

History: Recognition of Ourselves

By Daisy Le

Mr. Xuoi Van Le was born on February 6, 1946, and grew up in the capital of Vietnam, Saigon. He grew up as the rebellious youngest son of a family with middle-class status. Leaving home at the age of eighteen, Le joined the U.S. Navy Seals in the year 1964 – 7 years into the Vietnam War. For eleven long and strenuous years, Le fought in the Vietnam War against the communists with support from the United States. Although the war ended in 1975, the effects of it did not cease for Le. A few months before the war neared an end, his ship was caught and everyone on it was taken in as prisoners by the Northern communists. Upon contact, "Even after we had stopped resisting our capture, our opponents would continue to abuse us. We were verbally abused, spat on, and a few of us received blows to the head and neck. We were informed that we were being sent to some type of camp. The details were very vague, but I knew that it was going to be no vacation. I was ordered to grab what I could at the moment. The majority of us didn't have much to gather. The only belongings we owned were the shirt we had on our backs – the clothes we already had on. At the point, I was extremely tired. As much as I wanted to fight back, my body was unable to do so. I followed obediently in the single file line I was placed in. We marched for days on land until we reached the remote regions of some forest. It was now apparent, more than ever, that we were prisoners from the war and it was now time for us to pay for our disobedience and misconduct against the North Vietnam government."

Le's capture was horrid news for his family and wife-to-be. After the communists took over, the future for him did not look bright at all. Like thousands of the other South Vietnamese, including

former members of the military and former U.S. government employees, Xuoi Van Le was sent to "re-education camps" where he and the majority of the prisoners were detained for many years under harsh conditions. There was barely any food or living space. The living conditions were horrible. Occasions upon occasions, Le's fellow inmates would get sick and no one would care. Sick people were left unattended and would be left to waste away overnight. He recalls, "I felt like I was constantly surrounded by death. As optimistic as I wanted to stay, with the conditions in the camp so bad, I remember nervously joking to myself how I might be the next one to past away. I'm surprised I made it this far."

It was my father, Xuoi Van Le that made this statement to constantly remind my sister and me of the past and how lucky we are to even have a stable roof over our heads. I am the first-born daughter of this former U.S. Navy Seal and Vietnamese refugee, a Vietnamese American woman inspired by her father's vibrant remembrance of their family's past. History is important. Recognizing what we've done in the past is recognition of ourselves. By searching our past, we are searching how to go forward in our present life. It is through the history of my family that I find the willpower to conquer every task at hand and to move forward in my personal and academic pursuit.

My father's stories of the past were so descriptive that it would paint vivid images in my head of the conditions he was faced with. When my father was sent to re-education camp, his own family and relatives began to lose hope of ever seeing him again. Regardless of this slightly disturbing set-back, my mother, his wife-to-be at the time, did not lose hope and assured him that she would wait. My father spent eight years in prison before he was finally released in October

1983. As she had promised, my mother waited for the day when her husband would finally be released so they would be able to rejoice in harmony. No more than four months after he got out, my father and her ran away together against the permission of my mother's family and became boat people in search of the opportunity to start fresh with a new life together. My father left Vietnam for his freedom, the safety of his wife, and the future of his children. He left because he wanted to flee the communist government that was taking over his beloved homeland. Due to war and persecution from a new regime, my father had fled from his own country with my mother, leaving everything else he loved behind.

Due to the fact that my father was imprisoned for an estimate of eight years, he and my mother was one of the later groups of Vietnamese that were seeking refuge outside Vietnam in 1983. Along with an estimate of over 100 people crammed in a single boat, my parents were two amongst the thousands of Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese that sought to escape from the country. Although my father cannot recall exactly how many boat people there were, he does however remember that a lot of them were not as fortunate enough to make it to land. As he recollects, "I still remember everything so vividly. Your mom and I met so many people, yet these same people did not make it to Indonesia like we did. It was very sad. I remember meeting a new person one day, and within a day or two, he would be gone due to the harsh environment we had to put up with. There was barely any food or water. It was definitely not enough for all of us to share. Your mother and I had to do what we could and live off the bare minimum. We drank and ate enough to stay alive, and whenever and whatever we could, we saved. The boat ride was only a few days, almost equivalent to a week, but I think at least a third of the people that started out on the boat with us did not make it to land. Your mother and I were

both very fortunate to even get that far. We prayed day and night hoping that the heavens above would hear our prayers."

