

# PART I LIFE





These toddlers are just two of the more than 100,000 Vietnamese refugees now in the United States waiting for someone like you to help them relocate, to help them become accustomed to the

American way of life. There are several children like these at Samaritan House in Manteca, the older children looking after the younger ones.

My younger brother and I found ourselves on the front page of a local newspaper in 1975.

## REFUGEES AMONG US

I HAVE NO CHILDHOOD MEMORIES OF BEING READ to at home. It's not that my parents were neglectful or absent. It's not that they didn't believe in the importance of reading to children. They just couldn't read the books.

In late April of 1975, my parents made a quick decision that most of us can't even fathom. We were living in South Vietnam, and it was almost certain that our country was going to fall to the communist North. The fighting had intensified in the capital city of Saigon, and my father, who worked as an electrician at the

U.S. Embassy, had heard whispers from the Americans that they were leaving within days. The writing was on the wall: The democratic South, without the military support of the United States, would crumble immediately. My father would be considered a traitor for working for the enemy and his punishment would have been severe. If he were lucky enough to avoid a death sentence, he would surely endure a lengthy sentence in a “re-education” camp. When the U.S.-backed president, Nguyen Van Thieu, resigned on April 21st and fled the country, the decision was made.

The very next evening, my parents hurriedly packed two bags of clothes, about \$10 worth of Vietnamese currency, and a gold necklace. They knew at least the gold was worth something. They, along with my maternal and paternal grandmothers, my six-year-old cousin, my eight-month-old brother, and me (almost three years old at that time), left our house for the coastal city of Vũng Tàu, several hours away. They had planned to meet with some relatives who had connections to a shipping business owner who would charter a boat to a neighboring country, such as Malaysia or Indonesia, and seek temporary refuge there. When we arrived on the dock in the middle of the night, my parents realized that they didn’t have enough money to cover the fare for all of us. Dejected, we returned home to Saigon.

The next day, my dad went to work at the embassy. One of his co-workers was shocked to see him and said, “You need to get out! It’s over. We lost our country and they’re flying us out.” He handed my dad an official-looking document written in English and told him to make a copy of it—and add the names of all the family members who would be leaving.

That night, my dad, on a borrowed typewriter, made an almost identical copy of the certificate that would allow us to board the buses at the U.S. Embassy that would eventually take us to Tân Sơn Nhất airport. He could have waited for an official certificate, but that was a risk he was unwilling to take.

In the middle of a cold morning on April 25, 1975, we ran up a ramp into the open belly of a C-130 military plane, joined hundreds of other frightened and confused Vietnamese, and flew away from the only country we’d ever known. Saigon fell to the North a few days later on April 30th—the Americans had left and the Vietnam War was unofficially over.



There were so many questions left unanswered. How long were we going to be gone? If we did eventually return to Vietnam, would our house still be ours? Where exactly were we going? How were we going to survive in a new country? My parents were in their early twenties. They were barely old enough to legally drink. Furthermore, my younger brother and I were feverishly ill during the entire journey.

Nonetheless, our family was one of the lucky ones. For years after the war, many Vietnamese perished in the oceans on fishing boats, trying to escape their war-torn homeland. And many of those who remained behind faced years of imprisonment in “re-education” camps run by the new communist regime. America gave my family a new beginning. And for this, I am forever indebted. As it does today for many refugees and immigrants, the United States represented a beacon of hope for a brighter future.

With sudden cultural and language barriers in our new home of Manteca, California, reading aloud wasn’t a thing in our house growing up. Being in survival mode didn’t allow for indulging in anything but making ends meet. Given the choice of paying the electricity bill or buying a children’s book, my parents chose what any parent would have chosen. And on occasions when I would bring home a book from the school library, they left the reading to us kids because our limited English skills had already surpassed their non-English skills.

For the same reason, my parents never involved themselves in my school. They were just learning not only the English language, but also American culture, and didn’t feel there was a place for them—newly arrived immigrants—in my school. The schools were just beginning to respond to the recent influx of refugees from Southeast Asia; the lack of understanding and resources left many families on their own to struggle.

My parents focused on the importance of their children’s education. They viewed literacy as critical for success in their new country. Being unable to read, write, and communicate in English limited their own abilities. They had traveled across the world to give their children a brighter future in a foreign land, and they were determined that those children would be as literate as any American child. Literacy meant freedom. They knew that reading was important. They just couldn’t do it for us at home.

