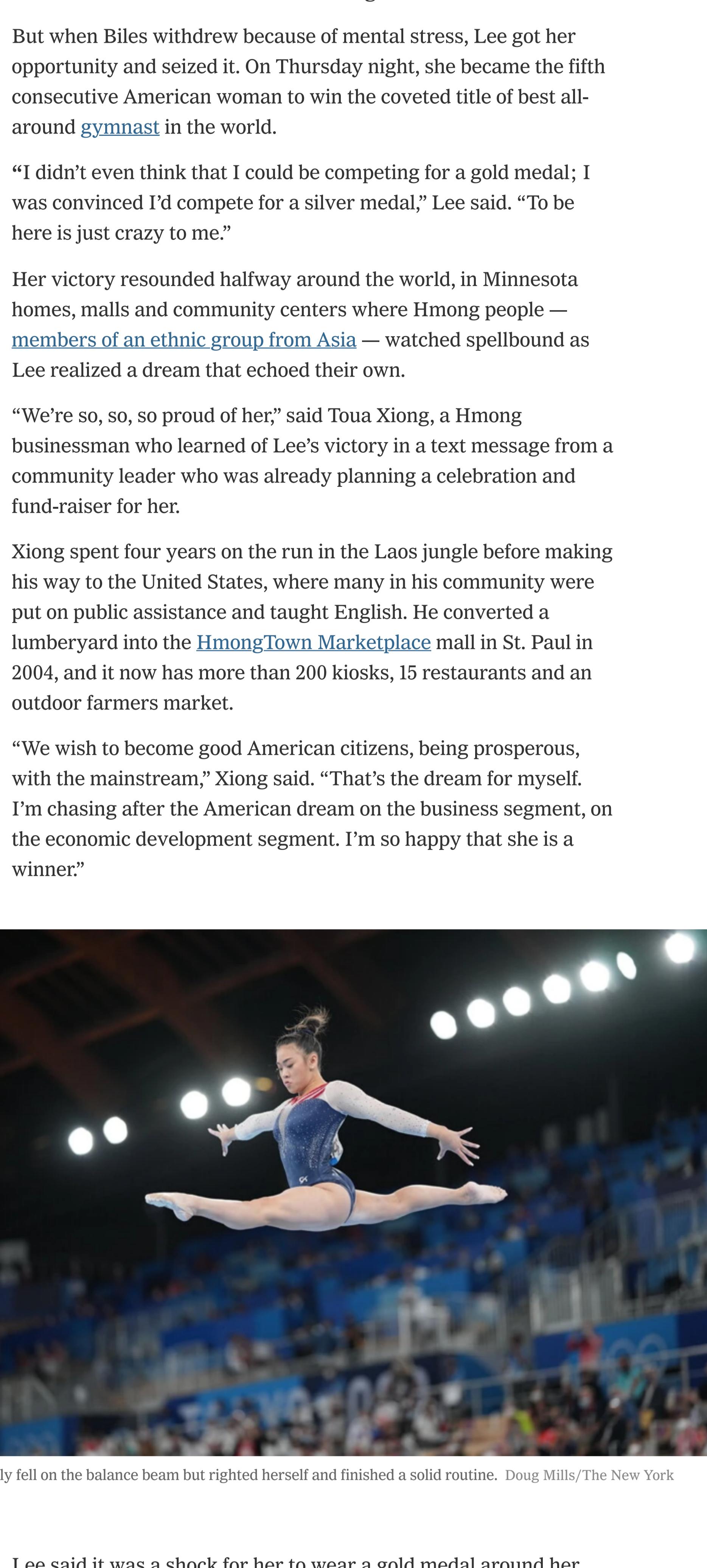


With Biles Out, Sunisa Lee Seizes the Moment and Captures Gold

The victory for Lee, 18, resonated deeply back home in Minnesota, particularly with the state's Hmong American community, in which she was raised.

