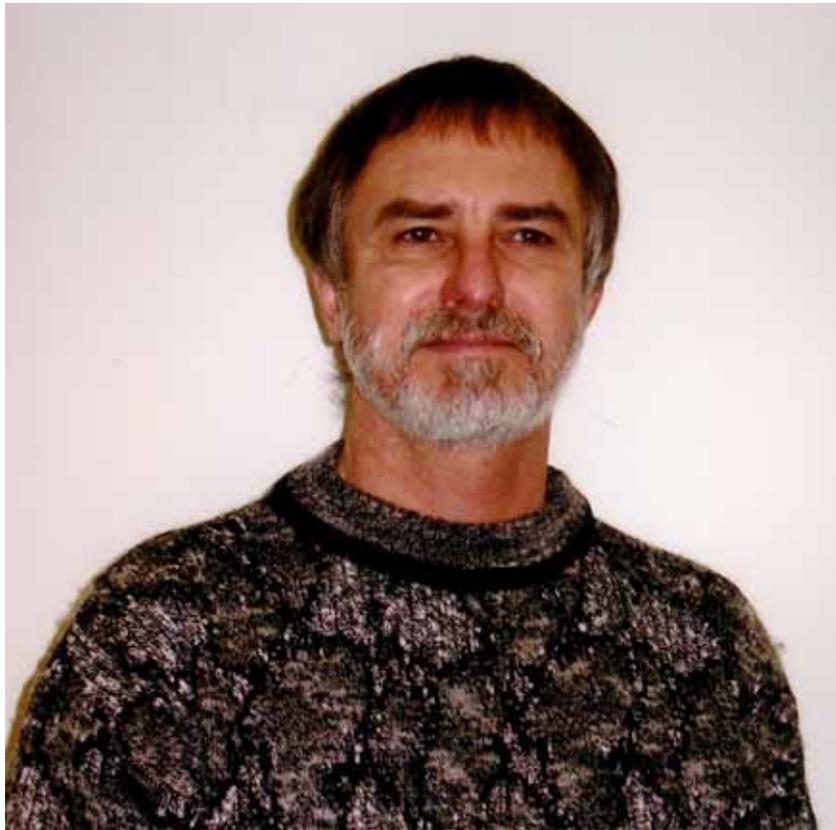


## **My Life Story**



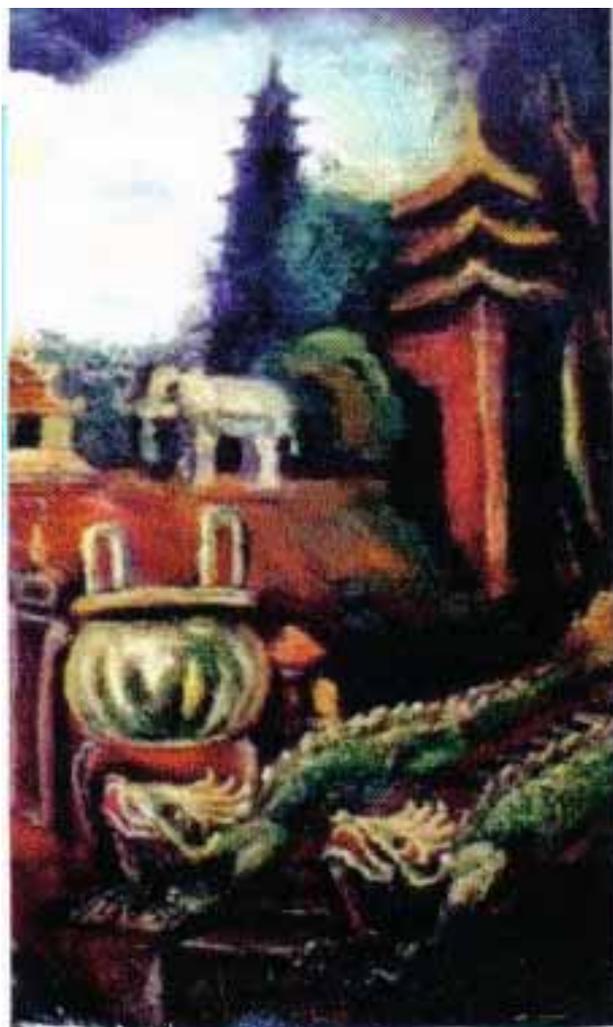
**Loan Vu Nigh**



**Loyd Nigh, Story Keeper**

## The Bamboo Tree

**Under the trust of Mary's hands, have a happy peaceful life in war.  
After the storms, stand up, and be straight  
To the narrow hope, the way to God.**



**Loan Vu Nigh, Artist**  
*Vietnam Voice*

*The Ethnic Life Stories Project*  
Springfield, Missouri  
Class of 2003

## Acknowledgement

As we near the consummation of the Ethnic Life Stories Project, there is a flood of memories going back to the concept of the endeavor. The awareness was there that the project would lead to golden treasures. But I never imagined the treasures would overflow the storehouse. With every Story Teller, every Story Keeper, every visionary, every contributor, every reader, the influence and impact of the project has multiplied in riches. The growth continues to spill onward. As its outreach progresses, "boundaries" will continue to move forward into the lives of countless witnesses.

Very few of us are "Native Americans." People from around the world, who came seeking freedom and a new life for themselves and their families, have built up our country and communities. We are all individuals, the product of both our genetic makeup and our environment. We are indeed a nation of diversity.

Many of us are far removed from our ancestors who left behind the familiar to learn a new language, new customs, new political and social relationships. We take our status as Americans for granted. We sometimes forget to welcome the newcomer. We bypass the opportunity to ask about their origins and their own journey of courage.

But, wouldn't it be sad if we all spoke the same language, ate the same food, and there was no cultural diversity.

This project has left me with a tremendous debt of gratitude for so many. The almost overwhelming task the Story Keeper has, and the many hours of work and frustration to bring forth a story to be printed. I salute you.

To the Story Tellers, thank you for letting us share in your heart and soul. It is my prayer that some or many of the stories will influence many young persons to another level, to be enmeshed in the pursuit of learning of other cultures that make up our community and the world.

This has, indeed, been a project of "Many" for the Community. Thanks to the following who have played a role in helping to achieve the goal. The list is practically endless, first names only. You know who you are and what you did . . . sincere thanks to each of you:

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Jim Mauldin  
Coordinator  
Ethnic Life Stories  
'01 '02 '03

**The Ethnic Life Stories Project....**

*...giving the Springfield community a window to its diversity through the life stories of ethnic elders.*

Liewe Se Storie Afrikaanse	Afrikaanse (2)
ŌSŌ GAY HĀY WŌ TAN	Apache
قصص من الحياة	Arabic (2)
Ga-no-du Ka-ne-he-iv-s-gi	Cherokee
自傳	Chinese (2)
Life Stories	English (5)
Histoires De Ma Vie	French (2)
Lebensgeschichten	German
סיפור חיים	Hebrew
Mayer rah-Khaan Knee-Hindi	Hindi
生きてきた道	Japanese
나의 살아온 이야기	Korean
DZĪVES STĀSTS	Latvian
ജീവിത കഥകൾ	Malayalam
OPOWIESC z ŻYCIA	Polish
Imanawangtanan Wawanaycasjas	Quechwa
Povestea Vie Ții Mele	Romanian
Жизненные истории	Russian
Historia De La Vida	Spanish (8)
പ്രാദേശിക ചരിത്രം	Thai
Kuwento Ng Aking Buhay	Tagalog
CHUY-N [◎] Tjĩ	Vietnamese
געשיחטע פון מאן לעבען	Yiddish





Kunming

CHINA

Nanning

Salween R.

Mekong R.

Red R.

MYANMAR

Thai Nguyen

Hon Gai

Zhanjiang

Hanoi

Hai Phong

Haikou

Nam Dinh

Thai Binh

LAOS

VIETNAM

Gulf of Tonkin

Chiang Mai

Vientiane

Vinh

Savannakhet

Da Nang

Nakhon Sawan

THAILAND

Nakhon Ratchasima

Bangkok

Qui Nhon

South China Sea

Siemreab

Batdambang

Mekong R.

