

## Connecting History with My Life

By Helen Tang

Upon first hearing my father's story of how he came to establish a comfortable life in the United States, many may be quick to label his like any other ordinary "rags to riches" tale. Many may be quick to predict the plot of his story: he came to the United States with hopes and dreams of a better life, and thanks to his Confucianist upbringing, he managed to battle through odds and ends to finally reach the "American Dream." However, like in all stories, what we hear or read is a lot more complicated when carried out in reality. My father's story of how he turned a life from owning barely anything to a fairly luxurious life where he now owns his own home and small business, has never ceased to remind me what hope and perseverance can do. In this essay, I will guide you through my father's journey of how he came to establish a comfortable life here in the United States and how his story has shaped my life to where it is today.

On March 1, 1976, my father, Duong Ly Tang made his first successful attempt to escape from Vietnam. Having had tried to escape two times before failing both times because the boats would not let him in, he managed to escape in a rickety boat by bribing the fisherman who owned the boat. Congested in a boat filled with 15 other passengers, Duong endured through almost a week's journey of living off of nothing but a few steamed buns that he had brought along with him and drinking sea water only when absolutely necessary. By the third day out on sea all of what was left of his food was stolen by the larger and much more intimidating passengers of the boat. However, two passengers on the boat were caring enough to share with him the steamed buns and French bread they had brought with him. Having had evaded the dangers of sailing out

on sea-- hunger and pirate attacks, he came near the shore of Malaysia on March 6, 1976 amazed that he had made this adventure alive. Once landing near the shore, the boat owner quickly ordered all passengers to jump off the boat so that he could sink the boat more easily. Once the boat sank, they knew they had evaded all possible chances of now being sent back to Vietnam. With everyone now out on the sea, all the passengers began swimming to the shore.

Having had been an experienced swimmer as the son of a fisherman, my father's journey from where the boat had sank to the shores of Malaysia was nothing of a challenge for him. "The water's were actually calm, and cool. I wasn't scared, only a little bit worried because it was dark and couldn't make out where I was swimming towards since the shore was hard to see at night. The swim took about fifteen minutes and I made it " Once on shore, all the passengers including my dad slept on the sand and waited until morning for the officials to find them.

On the morning on March 7, 1976, my father was officially documented as a refugee of the Pulau Bidong camp, a refugee camp that housed nearly 40,000 Vietnamese 'boat people' during its 30 years of service. He spent the next year staying from different tents within that camp. According to my father, the living conditions there were a lot more accommodating then the ones he had faced at home as the son of a poor fisherman. "We had plenty to eat and we did not have to work so life was pretty relaxing." However, according to my father, life was not all great at times because he had to battle through the emotional turmoil of living in a strange land away from his family, knowing nothing of what was to become next. "Once I got there, I wrote to them to let them know I got there safely...I wrote to them everyday and every time I got a letter from them and read how they were doing with their fishing, I was reminded of how it felt like to

be at home and I missed it....when I was alone, I worried a lot about whether I would survive, where my life was going to go.” My father, strong and having gone through much more horrific experienced in his life like witnessing the death of his brother having had to become the supporter of his family when his father left to fight in the Vietnam War, combated this obstacle like any other challenge he had: with hope and optimism.

For the next couple of months, my father’s homesickness dwindled as he became more determined and started to concentrate on his future. As days passed, he became more and more concerned about getting into the United States. While at the Pulau Bidong camp, an employee of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), an organization that was responsible for processing refugees and deporting them to other areas, located my uncle and gave him his address. He spent the last three months of his stay in Pulau Bidong writing letters back and forth to my uncle, trying to get the necessary documentation so he can come to the United States.

Finally around April 1977, my father arrived in LAX with nothing but his suitcase, his immigration papers, a picture of my uncle and that gold necklace he had sewn into his pockets when fled from Vietnam. This was the beginning of a new life for him. Spending the next four months living in a small two-bedroom apartment with 8 other of his family members, he managed to pay his share of the rent by working at a nearby pizzeria making pizzas. Having felt he was being underpaid and overworked, and knowing at that time only a few standard English phrases, like “hello” or “how much is that,” he managed to find another higher paying job washing cars. Making an average salary of about \$800 per month, my father eventually saved

enough money to move out into his first apartment located on the hills of Sunset Ave in West Hollywood, paying only \$250 a month for this humble shack style apartment. From then on, my father worked several blue collared jobs mainly in carpentry and plumbing business. In 1980, he saved enough money to fund him self through technical school and eventually earned his license in plumbing, electricity, heating and ventilation. This marked the beginning of his promising career and a finally a stable life, which eventually led to my birth.

Born on November 3, 1985 in Monterey Park, I was conceived when my dad was only twenty-four and my mom was only twenty-one. Even though my parents were young, their upbringing had more than prepared them for the weighty task of raising two children, my brother and me. I grew up living a somewhat improvised lifestyle, being that both my parents spoke little English and worked long hours to support our family. Although we were fairly poor, forced to move around a lot due to hikes in rent prices, I grew up never understanding the meaning of gratitude. I remember as a young child, I complaining to my parents why I couldn't do the same things my white friends did, like playing in the park after school or watching television when I wanted to. Even though I was still an adolescent, my parents never allowed me to do any of these things because they believed these activities were distractions on what they thought was a more important factor in my life, my education. I never understood their reasoning and had always seen them as vindictive parents for not allowing me to live my life like my white friends. It was not until the fourth grade when I first heard my father's story did I change my perspective on life, and even until this day, I continue to live with that same grateful, optimistic and hard working attitude my father's story has taught me to live by.

How does history impact my life you ask? How could it not, I ask you? Even till this day, every time I hear my father's story of how he came to the U.S, every time I think about what he had to endure through -- from fleeing from his homeland in a boat crowded with 15 other people living off of buns and bread, to how he was forced to live without the comfort of his family at a tender age of 18, I think, "how was it possible for him to get through all of this without any complaints?" My father's history of how he immigrated to the U.S. has taught me the value of hope and the meaning of endurance. Every time I find myself complaining about my life, how I have to write an essay, or that my life is so miserable because I don't have a boyfriend, I think to myself, "why am I complaining?" My life's struggles are only mere inconveniences compared to the hardships my father had to face. And this positive thinking has helped me numerous times, not only as a student trying to get through the havoc of midterm and final studying, but also at a time where I was nearly killed by a dog who had wounded my neck, arms, back and hips. How does history impact my life you ask? It impacts me everyday. It gives me my motivation to persevere no matter how difficult I think the circumstance maybe

This optimistic outlook in life has led me to be the person I am today- determined, hard working and appreciative of what all life has to offer. It has inspired me to become a tutor for Bruin Corps, a government facilitated organization that works with UCLA students to bring higher educational opportunities to schools throughout Los Angeles. I decided to join Bruin Corps because I wanted show these children the same lesson my father had taught me -- everything is possible as long as one has hope and keeps preserving mentality. My father's story was also the motivating factor for my decision to become an Asian American Studies major. I decided to become an Asian American Studies major because I wanted to learn more about the AA

community specifically what resources it is lacking so I can help my community. I hope with the knowledge I have gained and will continue to gain in my last two years as an Asian American Studies major here at UCLA, and with the many opportunity Bruin Corps has to offer to me, I can make that same impact on the community that my father had on me.