Le was a part of the more heterogeneous second wave of refugees who started arriving in 1978 that can be divided into the 'boat people' and the 'land people.' He and my mother were poorer, less educated, and less urbanized than the refugees from the first wave. The two of them arrived in Indonesia seven months later with an estimated 125 other Vietnamese, fleeing the transitional violence that enveloped South Vietnam after the North Communist won the war in 1975. They ended up at a refugee resettlement camp on the island of Indonesia near the end of 1983 and were the few that made it safely to land. Their life in the refugee camp was simple. The majority of the people in the camp worked together and helped one another. Both men and women alike were able to lend a hand if they were capable. Gender roles did not play a huge role in the camp. Besides once a week on Mondays when the entire camp worked together to clean out all the barracks and clean up the campgrounds, refugees weren't demanded nor mandated to work in the resettlement camp. Due to this factor, Le and his wife had time and were able to start and maintain a little business of their own. The well off owner of a little unsteady hut did not want this property anymore. Chance and luck had it that he was willing to sell it to my parents for a very cheap deal. Even though it was a cheap deal, at that point in time, money was still hard to come by. With the help of a few of their close neighbors, my parents were finally able to front for the little hut which the original owner had requested them to do. In no time, my parents were the proud owner of a small grocery shop that served the 5,000 refugee residents on the island of Indonesia.

Despite stories of the squalid encampment of more than 5,000 refugees on the island of Indonesia, my parents found the refugee camp an endurable support system away from Vietnam. The refugee resettlement camp provided its "guests" with small portions of rice and sugar on a daily basis. It got through their days and that was all that mattered to them – to be able to eat just enough to stay alive. The life he had in the refugee resettlement camp was not that bad at all. Being a former Navy Seal member that fought in the war, Le was offered a position as one of the camp security officers. His main duty was to patrol the boundaries surrounding the camp grounds and to make sure there was no inner-camp thievery taking place. It may not have been the best position there was, but it helped Le pass the days by and allowed him to earn a little bit of extra pocket cash that he saved up. This was another rare opportunity my parents were presented with in addition to the owning the small grocery shack. As a former Navy Seal fighting for his country, Le was respected by many of the refugees in the camp. Along with the respect his fellow refugees had for him, trust trailed right behind. This may not seem like much, but to Le and his wife, it was enough. To be respected by others and to be trusted with opportunities to provide for the community, it gave my parents a purpose to life. When asked why Le couldn't just start over in his homeland, he responded: "If I had the choice of going back to Vietnam or staying in Indonesia, I would definitely have stayed on the island without the slightest doubt. If I had returned to Vietnam, the communist would have caught me and held me prisoner once again. My family would be at risk. I wouldn't have allowed that to happen to them. They mean too much to me. I refuse to give up and surrender to the communist rule! I've fought too hard to let them think that they can rule me just like that. At least here, on the island, the offer of stability was present."

Le's experience on the island of Indonesia was a manageable experience. Even though he and his wife spent an entire year at this refugee resettlement camp with minimal food, they didn't find that their situation was bad at all. He remembers the condition they were in on the island of Indonesia: "It's wasn't that bad at all. We were fortunate enough to even be there. There was minimal food, but at least there was food. Compared to everything else your mother and I've been through since the very beginning when the Vietnam War started, Indonesia was nothing. We enjoyed our stay there. It was peaceful. Everyone worked together and was content with the simple ways of life. We weren't filthy rich or anything like that, but we were just as happy. Everyone in the camp was inter-dependent on one another. Although it was unspoken of, we all knew that we've all gone through similar experiences as a result of the war."