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"Go out there and just do you, nothing more," one of Sunisa Lee's coaches told her. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

 By Juliet Macur

July 29, 2021

TOKYO — For years, the gymnast [Sunisa Lee](#) wasn't training just for herself.

Lee, a Hmong American from Minnesota, went to the gym every day for all the people whose parents had immigrated to the United States with nothing after escaping war zones. She endured grueling, painful practices to [honor her father, John](#), who put her in the sport when she was 6 and who now uses a wheelchair because of a spinal cord injury.

[Lee](#), 18, had said publicly that her goal was to win silver in the all-around competition at the Olympics, because her teammate [Simone Biles](#) was considered a lock for gold.

But when Biles withdrew because of mental stress, Lee got her opportunity and seized it. On Thursday night, she became the fifth consecutive American woman to win the coveted title of best all-around [gymnast](#) in the world.

"I didn't even think that I could be competing for a gold medal; I was convinced I'd compete for a silver medal," Lee said. "To be here is just crazy to me."

Her victory resounded halfway around the world, in Minnesota homes, malls and community centers where Hmong people — [members of an ethnic group from Asia](#) — watched spellbound as Lee realized a dream that echoed their own.

"We're so, so proud of her," said Toua Xiong, a Hmong businessman who learned of Lee's victory in a text message from a community leader who was already planning a celebration and fund-raiser for her.

Xiong spent four years on the run in the Laos jungle before making his way to the United States, where many in his community were put on public assistance and taught English. He converted a lumberyard into the [HmongTown Marketplace](#) mall in St. Paul in 2004, and it now has more than 200 kiosks, 15 restaurants and an outdoor farmers market.

"We wish to become good American citizens, being prosperous, with the mainstream," Xiong said. "That's the dream for myself. I'm chasing after the American dream on the business segment, on the economic development segment. I'm so happy that she is a winner."


Lee nearly fell on the balance beam but righted herself and finished a solid routine. Doug Mills/The New York Times

Lee said it was a shock for her to wear a gold medal around her neck now, especially after the year she'd had. When her Midwest Gymnastics [gym closed because of the coronavirus](#) in March 2020, she was stuck at home with her parents and five siblings, without a proper place to train.

When the gym reopened about two months later, Lee fractured her left ankle on a fall from the uneven bars. Soon after, she spent nearly two weeks in isolation with what she assumes was Covid-19, terrified that she would spread it to her father, whose accident left him paralyzed from the chest down and whose breathing is compromised.

Some days, she wanted to quit the sport, particularly when her ankle wouldn't heal, and she was unsure if she could make it to the postponed Olympics in Tokyo.

The hardest part, though, Lee said in interviews with The New York Times last year, was when two close relatives died of Covid or a Covid-related issue just 13 days apart: her favorite aunt, to whom she said goodbye over a family video call, and her uncle, a Hmong healer who would often tend to her injuries. In the video call, Lee said, her mother asked her aunt to watch over the family.

Lee is sure her aunt is doing that now. The whole Hmong community has been supporting Lee for years, she said.

Lee grew up in St. Paul, in an area heavily populated by [Hmong immigrants who came to the United States to seek refuge after the Vietnam War ended in 1975](#). Her parents, John Lee and Yeev Tho, were children when they escaped Laos, where their relatives fought on the American side during the war. They crossed the Mekong River to refugee camps in Thailand. From there, they headed to the St. Paul area, where about 80,000 Hmong now live.

"People say the United States is the land of opportunity, and I'm living proof of that," John Lee said Thursday in a telephone interview. "For my kid, a Hmong girl, to be on the world stage, winning a gold medal, it's just the best feeling ever."

When John Lee initially put Sunisa in gymnastics, it was frowned upon by many in the Hmong community, he told The New York Times, because the culture considered sports a frivolous activity, especially for girls, who were thought to be better off staying at home to learn how to cook. But he rebelled against that idea, eventually building a wooden balance beam in the backyard for Sunisa, giving her intense pep talks and attending all of her meets.

