Big River Farms is dedicated to supporting immigrant and refugee farmers by developing their skills to farm organically. Mhonpaj supports her parents with their organic certification paperwork.

Mhonpaj’s mother, May—an activist herself—didn’t stop at getting her own farm certified. She has been engaged as an educator at Big River Farms, supporting other immigrant farmers and screening new farmers to incubate with the organization. She also volunteers her time as a Ramsey County Master Gardener.

Mhonpaj and her husband are looking for the right farm for their own family and have recently decided to take the leap and sell their house in the city to finance their dream. She will be leaving full-time work as a realtor to focus on a better quality of life for her family and putting more of her energy towards living sustainably.

This article is adapted from an article that was originally published in the July/August 2020 issue of the *Organic Broadcaster*: <https://mosesorganic.org/publications/broadcaster-newspaper/>

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## ANNUAL MEETING NOTICE

The MCIA Annual Meeting will be held January 13, 2021. Unlike previous years, the 2021 annual meeting will be held virtually. The meeting will have a short format: official proceedings, the business meeting, and informational presentations will be covered in a couple of hours. No trade show is planned. Instructions on how to attend the meeting, along with an agenda, will be provided to MCIA members later this year. This information will also be available to the general public and media via MCIA's website.

## CALL FOR RESOLUTIONS

A draft of any resolution to be considered by the MCIA Legislative and Public Affairs Committee and forwarded to the floor of the annual meeting should be received by MCIA 14 days prior to the meeting.

## MCIA BOARD POSITIONS OPEN

MCIA is seeking candidates for positions on the MCIA Board of Directors. The following seats are open: Kurt Flegel, District 3; Nat Forster, District 3; Denise Thiede, Related Industry. Forster and Thiede are eligible for re-election; Flegel is not eligible for re-election.

The MCIA board districts are shown on the adjacent map. Related Industry is a statewide position. Directors are elected by and from the members at the annual meeting to a 3-year term of office.

To propose agenda items or resolutions for the annual meeting, or to nominate someone to serve on the board of directors, or to inquire about serving on the board, please contact Fawad Shah at fawad.shah@mncia.org or call the MCIA office.

## MCIA BOARD DISTRICTS



## Farewell Susan Stewart

The Minnesota Crop Improvement Association wishes a fond farewell to Susan Stewart, who retired in June after nine years of service as an organic certification specialist/inspector.

When Susan began her work at MCIA, the Organic Services department had less than 100 clients and a staff of two. Nine years later, MCIA has well over 500 organic clients; the department's staff has increased to seven. Besides the challenge of keeping up with rapid program growth, Susan's job required her to keep up-to-date with ever changing governmental regulations and guidance, and to understand how those regulations applied to farms whose operations are becoming more complex in the face of climate change.



Susan Stewart

Susan's determination to solve problems and answer questions earned her the admiration of both clients and colleagues. "She could always be counted on to finish what she started, even with the thorniest issues," says one of her co-workers.

Asked what she most values about her work for MCIA, Susan replies, "Implementing organic regulations with farmers that are committed to reducing agricultural pollution and increasing the health of their soils and livestock."

Susan cites the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill as the compelling event that motivated her to pursue an education in environmental studies, initially focusing on marine life. Susan earned a BS in natural resources and environmental studies from the University of Minnesota. She also holds an MPA from Hamline University. Of her time at the UMN, she recalls, "I studied terrestrial pollution. At that time, scrap tire dumping presented a problem for most states. So, my senior project brought me to the University of Minnesota's east bank for a summer to evaluate recycling scrap tires in the Mines and Metallurgy Lab. I designed a wave pool and defined the properties of scrap tires specifically for absorbing pollutants, like spilled oil in the ocean. This project led to my first professional position, to develop and manage scrap tire cleanup and recycling for the state of Maryland."