CAMBODIA

Phnom Penh

Nha Trang

Chumphon

Kampong Saom

Ho Chi Minh City

Bien Hoa

Phan Thiet

Rach Gia

Can Tho

Vung Tau

Gulf of Thailand

Songkhla

Hat Yai

Loan Vu Nigh  
Thai Binh, Vietnam

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank God for he has created a simple little Bamboo Tree like me. He is a wonderful artist. He has put up my life with all kind of material hurt, pain, sad, sorrow, happy, joy, as all colors, and the thickness piece, which I do not want miss a stroke on it. When I look back, from the little small pox to my trip to U.S. on Oceans with many, many gifts as my ancestors, grandparents, parents, relatives, husband, son, friends, art works, writings, treatments, tea... and special let I know you as The Way, The Truth, and The Life.

Thank you to Mary, mother of God, my spirit Mother, my best friend. She is always on my side and leads me to choose the right way to go the right step to walk the right work to start the right thinking about God. Thank for chose me to consecrate to you to be training under your hands so could be useful for glory to God, The Almighty Father.

From God, I would like to

- Thank you to my ancient wisdom, and ancestors had transfer to me all the rich culture, and religions to form a “me” today. Thank for all of courage to keep my country stand up for more 4,000 years of civilization, which I could proud of to be a Vietnamese, today.
- Thank you to my grandpa, who had loved and taught me while I was a little. I did not understand any of his words but it was stored in my mind as a little yeast. This yeast kept growing on me and built up a part of my characteristic on the society.
- Thank you to my father, he was my teacher from read, write... to life. Special, he is my example of put all the trust on God. From him, I learn go to church daily, love the nature, like working hard as farmer, enjoy the simple life, and the taste of art.

Boulay, France

Adalyn Cravens

Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

Taj Farouki

Wadi-Hunayn, Palestine

Malca Flasterstein

- Thank you to my mother, she taught me know the value of education. She learned to read and write, which she wrote letters to my fathers, while I was little. It makes me never stop to learn something new, and used it in life.

- Thank you to my relative and friends. I could not tell the stories without you. You are among the gifts God gives to me. You had made my life more interesting and easier to going on.
- Thank you to my husband Boyd Nigh, he is the one show me how love is trust, care, and accept... He forgives me when I neglect on the role of the wife. He encouraged in my art life, The “my life stories in painting - Vietnam Voice”. He helps me to finish any writing work, which I have started. He is my special tutor in what ever I need.
- Thank you to my son John Vu Nigh, the special gift from God. He gave me a chance to learn how to be a good mother. From him, I had finished and published my first baby book in Vietnamese for Vietnamese parents. With him, I learn about all kind of sports, social life, and richer my life. His talent about art, helped me finished my painting with more detail. His strong mind helped me to control my temper to more patients in any of my project.
- Thank you for Jim Mauldin, and all, involves with this project. You give me a chance, to write about myself to the community.
- Thank you for The United States has taken me as one of your people as help, teach, and give me a chance to become citizen of the country. Now I can proud to say God blesses American and I am one of them.
- Thank you for the Community of Springfield, Missouri has accept me as a member of the Community, while accept me in any public place as schools, churches, libraries, markets, stores... Thank for many letters from students and people to me, while my paintings shows as my Videotape “Vietnam Voice” on libraries in town.
- Thank you for SMSU, special teachers had given me all knowledge they could. Especial Dr. Hill had encouraged me on the graduate Project, and the Videotape of “Vietnam Voice”, while he was the head of art department.
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- Thank you for the Congregation of the Mother Coredemptrix has guided me in every year retreat, to see thing under the God way, the narrow way. Help me to consecrate to Mary.
- I also sorry about any mistake I had done to any in my life. Please forgive me.

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## CHAPTER ONE – FAMILY HISTORY

### *What is your full name?*

My full name is Loan Thi Vu Nigh. Before I married my name was Loan Thi Vu. The Vietnamese way was Vu Thi Loan. Loan is my first name and Vu is my family name.

Loan is the name of my great, great, grandfather. He was the oldest child and only one to become Catholic among six brothers. Loan Dang Vu was his full name. He was born in 1801, was a teacher and died around the 1870's. Loan had three sons. The first, Chieng Dang Vu, was martyred by the Catholic Church. This was because he would not change his answer, to the King's Officer, about his worship of Christ after being tortured many times. His body was buried inside the old Catholic Church of the Sa-cat village.

### *What special significance or history does your name have?*

Loan means “announcing the good news”. It's special significance in historic literature was ‘the name of the bird which followed and admired the sun’. The male name was Phuong. Like the dragon, the bird was only in myth. It only exists on artworks, as the dragon, in Oriental art, story and literature. I think my name was chosen because my older sister was named Phuong Thi Vu. Thi was also my middle name. This middle name, Thi, meant a girl. More than half of Vietnamese females have the middle name Thi.

I was born on June 13, 1948, in the year of the rat. That was the date on my Birth Certificate. On my Baptismal paper, the date was June 13, 1947, from the Sa-cat Roman Catholic Church. The date, June 13 was the day The Virgin Mary appeared at Fatima, for the second time, in 1817. My father would remember that day, more than my birthday, because we never celebrate birthdays in VietNam. If I was born in 1947, I was born in the year of the pig.



*The new church at Sacat was built in 2000 on the site of the old church where Loan was baptized in 1947*

### *Were there any unusual circumstances surrounding your birth?*

On the day I was born, my mother, like everyone in the village, got up between the first and second bell ring from the church. This was about 4:00 to 4:15a.m. in the morning. She went to church, came home about 5:00a.m. and cooked the meal for the family, to be ready after the second mass at 5:30a.m. My father was ready to go to the fields at 6:00a.m., with the other workers. At that time, the merchants would buy vegetables brought to market for selling. My mother would stay home and clean up. She would continue to feed the rest of the household members, children, dogs, cats, chickens and pigs. For the silk-worms, she needed to pick the berry-leaves, but this caused her some pain. She knew that the labor pains had started, but the worms had to be fed. She took the deep breaths, held the pain and ran to the field to pick berry leaves. More pain, but the leaves were almost done. I was ready to pop out. Carrying the leaves and holding the pain, she went home. Passing the church, the church cleaner saw her. He walked out and politely invited her to come in and have a bowl of tea.

Holding the pain and the bag of leaves, she thanked him and ran home. Grandpa saw her and ran and yelled for my father. My father ran to a neighbor, kind of like a midwife. It was about 10:00a.m. and my grandpa said about me: “born in the year of the pig and at the time had already been fed. She never had to worry about looking for food”. Then he added: “That pig was born in the field, seems like a little wild”. That was my future being told, isn’t it?

***Tell about your homeland when you were a child.***

I was born, at home, in the village named Sa-cat (which means ‘a piece of silt sand’), Thai Binh (mean peace) City, North Viet Nam. It was located southwest of Hanoi. Capital the of North, while Saigon was the Capital of the South, in the civil war. Now Hanoi is the Capital of Vietnam.

Thai Binh was built up by the silt from the Thai Binh and Hong Ha Rivers. Hong Ha (Red) River begins at the border of Vietnam and China. It runs over 300km or 200 miles before reaching the ocean. It runs through mountains and high lands before coming to a plateau, bringing a lot of silt which makes the water red, thus making its name. Before reaching the ocean, the silt sinks down and makes the new place they call Thai Binh, my city. The water line makes up Thai Binh river. When we left Thai Binh in 1954, the Thai Binh river was still very large. The people in Thai Binh usually went to the Thai Binh River to take water home to use.

On July 5, 2003, my cousin Loat came to see my mother when she was in the hospital. We had a talk about that river. Loat told me Thai Binh River was now only a small creek. The bridge now was a sewage well. That meant the silt had build up Thai Binh bigger and bigger every day.

The silt from the high lands run down the Hong Ha (Red ) River. That build up the bottom of the river even higher. The drainage well was not good there. That caused Thai Binh and, of course, Sa-cat, my village to always flood. After the flood, the land was richer, but it causes many deaths for human and animal. Poor people can’t “get rid of it, so they have to live with it”. The simple way was to make the land for homes higher. To do that, they make ponds. The soil from the ponds was used to make the floors higher in the home and maybe even on the front yard and little on the back yard, depending on how rich you are. The poor have to work from dusk to dawn just for food for the day. They have no time to prepare the floor of their houses.