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In 2019, he fell from a ladder while helping a friend trim a tree and injured his spine. Sunisa had planned to leave for national championships the next day, but she begged to skip them. Her father insisted that she go. In a moment that might have crushed lesser gymnasts, Sunisa focused enough to win the title on the uneven bars, her specialty, and to finish second to Biles in the all-around competition.

"We've always talked about this," said Sunisa Lee, who graduated from a public high school this year and will head to Auburn on a full scholarship. "Like, if I were to win a gold medal, he would come on the floor to do a back flip with me. It sucks that he's not here."

On Thursday, Biles watched the event from the stands, with several U.S. teammates, and Lee could hear her cheering. There is a six-year age gap between them, and there was a time when Lee was nervous about even being in Biles's presence. But now they are friends, and Lee knew what she had to do to pick up where Biles had left off.

"I just had to go out there and have the best competition of my life," she said.

Lee hit routine after routine, managing to prevent a potential fall on the balance beam during a one-footed turn and breathing so heavily at times between exercises that spectators could see her chest rise and fall. But at the end of the night, Lee nailed a floor exercise with new choreography and elements that had been changed that morning by her coaches, Jess Graba and Alison Lim. They had decided to take out Lee's fourth tumbling pass because her left ankle hadn't completely healed, leading to poor landings when she was tired.

The change worked. Lee had her best floor exercise score of the Olympics, and she clinched the gold medal.

Rebeca Andrade of Brazil won silver, and Angelina Melnikova of Russia took the bronze.

Graba and Lim, who are married, have coached Lee since she was in elementary school, and they knew she could master her new routine — and the others, too. From the start, Graba believed that Lee was a special athlete, with "a lot of spunk" and natural talent, and that she was fearless. His goal was to hone her gymnastics skills while keeping the sport fun.

"A gold medal is wonderful and it's awesome," Graba said. "But I really want her to just be well-rounded, happy, enjoy life and be well set for the rest of it. And that was my goal."

Winning, of course, was also important. Lee and her coaches often discussed capturing the Olympic gold medal, even in the era of Biles, because they all knew Lee had the potential to do it. Even if Biles had been in the competition in Tokyo, Graba said, he thought Lee could come close to beating her.

"I think for how great Simone's been, too much of the conversation has been about one person," he said. "And a lot of these girls have these incredible qualities that a lot of people just don't know. And I'm glad that we got to show it."

Graba added, "I have been telling her for four years, 'We want to be so close to Simone, if she messes up, you win.'"

Sunisa Lee won gold with a new routine on the floor exercise. Doug Mills/The New York Times

That's exactly what happened at the Olympic trials in June when Biles was not at her best. Though Biles won the two-day all-around competition, Lee finished ahead of her in the second-day results — the first time any gymnast had outscored Biles in eight years.

Lee, though, did not expect to be the top American gymnast in the all-around in Tokyo, the one carrying the team's hopes. When she began to get nervous, she reminded herself to do what she had always done — perform under pressure, just as she did in the days after her father's accident. And just as she did earlier in Tokyo, during [the team final](#), when Biles withdrew after the event had started, leaving Lee and her teammates to carry on.

It helped that she received encouraging texts from Lim, who was back in Minnesota because only one coach per athlete is allowed at these Olympics.

"I can't wait to watch you go out there and kick some serious butt," Lim wrote to Lee before the final. "Go out there and just do you, nothing more. You're good enough just the way you are."