Susan's career also included stints at Resource Recycling International and at the Wedge Community Co-op. Susan has given back to her community through volunteer work. She served on the Minnesota Department of Agriculture Organic Advisory Task Force

and she continues to serve as a member of the City of Mahtomedi Planning Commission.

What does her future hold? Susan plans to spend more time with her busy family, which includes her husband, Tom, children Alyson and Bryan, and four grandchildren. She has plans to explore the National Parks, and to continue to enjoy gardening and bird watching. She has also developed a new interest in orchids! [🌿](#)

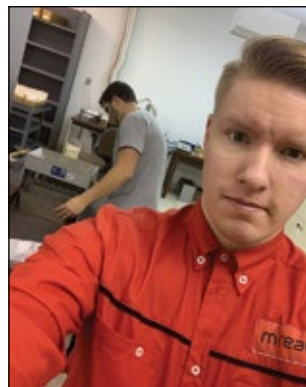
## MAST International Student Intern: Jukka Pitkäkoski

MAST International is an international exchange program dedicated to promoting mutual understanding and building long-term international relationships by organizing paid agriculture training and internships in the USA for non-U.S. citizens. The UMN's College of Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences regularly arranges MAST internships at MCIA.

"MAST students are good workers and they bring a different perspective to MCIA. They are interested in what we do at MCIA and we enjoy learning about agriculture in their home country," explains Roger Wippler, MCIA Foundation Seeds Services Manager.

This past year, MAST intern Jukka Pitkäkoski has become a familiar face at MCIA. He has lent a hand in several departments, planting germination tests for the Seed Laboratory, roguing fields for Foundation Seed, and entering data for Organic Services.

Jukka is 27 years old and hails from Isojoki, a small town in the South Ostrobothnia region of western Finland. He grew up on a dairy farm that has been owned by the family for seven generations. Now, though, Jukka and his father are focusing on forestry.



Jukka Pitkäkoski

Jukka has completed all his college studies. When he returns to Finland, he will complete his thesis and will graduate with a bachelor's degree in agriculture.

Reflecting on his internship at MCIA, Jukka says, that he "learned a lot of seed production and research behind breeding the best seed for farmers. But most valuable thing is that the U.S. has an organization which is truly helping farmers and does research for farmers that finds them the best quality seed and farming." [🌿](#)



## President's Corner

**Fawad S. Shah, MCIA President/CEO**

For individuals and businesses, the year 2020 has been dominated by the impact of COVID-19, which has affected nearly every aspect of our lives. MCIA, an essential agricultural business, has devised ways to continue to operate and serve our clients. Many of our staff members are able to work remotely. However, some

of our work, such as performing seed analysis and conditioning seed, is possible to do only from our office. Thus, MCIA operates in a hybrid fashion: Half of the staff work remotely, the other half work onsite, closely following Minnesota Department of Health and CDC guidelines to mitigate the spread of the virus.

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I am pleased to report on three major project initiatives that are the result of close work between MCIA's management and board of directors. First, the board approved funding to complete the MCIA database. This project will automate functions of the Organic, Field Services, Foundation Seed, Seed Laboratory, and Certification departments, streamlining processes, increasing efficiency, and improving our service to customers.

Second, the board approved funding to replace outdated HVAC units and skylights. During recent summers, the HVAC system has not been capable of adequately cooling the building, resulting in an uncomfortable working environment in many parts of the building. Skylights that were originally installed for ambient lighting have long since surpassed their useful life and have become prone to leaking. Work is now underway to complete both of these facility upgrades.

Finally, I am particularly excited about the restructuring of staff salaries. The ability to offer a competitive salary is one of the most effective tools to recruit talent and retain trained and seasoned staff. During the last five years, more than half of MCIA's positions required restaffing, due to retirements and other departures. Since the beginning of 2019, MCIA has hired seven new staff members, which is nearly 40 percent of our total workforce. I worked on a salary restructuring proposal with the board chairman and the budget and compensation committee members. We have now achieved our goal of aligning MCIA's salaries with like businesses in the vicinity.