The Roman Catholic fathers who took care of the church usually had education. When building the church they tried their best to make the church useful for as long as they could. So, the church was on the highest land in the village. The church was also the refuge place for people when floods come. The church has two big ponds: one in back and the other in front. Both with large bricked steps. Since all the roads in the village were dust, people walking to church with bare feet needed to wash them before entering the church. All around the church was covered with brick. Inside it had only some chairs, for people with honor in the village, which had their name on them. The rest sat on mats put on the floor. That makes sense, for even after washing your feet before entering the church, nobody knew what you

might step on while walking to the church in the dark. The Father's house had a brick well and a brick pond, which collected rain water. The water came from the brick roof from many half pieces of bamboo connected together. That rain water was used for drinking.

Our village had a lot of ponds. At my grandpa's home, he had five ponds. The first one saved water for cooking, That was build with bricks and at the same level with the front yard, and on the other sides had a thick fence of berry and fruit trees. The second was for washing food. It was used for cleaning rice, vegetables and to wash dishes. The third was for bathing and washing clothes in the back yard. The fourth was for animal use. Usually it was a place you could take water to clean pigs and their cages. It was also used to clean fish, chickens, ducks, pigs, or even a cow or water buffalo, after killing them. The water run out going to another dirty pond, with all the leftovers from everywhere, running to the fifth pond. Into this pond had been put many fish, to be raised, as a source of food. Besides, two of these ponds were used to water vegetables. With two buckets made by bamboo on both sides of a pole, people would carry water up and down the ponds. When they walked in the fields, the water was poured slowly down both sides of the vegetables.

Actually, the land was close to the river. People tried to connect their ponds to the river so the water going up and down made the water fresher. To make a well, they did not have to dig very deep. The reason they use water from the pond was because it was more convenient. The well needed a bucket and things to hold the water when you used it. With lack of education, sometimes they did not know anything about germs. The water in the ponds looked clear, so that meant clean. So why make a well.

Vietnam was a country close to the equator so it was always hot and has only two seasons: dry and wet. We didn't have thermometers, so we looked at nature. My father says on the cold days the water at the pond was gray. The cold was not too bad, but could make poor people hurt in the cold. People, for a long time ago, made the coat by a layer of cotton, in the middle of layers of black cotton material, sewn back and forth to hold all the layers together to make a thick, heavy coat. That was only in the North, in the highlands, especially along the border with China. Usually, the winter was like spring here. The summer was very hot, but it's better with many ponds. Of course, there was no snow there. Last year, I heard my cousin Huyen (still in VN) say it had a little snow. I am not sure about that.

People in our village of Sa-cat live from agriculture. They take good care of a small piece of land to grow rice and another piece of land to grow vegetables for the needs of Thai Binh City. Sa-cat was about two miles from Thai Binh. People from Sa-cat take to Thai Binh meat, fish, poultry, cabbages, lettuce, etc... any thing they can sell for money.

We are Vietnamese and all the country speak one Vietnamese language. The Vietnamese language was from a long, long time ago. After 1954 Vietnamese became the native language for all the education system until now.

### *Personal memories*

Vietnam is a small country (about the size of the State of California). The population in 1975, when the Communists took over the South, was 35 million. Now, in 2003, it was about 85 million. The country is in the shape of the letter S. The North is next to China. On the West are our neighbors, Laos and Cambodia. On the right side of the S was the Pacific Ocean, and to the south of the S was the South China Sea. The total sight of Vietnam is beautiful with sunshine, blue skies, aquamarine ocean and green rice fields, with little blue lines of smoke moving over tops of yellow thatch roofs. Above everything are the top of coconut trees, which you can see from far away. I remember, after moving to the city, whenever I saw the top of a coconut tree, that meant I was close to my home. It still gives me a special feeling when my eyes see that scene, even on a picture. The color which remain in my mind was green. There are many, many different green colors around. Maybe my conscious mind reminds me of a very young time in my village with colors all around: the sky, the brick front yard, the trees, the bamboo, the leaves, and especially flowers. Flowers and butterflies on the trees, on the fence and especially on the ponds. That was the place I could only watch, not to touch because I had fallen into the ponds not once but twice, and anytime waking up I saw my mother was crying. All scenes looked like a part of a painting. It could make me keep trying and trying to paint the loving of nature on canvas today.

Sounds were different from time to time. We had no clock so everybody knew the time based on the ringing of the church bell. Which was rung early in the morning, noon and evening. After that people walked to the church talking and children (who walk a mile to school go to first mass) call to each other to go to mass. This was mixed with dogs barking, roosters crowing, and hens cackling about the eggs they just laid. Just 5:00a.m. in the morning, but whole the village was awake for the new day. The smell of cooking wakes the pigs up calling for food. The chickens fight to get out and fight over pieces of rice. Daytime, the sound of children playing and some dogs barking if someone got close to their property. In Vietnam, dogs always do a good job of watching for strangers. The stranger needs be careful or they will be easily attacked from the dogs. The edge of the river had soil put pretty high up to protect against flooding from the river. Children usually brought water buffalo there. When the oxens were eating grass, those boys played with flutes or kites. You could hear high and low voices depending on which way the wind blew. At night, you could hear hundreds of different sounds from insects living close to the water. Especially on moonlight nights, people would put mattresses on the front brick yard. They would sit outside and talk while the children ran around playing and laughing. I remember lying on a mattress counting the stars. I do not know how I count them but I know in the good dream, the counting still on me. Now, I always count anything I am working on: exercising, watching flowers in the garden or picking some vegetables. I mean, I like to count. People who exercise count how many minutes. I count how many times. I think counting helps me work in less time and work faster than counting the minutes. Seems like I try to compete with myself.

***Tell about your family.***

My father's name was Khien Van Vu. He was the youngest of four sons and one sister: Tuyen, Vien, Thau, Tri, and Khien.

Tuyen ran away, from the Communists in 1954, to the South, with two of his sons. His wife stayed in the North. In 1956, the Communists took their house and kicked them out of the village. She took her youngest son, who was about my age, went to the cemetery, made a hut and stayed there until 1960. The Communists gave their house back after they took everything even the bricks on the floor and front yard.

Vien gave his life for salvation. He died in 1960 at The Catholic Congregation of the Mother Coredemptrix (CMC), of Father Thu Dinh Tran, at Thu Duc (South Vietnam). After his death not very long, my oldest brother made his first vow on March 21, 1961. The vows were poverty, purity, and obedience as Uncle Vien at the same Congregation. Cung became a brother and then a priest on 1981.

Thau was killed by the Communists, in 1952, by shooting him in the head.

In 1954, our family ran away to the South. Tri (the in-law) said he was poor and had not done anything wrong in his life so his family stayed in the village. In 1956 the Communists required that five per cent of the population be tortured. Tri was poor but he had about one acre of land. That was enough to be tortured, while those richer than him had gone to the South. He was the richest at that time. The Communists ordered some people to dig a hole. They put him in standing up and buried him up to his neck. People left one after another. After three days and nights, the one with the gun guarding him left. His family then dug him up, but he died a month later.

My father was born in Sa-cat (same village where I was born), when grandma was kind of old. So she did not have enough milk to nurse him. He shared nursing, by his sister-in-law (Tuyen's wife) and her first son (my father's nephew). He was 26 when I was born.

The history of my father's roots could be traced back to an ambassador to China. Only one time, but he waited a long time. He got the Chinese King to give away his daughter, for his second wife. When he came back, the Vietnamese King rewarded him by giving him a piece of land. The Princess chose Sa-cat, a little away from Hanoi, where the first wife lived, to make a new home. Being from a Palace, with much competition and danger, my great, great, grandma told her children and her descendents, not to work for the king. Because if you were bad, the people kicked you out and if you were good they would betray you. She only encouraged her children to go to school to learn to be a respectful person and be a farmer. For many generations, my father's relatives always had education and good living. That



*My oldest brother had his first vows at CMC in March 1960.  
First row from left: Thai, Bon, Tiep, my mother Mo, Vinh.  
Second row from left. Cung, my father Khien, Phuong, and Loan Vu*

made them honorable in the village. If anything happened in the village, people always went to my grandpa, and afterwards to my father's first brother Tuyen Van Vu, for solving problems among the people in the village. They acted as a judge.

