

From Vietnam to City College

Minh Tran remembers her Vietnamese youth

Story by Chelsea Shannon

It isn't obvious when Minh Tran, student personnel assistant with CalWORKs Job Services at City College, walks into a dimly lit room that she has a dark past full of sadness and loss because she lights up her surroundings with a warm attitude and bright smile.

"It just makes me sad just to think of it," says Tran, who is now 50. "But I am proud of what I have done."

Tran says she struggled for many years as she grew up in communist Vietnam only to escape to America and work hard to support her family and make a life for herself.

Through this process, she lost contact with many of her beloved friends from Vietnam, but with today's social networks she has been able to find them after nearly 25 years.

The path to happiness was a rocky one for Tran, her family and many others in Vietnam. After the Vietnam War and the withdrawal of the United States, the Communist Party gained control of Vietnam and the capital Saigon fell in 1975.

Life became so difficult that Tran and her family had no chance of survival unless they left Vietnam.

"To live in Vietnam at that time was terrible," says Tran. "Because if you live there, you die of starvation."

Tran went from living in a one-story home with plenty of space and a beautiful garden to living in her grandmother's home with her mother, father and brother.

Though her father was still working, Tran's mother lost her job, and the Communist party confiscated the vehicles of the families in Saigon, which became known as Ho Chi Minh City. Due to the lack of available employment and low wages, Tran's family struggled to provide for their basic needs.

"We had very little food for our family," Tran remembers. "We would share one chicken leg for four people."

Because they had no vehicles, 10-year-old Tran had to walk 10 miles each way to school every day. After Tran graduated from high school, she could not go to college in Vietnam because her family had filed for immigration.

At this time, South Vietnamese wanting to leave could either flee by boat and hope they might make it to safely to land where they could live or be sponsored by others.

"The three qualities Minh has are trustworthiness, honesty and loyalty."
To Nhi Do

Many Vietnamese escaped aboard makeshift boats and were known as "boat people." Tran's uncle escaped in 1978 as a boat person to San Francisco and was later able to sponsor his family members for their immigration to the United States.

"A lot of my friends died on the boats on their way to freedom," says Tran.

After 10 years of waiting for their immigration approval by the government, Tran and her family landed in San Francisco in 1991. There she reunited with her best friend, To Nhi Do, who had escaped as a boat person. Ten days later Tran and her family traveled to Sacramento to settle down.

Tran recalls her family's first apartment near 47th Street. They did not know the area that Tran describes as a ghetto

where they heard drive-by shootings at night.

"It was kind of scary," Tran says. "But we had no choice."

Soon after settling in South Sacramento, Tran began her studies at City College and worked with her brother delivering newspapers and at her on-campus job.

"At 2:30, we would get up [and] get on our bikes to ride around Land Park delivering papers," she recalls. "We had to do it quickly because they had to be delivered by 6:30 in the morning. Then I would go take a little nap on the bench in the Student Center before going to my student help job in the library at 7:30, and I would work until my class started."

Tran and her brother (also named Minh Tran; their friends call her Minnie) have had to work hard to support their family. Their parents were not able to find work due to the language barrier. Also, the Vietnamese government would not allow them to bring many possessions, especially money, when they left the country.

"Well, you know, I had to work to support my family," says Tran. "When we would deliver newspapers, if a family did not give us the money on Thursday, that was it. I would be so frustrated, but there was nothing I could do."

After graduating from City College with two associate's degrees in social science and French, Tran went on to California State University, Sacramento, to earn her bachelor's degree in French.

She continued working student jobs until she found a full-time job in Orientation Services counseling international students at City College in 1998.

"I remember that day still," says Tran. "I chose these jobs because I like to help students."

As Tran sits on her couch in her Elk Grove home with the faint squeak of her dog playing with his toy, she looks at pictures of her friends now and in the past on Facebook.

Despite the physical distance between them, Tran and her friend Do kept in contact since 1980 when Do safely landed in Indonesia after her journey as a boat person. Do ultimately ended up in San Jose where she lives now.

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Minh Tran

Do convinced Tran to get a Facebook account and get in touch with other Vietnamese friends they had known since elementary school.

Through Facebook, they have been able to share old pictures with about 50 friends and arrange annual reunions so they can all see each other in person again. Many of Tran’s friends escaped as boat people, and many boat people ended their journeys in different parts of the globe.

Some of her friends live in France, Australia and the United States, including California and even in Tran’s neighborhood.

“It was such a surprise, a good surprise, to have her live so close,” says Truc Thieu, Tran’s old elementary school friend who lives 10 minutes away in Elk Grove. “It is nice because she is a good friend.”

They now are able to spend time together in between the larger reunions among their friends, when their schedules are not busy.

“We see friends from like when we were little,” says Tran. “Some look the same, and some I cannot even recognize them. We still talk about the past, when we were in Catholic school and just remember about living in Vietnam at that time.”

Although Tran no longer has huge hurdles as she did when she first attended City College, she still works hard and applies her work ethic to everything she does.

“She is a hard worker,” says Ramona Cobian, Tran’s supervisor. “She is very dedicated to her students.”

Tran’s friends also speak highly of her work ethic.

“The three qualities Minh has are trustworthiness, honesty and loyalty,” says Do about her friend of 45 years. “Her work ethic is highly recommendable. I put my trust in her for both work and in friendship. She works hard to get to where she is.”

Now living in her comfortable home, Tran surrounds herself with things that make her happy — photos of her family and classmates, an altar for her grandparents, California poppies, bamboo, her dog Georgi and a large cactus.

“I am very proud of myself,” Tran says. ■



Minh Tran, student personnel assistant with CalWORKs, reconnects with old friends from Vietnam on Facebook.

Photo by Evan E. Duran