

Part I: Boat People Experience

My name is Nicki Tung. I came from Vietnam in 1980. My ethnicity is Chinese and we were one of the boat people that escaped Vietnam in 1979. But I think in a way it was easier for us to leave Vietnam and to be able to escape because we were Chinese and they were trying to get rid of all of the Chinese. So, we escape with just one try and we were very, very fortunate to be able to leave Vietnam. But the biggest thing was that when we left Vietnam, we had no goals. We didn't know where we were going to go, just wanted to leave Vietnam for a better opportunity. You know, my parents just wanted us to leave and have a better life in another country. They didn't care what happened to the whole family, that's why they kept the whole family together. And we just left, and we got pirated by the Thai fisherman. And we just go, and we just hope that any country will take us. So, when we left there is a saying that, "10 people left only one survived" and that is very true, and we were very fortunate.

So, we made it to Malaysia on a boat and we were stranded on an island. The government came and they took us because there were no refugees in Malaysia at the time. They took us to a harbor, and we stayed on a beach for about a month. And there's no help from the government at all. We have to buy our own food with the gold that we have left. They sent military personnel to watch us every day so we wouldn't leave the beach because they didn't want us wandering out. And they would let people come in at night and try to sell us food.

So anyways, we stayed there for about a month and they moved us to a harbor and they just rounded us up on a boat, any boat. They destroyed the compass and they just pushed us onto the boat. And then, they used the Navy ship to drag us out into the ocean and they only gave us enough gasoline to go back to Vietnam. Because, they didn't want any refugee there, they didn't want any of us there at all. So, they drag us out with their Navy metal ship on our little dinghy wooden boat. And they dragged us out so fast the captain said that their intention was to drag us out so fast that we would drown. But we didn't. And then, in the middle of the ocean they chopped the rope and they let us float and just told us to "Go away! Go back to your own country!" And they gave us enough gasoline to go to back to Vietnam. And we didn't do that. So, the captain put the gasoline into the boat. We float back onto the harbor they took us out from, and they drag us out the second time. They got so upset they asked if anybody on the boat speaks English and my dad was the only one. And then, so he volunteered, and the Navy officer asked him to come to the front and then he said, "You tell your people..." he started meeting my dad first with the back of the gun, with the rifle and said, "This is what's going to happen to everybody if you guys don't listen. We don't want you! Tell your people we don't want you here. You just have to go back to your own country." So, they dragged us out further out into the ocean. They chopped the rope again so that will float. This time, the captain waited until at night and then he looked at the moon and then he knows which direction to go. He said, "We're not going back that way. That's Vietnam, that's where they are dragging us. We are going to go into the opposite direction." And so, we were able to reach Indonesia on the second try. Luckily, Indonesia was taking refugees at that time and we were able to stay at the Indonesian refugee camp for another couple of months.

I remember when we were floating in the ocean for days without water and we see all these cargo ships passing by. Big giant cargo ships. And we brought out the pots and pans and

everything that we have to make noise. We were afraid that they wouldn't be able to see us. And we were just asking, begging for help, begging for any boat to take us, because we were just floating in the ocean. We don't know where we're going. And they saw us, and they didn't pick us up. All they did was just throw water into the ocean, you know, drinking water. Barrels, big barrels of gasoline, big barrels of drinking water, and they just left because they were afraid. And after that experience, I mean seeing those, we were just so disappointed. It's like, how can you let us die out in the ocean when you were just so desperately needed somebody to rescue us. And they didn't. None of them did. And I talked to, years later, I was living in Taiwan and I talk to one of my coworkers who used to work in a cargo ship. And she said, "You have to understand that we have a schedule to keep. You know, we are transporting all of these goods to another country. We have a schedule to keep and what are we going to do with all of these people that we are going to rescue? If we take them to our destination and what if that country doesn't take refugees? What are we going to do with 200 people, you know?" So that's why, that's the reason why they didn't pick us up. They didn't rescue us. It was sad and away, you know, a lot of people died because of hunger, of thirst. But, you know, that's the way of life, I guess.

I have been here for so many years and I never really thought about it. I never really realize it has a big impact on me. Just by talking about this, all of these memories coming back, it's just, I never realized it's such a traumatic thing in my life. I am a scuba diver; I am a certified scuba diver. And the other night, we went out for a night dive in the ocean. And then coming back, I was sitting on the back of the boat. It was total, we were in total darkness. And I was just sitting there enjoying the view and then suddenly the sound of the boat and the smell of gasoline just brought me back to the time when we escaped Vietnam, you know. And I was just so scared of that experience. I don't know why it just... it was a good learning experience, but it was also a very traumatic experience for me.

I'm happy to share my stories. I am happy I am able to talk about it in detail and share it with other people. I don't know if anybody has ever heard of the boat people, but this is what we're going through. It's a life changing experience for myself and a lot of other boat people. I can say that I came from a very pretty well to do family in Vietnam and without this experience I wouldn't have known how hard life is, you know. And how grateful I am to be able to come to the US. My family, everybody in our family is so grateful that we had the opportunity to come to the US and have a better life because, my parents taught us good morals. We don't ask for handouts. My mom and dad they work hard to support the family and the teachers that. They taught us to work hard and not depend on anybody except yourself.

