

My Parents' Journeys to Freedom

By Kristina K. Pham

My name is Kristina Khanh Pham and I am an 11-year-old rising sixth grader at Moody Middle School in Richmond, Virginia. As the daughter of proud Vietnamese immigrants, I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, site of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. This important historical document states that the citizens of the United States of America are entitled to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” because the USA is a free country. Freedom is an honor and privilege that some people take for granted. For my parents (Cathy and Valentine Pham) and their families, the pursuit of freedom and happiness is their American dream. However, their respective journeys to freedom and establishing roots in a new country were not easy.

For my mother, her family, and her paternal relatives, their journey began 30 years ago on April 29, 1975. There were 28 members in the family who made this journey. Fortunately, they had already made their way down to the sea by the time the South Vietnamese president announced the surrender to the North Vietnamese soldiers (also better known as the Vietcong) on April 30, 1975. When the Vietcong troops and tanks knocked down the gates of the presidential palace, the Vietnam War finally came to an end after decades of war. If my mother’s family had waited until April 30th to escape, they would have been caught and sent to the jungle for hard labor or even execution. This was the fate of those South Vietnamese loyalists who were well-educated and wealthy. The same fate befell the South Vietnamese government employees and military troops who were captured by the Vietcong. My mother’s dad and uncles were all in the military and my mother’s grandfather was a famous soccer commentator so they all had to flee fast or face persecution. When my mother and her family reached the seashore, they boarded a small boat that took them out to the South China Sea at night. They were transferred to one of the barges, which were larger than the boat they had sailed on and left in the sea by the military. Conditions on these barges were horrible since they were all unsanitary and overcrowded with scared and hungry refugees. Eventually, the boat people, including my mother and her family, were picked up by the US Navy Ship Kimbro and transported to Subic Bay in the Philippines. Although my mother was only five years old at the time of the escape from Vietnam, she vividly remembers how during the transfer from the barge onto the big military ship, many people were so anxious to board the big ship that will take them to begin their new free lives elsewhere that some refugees fell into the wide open sea as they rushed to climb the rope ladder from the barge to the ship. Luckily, my mother and her family boarded the Kimbro safely. When the American sailors gave them rice with soy sauce and Spam to eat, they divided the food among their family members because there wasn’t enough food for all the passengers. Nevertheless, they enjoyed each bite of their food since this was the first time in several days that they finally had something to eat or drink. Eventually, the Kimbro took the passengers to Guam, where they had to fill out immigration papers and waited to be sent to one of the three refugee processing centers that were hastily set up in the United States to handle the overwhelmingly large number of Vietnamese who had fled their homeland to avoid the Communist regime. My mother and her family were sent to the refugee processing center in Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. Then through the support of U.S. Catholic Charities, an American friend of my mother’s uncle sponsored her entire family to resettle in Newport News, Virginia, where they have been residing for the past 30 years.

Establishing roots in a new country was rough for my mother and her family in the beginning. But they slowly adjusted to the language and new culture. To learn English, my mother remembers watching educational television shows like *Sesame Street* and *Romper Room* and even entertaining shows like *The Brady Bunch* and *The Partridge Family*. She also remembers the bad part of adjusting to school in a new country. Her first school year in America was unbearable in the beginning because the kids in school teased her since she looked different from the American kids, but she later befriended many classmates since the kids were amazed that my mother was such a smart student for someone who was new to the country. The other children in my mother's family were also encouraged to study hard so that they could go to college and get well-paying jobs. My mother eventually graduated cum laude from Christopher Newport University in Newport News in 1990. The adults in my mother's family, on the other hand, worked blue collar jobs in the beginning to provide basic needs for their families. One of the most gratifying and emotional moments for my mother and her family occurred in 1980 when they became naturalized as citizens of the United States of America. Having endured a tough and unforgettable flight to freedom, my mother and her family are proud to be Americans in the land of the free.

My father's journey to freedom, on the other hand, was much tougher emotionally as he had to escape without his family, which consisted of 11 members including my father. He was 12 years old in 1978 when he first attempted to flee with his two oldest brothers. Unfortunately, my father was caught by the Vietcong and sent to a labor camp before he was allowed to return to his family. Four years later in May 1982 my father tried again to escape and succeeded when he and 92 other strangers sailed to a refugee resettlement camp in Malaysia. There he was interviewed by the U.S. Embassy to come to America. Then he went to the Philippines to learn English and finally a refugee resettlement agency called the Connections Program in Northern Virginia had my father flown to Northern Virginia to resettle there. After finishing high school in three years, my father joined the U.S. Army in 1986 and served a three year tour of duty in Germany. In 1989, he was transferred to Fort Eustis, Virginia, where he met my mother, who was living in nearby Newport News, Virginia. My father's lonesome journey to freedom was all worth it when he became naturalized as a U.S. citizen in 1990.

Having established his roots in the United States, my father was now able to sponsor his entire family to immigrate to the United States as well. The family included his parents, five brothers, three sisters, a brother-in-law, two nephews, a niece, and a sister-in-law. Since the family had a friend who was already living in Philadelphia, the family decided to establish roots there. After my father was honorably discharged from the U.S. Army in 1992, he used his GI bill to pay for his four years of college at Philadelphia University. My parents were married in 1993 and I was born a year later in 1994. After my father graduated cum laude from Philadelphia University in 1996, he and my mother decided to uproot from Philadelphia and headed south to Richmond, Virginia for better jobs. Since resettling to Richmond in 1996, our family of three had grown to four with the birth of my younger sister Maria in 1999.

My family and I are very happy living out our American dream in Richmond. My parents have fulfilled their American dream of having the freedom to choose their occupations and provide financial security for our family to enjoy life fully and happily. Now my sister and I will continue to study hard in school so that we can pursue any opportunities that interest us. One of

our interests is to maintain our Vietnamese heritage even though we live in America. My family and I are very proud of our Vietnamese heritage and we keep it alive by speaking the language at home, watching Vietnamese entertainment shows, eating traditional Vietnamese foods, attending Mass at a Vietnamese Catholic church, and participating in Vietnamese cultural events. So we are very thankful to be living in the United States of America, a free country that not only offers many opportunities, but also allows us the freedom to celebrate our Vietnamese heritage. May God continue to bless America indeed!