Thanks to these bold steps taken by the board of directors to make necessary investments in MCIA's personnel and property, along with the unwavering commitment of our managers and staff, MCIA's clients can expect efficient delivery of services and exceptional customer care in the months and years ahead.



## Organic Corner

**Michelle Menken, Organic Services Manager**

This has been a challenging year for everyone here, as I'm sure it has been for many of you. We still have a couple dozen inspections to arrange—a few have been held back to allow us to use them for training staff inspectors. Bailey Webster began doing crop inspections this summer and Karen Gjelhaug will be doing

some livestock inspections soon. We have perhaps 100 files out to inspectors, who should have them scheduled already. If you have not heard from an inspector yet, please contact us and we will follow up. The good news is that over 100 certificates have been issued and over 200 inspections are done and waiting for us to complete the final reviews and issue certificates. We're starting to work our way through those. If you receive a letter requesting additional information, please respond in a timely manner. This will help speed the certification process.

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The Organic Certification Cost Share Program is again available this year. Costs paid between October 1, 2019 and September

30, 2020 are eligible for rebate. The USDA Farm Service Agency has changed the terms somewhat. This year, the maximum rebate per scope is \$500. If you have not paid for your inspection or other fees and you plan to apply for a rebate, be sure your payment is postmarked by September 30.

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The USDA Agricultural Marketing Service issued an announcement regarding the status of state and tribal hemp programs. Minnesota and Iowa have approved plans. Wisconsin, South Dakota, and North Dakota have plans that are under review. It seems that the USDA will issue producer licenses in the future. Here is the link to the announcement: <https://www.ams.usda.gov/rules-regulations/hemp/state-and-tribal-plan-review>.

On July 8, 2020 we received guidance from the USDA National Organic Program that, per the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetics Act, it is illegal to market CBD by adding it to food or labeling it as a dietary supplement: <https://www.fda.gov/media/131878/download>. This means we will not be able to certify food or dietary supplement products that contain CBD oil. Hemp and CBD themselves are legal and we can certify them. MCIA participates in the Accredited Certifier Association (ACA) working group on hemp. We will continue to keep you informed of any regulatory changes.

**IN MEMORIAM Harlan Haugrud**, 89, of Rothsay, passed away June 25, 2020. A longtime member, Harlan was an avid promoter of Certified Seed and MCIA. He served on the MCIA Board of Directors and was active in the Wilkin County Crop Improvement.

**John Evers**, 67, of Wabasha, passed away on September 14, 2020. John handled the seed operations at Gerken's Feed and Grain in Wabasha. He conditioned and sold certified seed for many years.



## Lab Report

**Chase Mowry, Seed Laboratory Manager**

While samples submitted for testing slow down during the summer months, the seed laboratory has been nothing short of busy. The summer provides an opportunity for us to clean, maintain, and calibrate equipment, such as scales, dividers, and germinators, in preparation for the upcoming season. We also order testing supplies and new equipment. In addition, we review and refine our processes and update and develop internal documents. In that area, our main focus has been developing Quality Procedures and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) necessary for lab accreditation.

As part of this process, we sent out our annual Customer Satisfaction Survey. The responses we received provided us with valuable feedback. In addition, a new fee schedule was approved by the board. It includes minor changes in testing prices; it can be found on the MCIA website under Client Resources.

To meet requirements for lab accreditation, as well as for maintaining testing certifications (e.g., CVT, RST), we

participated in proficiency testing via AOSA/SCST and the USDA Federal Seed Lab. Aside from helping to ensure the accuracy of test results, accreditation will give us the ability to grade seed for Canada.

With the new testing season upon us, I'd like to stress a couple of reminders: The first being the importance of submitting a representative sample—the test results we obtain are a direct reflection of the sample that is provided. The sample you submit should be a composite of many smaller samples obtained during the binning or bagging process. If you store the sample prior to submission, be sure it is in a closed container in a clean, dry location away from excessive heat. Second, make sure to use packaging filler when shipping your samples. Packaging filler not only helps to minimize damage to your samples, especially fragile crops such as soybeans, but will also aid in preventing sample bags from opening during transit.

