

Chapter Four

Refugees from Southeast Asia: 1975-1990

The arrival of hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asian refugees starting in the 1970s illustrates the difficulty of predicting the future. No one in 1970 would have predicted that people from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos would comprise a large proportion of the Asian American population in 1990s, with new Asian American communities where none existed before. Also, because many refugees were also ethnic Chinese, they changed the character of many existing Chinese American communities.

Refugees enter as a special category, outside of regular immigration channels. The numbers of refugees and their origins varies from year to year, depending on decisions of the Federal government. Eventually, they receive resident visas like regular immigrants but they may also receive various types of government assistance not normally granted to regular immigrants. They have also, at times, received aid from private charitable sources. The regulations affecting refugees change from year to year with the political winds and world events.

Refugee experience is often, although not always, significantly different from that of regular immigrants in a number of important respects. Their circumstances in Asia are usually more disrupted and difficult and the decision to leave frequently abrupt. Departures are often clandestine and journeys may be dangerous. In some cases, experiences are exceptionally traumatic, with associated long term emotional difficulties. Most arrive in the United States with relatively few belongings or assets and no ideas what their future may be. Some come from isolated rural areas, with little or no schooling or previous knowledge of modern urban life.

Moreover, many earlier refugees did not have relatives already in the United State who could provide either assistance or an introduction to their new surroundings. Because there was no prior history of immigration from Southeast Asia, there were no existing ethnic communities that could serve as way points or sources of jobs, goods, and services. With time such communities have formed. Ethnic community networks was also affected resettlement policies that attempted to disperse the refugees throughout the nation. Collectively, these factors have served to make refugee adjustment both different and more difficult than that of many immigrants.

The period of large scale refugee arrivals from Asia has ended, although unstable circumstances in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong could reverse the trend. The stories that follow are, therefore, reflections of an important and unique period in Asian American history.

Journey to an Unknown Land by H. T. B. N.(1)

The immigration of my family was forced rather than by choice. Wars and conflicts always end up affecting a nation's citizens and the two choices that my family had to make were to stay and die or to flee to a new country. If we remained in Vietnam, we would have perished.

When I asked my mother why we left the country when we did instead of months before or months after April 30, 1975, she replied, "We didn't think the fall of Saigon would come so soon." On that day, we saw the Viet Cong troops closing off certain areas of Saigon. They took over the streets, banks, and governmental buildings, and on this same day my family left Vietnam, not knowing if we would ever return to our homeland. We weren't sure what was ahead either. It was like letting fate take control of all our lives.

I remember about two weeks before we left the country I was in a French Catholic boarding school and my mother came for my two older brothers, my two cousins, and me. She took us to the countryside where my grandparents lived, where all the grandchildren stayed for about a week. Then one eerie afternoon, my two aunts and parents came to the countryside and told my grandparents that we were going to leave the country. We had no idea where we would end up. My grandparents were devastated by the decision. My parents, aunts, and uncles were trying to convince my grandparents to leave with us. But my grandfather had too much pride and he didn't want to leave his rice plantations that had been passed down for five generations. So my grandparents decided to stay back with two of my aunts and live there as best they could.

I recall so vividly my last day in Vietnam. It was about mid morning and I was playing with my brothers and sisters in front of our house in Saigon. It felt weird because the front of the house was a business office, but on this day there were no employees at work and my dad was in and out of the house constantly. I wasn't sure where he was going or what he was doing but where ever he went there were four or five armed men with him at all times. My mother was busy packing and she had about six maids helping her. Our luggage and belongings were packed into three fishing vessels in our back yard.

Our house was on a vast waterway. I thought we were going on a vacation or taking a trip somewhere. At the last minute as we were boarding these little vessels, the coast guard announced that the fall of Saigon was near and the waterway that we were on was now closed off. My dad then immediately took off somewhere again, this time with one of my older brothers, who was in the southern army. They returned in less than thirty minutes and we then crammed into army jeeps to flee. I remember having a radio on my lap. I don't know how we did it, but we fit twenty-seven people into one army jeep. I guess in a war one makes the impossible possible. We then came to a check point and the only way we could get across was by bribing the guards. My parents only had a million dollars in Vietnamese currency with them at the time because the banks were closed. My parents assets were immediately liquidated. We were in the hands of fate and my dad's mother decided that it would be best if our jeep went ahead. That was the last time I ever saw my grandmother on my dad's side of the family.

At the port it was total chaos and people were panicking so much that some died that way. From our vessel, we saw the other ship captains beating innocent men, women, and children off the sides of their boats with baseball bats and sticks. My father couldn't stand the sight of this cruelty, so he ordered the ship's captain to hook up a cargo barge to our tugboat. (Editor's note: H.N.'s father was operator of a tugboat company.) This allowed others aboard our vessel. We must have had hundreds of people on that barge. As the ship began to pull away from the dock, I could see fires from the harbor.

Although we felt secure, as we peered over the edge of our tugboat, we could see crowds of people screaming and crying. It was utter chaos as the Viet Cong battalions flowed into the boulevards of Saigon. Children were searching in vain for their parents. Suddenly, the tugboat's engine began to roar under me. For a brief moment I felt relieved because it drowned out the anguish that I wanted to forget. As our ship slipped further away from the harbor and a massive spray of bullets filled the air, little did I realize that I would lose my country and our way of life. No one knows how many people perished that day but the sights and thoughts were sad as the bodies and paraphernalia drifted back into the Saigon harbor.

My parents told me that one reason we had to leave so suddenly was that there was a price on their heads, dead or alive, because dad had been in the southern army and had also done business with the U.S. Navy, so they were considered traitors and collaborators with the enemy. They had thought of leaving before April 30, 1975, but would have had to do so as tourists, which could take a year to arrange and there was not enough time. After April 30th we were simply refugees. My parents frequently reminisce how they lost everything in the holocaust that pervaded their

lives just a decade ago. I will always wonder what goes through their minds as they daydream about the life they once knew. Today, they feel like strangers in a strange land, they will be alienated forever.

In Vietnam my parents owned a shipping business. In our country we were very well off and had a three story house. Maids and servants were plentiful. My mother didn't have to work a day in her life until we came over here. We had the best of everything that money could buy: private schooling, material objects, toys, servants, villas, clothes, food and entertainment. It is disgusting to think how much money we once had compared to how things are today.

We were at sea for twenty-one days. During the course of our journey, there wasn't enough food or water for everybody. There were about three hundred and sixty people who were starving. The adults sacrificed their food and water for the children and elders. We were very fortunate because on two occasions we crossed paths with the U.S. Navy. They gave us canned foods, bread, and water. I do remember when one sailor gave us M&M's, chocolate candy bars, and chewing gum. We were also raided by pirates on several occasions. I don't remember these incidents but my older sister and parents do. They said, "these thieves took what little food we had and robbed us of our petty cash but they didn't harm anyone and for that we felt fortunate."

At last we sighted land, it was the Philippines where the U.S. Navy aided us. First they took the women and children to a U.S. Navy base and then, a week later, the men and boys were also taken to shore. We stayed in this base for three months. According to my parents, there were about ten thousand refugees in this camp. We took shelter in this big white building that was packed with people left and right. The only place that didn't have a cluster of people was the individual bathroom stalls and the community bath place. The other housing were tents, similar to the ones in *M.A.S.H.* We learned our first American societal rule here and that was lining up. In my country there is no such thing but, with ten thousand people gathering together for meals, there had to be some form of organization. At first it was very difficult for my parents and the older generation Vietnamese to accept this. However, the younger generation caught into this trend quite well. My parents can remember how they thought waiting in line was foolish and a waste of time.

These three months of not knowing or having much control of the future made every individual think about life itself. There was sadness for many and a feeling that we all shared was confusion and loneliness. Then, after three months, my family was transferred to Guam.

The flight to Guam was scary because it was the first time my siblings and I have been on an aircraft. This was our second stop and it was another U.S. Navy base.

Here we lived in these metal tunnel-like buildings and again it was crowded. In the late afternoon, my brothers and I would often hangout near the water. We used to make these little boats of palm reeds or paper and let them float out to sea. Other than following the lizards around the palm trees, floating boats was our favorite past time. I guess subconsciously we knew what was happening. We stayed for two weeks. The naval officers were good to us and they took good care of us. Now, thinking back, these American people didn't have to be nice to us, yet they were.

My parents were in shock and were still grieving for all that was lost. They weren't sure what should be hoped, wished or looked for. So we took life one day at a time and the thought of being alive today and not tomorrow made my parents worry considerably. Added to this mind-boggling situation was not knowing what had happened with my grandparents. Then we were transferred to yet another refugee camp, this time near San Diego, California.

We flew from Guam to San Diego. I remember as the plane was coming down the runway one could see the lights on the paths. We then took a bus from the airport to a place known as Camp Pendleton. It was located in the mountains and out in the boonies. The nights were cold and the days were hot and here we stayed for another three months. I remember this place quite well because we found out that, due to lack of communication, my grandfather had assumed that we had been killed at sea and he had become so upset that he died. He died in vain. If we could have communicated with him he might still be alive today.

This camp was close to the mountains and I can remember hearing bobcats, owls, coyotes, and rattlesnakes at night. There were many night when it was so cold that we couldn't sleep and our bodies would begin to ache. Sometimes my dad wished that the effects of war could be taken out physically rather than mentally upon its victims. This was our final refugee camp before we were sponsored by a church in San Mateo County, California. Upon notice that we had been sponsored, my parents were excited and at the same time scared.