My uncle, Tuyen, my father's first brother, was the leader of the village when my brother was a teenager. His job was to explain to the people in the village how to finish their tasks, which the French Governor and Vietnamese King had ordered. His pay, like the rulers from a very long time ago, was that he could use a piece of land (about half an acre), which the King gave to each village for this job. When there was a problem to be solved, he always took my father to learn. That was a small village of about 1000 people, so he spent little time for the public job. Tuyen always came to ask at my grandpa's house, next door. That time my father was still home. My grandpa, Tuyen and my father discussed about how to solve problems in the best way for everybody. Tuyen liked to teach my father by having my father with him when he did business. Buying fish in a pond and hiring people to scoop the water out. Buying oranges in the orange trees when they were just the size of eggs and going back later to pick the oranges to sell. They also bought rice from villages far away, brought it home to clean the shells and then sold in the city. From his travels, my father had a lot of time to meet many kinds of people and that was a good education for him.

My mother's name was Mo Thi Nguyen. Nguyen was her last name and half the people in Vietnam have this last name. She was born in the village named Thuy Dien. My mother had me at the age of 22 years old. She was the third among nine children: Dao, Mo, Binh, Phuc, Mi, Man, The, Xuan, and Tinh.

Her mother, Lieu, got married at the age of sixteen, while her father, Loc, was ten. Both families were very rich. They were from the same social class. To protect his daughter, Trung (Lieu's father) gave her over 20 acres of rice fields for a dowry on her wedding. Loc grew up based on the care of his wife. Loc treated his friends by going to see singers, staying there eating and drinking. After being married for twenty years and having nine children, Loc died in 1940. The last words he said to his wife was being sorry for the lack of taking care of his family. At the same time he let her know he had sold their house and all the land they lived on. My mother and all the family, after the funeral of her father, had to move to the kitchen of her uncle. The kitchen cooked by dry bush, leaves, grass...etc and had to be separate with the house. It was only one small room with pots and pans.

My grandma, Lieu, had to start buying things and bringing them to sell at the market, with the help of Dao, the first girl. My mother had been sent to live with and help a family member. Phuc was sent to study with the Catholic priests. Mi died when she was nine or ten years old. Man, The, Xuan, and Tinh stayed with their mother. Trach, a young man, knew some Eastern medicine, and volunteered to stay and help the family wishing to



*From left to right in front: my mother's sister, Man, my mother, her older sister Dao, and my father, on the day my parents left Vietnam to come to the United State to live with us.*

marry Dao. Binh died as a teenager. Mo (my mother) went to help her aunt for a while. During that time she learned how to read and write from a teacher who came to teach the children in the house where she was working. She was a beautiful happy young girl. Old people in the family offered her odd jobs. She saved her pay and started a small business. By herself she went to the city to buy a little lamp oil, matches, combs, needles, thread and buttons to sell at the small village markets, which went from village to village on different days, selling. She spent a lot of time walking. She learned, little by little, from anyone she met in the villages and the city. She started with a ball of yarn and the yarn needles. She learned how to knit, to make hats, baby shoes, socks, and later she learned to knit sweaters for children and adults. Later, she tried to move all her family, her mother and brothers and sisters, to Thai Binh City.

### *My parents personalities*

My parents, like any Vietnamese, have brown eyes and straight black hair. He was 5' 3" and she was 5' tall. Both of them grew up on farm land. He was a farmer and she was a businesswoman. Both of them worked hard from dawn to dusk. After 1954, with my father in the military, we moved a lot. Whenever we moved to a new place, my father would start a new garden to try to add some vegetables to each meal. Some extra we could sell to a neighbor or give to friend. My mother didn't like being a farmer. She didn't like to work outside, in the sun and not having any money. She had big eyes, a happy face and smile. She was a business lady. She liked it because it was easy to make money. She was good at saving, too. In 1963, when we decided to buy a house, she called my sister, Phuong, me and my younger sister, Vinh, into the place we rented and closed the door. She then showed us a bag of jewelry. At that time each of us had a necklace, bracelet, earrings and ring all made of gold. She ask if she could sell them to buy a house. I remember, I was the first one who told her that she should sell them, because we needed a house. If we liked jewelry, we could work and buy them later.

### *Are your parents still living?*

Both my parents are still living. They live in the house next to mine. All of my father's brothers have passed away. We still have contact with his nieces and nephews, by phone and letters.

When I started to write this story, my mother was in Cox South Hospital. The doctor said she was going to die. I remember my grandpa and grandma, at the age of 60, bought a coffin and put it in their room.

At the age of three or four, we always went to my grandpa's, in the village. We would open the coffin looking for rice cakes and oranges. Sometimes we pretend to die, lie in it and another would put on the cover. That coffin was not too heavy, so we could push the cover on easily.

In 1970, my uncle bought, for grandma, a beautiful coffin. It was made of a heavy wood and had a very good varnish. It was put by the wall, next to her bed. I always slept with her when I was there. My grandma died in 1985, while I was in the United States.

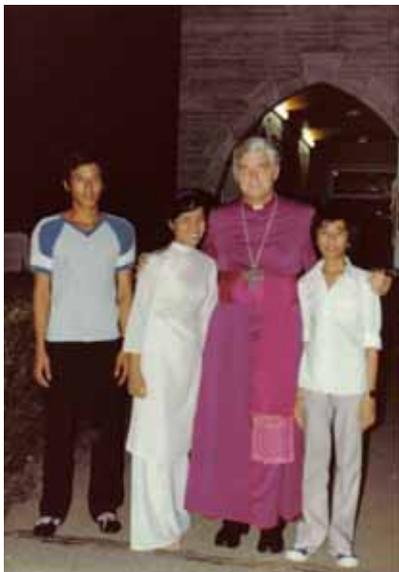
Coffins and death in the family are very friendly with me. Of course, I feel sad sometimes, but the death of the old seems to be prepared for, for years. That makes family members not feel too bad.

On my mother's side, she is the oldest one still living. Her younger sister, Man, was in Toronto, Canada. The next one, The, and the last one, Tinh, are in Melbourne, Australia. Her younger brother Long (dragon) Vi Nguyen is still in Saigon, Vietnam.

### **How many siblings do you have?**

I had ten brothers and five sisters. Five brothers and three sisters are still alive. I am the third born.

What are their names and where are they now?



*From left: My cousin Vu Nguyen, Loan Vu, Bishop Law, and Due on Marian Day at Carthage, Missouri, August, 1982. Bishop Law sponsored my brother, Cung Vu to Missouri*

The first was Rev. Ephrem Vu Khiem Cung (Vu Van Khien at home) who was born in 1942. Cung was one of the first 50 Vietnamese priests and brothers to come to Springfield, Missouri in 1975. They were sponsored by Bishop Law. With the help of Bishop Law, they settled in Carthage, Missouri and continued "the Congregation of the Mother Coredemptrix". In 1976, they started the first Marian Day Celebration during the second weekend in August. This year, the 26<sup>th</sup> Marian Day was from August 7-10, 2003. In recent years about 50 to 80 thousand Vietnamese, from all over the world come and stay in tents. They gather together to pray for some need or to say thanks for the many miracles which they have received. Cung became a Catholic Priest on June 13, 1981, from the hand of Bishop Law. He has been Pastor at St. Church in Port Author (Texas), and St. Church in Boston (Massachusetts). In 1999, Cung was Director of Junior Vocation Center (High School) at Carthage, Missouri.



*A Marian Day sticker from the Congregation of the Mother Coredemptrix at 1900 Grand Ave. Carthage, Missouri, August 7-10, 2003*

The second was Vu Thi Phuong, and was born in 1945. She married in 1968 and had five sons and two daughters. She and her husband came to the U.S. in 1996. They and four sons live in the same house, with my parents, in Springfield, Missouri.

The third was me, Vu Thi Loan, and came to the U.S. 1982. I live in Springfield, Missouri.

