Topic: A young teen’s journey from her communist homeland to the land of American Dreams

Abstract: Phoung was only thirteen years old when she was sent away on a little boat to escape her communist oppressed home. She was alone, did not know where she was going, who’d she turn to, nor how she’d make it; all she knew was that her parents helped her escape in hopes that she could have a better life. Two to three years later, she made it to America and from there her life became more that what her family had hoped for. The American dream could not have been seen more than with her life. Coming from a poor little town in Vietnam to owing her business, she had defined herself not as a refugee, but as a foreigner making it as an American citizen.

Key Words: Refugee, escape, better life, American Dream

It is beautiful summer Saturday morning, warm, bright, and sunny. Mia Nguyen is working doing my bi weekly nail maintenance, also known as a fill. It could be said that she is the stereotypical Vietnamese woman; works in a salon as a manicurist, very hard accent from the old country, and somewhat of a bad driver. Her story, along with her stereotype, is also one that is shared with thousands of others. This is the story of a thirteen year old teenager who, in the time of civil war, became a refugee, and now a successful American citizen living and fulfilling her American dream.

Born April thirtieth, nineteen sixty-eight, Phoung Nguyen grew up in a very small village in the southern tip of Vietnam called Thiem Tom, which literally translates out to Fish Market. Why this village is named this is due to the fact that all of the villagers were involved in the fishing business; men being the ones who do the fishing out on the boats and woman being the ones cleaning the fish that was caught and prepping them to eat or sale. As a little girl, Phoung would walk around her village with a big basket two to three times her size filled with rice cakes that her mother and sister had cooked to sale. Her family was poor and struggled for money, but they lived a happy life and she had a very simple childhood, until one day the effects of the war finally reached her village.
The year is nineteen eighty-three and the Communist regime had fully taken over and occupied Vietnam putting its people under it dictatorship that was enforced with an iron fist. Citizens whom participated in the war for the South and simply those whom disobeyed the laws of the Communist were thrown into prisons that could be compared to the Jewish concentration camps of World War II to rot and die. This was not the fate that Phoung’s mother had wanted her to be doomed with, so she made the toughest decision of her life, letting her thirteen year old daughter escape on her own. Her mother had somehow arranged for her to get onto a tiny boat that was carrying other villagers whom were also trying to flee from the tyranny to Malaysia where there were refugee camps already setup. So one night, when there was a full moon, Phoung got onto that boat, not knowing where she was going to end up or what laid ahead; for all she knew was that she was leaving her family, her home, everything she knew behind to hopefully reach a place that would offer her a better life. They said their good-byes.

A few weeks at sea, her boat finally reaches Pulau Bidong Island where the first refugee camp was located. She was alone, not knowing anybody, in a place that she was unfamiliar with, but yet somehow she was not scared. She knew she was safe and that Buddha was watching over her so she kept her head up, mind focused, and pushed forward. Luckily food and shelter was provided for her and the other refugees at this camp and thank the heavens the people around her took very good care of her for they took her in as if she were one of their children. She ended up staying at Pulau Bidong for a year until in nineteen eighty-four she was moved over to Sungei Bese, another refugee camp that was closer to Malaysia’s capital, Bangkok. Here, she was waiting for an American family to sponsor her to go to over to America. She
waited around for a year until finally she got a letter saying she was to pack her belongings and that she was going to leave within the next few days.

Nineteen eighty-five, Phoung arrives in New Hampshire in the small rural town of Wolfeboro and meets her new family. The Mertens were a very loving and open family that welcomed her into their home with open arms. The Mertens were a family of five: there was Laurie, the mother, Edward, the father, Mary-Carol, the oldest sister, Scotty, the middle child, and Susan, the youngest of the children. Phoung ended up going to the same high school that the other kids went to, Kingswood High School. Walking through the halls where the student population was white, Phoung was like an alien, all eyes were always on her, no one had befriended her, she was practically alienated; however, by her graduation, she was the valedictorian of her class with the highest grades in the hardest classes with scholarships being offered from all kinds of colleges all over the east coast. She had went against all odds, came from across the world, did not speak a word of English, lived with strangers, but ended up being on top.

It is nineteen ninety; Phoung was now married with her first born and opened her first nail salon. She relocated to California a few years prior because she heard that there was a large Vietnamese population that had established itself in the bay area all the way down to southern California, so she believed it would feel more like home for her. She first moved to Los Angeles to a small apartment complex located in the ghetto of the east side. She then decided to pursue a career in cosmetology and within eight months got her cosmetology license. From there she moved north to San Jose to an even smaller apartment due to her husband’s job relocating him and that was where she began living out the American dream she had worked so hard to achieve.
Her first salon was located in Mountain View, small hole in the wall location with three other nail technicians whom were immigrants that arrived to the United States not too long before getting hired at her salon. Business started off extremely slow with very stiff competitors being the American owned and ran salons, so it was hard to build cliental since the only person who could speak somewhat of good English was Phoung. However, it all changed when a client gave her the American name Jennifer. For some odd reason, whatever it may have been, just using that name, clients started to pile in one after the other to the point where Jennifer had to start making appointments and no longer taking walk-ins. The salon got so busy that the little space that she had to work with was no longer sufficient enough, so Jennifer decided to make the next big move and find a better location for her salon in a better neighborhood.

At this point in her life, her first marriage had come to an end because like many Vietnamese men, her husband was very abusive, both physically and mentally; so the big move that she was going to make could have not been needed more than it been then. On her own, with her own savings, determination, and will power, she bought a house in Gilroy and found a prime location for her new salon. The building was three times larger than her first and was located dead center in a busy shopping area where the possibility of new cliental was countless. The success of her salon was inevitable with at least three new clients coming in daily. It got so busy that Jennifer had to even hire two more nail technicians and even then, her nail technicians had to make appointments with the clients. After five years of running and building up the salon to the level of success it was on, it was time for a change again. Jennifer was now Mia; name being given by a Mexican client who said the name Jennifer would not appeal to large Spanish-speaking community in the area. The change of name was not the only change that had happened in her life at the time; she was in a new marriage with two children with her new lover,
so the time she had to spend at the salon working with clients and trying to run her business was taking a toll on her. Mia saw that she has built a strong enough cliental base where she knew they would follow her wherever she went, hence the decision to sell her business to one of the nail technicians and also longtime friend was made.

The year was two-thousand seven; Mia has taken her loyal cliental and moved to a single station that she rents out monthly in a hair salon called Image and Design Salon. She no longer had to worry about the pressures of running a full salon, but now solely focused on just working on her own clients. Everything was now done by appointments and organized in an orderly fashion with clients feeling as if they were getting the V.I.P. treatment at a day spa instead of the hectic fast pace salon like environment where even her clients were rushed in and out. Mia finally had the time she wanted and needed to be a mother to her children and wife to her husband. She finally fulfilled her American dream and she had done it on her own blood, sweat, and tears.

From the time she was the thirteen year old Phoung Nguyen from Vietnam to now as Mia the woman who does practically works every woman from Gilroy’s nails, she never gave up hope of putting herself in a better position in life. She had never forgotten why her mother had made the tough choice of sending her daughter away on that boat twenty-eight years ago. Phoung has and can say that she was a teenage refugee turned American dream prospered woman.