Some of the words that can help describe how we felt when we landed at San Francisco Airport are: happy, curious, confused, shocked, overwhelmed and hopeful. I remember stepping off the plane and there were all these people watching us. There were pictures taken, camera flashes were going off everywhere and people carrying on conversations in a different language. There was a big sign that had the words "Vietnamese Refugees" across it and under that was my dad's name. Other than the reporters at the airport, there was also people from the church, the ministers and the translator. We were so confused by what was going on. As things began to calm down, the church people began packing us into cars. They took us on a long ride with

many lanes (a freeway) and we were fascinated with this. At the end of this trip, there was our new home for the next four years.

As we stepped out of the car and into the living room my mother was dazzled with the carpeting around the house, because in Vietnam there was no such thing. As we toured our new home, my little brother had his eyes fixed on the rocking horse and all the little matchbox cars located around the room. Although there are many unfamiliar material objects situated around the house, the biggest unfamiliarity was that of the American culture. During the first few weeks here the church enrolled my brothers, sisters, aunt, uncle, dad and myself into school. My aunt and dad were enrolled in this English class at an adult school while my uncle and my older sister were at a middle school. My two older brothers, and older sister, and I attended elementary school. My mother in the meantime was a housewife because my younger brother was still too young to be in school. The church people got us on Medi-Cal and food stamps for the first few years. The congregation paid for the rent. In addition, we were given a food allowance, and utilities and phone bills were paid for. A couple of months after we arrived, my father was given a job opportunity with a company through the assistance of the church.

The things that we dreaded the most were the cold weather, answering the door and the telephone. We had a hard time remembering people's names. We were pretty much isolated from everyone except the church people, who were our only outside contacts. There weren't any other Vietnamese within a radius of ten to twelve miles. Our family got split up in the refugee camps, so all of our relatives are either in Southern California or up in Canada. My parents didn't know anyone but as time passed by we began to come out of the shell. We started to adapt to this way of life.

As the season changed and days became months and months became years, all of our lives changed drastically from their original form. We didn't come to this new land with many hopes or expectations. My family had to put all that had happened behind us and hope for the best. We became more open minded and we began to accept this strange land as our new home. The immigration process of my family was a journey of hardship through physical and mental torment. We immigrated solely for the reason of survival but wonderful things have evolved out of this ugliness. My family has adjusted to the American society and accepted new beliefs and values. The question now is how many beliefs and values do we still know, carry out, and understand of our own culture. My siblings sibling and I will never ever forget the day we left our country. We hope that a horror like that will never happen again to any society.

Immigration by Thuychau Nguyen

Honestly, the last thing I want to do is write about my own immigration experience. There were only troubles, shame and sadness. There is nothing good to talk about, and I am not sure that the readers would like what they read or they may even think that I tried to make up the whole story. But here I am, writing about what I have tried to forget for many times.

I was born in South Vietnam. My father was a health physician in town and my mother worked as his assistant. My father was employed by the government, he was usually transferred from place to place. Therefore, my family turned out to be a mobile family, but we were very happy with our life. I was the fourth child in the family. I have four sisters and one younger brother.

In April of 1975, after the communists had taken over South Vietnam, most of the previous government employees were sent to prisons which were called the "Reeducation Centers". My father was arrested, too. At that time my mother was confused and depressed because she didn't know what to do to get my father out. Then someone told her that she should give the local officials all of our property, so there would be a chance that my father would be released. My mother did that right away. After one year of hard labor, my father was released. Then we hastily packed our stuff and went to my father's home town, where our grandparents were living. So we started our lives at the farm. My father began to learn how to grow rice, take care of cattle, dig ditches, catch fish by net. My mother, my sisters and I learned to grow vegetables, plant potatoes and nuts. We usually brought our crops to the market. We gradually got used to it. We went back to school again, except my two oldest sisters who had to stay home to help my parents taking care of our farm.

In 1982, the government drafted men from the age of eighteen to the age of forty into the army. They also sent young women to very far and strange regions as pioneers for bringing land into cultivation. Moreover, they enacted a new law which they would turn privately owned farms into state-controlled properties. The original owners still worked on the land but the product would belong to the government. The most unreasonable thing was that the government did not supply any machinery, manure or even paid wages. They only gave back to each member in the family a small portion of the crops. Another new law was that students whose parents were former government employees would not get diplomas or go to school. At that time, my father was ordered to report himself every week to the local officials. They frequently came to threaten our family by saying that if we did anything that seemed suspicious, they would put us in jail. If my father didn't report weekly with

the local officers, he would be back in the Reeducation Camp. Everything we got out of our farm had to be turned in.

My parents decided to escape from our country by land. We secretly sold all our jewels and valuable things for gold to pay a guide. My parents didn't tell us about our leaving until the night before we left. We cried a lot because my mother, two oldest sisters, my youngest brother and I would go first. My father didn't want us all to leave at the same time because he was afraid the officials would notice. Besides, we didn't have enough gold to pay for everyone. Therefore, he told our neighbors that my mom took us to visit our other grandma who was living in Saigon. So we left without saying goodbye to my grandmother (my grandfather had died years ago), my relatives, my friends, and teachers. In the morning, I remember it was May 20th, 1983, my father took us to the next town to leave with the guide that my parents had paid. We would go by boat to Cambodia first. It was a heartbreak for us as we secretly waved our hands and said goodbye to my father who stood lonely on the dock. Suddenly, I recognized that he looked older than ever. I wanted to cry out loud and call my father. I wanted to swim back to him for I knew that I wouldn't ever see him and my sisters again. The feeling was torturing me. My sister held me in her arms and we wept together. I heard my mother whisper, "Do not look back! If you let people see you cry, they will know that we are leaving and they will call the police to arrest us." We listened to my mother's advice. I tried very hard to gulp down all the tears that was ready to burst out. But I kept looking back at my father's figure until I could see him only in my mind.

The small boat took us to a bigger ship which was full of people, most of them merchants who went to Cambodia to buy and sell goods. We hid ourselves among the crowd and we prayed that no one would recognize us. It was very dark when the ship started its engine. The skipper wanted to wait until dark because the customs officers on the border between Vietnam and Cambodia would search less than during the day time, that is what I heard the guide tell my mother. We passed the border by the next morning and came to a small village which was located very close to the border. The guide stopped here because he wanted to find some Cambodian clothes for us to disguise ourselves before we went further into the other towns. He also put a special powder on our faces to make our skin look darker and told us to always to put on our handkerchiefs whenever we went out.

After staying there for two days, we kept going towards the other side of the country, to reach the border area of Cambodia and Thailand. It was a long way and we had to go from town to town. Sometimes we took a bus which actually was like a station wagon with more seats in the back. The driver also let the passengers sit on the roof with the baggage, chickens, and ducks. I remember once we tried to find

some seat on the the bus but, since it was already crowded and we were the last passengers, we had to get on the roof of the bus. The guide told my mother to sit on the roof with me and my sister while he would take care of my little brother. Though my mother didn't want to loose sight of my brother, she had to do it anyway. The journey wasn't easy; the passengers bounced against one another. They pushed us out on the edges and since we couldn't understand Cambodian we had to hold on to the rails that they put around the roof to keep us from falling out. I closed my eyes and tried to forget the pain. When I opened my eyes again, I was terrified because I saw my little brother hanging on the edge of the car with three other men. He was too young to understand the danger he was in. What if he became sleepy because of the rough trip? What would happen if he became too tired from hanging on? I looked at my mother to see if she saw my brother or not. I saw her looking at my brother, too. Her eyes were brimming with tears and I wept with her. I started to pray to God silently for my mother, my brother and sister to have enough strength to hang on until the bus stopped. At last, we stopped at a small town to stay over night. Thank God that he protected us from the danger. That night we slept on the roof of the gas station. It was deadly cold to sleep outside like that. However, because we were very exhausted we immediately fell asleep when our backs touched the platform. The guide woke us up very early in the morning. After washing our faces, he gave us some bread and water to eat before we left.

We kept on going like that until we came to the area that was near the border of Cambodia and Thailand. We stayed there for three days because the guide needed to observe the situation at the border first and he had to contact other smugglers who secretly went to Thailand to buy goods and bring it back to Cambodia. The most dangerous thing that they were afraid of were the mine fields that they had to pass and the Cambodian soldiers at the border that could catch them at anytime. If they were lucky, they would pass the frontier post but then there were Thai soldiers on the other side of the border too: they would not let any one cross their territory. We tried to pass the mine field on the third night. We prayed that there would not be any battles between the Cambodian soldiers and the resistance soldiers or between the Cambodians and Thais. I can recall a moment when we were walking in a jungle with two other Cambodian smugglers, including the guide we had a total of seven people. We fell a little behind those two men because we were worn out after walking in the rain. A few minutes later, the two Cambodians disappeared. There was only my family and the guide. While we were lost, four armed men who appeared from nowhere and pointed guns at us. They asked us who we were, and where we were going because they recognized that we were not Cambodians. We were then arrested. They started to search everyone of us for gold and money or any valuable jewelry. Can you imagine how humiliated we were by those cruel and illiterate men? The

guide was beaten very badly and we were put into a small cellar with twelve other people who had also been captured like us by the Cambodian resistance.

They imprisoned us for about thirty-two days. During that time they contacted the Red Cross Agency and exchanged us for wheat in order to feed their men. My family were lucky because we stayed in there for only about a month but the other people been there for more than two or three months. After a day in that cellar, I felt like years had passed. That's why I was so happy when the Red Cross came to take us out of that terrible prison. The Red Cross sent us to a small refugee camp in Thailand which was called Nong-Chat. Our life still wasn't secure because this camp was located almost in the middle of the combat zone between the Cambodians and Thais. After three weeks, about two hundred people in Nong-Chat including us, were moved to another camp called NW82. They closed the camp right after our group came in. The rest of the other refugees in Nong-Chat did not have much hope of coming to a third country but those who were inside NW82 knew had a slight chance to go to the western countries. We were in NW82 for a year, during that time my mother tried to contact a friend in San Francisco and my aunt in Michigan, who was married to an American GI before 1975. We also wrote many letters to my father and sisters back home. We never had answers from any of the letters.