The fourth was Vu Thi Vinh, and was born in 1949. After she finished her senior bachelor (French baccalaureate), she study Law and Literature at the University in Saigon. She was an English teacher in high school in Saigon. She married in 1977 and escaped from Vietnam by boat, in 1980, with her husband Huynh Nhi and two little daughters. The engine in their boat died and the boat was floating in the ocean for 15 days. They had to drink their own urine for survival. After 15 days, they were saved by a ship from Holland and by the International Law, they went to Holland. They then immigrated to Australia in 1987. She has 3 daughters Huynh Vu Tri-Thi, Huynh Vu Tri-Thao, and Huynh Vu Tri-Toan. They live in Footscray.



*From left: Thu Vu, Loan Vu Nigh, Vui Pham, Due Vu. Back row from left: Loat Vu, Tien Pham, Boyd Nigh, & Cung Vu.*

The fifth was Vu Van Thai, who was born in 1954. He finished high school and in order for the mobilization of the Democratic government of South Vietnam, joined the Army. He trained to be a second lieutenant in the war. While fighting against the Communists in 1974 he was wounded in the right arm. In 1979, he escaped from the Communists re-education camp and escaped from Vietnam in 1981. He was on the same boat as me and came to the U.S. in 1982. He is single and lives in California now.

The sixth was Vu Duc Bon, who was born in 1955. Because of the order of mobilization, he finished high school but did not pass the exams and became a Sergeant in the Democratic Army. He fought against the Communists and was wounded in 1974. He came to the U.S. in 1993 and lives in Arlington, Texas. He has three sons.



*My sister Vinh from Australia came to unite with us. From left, front row: Loan Vu, John Vu Nigh, Christine Vu, Mary Vu. Back row: Vui Pham, my father Khien Vu in the back, Vinh Vu, mother Mo Nguyen, Due Vu, Giap Vu and Tot Vu.*

The seventh was Vu Minh Giap, who was born in 1960. He escaped from Vietnam in 1979. He married in 1987 and has two daughters, Mary and Cristine Vu. They now live in Joplin, Missouri.

The eighth was Vu Cong Due, who was born in 1965. He escaped on the same boat as I did, also. He now lives in Arlington, Texas.

The ninth was Vu Anh Thu, who was born in 1968. She also escaped with me from Vietnam in the same boat. She lives with her husband in Bentonville, Arkansas. They have three sons and one daughter.

*If they are deceased, where, when and how did they die?*

I have had seven brothers and sisters pass away. There were five brothers and two sisters.

In 1950 the people in Thai Binh and the surrounding area got small pox. We did not know how, but my little brother Sa was born and died within a couple day from that disease. I was the next. My mother took care of me. My mother again had a child, Cat, another little boy, who was born and died within a couple of days.

Hoang was born 1962, in Pleiku, when my family moved there to be close to my father's battalion. Phuong, my older sister who helped take care of Hoang, dropped him. His rib was broken. My mother had to move back to Saigon so Hoang could go to a Children's Hospital in Saigon. He died in 1963, while Vinh was holding him and sleeping in a hammock.

In 1967, when I was 19 years old, my mother went into labor pains. My dad wasn't home because he was in the battalion. I ran to a small, friendly, private delivery hospital (about two block from my house) and asked the midwife to come help my mother. When I got home, my mother was already lying on a small bed on which Thu and Ut lay during the daytime to play or take a nap. The mattress, under her body at the bottom, had been rolled up and a big basket place under it. I had to run back again. The midwife said she had to boil her tools. When she came, at midnight, my mother was ready to push. Phuong, my older sister, had to go to into the back room to keep the younger children in bed (Thai, Bon, Tiep, Giap, Due, Thu and Danh). I took her place to help the midwife. This was the first time I saw labor with the baby's head coming out. I turned my head away.

From the crying, I turned back, and the midwife gave me a baby wrapped in cloth. Mom told me to put clothes on her. The baby was so small and the shirt was so big that it was easy, but my hands kept shaking from being scared. The midwife pulled the bucket out and put another in its place. The whole bucket was full of water and blood. I carried it to the back room and Phuong carried it to the pond, in the backyard, to pour out. The next time, all I saw was blood. It come to my clothes, too. That was awful. That feeling followed me for a long time. It made me afraid of marrying.

I came back into the living room and heard another crying, The midwife gave me another baby. I did the same thing like the first and helped my mother into bed. Phuong took every dirty thing to the back room, where there was a well and a big pool to save rain water for drinking. We used this as the kitchen and laundry room. The midwife went home. I locked the door. I did not know what to do then, so I sat at the table and continued reading the page I was on before. My mom called me. She told me to take care of the baby. I never took care of a newborn baby before. Besides, they were so tiny. She told me to give them some water with sugar in it. Which Phuong had given me before. I took a spoon and gave each baby a little We had twin little girls. I put them in bed with my mother.

When I came back to check on them, one's skin had turned blue. Mom told me to check her breath. I put my hand on her breast and felt nothing. Mom said she was dead and told me to carry her out. It was about 3:00a.m. in the morning. Mom also reminder me to watch her and not let the cat around. Vietnamese believe that if a cat jumps over the body, the dead will stand up and walk until they hit something and fall down. My mom called me again to check on the other baby. She was okay, but around 4:00a.m. she passed away. I put both on the table, so I could study and watch them. To be more careful, I took the dish cover (netting used for protecting food from flies) and covered them. I came to checked my mom to make sure everything was okay. She asked about the baby. I told her that I put her on the table with the dish cover. My mom told me: "that's saint's bodies, you need to respect them". I went out to the table, I took both to my bed, with the mosquito net and continued to study.

It was raining outside. The smell of blood drew mosquitoes from the neighborhood which came to my house. With only me there, all of them were attracted to me. I never saw so many. I started to kill them one by one and laid them in a row on the table. Too many, I had never seen so many mosquitoes like that in my life. Looking around, I couldn't find anywhere better than my bed, where the twin were. "Well, those are saint bodies". They understood. I took the book and went to the bed. The twins layer on the top and I sat under them to read. It was after 5:00a.m. in the morning.

My hand touched something, opening my eyes, it was morning, but the rain seemed worse. I remembered everything. I got up to do the morning cleaning. Nobody cried, but it seemed like the mourning was all inside and outside. I went to check on my Mom. She told me to get ready to go to the funeral for the twins.

It was about 10:00a.m. in the morning. My Uncle Long, uncle-in-law Hue and his brother Chung came to my house with a simple, small, odd wood box. It was made by hand and on top was painted a big cross. It was not varnished. My mother was still very weak but she called all nine of us together for rosary. We were friendly with the Rosary. Uncle Long told everybody to hurry up. He was afraid it would rain more and he had to go to work. The men did not notice about praying. They put a towel in the coffin and put both in it. They covered them with some of their clothes and materials. The coffin seemed too big for them. I tried to find something else while Uncle Hue sprayed holy water, in the sign of the cross, on the coffin and the bodies and then nailed them up. They left the house with Hue going first. Hue carried a hoe, Long carried a shovel and Chung carried the coffin on his shoulder. I was bare footed like the three men. I ran after them, as I had not been in this cemetery before.

After passing the cement route where residents were around. We were in the field where people had before planted vegetables. Now someone had purchased it and made it into a cemetery. This place was lower than everywhere else in the region. Water from around ran into it. It had rained all night, which made it flood. The three men went before me, stirring the mud up in the water. This made my first time walking in this water more scary. I thought of the snake. That's the thing I am most afraid of in my life because it represents evil. Going to the place with some graves higher than the other place I became more confused because I did not know where to put my feet down. Water had not covered the grave lot. The corpse

was put in a thin wood coffin without cement or concrete around it. That makes the water warmer or hot depending on the body were there earlier. It's only the chemical solution when water soaks into dry bone but I felt like people under the water tried to hold my feet. I tried to step around, where the water was cool, but the men walked too fast. I had to catch up with them. The only thing I could do was say sorry to the dead and pray for them.

