

Thirty Years Later: The Struggle Continues

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Thirty years have passed since the first wave of refugees from the Vietnam War began arriving in the United States. Southeast Asians came into this country, unlike most immigrants, with traumatic experiences forever scarred in minds from a war where whole villages were massacred and children as young as eleven years old were made to carry AK-47's and fight in the war. Though we were all leaving our country, the land where generations of our ancestors have lived, where we played during our childhood in peace, we thought that the beginning of our new lives in the U.S. could not be worse than what we were leaving behind. We thought life would be ten-fold much better moving half a world around from a third to first world country. Sadly, though there have been many great accomplishments by Southeast Asians in the short time that we have been here, there have also been and still are many struggles within our communities. The dream that so many of us had imagined as we left our country, unsure of whether we will ever again step foot on it, is still miles out of reach. For some of us, this dream has already been shattered.

The American Dream still remains elusive to many Southeast Asians families even after thirty years. Census figures provided by the Asian Pacific American Legal Center on the demographic of Asian & Pacific Islander in California attest to this statement. More than half of Vietnamese, Hmong, Cambodian, and Laotian have limited English proficiency. In addition, these four groups are in the top five with respect to lowest educational attainment. Roughly two thirds of Hmong, and more than half of Cambodian and Laotian have less than a high school education. Lack of educational attainment translates into struggles for Southeast Asians just to get through the day with the bare necessities. Hmong have the highest level of poverty with over half of its population in poverty, followed by Cambodians and Laotians.

My life so far mirrors the struggles that many Southeast Asians continue to face. I immigrated to the U.S. from the Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand when I was six years old. Growing up I saw the struggles my families and those of other Hmong families within the community had to go through. My parents, like most other Hmong parents, did not speak English. All, if not most of us, the Hmong families, were on public assistance. Every month, my nine siblings and I couldn't wait until the beginning of each month because we knew that that was the time when our fridge would be half-stuffed with food, and when we could get a few dollars, if there was any left over after paying for all the bills, to take around in our pockets so that if the ice cream truck came by, we could get something that we've been craving. With five boys, including myself, and five girls, my dad, due to his addiction to opium, didn't do much to help out the family. My mom, the inspiration in my life, did the best she could to keep the family intact.

My oldest sister got married a few months after she finished high school in the summer after I completed fifth grade. That day is one I will forever remember, not because of the marriage ceremony but because death almost grabbed hold of my family. My second oldest brother at that time who was fourteen years old had gone to the nearby elementary school that day with a couple of his friends and some cousins to play soccer. As my brother and his friends came back home, they were approached by some neighborhood kids, who apparently were in a gang and had been chasing my brother months before because he was in a different gang. Lucky enough to get pass the neighborhood kids, my brother and his friends ran back home. I was eating outside

with some cousin. My brother ran past me with his friends. Two shots went up in the air. Fortunately, no one was hit. A few months later, my brother was sent away to live with my aunt in Wisconsin. As a kid, I did not understand what had happened. Now, I understand that my parents, who did not know of such things as gang didn't realize that my brother had been involved in a gang. A realization that came almost too late.

Looking back, this incident has been the most important turning point in my life. The younger brothers of many of these neighborhood kids were my friends in school. Every time I played with them afterschool, I would constantly get harassed by their older brothers, asking me where my older brother was. As young as I was, I made a conscious choice to try to stay away from my friends to avoid these harassments. Though I did not realize it, my decision to avoid my friends paid off as I began performing better in school.

Fortunate enough to have been placed in a few honors class in junior high school, I was able to associate with friends who, like me, were able to distance themselves from all the gang activities going on in our community. Many of my elementary school friends who had potential at being successful in school went through a period of identity-searching in junior high school. Unable to reconcile the two drastically different home and school environment, many of them turned to the gang family as the solution.

Going through junior high and high school, it was always tough to keep focused on doing well in school when there were so many other "fun" things that the neighborhood kids were doing, especially when I could not see or imagine the rewards of success in school due in part to a paucity of role models. My parents did not speak English, and although they did push for me to do well in school, they did not understand what that entailed. Though all my older sibling had been fortunate enough to graduate from high school, none had gone on to college. All my sisters had married shortly after they graduated from high school. My brothers went on to work in warehouses or fast-food restaurants. With this to go off of, my parents had little expectation of me. They wanted me to graduate from high school, find a stable job, and then start a family that could provide for the rest of my family.

However, as I entered my junior year in high school, I began communicating with my family what information I had learned about college. They began to get excited as they saw that I might have the opportunity to be the first to attend college. Thus I began getting a lot of support from my older sibling and parents to succeed in school and go on to college. All that support from my family culminated in another very important day in my life. On a late afternoon in May, as I came back home from an after-school program called Upward Bound, I searched through the mail. Hiding beneath the pile of mail, I came upon something that I would have never imagined. It had the word congratulation on it, with the Stanford University logo beneath it. Emotions overcame, and tears of joy stream down my face. It was so unexpected because I came home expecting that if I had received an acceptance letter, at least my family would tell me about it. Because of my family's lack of education, even the huge manila envelope with the word congratulation on it did not give them any hints as to the importance of such an envelope.

As my story demonstrates, though we constantly struggle to survive in this country, there have been success stories. We ought to celebrate the success and accomplishments of Southeast

Asians in this country. We have Southeast Asians in many different fields. We have Southeast Asians as professors, mayors, state representative, and much more. However, these success stories are few and far in between. Thus, though these success stories should give us hope as to what Southeast Asians can and will accomplish in the future, we need to take the initiative to ensure the greater Southeast Asian population will have the opportunity to reach their full potential. How successful Southeast Asians are in the future will depend on how we understand the struggles of Southeast Asians in the past thirty years and what changes we make to provide more opportunities for Southeast Asians to succeed.