We came to live in that camp without anything. Luckily, we met my mother's cousin, she had left Vietnam with her little boy and her husband was living in Boston. My mother also met two other friends of our family. One of them knew the friend in San Francisco that my mother had tried to contact so she asked him to write to that man and ask if he could sponsor us to the United States. The friend in San Francisco answered that he would gladly help us. He had received my mother's letters and sent answers, he did not understand why they did not reach us. He also promised to write to my family back home so my father would know that we have arrived in the refugee camp safely.

Though life in NW82 was very hard, I tried to think of a better and brighter future which was waiting for me on the other side of the world. I was seventeen years old, an age of dreaming and being loved but we were so lonely and homesick and the winter of that year was so cold even the oil in the bottle was congealed. We did not have enough clothing to wear so we usually sat in the sunlight to warm us up and we felt much better. The camp was under the direction of the Thai soldiers. They treated refugees very badly. They did not give us enough food, and they did not let people who had money buy food from the outside either. If they caught anyone who did that or just stood near the fence, they would hit that person with a gun or a very big stick; men, women, and even pregnant women.

After months of waiting my family was permitted to come to the United States because of my mother's background as a former employee of an US official in my country before 1970 and because the man who sponsored us had also been employed by an American official. We were moved to a transit camp call Panat Nikhom. That was where we had gone through the the health examination. At that time, we received a lot of letters from my father and the family that sponsored us. We stayed in Panat Nikhom camp for three months, then we were moved to Bataan, Philippines. We spent another ten months there, studying English and American culture and laws. On September 22th 1983, we came to the United States.

I cannot forget the moment I stepped out of the plane. There were too many well-dressed people surrounding me with welcome smiles as well as pity on their faces. Suddenly, I felt afraid of the crowd. Part of me wanted to reach out to them, another part wanted them to leave me alone. I felt my mother's and sister's hands on either side of me become very cold. I know that they were nervous like I was. When I asked my mother how she felt when we first arrived to San Francisco, she said, "I felt afraid and nervous and happy all at the same time. I forgot all the bad things that we went through and I wished that your father and sister were here with us." My sister, brother and I felt the same as her too. We really wanted our father to know that his dream had come true. The sponsor and his family took us home. Actually it wasn't a private home for us at all. We had to live with our sponsor's family. Including us, there were ten people that lived in a flat which had only two bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom and a medium size living room. My family occupied one bedroom and the living room. A few days later, the sponsor's son-in-law drove us to apply for social security, AFDC and medical care. At night when we were alone, my mother told us that she was very worried about starting our new life here. She was not sure that she could handle everything by herself and care for us and our family back in Vietnam. When we left, my mother hoped that she could earn a little extra money so she could sent it home to the relatives. I guess that this was a motive that encouraged my mother to enroll in the community college two weeks after our arrival.

Later, our sponsor introduced us to some other Vietnamese from the same town in Vietnam. My mother also met a cousin of my father who had been in this country a few years and he later helped my mother to find a part-time job selling ice cream in Chinatown. This job did not require my mother to speak English very well but she had learned a lot after a few months of working. However, my sister, and brother and I didn't like that job very much because we had to spend the nights alone by ourselves while my mother had to work from five in the afternoon until three in the morning. Sometimes, we tried to wait for our mother, we cried when we remembered about the good times we had together with our family back in Vietnam; but we

didn't let any one else in the house know that because we didn't want them to feel uncomfortable about us.

I forgot to mention about our school's enrollment. After taking the pretest at the main department of education in the city, they placed my sister and me in Mission High school and my brother in middle school. In school, we had problems with communication. Though, we could write and read fairly well, we had a hard time understanding lectures from our instructors; therefore, we got bad grades in our first three semesters. Most courses that we took were English and math in order to pass all the requirements for graduation. As time passed we did better. We made a lot of Vietnamese friends and some other American friends too. My mother later got a license as a manicurist and that became her work. Suddenly it seemed like God had granted us a favor to live in America. We got letters from my father and sisters who were now in the refugee camp in Thailand. They finally had saved some money to follow us. We were so happy to hear the news. My mother went to an organization called "International Institute" and filled out all the necessary papers to sponsor my family from Thailand. In April of 1986, my father and my sisters came to America. By that time my older sister who had come here with me was able to speak English very fluently and so she helped my father and my sisters to see a doctor and was the interpreter in the interviews with the social service agencies and at the school where they took the test to enroll in school. We moved to a new flat which had three bedrooms an 18th street and Diamond. Our lives were more comfortable than before and we bought a small car. My sisters went to a beauty school to get a manicurist license like my mother did. My third sister got married last year, and had a baby boy this year. We are now very happy with our life here. My youngest brother now goes to the same school with me, and we try our best in school for a better future.

Family Experience with Immigration by J.N. (2)

I interviewed my father and my mother this essay our arrival to the United States. All of us in the family the first generation to come to America, except for my little sister, Lily, who is a second generation.

Both of my parents were born in Binh Thuan, Vietnam. Binh Thuan is a small village, located in the Central of Vietnam and it is adjacent to a filthy beach. My dad went to school in the village and had to quit at fifteen for economic reasons. He had to make a living. My mother quit school at the age of fourteen for the same reason. They got married at the early age of seventeen and twenty-one. I asked my father why they married so early and he said "At that time everybody wanted (not only wanted but also had to) to get married early in order to make a living. It's easier

than living a single life. In Vietnam, everyone tends to have at least ten children in order to both help parents with the house and the fields work when they grow older."

After marriage my mother had to go over to the Le side of the family to live and help with the chores. When I asked my mother why she had to go to the man's side to live instead of living with her parents she said, "It's a tradition where the woman always has to live on the husband's side. When I got married, I had to go to your dad's family to help with their business and house chores. When I lived there, I had to work hard like a slave and if I didn't do things the way they wanted, your dad's family would yell at me. I couldn't say anything back to his family because not only do I have to respect your father, but also his whole family."

My dad had worked as a fisherman, like most people in that village. Everyday he went to sea and caught fish with nets and took them to the market along with the vegetables that my mother harvested in the fields so that they could be sold. Sometimes it was hard to sell anything because most people were poor and did not have that much money. Many people were fishermen themselves and whatever they could not sell each day they would bring home supper at night. The food was sold on the street. I asked my mother when she got up to work in the fields. "I woke up everyday at 5:00 A.M., including weekends, to go out to the field to water several long rows of vegetables and pick rice plant," she said. The living condition was very bad. After three children were born, including myself, their lives became harder yet. They had to work longer hours to support all of us. We, the children didn't go to school because of our poor living status. My dad said "We had to work very hard everyday to have enough food to eat. Sometimes we even have to eat just potato with fish sauce for three to four days straight because we couldn't afford anything else. We didn't even have enough money to buy clothes to wear. Whenever part of our clothes have holes, your mother would find pieces of cloth to sew on top to cover the hole. Everywhere you go, you would see patches of cloth that are being sew together. That's how bad Vietnam was. It is a poor country." My dad also added, "See how America is, you see a lot of beggars who are adults. But in Vietnam, there were so many young children, only ages of three or four, who had no family or relatives, and had to survive as beggars and thieves. They would steal other's people vegetables in the fields, or clothing that was hung to dry." I felt so sad when my dad told me this.

When I was born in 1972, I hardly ever saw my parents because they were always busy working. During my first three years of my life, I lived with my grandparents because of the age difference between my dad and I. (Vietnamese people have a lot of superstitions). My mother once said that I was always sick the first few years because (my parents believe) of the age differences. Sometimes I still feel that my two brothers and sister are lucky that they've lived with and were raised by both of

my parents, so they were closer to them than I was. My illness was one of the major reason my parents went broke. They used most of their life saving to buy medicine and to find a cure for my sickness.

My family had to leave Vietnam right away when the communists took over. I asked my dad why we had to leave, he said "We had to look for freedom and because of economic reason. If we stayed there the communists would taken our home and made me fight in the war for them. I didn't want to leave any one of you nor did I want to kill or be killed."

One night, close to midnight, my parents, brother, sister, aunts, uncles and everyone else were waiting at the beach on a very small fishing boat. They were waiting for me. I remember my aunt and uncle went to my grandparent's to get me with a bicycle. When they arrived at the house, all they said was "if anyone asks you where are we going, you are to say that we are just going out to play." I didn't even know where we were going, they didn't tell me anything at all. When we got to the beach, everything seemed so odd to me. I asked why everyone is going out to play at this time of night. "Don't ask questions, just be quite or someone will know," my aunt said to me. So I didn't ask her why they didn't bring my grandparents along. When I think back, I do understand why they didn't bring them or the other relatives with us. If there had been a lot of people during the night we would have been discovered and in trouble. Beside, the boat was too small to fit everyone. It's still hard for me to think back to that night. I was so confused but I will never forget is that night, leaving without my grandparents.

I asked my mother if we knew the operators of the boat. She said, "No we didn't, but we had to pay them in order for them to take us to our destiny." She also said that "none of us knew where we were going that night, we just traveled wherever the wind could take us". About four days later, we were rescued by an off shore oil boat. They brought us to Indonesia where we stayed for over one and a half years.

My dad said that everyday he would anxiously go to see if our family's name was on the list posted on the board of those that had been accepted in some country as refugees. He said that everyone else's names appeared on the list to go to America except for us. During the stay at Indonesia my father didn't work. "The Indonesian were very nice people, they help us with food and clothing". My younger brother was born in Indonesia at the same time as my aunt's son. Finally, one day my dad didn't bother looking at the board, so my mother did. "Our name is listed" she said to my dad while he was playing volleyball, but he didn't believed it. So he had to look at it himself. I still remember how happy they were but I was indifferent.