The three men stopped at a place which was dryer than everywhere else. Chung put the twins on top of the next grave where it was higher than the other. The men started to dig the hole. The soil was soft and the coffin was small so they did it easily. The hole was dug about three feet deep, but water ran in. The men had to use the soil to build the edge to keep the water out, but it did not work good. They dug more but it was difficult to take mud out of it, so they decided to put the coffin in. The coffin was okay until they pushed the soil on top of the coffin. Water rushed into the hole and push the coffin up, almost floating it out of the hole. They tried to push it back but it was hard.. They looked at each other and Long told me to stand on the coffin. After a minutes hesitation, I stepped on it. Under my feet, I could feel the body touch the top of coffin, only away from my feet by a layer of thin wood. I was scared. I told them I was sorry because of we had no choice. The soil was on and I could get off. The grave was done. We made the sign of the cross in front of it and left. On the way home, Chung and Hue turned another way close to their home. My Uncle Long went with them because his motorbike was there. I walked home alone on the neighborhood road. The first time in public, with muddy clothes and bare feet and as a teenager.

When we left Vietnam, Tiep, my seventh brother went with us and tried to escape but he could not. After we left, Bon tried to help him go but the secret Communists police found out and put him in jail a couple of times. In 1985, he tried one more time to go. Tiep tried to go with his little daughter, Kieu, five years old. As arranged, all the clients stayed in the bushes waiting for the small boat to come picked them up so they could be brought out to the big boat. Suddenly, the police came and they called for their hands up. Tiep came out of the bushes with one hand holding the girl and one hand up. The girl was scared, screaming and wiggling. He tried to comfort her with both hands and did not listen to the police who told him to put his hands up. They shot him in the head from the back. He fell down with his hand still holding the girl and died. He died at the age of thirty. He left his wife, That Thi Bui, two daughters, Kieu Thuy Vu, Van Thuy Vu and a boy named Lam Son Vu, who was born a couple months after his death.. After Tiep died the people around

there dug a hole and buried him there. When Bon heard about that, he went there to ask who had Kieu ( the little girl) and to take Tiep's body home. They



*Ut holds picture of Tiep at Tiep's funeral. The man with the white mourning turban on his head, at the left back is Bon, my brother.*

did let him. He had to bring 50 cans of beer and 20lbs of meat to the office. The Communists there took the gift and ask him for a talk. They let Bon meet the leader, brother Ba or Ba Minh, which they called him. With the promise of Ba Minh, Bon and his group let one boat go. That (Tiep's wife) and his three children left Vietnam. The boat was lost at sea with all the people on it.

Even though the boat was lost, Bon still had to pay Ba Minh US\$3,000.00. The next boat was ready and Danh Thanh Vu, we called him Ut, that meant the last one. Ut was my youngest brother. He was born in 1968. In 1987 he was fishing on boat along Mekong River so could be friendly with the guards. One day in summer, it was hot. Ut and another young boy from Saigon like him come down to swim. Because of the tide so strong, Ut was be push to the propeller. The other boy swum to the boat and called people for help. Ut died at the age of 20.

Tiep and Ut were brought home by my parents, cleaned and then their clothes changed before they put them in the coffins. After Tiep died, his wife and childrens lived with my parents. Every day they took care of Tiep's children, the children cried .

Ut was my mother's "Boy". She wanted him to sleep in her bed so she could take good care of him. Ut's body was at home for a day before the funeral. I admire my parents for the way they have dealt with the death of two sons in one year.

***Did friend or relatives live in your home? If so, who were they and why did they stay with you?***

In 1950 our family moved from Sa-cat village to Thai Binh City, about two miles away. When there, my mother started a business by making sweaters by herself. She was always in the front room and knitted all day until midnight. People from the city first saw her in beautiful, colored, knitted sweaters. They ordered the same as she had. More people ordered sweaters. She asked her two younger sister from the village to come learn from her and stay to help. She ordered a glass case to put yarn in for sale. People bought the yarn and chose the style they wanted from among sweaters, shoes, socks and gloves for adults and children. All the models were hung in closets. From our two aunts, six to seven young ladies stayed in our home to work. The people who sold yarn to my mom asked if she wanted to sell something else, such as needles, lamps and kerosene. They trusted her. That made her store bigger everyday and it became the store where you could find anything. It was close to the French soldiers station and on Highway 10 which connected the villages in the Northwest to three large cities in the North, Thai Binh, Nam Dinh, Hai Phong, and the old capital Hanoi.

People stayed in our house before 1954 because they were: maids, nannies, or worked for my mother. Relatives, like my aunts, stayed to knit and make money. The others carried little things such as combs, pins, mirrors, needles, thread, matches, notebooks, ink, pens and pencils... to the fairs to sell and make a profit for living.

People from villages went to the city to buy small things to sale in the village. Because of all the walking they stayed overnight and left early the next morning to be safe. That made my

house always crowded with people. They always said hello to my mother, gave us



*My father Khien Vu and my son John Vu Nigh play, "who is stronger"*

something, went to help the maid in the kitchen and look for something to eat. Because the front was full of merchandise and a place for business, my mother didn't let people in the front room for any length of time.

**Who in your family do you most admire and why?**

When I was young, my mother was the person I admired most because she was my mother and she was

beautiful and smelled good. I wanted to sit on her lap, touch her and kiss her. After trying many times to be close to her, I found she would not let me. At the age of five, my feelings for my mother turned off. Thinking about her, I felt like someone close and far away from me at the same time. When I was old enough to study, my father cared about my studies. He taught me to knit, write, read, and talked to me. I admired my father and my brother Cung.

beautiful and smelled good. I wanted to sit on

My father was always working. He did not finish high school but he studied by himself. His knowledge was in everything. He taught me in math, literature, and mostly, the way to live. He feels deeply about Religion and Culture. His words are based, not only on Catholicism, but also on Buddhism and Confucianism. He does not drink nor smoke. That made him rich in many ways, money, talent and wisdom. His saint name was Joseph, the adopted father of Jesus. He was in the Republic of Vietnam in the South Army for 17 years. His battalion was everywhere in the South of Vietnam. From 1954 until he retired in 1972 he never refused any mission. His bravery, kindness, and love, which he got from Saint Joseph, made everybody who knew him, admire and trust him, even the Communists. He was in fighting with Binh Xuyen, Hoa Hao in 1955 to 1956. He was in the first group to build up a battalion. My mother took us to go with him when he moved to many places. From the jungles of Dian to highland Pleiku, deep far away in the country like Cho Cau to the Capital Saigon. Once I visited him at Cu Chi (the home of Communists in the west side of the South), where they lived. It was an empty place with no trees, no houses or any buildings. They lived in tunnels. All you could see to get around in was four feet tall. They were built up by sandbags. Under the sun at 2:00p.m., I walked about a mile from the street where the bus dropped me off. On

the dusty road, there was only me and the sun. There was no thing and no sound. I felt like 100 eyes, hiding somewhere, watching each step of mine. A young girl in a white dress, the school uniform of Saigon, with long hair, was walking in the warfield. The war could start at any time and who was this girl. Who knows if she was a friend or enemy, because they look the same. Passing through a gate of simple wire fence, I saw nobody around. Keep walking to the door. I heard a voice ask me to stop, then my father came out. I told him mom asked me to come to take money. He handed some to me and told me to go home. I put the money in my school bag, which I held in front. I walked out to the gate and to the road. The time I met and talked and visited with my father only a minute. Coming back home, with all the business in Saigon, I told myself, you are lucky, you have just gotten out from the death. I knew each penny he brought home was paid by his blood and his life. Yes, his life hung by a piece of thread.

He always told me stories of the miracle of his life, which still continues. When his battalion first came to the jungle, they knew Communists were in town but did not know who. He was asked to lead his group to the market. Before getting to the market he told everyone the purpose of the trip. His orders were to buy food and leave right away. Many times they went and came home safe. They thought the market was safe, so more people wanted to go. He requested another car and told the people that when he left they had to leave too. He told them this because he knew some women, who he did business with, would blink their eyes, which gave him a sign of some strangers or Communists in the market. They did not agree with him, and asked if they could stay in town for a while. The first time was okay. The second time one of them died. After that, they believed him. Another time, they were in new place, which was reported the Communists had left a couple days earlier. They had to eat and get ready to fight that night. They suggested he be the leader of the group cooking rice and canned food. Another group would pick some wild vegetables in the pond there. His group had not started when they heard a big noise. A mine, in the pond, which the Communists had set up before they left, blew up.