So to Le and his wife, their experience on the island was not only tolerable, but a positive one at that. They did not have the most elaborate life adorned with a lot of money or material valuables, but they did lived a simple and meaningful life on the island as did a lot of the other refugees. They felt that they were fortunate enough to have the support of their neighbors that lend them some money to open their own little grocery shack during their stay in the camp. This was a rare opportunity at the time, so for Le and his wife to be able to open a small business was definitely a dream come true.

While Indonesia was the island of opportunity for my parents in 1983, they continue to dream and hope for greater opportunities elsewhere – particularly in America. Millions of people from around the world travel to America seeking better lives. To a lot of immigrants, America represents the land of opportunities. They come to America with the ideals of freedom and

wealth to be had. They come in hopes of a better future if not for themselves, then for their future generations. People come to the United States because they believe that the opportunity for a better life is more promising than what they would get in their home country. This may be the case for some immigrants, but in addition to that, there are also those immigrants that came out of necessity. Refugees, like my parents, differ in that their exodus was not voluntary and their path of escape was filled with peril. My father remembers sitting on a rickety wooden bed frame in a cramped corner of his barracks, with only a sheet to provide privacy from his neighbors, reminiscing about the life he had in South Vietnam and his experience during the war that changed his life and the lives of many. The familiarity of his home, his family, and that life are now only memories of the past. He spent every day in the refugee resettlement camp hoping that he and his wife could finally start fresh in a land of opportunity – America. If it wasn't for my parent's struggle and their ultimate decision to leave Vietnam to first settle in Indonesia and then America in hopes of increasing opportunities for my sister and me, we would not be where we are today and pursuing the paths that we do. My parents' stories of the past and their desire to one day return to their homeland powerfully influence my decision to succeed in academics and to pursue my career in Asian American public health and education. My ultimate goal is to return to Vietnam with my family and to be able to open and facilitate a health clinic there serving the under-privileged residents of the more deprived villages.

Of course, with my aspiration comes motivation and determination. Without my parents' consistent support and encouragement, I would not have the drive to do the things that I do. Education is further enhanced by experiences, whether it is of one's own or another's. My parents' involvement during my early childhood was through the historical stories that they told.

By reminding me of my family's past through their experiences, my parents instill values that are critical to my development as an individual. This ongoing learning experience sets me up to better perform academically and socially. As a college student who is at the threshold of self-reliance and independence, I can readily say that their concerns over parenting, education, and socialization depict the reality that is in whole or some part, relative to my life experience. If it wasn't for my father's historical narratives of my family's past, I would not have such a vivid visual of the living situations during the Vietnam War. And in addition to that, if it wasn't for my mother's constant reminders about their struggles arriving in the United States, I would not have the determination, motivation, and inspiration to succeed everyday in the things that I am involved in - from academics to extracurricular activities on campus and off. I've learned most of my values and principles by what my parents have told me through their historical stories, reaffirmed by what they've taught and shown me in their current life. These are the values and principles that I use today in my life to act, reason, and to justify. Because of my parents, I now know that everything must be earned; nothing of value in life is given. If it wasn't for the way my parents had raised me, I would not be the person I am today, knowledgeable and eager to undertake everything life has to offer. Growing up, my parents made it clear that "success cannot always be measured with wins and losses." They did not expect me to win every battle, and triumph in every war I fought, but to come out of them with the mentality that accomplishment is a success in itself. In their eyes, I can never fail if I tried my best and gave whatever I attended to my all. It is through my parent's experience and drive to educate my younger sister and I about our family's past that leaves me proud to be the Vietnamese-American woman that I am today. From praying in a temple to celebrate Lunar New Years to wearing the

traditional *ao dai* to school during culture week, I've always been proud of my culture, heritage, and history.