So we were accepted to America. We had to go through many steps in order to come. First we had to take our vaccine shots, get pictures and sign some papers stating our status. Finally, we flew to America. We arrived January 13, 1980. I remember everything seem so unusual and strange. I had never seen so many white people before. Beside relatives who had arrived here before us, the main assistance we got was from a Catholic Foundation that helped and supported us through the first months that we were here. They were very kind to us.

We stayed with some of my relatives who had arrived two months before my family. The house had three bedrooms, located in the Mission District. There were about twenty plus people who lived in this house. I remember the house was full of screaming kids. I started school in the third grade at Sanchez Elementary with my cousin. My sister was one grade behind me and my brother was two grades behind my sister. My youngest brother was too young to attend school. It was hard for me because of the English barrier. I hated school back then because everyone in class would make fun of me because I wore slippers to school. I felt strange wearing shoes and they were too uncomfortable to wear. My relatives are the one who helped us out during our arrival to the U. S. We're lucky, in a way, that we did not arrival to the U.S. first. During this time my youngest sister was born.

Two years later, we moved to another house in the Mission District. Both of my parents found work about three months after the arrival to America. They both worked in a plastic factory, making different kind of plastic bottles. They worked there for a year or so while going to night school. When they worked in the plastic company, they had to work harder than any one there, but their pay was lower than other workers. I remember everyday they had to get up at 5:00 a.m. to go to work. It was hard for them. I overheard a conversation in which they both had said that their coworkers cheated them and made my parents do their work for them. So they quit. My dad got another job after a few months later. He worked in a restaurant as a cook. He learned to cook Vietnamese and Chinese food. He worked there and saved enough money to buy a car. My mom didn't work at that time. She had to take care of us. We were too poor for day care.

I really enjoyed the second home because I made a lot of Mexicans friends next door. They also helped my dad to enroll in a welding school while he was working as a cook. Beside these neighbors and the co-workers and social workers that we had contacted with, relatives were people that we seem to be the closest to. They were important during that time because none us could speak English more than a little.

Now we are living in the Richmond District with a three bedrooms flat. When we started out, we had clothes that were given to us by the Catholic Foundation or we

bought clothes from Goodwill store and garage sales. Because of our poor status that was what we could afford. "I worked hard back then and work hard now to support you kids, so I can save up money to give you kids the education for the future that your mom and I didn't have back then", my dad said. During high school, my sister and I worked clerical, sales, and grocery store jobs to help pay for rent and food. It wasn't that easy working and going to school at the same time. Besides going to work, we had to keep up with our grades. Neither of us are not working now but we're still looking for a job. . My youngest sister and brother are in middle schools and one brother is going to a high school in Florida. My parents sent him to Florida to live with my aunt and her family because when he went to school here all he did was cut classes. He just moved there three months ago and he's doing well in school now. My other sister is attending City College and next year she'll be attending San Jose State University as a first-time freshman.

Both of my parents sell fish in the flea market now. Things are a little better now than they were before. We have better clothes to wear than before. All of my brothers and sisters can speak English well, but not my parents. We can at least afford more food. But certain things still remained the same for my family. We are still receive some government assistance. On weekends, my parents still visit their relatives. Sometimes they would invite our family over to drink, eat and socialized. Everyone just sit around on the floor even though they have chairs to sit on. They feel more comfortable that way. My parents always say, "You kids better keep your own culture by speaking Vietnamese at home". We try but somehow end up speaking English.

Even though I'm a U.S. citizen I will always try to keep up with my cultural background by listening to Vietnamese music and speaking Vietnamese. I used to go to Vietnamese school on Saturday, but quit because I got bored. My regret is not knowing how to write in Vietnamese although I know how to reading a little. I also like American music and entertainment that are shown on television. My parents still enjoy Vietnamese movies. My mom still cook Vietnamese food, but sometime she cooks American food because she knows that we like it. As for my parents, they still have responsibilities for raising us and making sure that we have the education that they never had. My dad always says "You better study hard in school so when you finish, you can get a descent job, unlike us, and so you can support us when we get older." My parents do expect more from me because I'm the oldest in my family and have to set good example. In high school, I used to do all the cooking at home, when my parents are at work but now my sister does it because she gets home earlier. I usually cook on weekends.

Sometimes my parents write letters and send money back home to my grandparents and other relatives. My parents plan to go back to Vietnam to visit them after they find a house to replace the one we are right now, which has leaking pipes in the kitchen and holes in the roof. I would also like to go back to Vietnam and visit someday. When various relatives were relocated from Indonesia, not all were able to come to the United States. One family is now living in Germany and another in Japan. My dad's brother and his family live in Australia with other relatives who arrived later. In the United States, we have relatives who live in New Orleans, Texas, and Florida.

My parents said that Vietnam is a little better now. Since the people who are living in America are sending money home, many used the money to build houses that are made out of bricks, unlike before when they were it was made of leaves. In Vietnam now, you can call straight to America without having to go through any officials or anything like that. But one thing that bothers me is that the people who are living in Vietnam think that everyone in America is rich. Whenever they call to my house, all they do is ask for money. It is bad enough making collect calls to my house. Whenever my mother said that we don't have enough money, they don't even believe us. I'm glad I don't live in Vietnam. America!!!

Rocky Boat, Rocky Car by Anh Tuyet Tran (3)

As a silent movie without the background music to enhance mixed emotions linked to stimulating visual effects, my mind plays back little bits and pieces of a 1979 journey from the mind of a 6 year old girl now being interpreted by a 21 year old woman. I was six when my family and a few trusted neighbors gathered secretly together during midnight to sneak to the shore of Vung Tao, a popular tourist Vietnamese attraction in South Vietnam. The half mile hike, full of confusion, remains vividly locked in my mind as I recall leaving a family member whom I dearly love behind, my giant polka dot doggy. He followed, wagging his long tail behind me quietly, obediently like a faithful child following its guardian. Until we reached the shore, all was quiet and vacant. I no longer hear my grinding teeth, quick breaths, or my faithful dog's foot stomp. As if he knew, he stood on top of the sandy hill, motionless with tail no longer wagging. I turned back, only able to hear the sound of waves washing bits of wooden back to shore, and ask my mom if doggy could come and she replies in a soft tone, "Doggy can't come."

The house, full of nervous people whispering endlessly without the need to breathe, becomes abandoned at the stroke of midnight. As if there is no time to talk, no time to regret, everyone is speaking all at once. My mother ignores the obligation to listen and finds herself lost in her own curiosity. She sits requesting predictions

from black magic as she follows her finger on the coin that runs freely on the cardboard witch board. She grasps for air as there the witch board reveals spellings of family names foreseen to make it to the shore of our destination. The men in our family flatly refuse to pray due to masculine egos. Mother feels relief as I kneel down to pray beside her for the sake and safety of my mother, father, brother, and me.

I recall the fears of back-stabbing neighbors, hungry with manipulation and distortion to gain money from authorities, labeling us vulnerable prey to be hunted by our own people. Since the first thought of leaving the new jurisdiction of communist rule, my father takes matters in his own hands. He saves two thin sheets of gold, 1 inch by 2, for each member of our family and also each member of my mother's side. Now, standing on the shore leading his crew and members of his planned voyage to the beach, father with his sharp eyes targets his floating rowboat off shore and gives the signal for all to quickly swim towards it.

Moonlight contours the image of the rowboat, our target floating off shore, awaiting for passengers to carry to the main transportation, a large, wooden fishing boat capable of carrying 40 members and an estimated capability of a two week endurance with nature. The ripples of waves reflect the calmness of the sea, in a tolerant mood for the sake of our journey. With pounding hearts and rushing thoughts, we head towards the rowboat. Some of us swim slow-paced due to dragging belongings sinking as if unwilling to leave their sources on from communist soil. Others abandon their belongings, assets for future use, to satisfy the security of quickly making the start of the voyage overseas.

The sea water, cold and salty, causes my jaw to uncontrollably shake as I shiver in the total darkness. After clinging tightly around my uncle's neck to be dragged towards the boarding of the rowboat, I sit once again beside my mother as the rowboat heads towards the fishing boat. We climb safely onto the fishing boat and mother, after assuring me that things are in control begins to frantically holler, "Where is my husband, where is my son."

The son, still childish in foolish ways, plays on the sand while others quickly swim towards transportation. Then when all are aboard, the son on the sand decides its time to be a man and carries both, fully stuffed bags mother had requested him to carry. He swims with loads dragging him back and an older cousin tells him to let go of them. "No, mom wants me to carry these bags" and he remains chained to obligations, in the name of honoring elders. Standing with eyes wide awake yet blind by the inability to take action, my brother sees dad swimming back to shore and is being led again.

Moonlight contours the two human figures standing still on communist shore. Slowly their images fade away leaving only a strong flashing image of a flashlight signaling towards the ones who made it onto the main transportation. The flickering of the flashlight soon dissolves into the darkness like a burned out candle. Distance separates the images of the men on shore and the images of the people looking back from the fishing boat who have not yet fully accepted the start of the well planned journey.

With the open sky full of glittering lights, I focus on the lighted specks as if searching for the last flashing of the flashlight. There holding the flash in one hand and the son in the other, a contoured image is lit only by the moonlight. As I look upon the open sky seeking the slight flash of memory, I feel almost as if our family is anticipating the risky voyage towards an existing, mystic, new world together. Yet, tonight with waves still calm and considerate, I find myself rocking alone on a wooden creation in which my father had built with his own hands.