Food was very important to the battalion. He put everything coming in and going out, daily, in a book, very clearly, like the leader wanted. Because they did not have a safe place to keep the food, the leader ordered him to sleep in the food pantry so he could take care of the food. He was a good Catholic and was never with any woman in the town. They tried to trap him with sin. They brought a woman to the jungle, paid her and led her to his bed. After walking around to check up on all the positions which should be guarded, while saying rosary, he went into the room and reconized the woman's smell. Looking around he saw her sitting on the bed with her clothes on. She said she was sorry, told him everything and ask if could she sleep on the floor. He said this was the jungle. There were many creatures on the floor and besides, it will get wet when it rained. It was late at night and he was sleepy. He ordered her to sleep in the bed. He laid next to her and was asleep in five minutes. In the morning, he ordered her to stay in there and not to go anywhere else. He did not want her to get into trouble. He went to report to the leader and asked if she could stay until the next day, when they went into town to shop as they regularly did.

At breakfast, all of them learned a lesson from him. He told them they wasted their money. He would not touch her because it was a sin, and for what. Everything will be gone besides

your real value as a person. He said he would keep the woman in his room and he would bring food for her. He did not want the Communists to later use her for information on the battalion post. He repeated again and again to never bring a stranger to the battalion. Communists can use them and to kill you and all your friends, too. After that, it became the rule of his battalion, “never bring a stranger into the post”. Later they helped people from the battalion build their houses outside of the post. Their families opened business’ of selling food, beer, wine, tobacco, and renting rooms, for those who wanted to bring woman in. Not very long afterwards, the people in the post and in the market knew his stories.

Another person who I admire is Cung, the Roman Catholic Priest, who is now in Carthage, Missouri. He was sent to Thu Duc to study at the age of twelve years old. At the age of eighteen, mom wanted to take him home to marry. He did not want to so she sent him to Saigon to study. He came back to Thu Duc, The Congregation of the Mother Coredemptrix. The founder was Father Thu Dinh Tran. He was training to become a Brother. He came to the United States in May, 1975 at Springfield, Missouri. Cung became a Catholic Priest on my birthday, June 13, 1981, by the hand of Bishop Law. In 1968, six of his friend were listed as missing, in Vietnam, and they are still missing. The Communists could have kidnapped them and killed them. Communists did not like them because they were Catholic Brothers. They hated them because the Brothers cared for, helped and loved the poor people, while the Communists threatened them with killing.

He works all the time, and all he has are two or three pants, three shirts, some socks and a pair of shoes.



*My painting, "Cho Noi"; where my mother got out of the sewer hole, after the bombing, at the market square.*

### ***Did your family move a lot?***

Our family moved, that means running away from Communists, many times. Another reason was to follow my father while he was in the Army.

In 1949, Communists came our village. My mother was in her last month of pregnancy, with my younger sister. She was at the market when it was bombed by planes. Because the Communists tried to shoot planes from the fair, this caused the plane to bomb the square. Blood was everywhere, mixed with vegetables and the bodies of victims. A pregnant woman, whom my mother knew, sat with her stomach laid open saying, “Give my baby to me”. All she wanted was her first unborn child. Not far from her, the fetus, still living, lay next to the market fish, which were trying to breathe in the new liquid: blood. After that, rescuers pulled my mother out of the sewage well, where water from the market flowed. I heard shouting, “run and hide.” I threw down everything and hid. That saved my life. My mother later told

the villagers, that because the Communists tried to shoot planes from the air, this caused the plane to bomb the square.

Sum, a man in the village, said the same thing as my mother, about the bombing. A couple of months later he sold a water buffalo and the buyer did not have all the money. He asked Sum to come to the next village to take the rest. Sum didn't come home that night. Early in the morning, a couple of days later, my mother saw a straw bag on top of a bamboo tree. My grandpa helped her by using a bamboo stick to pull the top down. My mother took the bag. She pulled something out. She screamed, pulled all of us and ran. She had felt Sum's head on her hand. My mother imagined seeing Communists everywhere around her. We left everything and moved to Thai Binh City.

After the Geneva Accords in 1954, the war was in the city. We heard the fighting all night, while we laid under the bed for better safety. In the morning, tables, chairs and beds were in the street, as obstacles to the fighting. There was nothing in front of my house. There was no TV, radio or newspaper at that time. My parents heard rumors saying that Vietnam was divided by two, and the 17th parallel was the border. The Communists controlled the North. My father joined the army and my mother left everything and took us looking my father. Then we met at Hung Yen port. That was the way to escape South. In the South, relatives came to stay with us to help my mother take care of us, because we were a handful.

After I left Vietnam with my two younger brothers and sister, my sister Phuong's children, went and stayed with my parent, waiting for the chance to escape Vietnam.

In 1960, my father's battalion moved to the highlands, my mother and Phuong, Thai, Bon and Tiep moved with him. Vinh, my younger sister, next to me, and I stayed with my Aunt Man (Tri) to study in Saigon.

In 1972, my father got out of the army. My uncle, Long, asked my parents to let me stay at his house to take care of grandma. From then, I went to work daily, at his school, as the receptionist. Instead of going home, I went to his house and slept with grandma. Usually, after getting paid, I brought money home to give to my mother to help out with the family. I lived in both house until 1973, when I started Saigon Pedagogy School.

In 1975, the Communists took over the South. I was a person who had to move a lot and live with many different persons, because of my teaching job in a public school. Han (same class) and I were teaching at Tuc Trung (40 miles from Saigon) on Highway One. The Principal arranged for Han and I to stay in the house of old couple and their youngest teenage son. Their oldest son, who owned the house, was in a re-education camp. His wife and children had moved to Saigon. Han and I stayed upstairs and cooked in their kitchen. Summer all teachers who taught at schools on Highway One, from Phu Tuc to Phu Binh, about 40 miles long, had to study politics. That meant studying about Communist Theory. We were to meet at Phu Ngoc School, with clothes, a blanket, mosquito net, rice and some money. The leader of the region arranged for us to live with people. We gave them rice and money. They cooked for us. We studied for one month, nine hours a day, six days a week

In 1976-1977 Han and I were transferred to Phu Ngoc and then to Phu Lam, 70 miles from Saigon on Highway One. People are Catholic like me there. Besides, I never lived far from home. That made me afraid. To be strong, I needed to very much trust in God. I went to church every day. People noticed me, but I did not know them. Then they talked to me and later asked if I would come to live with their family.

In 1978-1981 I taught at Phu Lam School, half a day and the other half, I was in cooperation with two other teachers, at the same school, to buy and sell dried tea on the black market. My pay from teaching was VN\$50.00 and I had to pay rent of VN\$50.00 a month. Buying and selling tea, I could make VN\$30.00 to VN\$80.00 day.

In 1981 I escaped from Vietnam to Malaysia. I stayed on Pulau Bidong Island in a Bataan (Philippines) Refugee Camp. I was trained by UNESCO (United Nation Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) to become teacher and I taught English as a Second Language, at Malaysia and in the Philippines until 1982.

In May, 1982 I arrived at Springfield, Missouri and I have lived here until now.

## CHAPTER TWO – EARLIEST MEMORIES AND CHILDHOOD

### *Nickname*

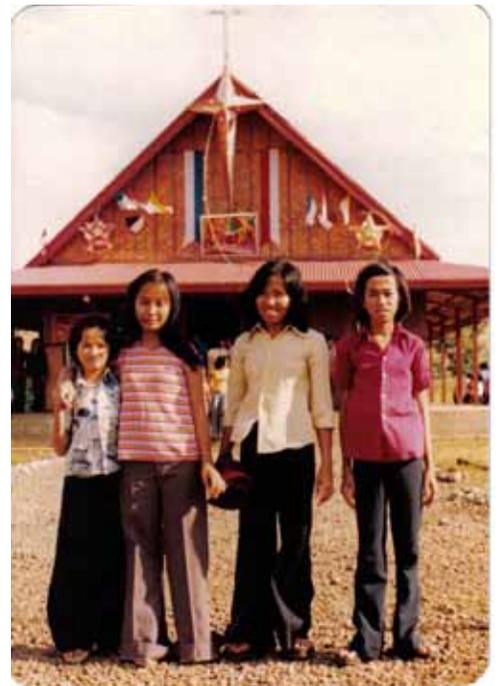
Yes, I had a nickname. It was Bamboo. I got it from my grandpa. Grandpa was always busy with his work when he took care of us. My brother, sister, and cousin, older than me, could run and play somewhere else. At that time, I was the little one. Grandpa was afraid I would fall in the pond if I did. He had to keep a close eye on me. His work was making baskets and chicken cages to hold the hens. All of these were made from bamboo. He always had a piece of bamboo in his hands. That made me jealous of the piece of bamboo. I usually pushed away the bamboo and sat on his lap. Two minutes later, I was ready to stand up to go somewhere else to play. If he called my name, I did not notice it, but if he said, “where was my bamboo tree”, I ran and sat on his lap. I was afraid he would hold the bamboo tree and not me. After a time, that was my nickname. I was the only one who listened to his talking. I still remember my grandpa telling me: “when you grow up, you have to be the bamboo tree”.