Also, be sure to include a completed Sampling Report and other relevant documentation for each sample submitted. Any missing information may cause delays in testing or completing the certification process. Lastly, we process samples in the order we receive them. By requesting rush service, your samples will be prioritized for testing.



## Field Notes

**Kris Folland, Field Services Manager**

The summer field inspection season has wound down and, as we often say in Minnesota, the crop so far has “varied.” Small grains in the southern half of the state were harvested early and the harvest in the northern half was late.

Remember to maintain air flow in your seed bins and maintain the proper moisture for storing your seed production. As always, an early germination test is a good idea.

Soybean seed field inspections have begun. Fields can be inspected at 75 percent or greater leaf drop. If you have seed production and are unsure of the inspection status, be sure to call your MCIA field supervisor or company representative prior to harvest. It is not too late to apply for field inspection. Visit the Client Resources page of our website, [www.mncia.org](http://www.mncia.org), to access an Application for Field Inspection. Contact your Field Supervisor for any other late inspection needs.

The 2020 *Winter Grains Directory* is available on the MCIA

website and the 2021 *Directory* will be published soon. It is not too early to secure seed needs for next year.

Growers interested in fall seeded cover crops are reminded to purchase seed that has been laboratory tested and is of known origin. Plant Variety Protection and seed technology agreements apply to all seed intended to be planted, even cover crops. Certified seed is an economical choice and often priced competitively to bin-run seed that may not be legal to purchase. The value of pure live seed and avoiding undesirable weeds will offset any cost savings of low-quality seed. Weeds such as Palmer amaranth and water hemp can easily spread in seed that is not cleaned or tested.

Inspected acres of noxious weed seed-free forage and mulch, increased over last year. A listing of certified noxious weed seed-free forage and mulch producers is available on the MCIA website. Remember, a certified label must be attached to each bale.

MCIA Field Services is your boots on the ground answer to your field inspection and seed quality needs. Field Supervisors Dan, Kris, Seth, and Tom are always eager to hear from our members.

# State Fair 1946

BY HARLAN STOEHR

Sunday's Variety Section headline, "The Beer Garden's Waiting," roused recollections of my 1946 trip to the Minnesota State Fair.

I was 17, had graduated eighth grade of an Olmsted County one-room school at 12. High school was not an option; I thereafter worked on the farm and had never been so far as St. Paul. When my Uncle Slug—his given name was Henry, but I knew him as Uncle Slug—invited me to go to State Fair with him, his neighbor Hugh Liebenow, and George Meyer, Slug's brother in law, my horizon exploded. We all lived within 4 miles of Potsdam, population 37, the others to the east, I a mile west.

The 1945 State Fair had been cancelled due to wartime; the 1946 Fair was much anticipated. During WWII gasoline and tires were rationed, the speed limit 35 mph. The postwar limit was 55. Uncle Slug had traded his 1936 Chevy Master for a 1941 Buick Special Sedanette; I pictured us literally flying once on paved Highway 52.

The day was overcast; we got a late start after morning chores. Sure enough, once on 52 we tore along at 55. Cannon Falls was considered the halfway point; there, about 9, we stopped for breakfast. When we went to leave, the Buick would not back up. We pushed it away from the curb, forward gears functioned, and northward we sped, at 55 mph, to St. Paul.

University Avenue was such a wonderland of auto dealers, the big Montgomery Ward mail order house, and so many other sights, that we missed the Snelling Avenue fairgrounds turn and, on Washington Avenue, saw Minneapolis ahead. George had studied mechanics at Dunwoody Institute. Drawing from his Dunwoody days, he advised continuing to Hennepin Avenue where he would show us the Alvin (burlesque) Theater.