My father, full of richness in creativity, success, and especially in heart, brings many smiles through his inventions. I love playing with my brother on my see-saw that sits in a sandy, large portion of my father's land. Father enjoys building things with his own hands. The see-saw brings smiles to my face. Yet, father's flour grinding machine brings many more smiles. As people line up with bag loads of wheat, rice, and corn to be grind into flour, my father stands beside his invention proud, happy, and honored while providing lasting smiles to the community. Father not only is an inventor, also holds entertainment gatherings at our house. As the people come to grind wheat, rice, and corn to flour, in return, they receive a smile. Later in the same day, when night replaces day, the people return with the same smile on their face. Their smile turns into pure laughter as they dine, drink, watch color TV with the man well-known and respected in the community. The community consists of trusting friends and hungry back-stabbers all ruled under a new governmental standard of total regulations by communist party. Yet, that never stopped father from holding and attending his own parties, drinking parties. Father so full of giving, gives the best to total strangers. One time on his way home from a drinking party, he trades his Rolex in return for a bum's watch and wears it home only to wonder where his watch is in the morning.

The morning, with gloomy weather full of dark clouds that spread across the vacant sky, hints of troubling weather to come by night. I stare far out into the ocean and dolphins, in its playful mood, glide across the water beside our boat. The water begins to rise, shaping waves larger in time. As the waves grow larger, the rocking of the boat grows stronger. I close my eyes remembering the rocking of my see-saw and the times I climb on the wooden, polished plank rocking without the notion of

sickness. In my mind, the rocking of the boat, once similar to the rocking of the see-saw, now becomes more wild. I no longer dictate the frequency of the rocking nor the choice to stop. Somehow the rocking no longer brings smiles to my face nor the craving of an endless ride. As the night begins to take full charge of the sky, defining darkness as a mighty force, I leaned overboard with face blue, stomach full of sickness, and mouth deporting crucial scraps of food.

Food, abundantly swimming, couldn't substitute for the crucial need for water. We wait for any help to come with eyes drifting off as if lost in secure memories of comfort, proper food and shelter until the spotting of a more secure boat from afar. Hands waving and voices screaming, we eagerly wait for the boat to come closer but we quickly acknowledge the black and white flag of skull and bones. As if myth has come to life, these pirates from Thailand are more real than the imagination, than the warnings of other refugees who have made it and written back such warnings. People start rushing about, hiding valuables and panicking. An aunt with quick hands after sewing a small pouch of jewelry in the inner side of my underwear, hides her jade, diamond ring in my mouth. After nearly peeling off my mothers skin while stealing her jade bracelet, one of the robbers fixes his eyes onto me, a child sitting quietly motionless with mouth closed. They rob all the people and kidnap a woman from our boat. As if we have nothing left, the rest of us remain floating in the wide ocean still lacking matches to cook the fish and water to wash it down.

The bottom of our boat scrapes itself against sharp rocks in shallow water. We reach land and climb off the boat to walk once again on stable solid matter. Reaching a new shore, I walk with feet unstable from the sudden change from constant motion. The sand slides off my feet and new sand buries my toes as I take each step more stable in a new surrounding yet similar to scenes back home. I put out my hands to accept pieces of hard coconuts to eat and as my teeth sink into the hard meet of this white fruit, I bite my fears and take a deep breath to regain the hope I lost during the endless rocking of uncertainty controlled by nature.

Nature, as if taking pity for me, once again displays a mood in the horizons. The color of redness blending into the light, feathery clouds decorate the different shadings of blue across the sky. The sun slowly setting behind the surface of the sea, feeds me calmness. It's red full of glory, lighting the sky and covering my shivering body with warmth. I lay still, look to the horizons and suddenly feel an overwhelming lightness in spirit. I close my eyes to rest the visions and still I could see the redness of the sun balancing out the shadings of blue. The sky takes hold of me and with its blanket of warmth, leaves me resting calmly on the shore of our destination, Indonesia.

Refugees from different Asian backgrounds occupy the camp areas. During their waiting period to be sponsored to whether America, Canada, or Germany, refugees write letters informing people back home. Life in the camps, comparing to life back home, is harder and less luxurious. However, after living through weeks of drifting across the ocean, any life, any day full of clean water, food, and shelter becomes easily acceptable to the humble refugees who once had more. Although rules and regulations set standards and guidelines, they accept without debate and eagerly wait for the process of paper work. During waiting periods ranging from months to years, most follow the rules while others, if caught in the eyes of so called democratic authority, receive long, extensive exercises as punishments or even jailed for breaking curfews. However, life here is the same to me. I follow rules the same as back home. Remaining obedient and loyal to authority figures never kept me away from the same basic, daily routines in my life.

The day arrives when our notices call upon us to pack our things and get ready to fly to America. I know nothing of this place except the name and the eagerness people have of wanting to pursue a new life in the country they label "free." Free as it is, after receiving a coloring book and crayons, the "free" is now implanting in my head and I crack a smile accepting such a concept through the eyes of a more grown-up child. The plane ride, calm and exciting, introduces me to a more luxurious life style than that of the one I was living at home. The moving stairs, the huge, well lighted shops and professional outlook of advance technologies and lifestyles trigger my ability to absorb. My eyes wondering everywhere, like the first time I witness a Moon Festival back in Vietnam, and make me dizzy from all the excitement. I take a break from riding up and down the moving stairs only to find myself heading for a new ride. We are heading to my aunt's home who came to America after marrying an Anglo American in 1975.

The car, moving faster than my father's old, red Honda motorcycle, spins my mind and drifts me off to a state of uncertainty and vulnerability. Ready to lose control of being able to hold it in, I turn to my side and find myself vomiting again but this time in a paper bag. I close my eyes and anticipate the end of this ride, I know that although my stomach twists and turns, I will overcome this ride as I have overcome the ones that have past.

Ending is when a memory no longer haunts you or controls your emotions with slight reminders triggering a thought of something important. I am ashamed to admit that after three years, my father and brother are no longer familiar to me. Although I remember their face, the way they look when I left, I find it hard to recognize the same people I grew up with during my early years. As if three years had strangled the normal aging process of my father and quickly sped up the growth

process of my brother, they stand before me staring at me with tears in their eyes as if I am still the same, look the same, and feel the same. Although half of our immediate family hopes that things could unravel itself, maybe there is still time to replace the lost times and build on from where we stop.

Moody as nature could be, predictions never serve more than fifty percent accurate. Our families, reuniting again, never trace back to the time when we lost our course. Identity lost, so long gone, things will never be the same. Certain things never in our control demanded us to be ready for all outcomes deriving from decisions we thought were ours. Yet, during times of survival, who is to hold her head high and not let go and accept a new course of life for the better of the child and for the better of herself?

Mother remarries and gives birth to a new baby girl. She and the rest of her relatives feed on ambitious drive and successfully hold professional, technical jobs creating microchips and putting together computer parts. I, with the rest of my other first generation siblings, have enrolled through grade school and am attending Universities in pursuing better pay and higher status. We are now all successful in our own way. Although not fully satisfied with ourselves, we still live freely from the haunting memories of the voyage.

My father, twelve years after his arrival to America, most of the time finds peace as I can tell during the times when he works in his son's half a million dollar house's backyard, growing beautiful things of nature and adding more color to his well-planted garden. Sometimes his eyes seem to drift off beyond the horizons as he could truly see more than the red and blue shadings of the skies. As my eyes follow to the spot where his eyes are fixed in the sky, I truly believe he sees across the calmness of the sky, in its peacefulness and color, to that other dark sky still lit by little specks of endless flashing lights so long ago.

The Journey to the United States by V.L.(2)

My family had five members; my father, my mother, my older sister, older brother, and I. My father was a dentist in Vietnam. He had his own private practice and earned a good living until 1975, when South Vietnam became a communist country. My father decided to leave Vietnam and sacrificed all his business. My father had come earlier from China to Vietnam when the communists threatened him there, so he knew what the communists would do to his family. Although the Vietnamese communists said they would not change the living standard of people in South Vietnam, there was a saying that everyone knew, "Never listen to what the communists say but watch carefully what they do."

In 1977, we tried to escape but were caught and put in jail. My father was in jail for two months but we (the kids) stayed there for only two days because we were too noisy. Boy, I remember the smelly boiled fish they fed us and the rain water we drank. Anyway, it was quite an experience. After my father got out of jail he reopened his practice and earned enough money to get out of Vietnam. This time the road was different. My father spent several hundred in U.S. dollars to buy a name as a representative to go to Hanoi for a meeting. From there we planned to cross the border to China and travel to Pei Hai, a sea port, and go to Hong Kong.

The night we left it was raining hard, my mom dressed me and my brother very warmly and told us that we were going to the United States and would eat the big red apple. So, we said goodbye to my lovely big aunt, whom I adored the most. Tears ran down on everyone's cheeks and I cried silently as I left the house. Fortunately, because of the rain, people in the neighborhood didn't really notice us. I remember it was very late. We went to the bus station in a small van without a back door. We arrived in Hanoi by airplane. I have forgotten how we ended up on the plane, perhaps I was asleep. When I asked my mom, she could not remember, she just said it was very dark. When we got off the plane, my sister, brother, and I were told not to say a word in Chinese or Vietnamese, because of our accent. So we pretended deaf for a while.

We stayed at my father's friend's house in Hanoi. I had heard that it was a beautiful city from the communist kids in South Vietnam but I tell you, the city was torn to hell, there was no competition with South Vietnam. O.K., I admit a little bit of provincialism here. (Editor's note: Hanoi was heavily bombed by the U.S. Air Force during the Vietnam war.) After two weeks, we took a train to the border between North Vietnam and China. The amazing thing was that the two countries were separated by a river, a very dirty river. No wonder they had so much influence on each other. They were both undeveloped, communist countries. What a shame! Anyway, my hatred should not destroy my story.