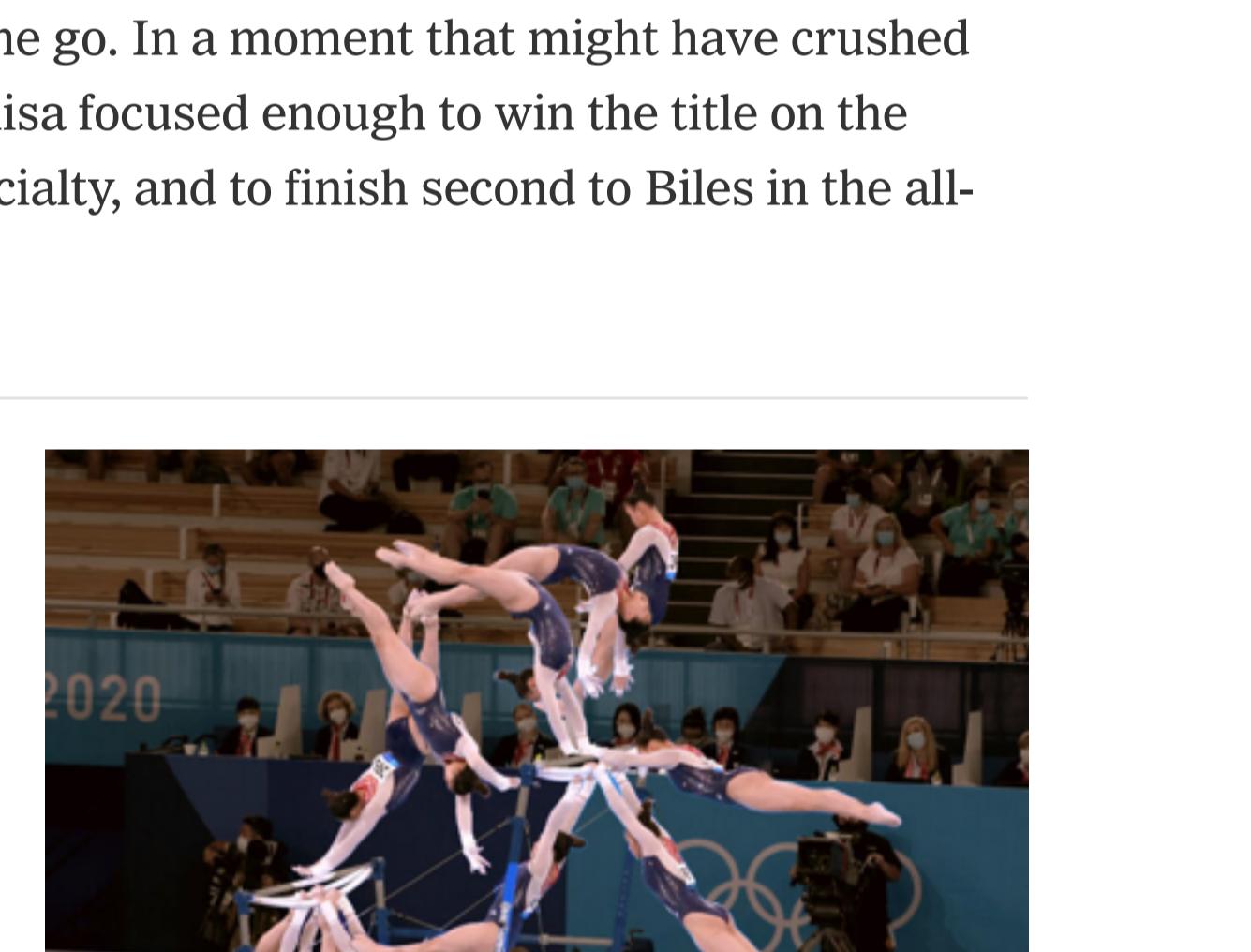
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Before the medal ceremony, Lee used FaceTime to contact members of her family who had been watching the competition from a large hall near her home. They were supposed to be in Tokyo to watch her, and then visit Laos afterward, so her parents could show her where she grew up and just how hard things are for people in that country. But Covid ruined those plans.

Instead, a [huge contingent of family and friends](#) — Lee has 100 relatives on her father's side alone — and many people from the Hmong American community, were celebrating her at a party. She talked to her father first, saying, "I did it!"

They both cried.

Deena Winter contributed reporting from St. Paul, Minn.


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