I think most people don't know the difference between a refugee and immigrants. And they are just saying that, "People are coming to the US! People are coming to the US and they're taking away jobs!" But it's the jobs, the low-paying jobs that all of these people are willing to do, are willing to work for to sustain, to support their own family. It's the job that most Americans don't want. It's not taking away their jobs. If you are willing to do those jobs and people are fighting with you over those jobs, then they are taking it over. But, those are the low-paying jobs, entry level jobs that people don't want to do. If you go to the car wash place and see all of those people that are working there so hard, have you ever seen their hands? They are so rough. Now, are they really taking your jobs? Are you willing to go and work in a car wash day in and day out under the sun in those rough conditions? Doing the jobs that they're doing? If you are not willing, then they are not taking away your job, right?

I wouldn't say that I am carrying all of this weight on me. It's a good, again, it's a good experience. It's a life-changing experience that I went through and I think what I personally can

do is give back to the community. Volunteering at the senior citizens, giving your time to the people that don't speak English, going to the senior home and spending time with them. It's just the level of communication and the interaction that people need. It's being more empathetic and being more sympathetic to their situation. I think that's giving back enough, giving back enough of your time. It's the precious time that a lot of us don't have. Giving money, of course nobody says no to money. Giving money is not as heartwarming as giving your time, and your energy, and your level of care to other people. Giving back to the community, I highly believe in that.

Part II: Life as a Refugee

And then, so we were able to reach Indonesia on the second try. And luckily, Indonesia was taking refugees at that time. We were able to stay at the Indonesian refugee camp for another couple of months. I would say I learned a lot. They didn't have any school then. My dad speaks English so, every day he would have an English class for us, five of us. He said, "You guys, I don't care what you do; you're going to come to class and I'm going to teach you guys English." So, every day we would go, you know, it's like in our little backyard or somewhere. All five of us just sit there and we learn English because my dad would teach English. And then, the neighborhood kids would come over and take lessons from my dad.

At that time, we weren't able to work so, whatever you can make you can sell at the farmers market. My uncle from Hong Kong sent us peppers, chili peppers and bitter squash seeds. Seeds were very valuable at that time, so we received a big bag of seeds of peppers from my uncle. And then, my dad told my sister and I, he said, "Here's some peppers. You guys do whatever you want with it. You can grow pepper trees. You can grow whatever you want and if it grows, you can take it to the market, you sell it. Whatever money you earn, it's yours." So, my sister and I tended to our own little garden. We were growing pepper trees and onions and stuff. It was our responsibility; it was a little task that my dad taught us to keep ourselves busy and not just laying around doing nothing. So, he thought his English, he taught us the moral of making money, the value of money. Things don't grow on trees. Whatever you want you have to go after it. You have to earn it. So that's what she was teaching us, you know, small lessons. So, my sister and I, we grow those peppers and she was caring a bucket with water with the vegetables and I was caring this little plywood and we went to the farmers market and we just sat there two of us. We just sat there with our vegetables out and we were able to sell all of the vegetables that we took to the market that day. And then with the money that we made we bought fabric so that my mom could make pajamas. It's just a little luxury that we have that people take for granted nowadays.

It was scary even at my age, you know, a lot of people said that "Oh, kids, they don't know anything." But it was scary for us because, you know, you come to a new country and you don't speak any English at all. I started second grade when I first came here. And, I remember the teacher partnered me with this girl, this Caucasian girl, and I think she was really, really sweet. And then, I don't know what we did but, there's these pictures of food and hotdogs and things like that and then I think we are supposed to be matching those pictures. But I took it home and I showed it to my dad. I said, "Dad, this is what they are going to feed us tomorrow at school!" (laughter) But he said, "no, this is a test." I said "oh, I don't understand any of that." It was fun in away, but it was scary because you have to grow up fast. You have to learn the language and you have to stand up for yourself and not be picked on. We got picked on many, many times in school and outside of school. We got called different names and people making

fun of us and throwing water balloons at us. And just yelling profanities and just wanting us to go back to our own country.

I think in California there is more refugees that are coming to California than to other states, but I think it's the same. People get the same treatment no matter where they go. I mean, to this day, I went to Virginia with my boyfriend a couple of months ago and I still get the look because I'm Asian. So, just imagine 20 to 30 years ago, people have never seen Asian before and they don't know what to do with us. And they don't know how to react around us. It was very small, I remember I was going to elementary there was only two other agents in the whole school, and then my sister and I. That's it. For Asian people compared to now I mean, at that time it was fast for us to learn English because there were no other kids who's with their own language. I speak Cantonese, Mandarin, Vietnamese, and English. You know, my parents work hard and seeing them working so hard, and my dad he was a mechanic. Even though he speaks English he had to find any job that can provide for the family. At that time, he goes to school, he got his certificate, and he was a mechanic. Seeing him coming home every night with his rough hands and all of the grease on his hands, it's like you don't want to ask him for anything else. Because, he works so hard to provide for the family. It shapes my life, at least to appreciate what I have. Whatever I want I have to work for it myself. Because, you know, you're seeing your parents work so hard; you can't ask more of them. And everyone in my family, my siblings they know it, too. We never asked dad, my parents for anything. My brother, my oldest brother he can see how hard my parents work. He rode his bicycle to work and with a little money that he had, that he made, he gave my sister and I spending money. So, it was my brother that gave us money, a little spending money. You know, \$10 a month. That was a lot of money. So, we don't have to go to ask my parents for it. It teaches us the value of money, and it shapes us. It teaches us to only spend what you have and not putting debts on credit cards. That's what my parents teach us, "Spend only what you have, not what you don't have and pay it off later!"

Most of my relatives, they escaped Vietnam before we did. So, we were basically the last family to escape. My aunt came here in 1978 and she was one of those people who paid a lot of money to leave. And, she was able to be on a metal boat, whereas we were in a wooden boat. So, her life, her journey was not as rough as ours were.