Fortunately, that day the river was flooding, so the Chinese across the border opened the bridge to accept the Chinese from Vietnam, after hours of proving we were Chinese. We arrived in China in May, 1978. We stayed in a border camp in Ho Kau, Yunnan Province, for one month while waiting for housing which the government built for the incoming Chinese from Vietnam. When we arrived at the permanent housing we were totally shocked. The housing was located way up on the mountain. There was no real road to walk up there. Eventually, people walking created a road. My father's name was posted outside one of the wooden houses. Everyone could see from one house into the next. Later, people used a lot of fabric to

hang on the walls so they could have their privacy. The house had three wooden beds, no kitchen, no bathroom, no nothing. It was a square box. It looked like one of our store rooms in Vietnam. Anyway, I didn't complain at all, too young to ask for a better life, but I heard one lady near our house crying aloud, regretting that she had come to China. I felt sorry for this woman, perhaps she would have been better off in Vietnam.

Well, not me, I loved my childhood life on the mountain. We lived on the mountain for six months. My father built a small kitchen and shower room behind our square house. We didn't need a bathroom because there were bushes everywhere and the mother nature stuff from humans was good fertilizer for the green bushes, too. We had to get water from the spring and bring it home for washing and bathing. I learned how to carry two big metal pots with a wooden pole over the shoulder. My brother and I were responsible for providing water every day, that's why we are so short now. (Good excuse for not exercising!)

The climate was very hot. I made many friends, whom I have now totally forgotten. We stole pineapples, sweet potatoes, and peanuts from the fields of the mountain people. We were chased by their dogs, it was a hell of fun. The way we cooked the sweet potatoes was to heap up branches above a hole in the ground, then stick the sweet potatoes inside and sit around the fire and wait for the dessert. We also collected small branches for our mom to cook with. The mountain people were very dark and have little clothing. They were kind of behind in fashions. The guys would come out at night and put a blanket over the girls they liked so they would become their beloved wives. They never did that on us because they knew we were not of their tribe. They brought chickens and other food down the mountain to the market to sell in the market. Their food was hot and spicy, I guess that's how I started to like hot stuff.

After spending my precious childhood on the mountain for six months, my family was recommended for a move to the community health center because they needed a dentist in the clinic. This time the house was larger and the neighbors were Mandarin speaking Chinese. We were the only family from Vietnam. We lived just across from the clinic. My mom helped my father half time and ran the house half time, my sister was the announcing broadcaster, and my brother and I attended a real school. People treated us very nice, they honored my father's profession.

However, my father became ill from high blood pressure, so my mother took the responsibility of moving us on with our journey. She contacted all our relatives in China, both her relatives and my father's. She went to the supervisor and applied for permission to visit our grandmother because she was very sick. It was a lie to get us

out of town. The head of the town approved the travel permit and, indeed, we did visit all our relatives in China. First, we went to the capital of Yunnan, it was big and full of bicycles. We stopped over in many places and spent a night here and a night there. We went to visit my mother's relatives first. So, once in my lifetime, I saw my grandmother, the only grandmother I had left. She was 83 years old and very healthy, she even cooked for us. I met my uncle and auntie, nephews and cousins. They were Chiew Chao but they all spoke Mandarin, so we had no trouble in communication. I saw my grandfather's fruit tree. My relatives lived all around the bay, it was fascinating and they were so warm and welcoming.

Then we visited my father's side. It was more exciting for me because my father had lived there and had his own home and land there in the 1940's. He left when the communists arrived. He had been young and rich and here was where it all began. I met my father's youngest brother, he didn't look like my dad at all. My older aunt looked much more like him, she lived in my father's old home with fifty family members. We went to see the land, the rice fields which had belonged to my dad but which all belonged to the government now. The most amazing thing was I found out that I had an older "mom" - my father's first wife. They had married at the age of seventeen. She was beautiful and kind. I had a brother who was forty and a sister who was thirty-eight. My nephew was twenty two years old and called me sister auntie because I was only nine.

After all that we left for Bac Hai, our last destination in China. We stayed with my father's friends while my mother went to search for a boat to Hong Kong. My father was ill again. I was so proud of my mother, this was her first time in China but my father had told her the road. Still, she had the guts to run around and search for a better future for her family. She said she was scared inside her heart to walk alone on the road, looking for a boat owner. She said by facing a little hardship on the road she would win her family a better future. Nothing would stop her from her goal. It cost one ounce of gold per person, so for our family we paid five ounces. We didn't go straight to the shore, first we stayed at the boat owner's house overnight. We left on a cold night, I was again stuffed with clothing. I walked close to my father. When we first arrived at the boat, there were many people all ready on it. They stuck us beneath the cabin, it was very stuffy. The next morning we were able to get out of the boat and the kids could play on the beach. We were warned not to say anything about our stay in China, we were supposed to say we were just on shore temporarily to get food and gas. it was illegal for Chinese residents to leave the country, which was what we were doing. For that reason, we had throw all the stuff with Chinese labels overboard.

The boat held 97 people and three babies were born, so that made a full hundred people. It took one week to reach Hong Kong. We stopped along the shoreline for food and to bathe. I bet the owner wanted to collect more passengers. Anyway, the boats that passed along the shore did profit the Chinese that lived there. They sold us food and water. I remember the fried shrimp was the most popular dish, I wanted some so bad but my mom didn't spoil me. I promised myself that one day I would eat as much as I wanted to.

We arrived in Macao first but they would not accept us. They towed us away from shore but we managed to get to Hong Kong anyway. The night was flashing with colorful lights as our boat slowly come to the shore in Hong Kong. We slept in a dark storehouse and after one week we transferred to Kau Long refugee camp, where there were tons of people from Vietnam. The date was March, 1979.

Life in the camp was fascinating for me, I had lots of friends and started to learn Vietnamese. The camp offered food and shelter. We had our independence from the camp after six months because the government had no extra money to feed us so they decided to let us go out to work. My mother and sister went out each day to work in a toy factory and my brother and I stayed home to cook and play. My father stayed home also. This time our place had no door, it was in the hallway and we slept on the floor. Everyone could see you when you ate and slept, that's why someone had to stay home all the time and guard the belongings. Stories of rapes and thefts went around all the time.

At that time several countries were accepting refugees; Australia, Canada, Germany, and the United States. My father wanted to go the the Old Golden Mountain (San Francisco), so we applied to the United States. We were fortunate to have my cousin as our petitioner, we only waited for a month for the paper work to be done, then we went to have our health examination and to sign all the papers. Before we left we gave back all the pots and pans to the camp. And I kept this memory as I left.

We got on a 747 airplane, not like the one we were in in Hanoi. The minute I sat down, my mom said in my ear, "soon we are going to eat those big red apples." From her confident smile I felt that she had proved she could do it and do it well. We arrived at our final destination, San Francisco, late in 1979. My mom spent the first moments looking for my cousin, she said we would all be lost without knowing somebody, unlike China where my father had many relatives and friends. We saw my cousin, he was thrilled because we were his first relatives to arrive and be with him. We took some pictures and went to his apartment which he shared with his friends. It was in the Tenderloin area, the first community for Vietnamese refugees.

Later, we were able to find an apartment close to him. He took us to apply for green cards and social security cards. We were on welfare, although my father had been a wealthy man in Vietnam and China. He did not regret coming here or complain about the living standards because he had been through everything in life. My mother was the most active, she went to school with my father every morning at Kam Bar Lan (Cumberland Church) adult school in Chinatown. Then she went to work at a sewing factory as an under the table paid worker. She came home and cooked supper in the evening. My sister went to Galileo High School as a senior, because she was already eighteen, and she worked in the sewing factory on the weekend. She knew some English already, from Vietnam. My brother and I went to elementary school on Turk Street.

From time to time, my mom encouraged us to study harder because that was the biggest reason we had left Vietnam, so we could have a good future. My parents believed that the communists would not give us a good education, so for our sake they left and came here to start all over again. My father went to a college on Geary Street to get licensed as a dental lab technician, something he knew already. In fact, he was a great help to the school. Unfortunately, just after he graduated he was killed in a robbery at our house when I was thirteen. Sometimes, I think that if he hadn't come here he would be alive and safe. He would be telling stories about his early career and his escape from communists in China. Well, he got to the Old Golden Mountain and died in the Old Golden Mountain.

My Family's Experience by L. Ouch(1)

My family's background is one of the most difficult of any family. We have been through a lot of hardships that no other families have ever been through. I'm going to introduce my father. He knows much more about our immigration experience than I. What follows is my translation of what he said.

I lived in group Trout Jom, block Tlock, town Trang, and city Takeave in Cambodia. I drifted around with my two brothers and a sister when young because my parents died when we were very small. They died because there was not land enough for all of the people to grow enough food, so my uncle and aunt fought with my parents and took their land as their own. Besides, the crops didn't produce very well because some years they had no water, and other years there was too much water. In that place, there were shortages of everything.

My other uncle, who lived in Tany, brought us to live with him for a while, then told us that there was plenty of land in Battambang and it would be better than where

we were. There was plenty of fish, fruit, and it was very easy to grow crops. So my brothers, sister, and I moved to Battambang. We lived with some neighbors and worked with them because we didn't have any farm equipment of our own. We worked with them for a year, but we didn't get any benefits from them. After that, we worked with more generous neighbors who also had the equipment and we shared the profits with them. One year later, I married my wife, who also had drifted from her hometown. We worked together for a year, and we harvested about one thousand sacks of rice and we traded rice for pair of water buffalo and a big wagon. It was as valuable as a truck. We put hundreds of pounds of rice in the wagon then we ordered the buffaloes to pull it. My buffaloes were stolen seven years later because I was very sick and there was nobody to care for them.