Mission accomplished, and somehow now on East Hennepin, we stopped for gas and



MCIA State Fair display in 1949.

directions, and eventually found the fairgrounds. The gates were untended, my uncle's forecast crowd nowhere to be seen. News of the 1946 Fair's cancellation due to polio had not reached Potsdam.

The Midway had a few idle rides and attractions whose operators apparently hadn't known of the cancellation. That was about it—except for the Beer Garden, open, and nearly empty.

It was then past noon and we were hungry. George's sister, Millie, had packed a picnic basket with fried chicken, potato salad, and an apple pie, and sent a thermos of coffee. In the 1940s one did not go to State Fair to buy food. Leaving the thermos behind in the Buick, we carried the basket to a far table in the Beer Garden and washed down our lunch with a brew.

Refreshed, Uncle Slug said we would now tour the grounds to show what I would have experienced at a real State Fair. On

Machinery Hill I saw where John Deere, Case, International Harvester, and other tractors and implements would have been displayed, and learned techniques for arguing with factory reps. Farther on, my uncle described absent displays in the Industrial Arts and 4-H buildings.

After a mid-afternoon Beer Garden break, George, a veteran State Fair goer, took front and center at the Agriculture-Horticulture building. His family raised and sold Certified seed; his father was an avid

horticulturist. I marveled at his knowledge and descriptions of unseen fruit, produce, and grains displays.

I learned that the Dairy Building usually was where to buy milkshakes, Princess Kay of the Milky Way had yet to be invented. Descriptions of horse and cattle shows in the closed 5,000-seat Hippodrome were total mind stretchers; I'd seen nothing larger than Rochester's Mayo Civic Auditorium. My fair tour ended with vivid descriptions of thrills I'd have had at a functioning Midway, and wonders normally seen at Grandstand exhibits, shows, and racetrack.

Following a farewell stein and pretzels at the Beer Garden, we left. After but two or three wrong turns we eventually passed the South St. Paul Stockyards, connected with Highway 52, and headed home.

From the late '50s I attended State Fair regularly for many years, sporadically thereafter. Through these years the Fair's wonders and exhibits have never been so vivid as Uncle Slug's descriptions.

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Harlan Stoehr is a former employee of MCIA and the University of Minnesota. He served as editor of the *Minnesota Seed Grower* and was instrumental in preparing the UMN varietal trials for publication. In the 1980s and 1990s, Harlan was very involved in the MSPPA group, which promoted public varieties marketed under the MPS brand.



MCIA State Fair display in 1956, ten years after Harlan's visit.



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[www.mncia.org](http://www.mncia.org)

See page 2 for  
details about elections,  
nominations, resolutions,  
and other meeting  
procedures.

PERIODICAL

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**Mission Statement**

Minnesota Crop Improvement Association is an organization dedicated to improving the productivity, profitability and competitive position of producers, processors, and distributors of agricultural products by providing services to enable them to provide high-quality products to Minnesota, the United States, and the world.

Improving your process • Enhancing your products • Increasing your profits

**Recognize a Deserving MCIA Member!**

MCIA members are encouraged to submit nominations for the Honorary Premier Seedsman, Premier Seedsman, and Achievement in Crop Improvement awards, which will be presented during the MCIA Annual Meeting in January.

If you know a producer, seed conditioner, or supporter of MCIA deserving of recognition, or if you have questions about nomination requirements, please contact Roger Wippler at 1-800-510-6242 or by e-mail at [wippl002@umn.edu](mailto:wippl002@umn.edu).

**CALENDAR**

**NOVEMBER**

- 5–7 South Dakota Local Foods Conference, Pierre
- 14 MCIA Board Meeting, Saint Paul
- 28–29 MCIA Office Closed

**DECEMBER**

- 9–10 Prairie Grains Conference, Grand Forks, ND
- 24–25 MCIA Office Closed

**JANUARY**

- 13 MCIA Annual Meeting, virtual

For more event information visit [www.mncia.org](http://www.mncia.org).