# THE PROMISE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

*"The American Dream belongs to all of us."*

—VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS

"Thank you for teach our son," she said.

The young mother concentrated so hard to put together that sentence and smiled in relief when she did. With confidence, she attempted a couple more words but they were unintelligible, so she gave up and turned to her son. She spoke quickly in Spanish. Roberto turned to me, avoiding eye contact, and translated, "My mom says that she is working a second job at night and can't help me with my homework, so thank you for helping me."

I turned to Roberto's mom, speaking slowly to allow the boy to translate. "You're welcome. It's my job, but Roberto is a hard worker. I will do everything I can to help your son be successful in school."

I may have sounded confident to Roberto and his mom, but the truth was this was my first parent conference as a new Teach For America teacher in the Oakland Unified School District. I was a 21-year-old kid straight out of the University of California, Berkeley, and I was in way over my head. The

organization didn't give us new teachers much professional training before we stepped into the classroom, and I was overwhelmed for much of my first year. For relief, after escorting the kids to lunch, I would sneak back into my classroom and curl up under my desk for a nap to recuperate from the morning's activities. Teaching was exhausting. Because there was such a need for teachers in Oakland (like so many other urban and rural towns across America), school districts had no choice but to issue inexperienced teachers emergency credentials. It was either hire a long-term substitute for the year or a young college graduate like me. I didn't have the experience, but I did have a strong desire to make a difference.

Back in the 1990s, as it still is today, Oakland's population was a mix of recent immigrants from Southeast Asia, Mexico, and Latin America, as well as generations of Black Americans who initially moved to the West Coast for work during World War II. Most of the students at my school were from socioeconomically challenged backgrounds and many were far below proficiency academically. Teach For America was still young and had just recruited its fourth class of bright college graduates for school districts facing teacher shortages. It was a little bit like the Peace Corps, except that recruits went into the inner cities of America instead of developing countries throughout the world. My fellow teachers and I all wanted to change the world, and many of us quickly realized that changing the world is an overwhelming task. Some of my colleagues quit before their two-year commitment was up. Some, like me, stuck with Teach For America longer than anticipated.

I don't remember much of my parent conference with Roberto beyond what I shared at the start of this chapter. But I do remember looking at his mom and seeing a reflection of my own mother. How could I not? Their storylines were too similar. Leaving a home country for a better life. Struggling to assimilate into a new culture and learn a new language. Recognizing education as a door to a brighter future for your children. Feeling like an outcast in your new country. Throughout conference week, I met with other families from similar situations. Recent immigrants from Vietnam. Mexico. Cambodia. El Salvador. Even some nonimmigrant families expressed frustration that there wasn't a place for them in society. For example, Black families were frustrated because they had experienced this struggle to succeed for generations and the school

system did little to help them. Some even thought that the system hurt them. Even today, I'm told, those families are feeling the same way—if Black lives matter, then they should matter in our schools.

After two and a half decades of doing this work, I wish I could say that things have gotten better. For some, things have. Some of my first students and I keep in touch, and I am happy to report that many of them are realizing the promise of the American Dream. They've attended some of the best universities in the world—Stanford, Berkeley, UCLA, Amherst, Oxford. They now work as teachers, doctors, researchers, chefs, and business owners. They are active in their communities and have their own children in schools. They continue to reinforce the importance of education for the next generation of Americans.

At a recent reunion of former students, I asked one of them, Hai, who is now a pediatrician, what she believed helped make a difference in her early years.

"I wanted more because I knew that there was more out there in this world. I knew that education was a way to get there. People like you believed in me, and I believed in myself after a while."

Unfortunately, however, many of my other former students have never escaped the margins of American society. Some never finished high school. Some fell victim to gangs. Some were incarcerated. They are the next generation that struggles to realize the ever-elusive promise of America—and unfortunately, a disproportionate number come from communities of color. It's apparent just by turning on the television and watching the news, reading the newspaper, or just paying attention in our schools and communities. When we examine the persistent opportunity gap, the disparities in graduation rates, and the differences in how children are disciplined based on color first, behavior second, it becomes crystal clear that the American Dream is not as reachable for some as it is for others.

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