In 1970, I moved to Sdao (another town) and I joined the army because the country needed help and also I could support my family that way. We didn't farm anymore. We lived happily until the communists (Khmer Rouge) forces took over Cambodia on April 17, 1975. The leader of the communists was Pol Pot, who was mean, rude, and killed many people. He made an order to bring the generals, professors, politicians, and other educated people to see the king (prince) Sihanuok but unfortunately he really gathered them to kill them. The regular soldiers were brought to stay in a small camp which was called "the camp of traitors." The Pol Pot soldiers were going to kill us if we ran away from the camp. Then two weeks later, they brought our families. We lived there for about a month, then they brought us to stay in Rong River for three days and, finally, they moved us to the Chalk-a-kar Mountain.

They didn't provide us any food or water. We had to find our food and water on that mountain, and we lived in the tree shadows until we could build houses from bamboo, trees, and grasses. We dug mountain potatoes from about three meters under the ground, and that mountain was full of rocks and stones. We ate mountain potatoes and wild vegetables for our survival before we could plant our own crops such as rice, green beans, and corn. One day, they lost one or two cans of rice, they thought that a man who had a bad reputation took it because he used to steal when he was a soldier. They tied him up and pushed him to the ground in the center of the village, then they chopped him up with an ax. One week later my youngest daughter was very sick. (Editor's note: The youngest daughter is the author of this account.) Nobody thought that she would live, but she recovered. After my daughter got better, my wife was very sick, and after my wife got better, my mother-in-law died at the age of 60 because she couldn't survive with the little food we had.

In 1976, they stopped calling us traitors and took us to live with regular people who were just farmers. But first they collected all of our property, such as plates,

pans, bicycle, crops, and vegetable we had planted. They even collected paper money and they burned everything. In the new place they forced us to work eight hours or more every day, but they didn't give us enough food to eat. We sometimes got three small green bananas per day, we chopped them into small pieces to make banana soup, sometime we got a half an ear of corn per day, and sometime we even didn't have anything to eat for three days. During that time, people kept on dying every day, and we couldn't bury them because we had no strength and besides, there were five or ten people dying every day in that small village called Anlounmean. My brother-in-law died in that time because of hunger.

One day my wife went to the village president's wife to trade her golden necklace and bracelet for rice. She got about twenty cans of rice and we decided to run away from the village that night. We left there in the middle of the night and stopped in a broken temple where there was a six years old girl tied up as punishment for picking some green beans. She died that night. Then we continued our journey to Bydomram which was the village we wanted to reach. It took us three days to get there because we got lost.

When we got there, we were imprisoned as "intruders" for three days and they were going to kill us. Luckily, we knew a person in the old village who had a family living in this village, so they let us live there. We went to work in the fields, of course, for two months. Then the Pol Pot soldiers from the old village came and were going to take us all back but I hide my children with the neighbors so the soldiers would never find them because we knew that any people who escaped from the village had to die. Fortunately, they didn't kill us but if we were to run away again they surely would. There were not many people left in the old village to work because most of them were dead and a few of them had escaped, like my family. So my wife and I went to work regularly.

A few months later, they made an announcement, telling the people to go to Karhot River to dig up the ground and to carry soil and rocks to block the river (build a dam) because they needed water to grow crops, especially rice. Thousands of people died during this time because they were forced to work day and night with a little food to eat. There were no machines, people worked by their strength only. When they had not enough food, they had no strength nor energy but they still went to work regularly even though they died there. They were forced to work all the time. My wife volunteered to go because she missed my daughters very much and Karhot was near Bydomram, so when she had a chance she hoped she could go to see them. She got so sick over there that no one thought she would live, but she was taken to the hospital where she got enough food to eat so she got better. She told the nurse that she lived in Bydomram instead of Anlounmean, so she could stay with her two daughters.

I thought that she was already dead until nine months later I heard that she was still alive. At this time they made a rule that people could live with relatives and family again. So I went to Bydomram in the middle of 1977 but my wife and my children were still separated from me until 1979 because my wife had to work very far from home and had to stay there with my children.

In 1979, there was chaos and we could see explosions in Battambang for three days, where they had hidden their military supplies such as rifles, bullets, dynamite in the big temple with a big statue of Buddha in the front. The whole temple was destroyed except that the front of the statue was normal, it looked as if nothing had happened. I was amazed by that. This statue showed why Cambodians strongly believed in Buddha.

This was the time that Pol Pot soldiers and their families fought to escape from every village. They killed all of the prisoners that were in prison. I was ordered to carry their families and goods to where they gathered together, then they released me. Usually they didn't do that because they were afraid their plans would be ruined. But I didn't want to hear or know anything as long as I was alive. That night my neighbors and I planned to leave the village because the Pol Pot soldiers might come back and kill all of us, so we left. When we were almost to Battambang they shot after us and we ran like we had never run before. Then we got to Battambang, with Vietnamese soldiers all over the place and we were safe once again.

In Battambang, there was also chaos because Pol Pot soldiers were shelling the town with explosives. We ran back and forth like crazy people whenever we heard a sound like a long loud whistle. The shelling lasted about a month and many people died because of it. There were many dead people all over the city. Then things went back to normal again but still Pol Pot soldiers tried to come and kill people once or twice a week. I found my relatives, including their families and we moved to live in a village which we called Birkcheange.

This village was dangerous because it was very far from the city which made it made easier for the Pol Pot soldiers to sneak into the village at night but it was our place, where we had lived before. We were not the only ones; there were lots of people living there, too. We had new born twin babies at that time, a boy and a girl. We lived there for seven or eight months, we grew crops like bananas and potatoes. We also planted rice but it didn't produce because there was a water shortage. We got only some vegetables, corn, and potatoes. I looked for food everywhere, it didn't matter whether it was near or far from home. After all that searching we couldn't find anything and the Vietnamese soldiers treated us just like the Pol Pot soldiers had. We decided to escape to the Thailand border, to a place called the "New Camp."

Our escape from the Vietnamese soldiers was harder than from the Pol Pot soldiers because we had to cross dangerous places. My wife carried the baby boy and my younger daughter carried the baby girl. I had to carry everything else, such as food and clothing and I also had to take care of my older daughter because she became insane when we lived in Birkcheange. She sang songs, cried, laughed, and ran away if I didn't keep an eye on her. She didn't know what was right or wrong. We were with about one hundred people altogether. We crossed the big river on the railroad bridge at night and you can imagine what it was like. There were so many large holes we could barely cross and what would happen if the train came, where would we go with so many children and babies? We were afraid of Vietnamese soldiers and of the train. Luckily, nothing happened to us. Then we crossed a large, deep field of water. We had to pay in order to cross it by canoes. We didn't use money in Cambodia anymore, we used only gold and rice. We spent the night in the forest in the other side of the field of water.

We continued our journey in the morning and met with about five hundred more people in a big field who also wanted to go to the New Camp. While we were staying there the Vietnamese soldiers followed us and started shooting all over the place. We hid in the long thick grass and slept there for the night. We then crossed an extremely big field of water on foot. The water was deep, up to adult knees and sometimes to our necks, it was also slippery because it was half mud and half water. Most of us fell down at least once or twice before we could reach dry land. When we got to the dry land, we had to walk in one line because there were mines hidden under ground, small trees or grasses. We kept on seeing dead people along the way and we could hear the sound of crying children and women everywhere. When we had nearly reached the camp we found there were three rows of guards around the camp. We spent the night at the first row before we could actually reach the camp.

We lived in the new camp for two months. We got a little support from Americans but that was not enough because we only got one can of rice per person per week. We were short of food and water. We had to find a way to live there. One of our twin babies, the girl, died during this time because my wife and I went out to find food and water. I let my daughter take care of her, and she didn't know enough to take care of her. The other twin, the boy, was going to die, too, but we took time off to take care of him and brought him to the hospital.

As soon as we heard that Americans had opened a refugee camp in Thailand, we were eager to come to it. It was called Kao I Dang camp. We got enough food to eat and other supplies to use which were also provided by Americans. We lived happily for a little while because nothing serious happened.

Most of the refugees applied to go to the United States, France, and Australia because we all wanted to get away from a communist country, we wanted a country that we could do whatever we wanted. We wrote letters in English, in French, and in Cambodia, and we mailed them by throwing them inside the helicopter of the ambassadors or tourists every time they came to the camp. Two brothers of mine died in Thailand because the Thai soldiers betrayed them. They agreed to let them go outside the camp but when they returned they shot them anyway. The reason they wanted to go out was that they needed money to pay for the English private school. We had freedom to go anywhere we wanted inside the camp but there were many pointed wire layers (barbed wire) surrounding the camp. We stayed in this camp for three years, from 1979 to 1982.

In May 1982 we were accepted by the United States. We had to go through many steps to be accepted. First, I had to prove that we were legal refugees, then I sponsored my sister-in-law and her children come with us because she had nobody to depend on if I left her alone. Then we were taken to another camp called Kamput where the Americans interviewed us to see if we were all one family and asked why we wanted to come to the United States. They took pictures of us and I had to agree to pay them back the amount of money they had paid for our passports. If we had failed to be approved we would have had to go back to Kao I Dang camp but we passed, so they took us to stay in another camp called "transit camp" in which they checked us to see if we had certain kinds of diseases. We had no serious illness so we stayed for only a week then continued to the another camp before we could get on the plane to the Philippines. After five days we got on the plane in Bangkok to go to Manila.

We lived in a camp in the Philippine which was very far from the city and surrounded by mountains. We had to stay there for at least three months to learn about the American system and to study English, at least A, B, C to Z and some dialogues. We stayed there for six months. The Philippine camp was the best camp. Americans supported us in every thing, we could go anywhere we wanted as long as we could walk. There were many streams and mountains which gave us beautiful views and we had good shelters. This camp was the final camp, if we had had skin diseases or problems we would have had to stay a little longer than six months, but we didn't have any.

We arrived in the United States April 25, 1983. First we stayed in a hotel near the San Francisco Airport, then we were flown to North Carolina, where we lived in Charlotte for two months. We were sponsored by American agencies. We moved to

San Francisco when we heard that there were lots of Cambodians and friends that I had known for a long time there.

Everything surprised me when I first came to this country. The structures of the buildings, bridges, cars, freeways, highways, clothes, school, people, everything, because I'd never had seen anything like these in my country. I felt like I lived in heaven and everything impressed me. But the main problem that was very, very, very difficult was that I, as the head of the family didn't know how to speak or write English, I was illiterate. I couldn't find a job. My sponsors helped me to rent an apartment, helped me to find school for my children, everything. Now, even though I have lived in this country since that time, I never have felt happy any day. I often said to my children that I have nothing to give them but education. I wanted them to go to school and be literate because there was nothing harder than being illiterate.

Now, I live in San Francisco (in the Western Addition) in an apartment. I go to John Adams Adult School every day. I have been in this school for four years, but I still can't speak or write English. My English is just the same as when I arrived in this country. I have made no progress in learning. I receive about \$830 per month from AFDC for six people. I have to spend it very carefully because the rent is very expensive. My sister-in-law's family and my family live together with three bedrooms. We pay the rent together. We have eleven people in our household including my sister-in-law's family and my four month old son.

This all my experience with immigration.

(Editor's note: the remainder of the paper are memories of the student author, the younger daughter in the father's account.)

These are some of my own memories. I remember that I carried a basket after my father to find food. My father was the one who did all the work. I just held the basket. I also remember when Pol Pot soldiers set up a meeting to kill a teenage girl who was about 18 years old. She was pregnant and they just pulled her out from my side and shot her in front of the people in the meeting. I didn't know why. I remember that I had to carry wood in the rain with a bunch of other kids, and I was very sick with the flu but they still forced me to work, and their kids pushed me into the water. I remember that I had no shoes to wear. I also remember that I got lost in 1979 when my family was on the way to the New Camp. I was carrying my baby sister and I stood near the railroad and saw the train. I looked at it as long as I could because I'd never seen a train before. My family and other people continued their journey, but my baby sister and I were still at the railroad. I was lost for several

hours, then my father came back and he found us there. These are just my primary memories.

I, as one of my father's children, am trying very hard to be literate. When I came here, I went to Newcomer High School as a freshman. I was there for a year then transferred to Galileo High. I liked my school very much because I had never been to school in my country before because there were no schools and no teachers. The Pol Pot soldiers destroyed and killed them all. There was no reason for me to dislike school here because I didn't need to pay for school, and I didn't need to buy text books either. I just needed to buy a few additional supplies. I found out that school was a good place to go, I could make friends, and learn new things, too. I went to school every day, and I never cut class either. I was very satisfied with my grades, which made me very happy and want to study more.

Now that I'm at this university, I don't know whether I can catch up with my classmates or not because I have nobody to help me at home. I have to deal with everything by myself. My parents can only support me by telling me what is right for me to do. They can't help me with my studies. I am the first person in my entire family who has finished high school and started with college. I have to study as hard as I can in order to maintain grades in my major which is in a medical field and the most important thing of all is to make my parents proud of me and for them to be very happy.

Adjustment to the United States by Sayonn Sok

Editor's note: The following account is edited from a talk given to an Asian American Studies class at San Francisco State University in the spring of 1987. Another portion of her talk appears in Chapter Seven.

First I would like you to know who I was and know how long I've been here. The Cambodian community in this country is very new. In 1975 only few families escaped Cambodia to the United States, but after 1980 many people started to come to this country. I left my country at the end of 1979 but I stayed in Thailand in a Cambodian refugee camp almost a year. I didn't get out until 1980 and I got to San Francisco in August 1980, quite awhile ago, almost six years now. It was hard for me because at the time I got here I was not a young person. I got here when I was close to 40, I am 42 right now. As you know, it's very difficult to learn another language and language is the most difficult thing for older people to learn.

I want you to know who I was. I was a teacher back in Cambodia. I taught from 1969 until 1975 when the Communists took over the country. At that time,

everybody was moved to the country-side and everybody lost jobs. Everybody had to work in the farms only. Some of you know people who escaped from a communist country so you know how hard it was. I had two kids, they are almost your age. My daughter is about eighteen and my son fifteen. When the communists took over the country in 1975, my kids were eight years old and four years old. They didn't have much chance to go to school. My daughter went to school only two years, kindergarten and first grade only, and after that she didn't go to school from 1975 until 1980. She started school again in September 1980, in Berkeley. I don't know how many of you went through hard times and lost education for a long time and then started school again but it was hard for her when she started school in the United States because she knew no English and had not been to school for a long time. The first year she didn't understand. The second year she start to talk and understand a little bit, but the third year she started to to compete.

The first year she came to United States she didn't want to go to school. She felt everybody around her looked down on her because she was the only Cambodian in the class and she didn't speak the language and she didn't know how to express her feelings to the teacher and she had difficulty to communicating with her classmates. So she felt alone for quite awhile. There was nothing I could do. When she came home she just didn't know how to tell me her feelings and I didn't know what was going on because I myself really had difficulty adjusting to the new society.

I attacked myself, I didn't know which way to go, what to do to make me feel good. If you are Asian, maybe you had this same feeling in the beginning when you came to this country. I looked around at people, the people around me were different. They were White and I really felt lonely when I was among White people. When I was in the Black community I felt scared. I felt good only when I went to Chinatown and I saw people that looked like me, but the language was still different.

I thought when I left the refugee camp and came to the United States "I will never have problems again at all." I thought "I go to paradise. Nothing going to happen to me." Then when I got to San Francisco airport, I got lost. My feeling got lost. I started to feel "what am I going to do here?" I didn't speak English, I spoke only a few words, not enough for me to survive. But in my mind, you know, I made up my mind "no matter what kind I get job I will take it. I will do anything to survive." I decided "no matter what, if I happen to clean somebody house as a house keeper I will do it. If I happen to wash dishes for restaurant I will do it." But how can I find a place to work, even housekeeping or dish washing?

I still felt lost. I went to Berkeley Adult School to study English. They put me at the 200 level, six months later I passed to 300 and when I finished 300 I started to

go to the East Bay Skill Center. I didn't want to waste my time because I had a family to support. At that time I went to wash dishes for a friend who owned a restaurant for which I got really very little money and some chicken wings, leftovers. Whatever they didn't use in the restaurant, I took and I fixed for my kids. I tried to save as much as possible and I got referred to clean a lady's house in Berkeley by a Japanese lady who had the same class with me and I thought it was great, at least I made some money. At least I got to start something.

I wondered how people got jobs here. I saw people working in banks, people who had work in offices and I thought it was great but how did they get in there? I had no idea how to get a job but after a while I started know how to go around and look for job. When I went to the Skills Center, the teacher taught how to get applications and then I felt a little bit more comfortable. At the East Bay Skills Center, I took course as a data entry operator. But the way I am, I never wanted to sit and work with a machine. I like to work with people.

Then, I got a call from a Vietnamese friend. He worked for the Oakland public schools at a bilingual school and he told me they needed a Cambodian teacher aide. It took me half morning just to find the office. Finally I went to the district office, they sent me around until I found the bilingual office. After an interview I got the job right away and seven days later I started to work there but I still felt bad. I was not a teacher aide, I was a Cambodian Community Assistant in the central office and I contacted parents, students, and schools whenever they had a problem. Most the people that worked with me were Chinese people, they were teachers and some were born here and some were from Hong Kong and Taiwan. I thought everybody was better than I was, I thought I was the one that didn't know anything. This feeling stayed and stayed and stayed with me for a few years. I didn't know what was going on, I just felt bad about myself. I would go around asking "how do you feel?" and everybody would say they feel okay and I just couldn't find out why I feel bad. I didn't really know how I felt at that time, I just felt low self esteem, that's all.

I worked there for two years, then I found a job as a mental health counselor at RAMS (Richmond Area Multi-Service Center) on Balboa Street (in San Francisco). I think from there I learned a lot about my feelings. I learned a lot about how difficult it is for people to adjust. Instead of me helping people at that time, I think it helped me more to be a counselor helping people. Instead of helping people, it helped me. I start to be active in the community. Before (in Cambodia) I was active no matter if I wanted or didn't want to because of the way I was born, you know, going around and helping people and make connections with people. But here I did not intend to do that, I wanted to hide. The first year, second year, the third year I didn't want expose my face to the community because of my feeling that I was not a good person, that I

didn't know anything, that I hadn't done enough good things. That's why I wanted to hide but when I was with the school district and RAMS I couldn't hide, I had to contact people. Then I saw all the problems and that they needed help and I tried to help as much as I could, using my own ability. When I became a mental health counselor I realized that other people who are here have the same feeling as I had, especially the people who never had any education. I saw how hard it was for them to learn about the new place, how hard they tried to adjust, how hard it was for them to learn another language to communicate in the new society. That made me feel that what I did with the community was worth it to me because I felt I had done a good thing as human being for my community.

Notes:

1. Personal names changed or deleted at request of author.
2. Names and some identifying details have been changed at request of author and initials are a pseudonym.
3. This story was originally published in *The Yellow Journal* Vol. 7, #7 1995. San Francisco: Asian American Studies Department, SFSU.
4. Personal names and some details changed at request of author, initials are a pseudonym.

[RETURN TO TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)