When I was in the village, time seemed very fast. I did not remember my brother and cousin going to school. I was happy with my grandpa, and I was happier more with my older brother and sister. I liked to follow them to catch the dragonflies or crickets and I did not like to see them fight.

I did not like the dogs and cats because they were very mean there. But I could watch the mother hen and her chicks fighting around until I was sitting and falling asleep.

### *A typical day as a child*

When in the village, we had a big, clean, brick front yard. It was used to dry the seeds of rice or beans. There was nothing to do inside the house so we always played outside from the time we got up in the morning until bedtime. We even learned to write on the front yard, too. I was three years of age at that time so I couldn't go to church in the morning like the older kids in the house. I could go to church in the evening if any of my cousins took my sister and me to go with them. The reason we couldn't go with my brother was the females sat on the left and the males sat on the right side of the church. My brother always had many stories about his friends at church and in his school, which I could understand. That made my life with more waiting time. When my brother and cousins came home, I followed them to watch what they were doing. They liked to dig for the crickets and use them for fighting. They also liked to catch the butterfly or dragonfly and tie a little string to their body, so they could fly around in front of us.



*In front of the Vietnamese Refugee Camp at Pulau Bidong Island (Malaysia) Church, on Christmas 1981, from left: Thu, Thuy, Loan Vu, and Due.*

I tried to catch them all the time. You had to follow one quietly. When it stopped, you had to hold your breath and slowly hold their wings. Once I got one and it bit me. It hurt so I let it loose and she flew away.

In the city, only my father was able to go to church daily, because it was a bit far away and it was unsafe. After my father would get home from church, we had breakfast. Usually with rice some fish and vegetable soup or pickled cabbage. Right after that my father opened the front door and with my mother, was ready for business. We could help bring things to put outside. Like buckets of potatoes, onions, ginger, garlic, stoves, wood, pots and pans. My mother wanted everyone to come to her store could buy something. When I did not go to school, I liked to be at the store so I could see the many people walk by. People selling sweet rice carried it on their head. People selling rice stick soup carried it on their shoulders, like the water sellers, but they had a big pot on one side and on the other the rice stick and vegetables. The vegetable sellers carried them on both sides. The meat sellers carried like the sweet rice. I tried to figure out what kinds they were selling, but usually I had to listen, when they cried out their wares.

Because of the war, there were many people from the country, who came to the city for safety or to look for relatives in the army. Traveling without money, they had to ask for food and sleep on the pavement. One, who made me pay attention was a woman begging with her daughter. The little girl was the same age and skinny like me. She was very dirty, but her mother loved her very much. I waited daily to watch for them. My brother knew that, so he always called me and said: "Loan, your mother has come", whenever they came to beg at our door. I would run to the front and hide behind the back of something to watch them. The reason I liked them was I did not understand why her mother loved her that much. The girl could sit on her mother's lap and play with her face. My mother would not let me touch her. My mother always pushed me away and said my hand were dirty, with dirt or candy or food. Compared with that girl, I was cleaner. I wished to be she, so I could hug my mother and take her smell into my lungs. My wishes never came true.

On the days, we went to school; we walked about a mile to the house, which we called school. There were many pots, in the garden next to the house, to keep our urine for fertilizer. That made the house have a special smell. There was only one room for all twenty of us, from preschool to the fifth grade, with one teacher, the owner. The class started at 7:30a.m. and went to 12:00p.m. Because of the war, people moved all the time. The students were less and less and our time in school was shorter. If school was early dismissed, Cung and Loat took us to the temple if they had a festival. They took food and gave it to us girls to hide. Then we went to the bank of the river to eat. After that, they swam to the other side of river to play. The girls stayed on the bank and took care of the school bags.

One time right after a fight at night, we had no school. The boys took us to the field. There were many people sitting around with their backs to the rice field side. I was small so it took a long time to get down to the field. In front of me was a man sitting with his back leaning against the field's bank, with his eyes closed. I told Phuong: "he was sleeping". Phuong said: "he was dead". That was the first time, in my life, I saw death. The difference was I talked in front of him and he did not get up.

At night, I liked to sit in front of the city light pole. I would watch the shadows run on the other pavement of the street and disappear into the sewage well. Once, someone told me they were souls and they ran to that hole to go to hell. I believed that, and from night to night, I sat there counting how many people were going to hell. I would ask myself how to save them from hell.

### *The day involve with religious*

On my mother's side, they were Catholics a long time ago. On my father's side, my father's grandpa became Catholic, while his brothers and sisters stayed Buddhist. My family was one of the ten per cent of Catholics in the Vietnamese population. The Catholics came to Vietnam for the first time with a priest name Ignatius, in 1533. The first place to receive the Good News was Ninh Cuong, Bui Chu. Bui Chu and Thai Binh are next to each other and separated by the Thai Binh River, with a bridge called Bo. It was 20 miles from Sa-cat, where I was born.

In Religion, we are Catholic. Intellectually, we are Confucian. When the Vietnamese language was first written using the English alphabet, from the Italian priest's prayer book, this was a beginning step for Catholics in Vietnam. With this alphabet, the people could read Vietnamese easily. The Vietnamese Catholics published a small booklet of poems. My father has sung this long lullaby song since I was little until now. It took me a long time to learn, by heart, only a part of it as a girl. I won first prize VN\$10.00, from my father, among the three sisters, for learning it. The poems teach the ways people should or should not do, for males and females. Girls had to respect their father at home and after getting married, respect their husband. He taught what the woman has to do to care about everyone in the family. In school, I had been taught, when a girl was young, to depend on her father. When she married, she depended on her husband, and if the husband died, she depended on her son. How you are referred to reflects this relationship. When we lived in a country at war all the time, we could not count on the role of men very much in the home. The children's lives depended on the mother. When the husband was not home, the woman had to go home to ask for help from her mother. We learned how much value the role of the mother was in our life. When the Catholics came, Jesus had his mother, Mary. She naturally became the mother of all Vietnamese Catholics.

Like a tradition of the Vietnamese, when a child starts to talk, the mother teaches him or her to make the sign of the cross, and after that learn the "Hail Mary" prayer. Like I taught my son, I learned the Hail Mary Prayer when I started to talk. Every night before going to bed, with the help of an adult, I made the cross and said the Hail Mary Prayer. At the beginning, we said it once and then worked up to three times. When my son was three years of age, like me, he joined the prayer with the family. By tradition, we split the pray into two parts, male and female. One side says 'Hail Mary' and the other says 'Holy Mary'. We prayed one rosary every night. If we lived close to a church, we went to church daily. Sunday, Christmas, New Year's, and Easter were special days. The whole family dressed up nice to go to church. Sometimes after church, we went to a restaurant and had a special meal. That's the reason we always had nice clothes, while most people who were not Catholic, did not.

In 1954, we left everything in the North and moved to the South. We lived in a classroom, with many families, and daily got some rice and food from the United Nations. My mother was cooking. Cung and Phuong were in line for food. I held Thai, my younger brother, for him to sleep on my shoulder. To keep him sleeping, I gently walked around the classroom, beginning from the end (where my family stayed). When I walked to the door, two women were cooking. I heard them talk about a Mr. A, who was in a tiger cage. The word tiger cage made me curious. I went to ask my mother why Mr. A had to be in a tiger cage. The woman, next to my mother, asked them at the other end. I did not know what they were talking about. Suddenly, my mother pulled Thai away from my shoulder. One hand grabbed me, the other took a rod, and my mother beat me. The first time in my life I was spanked and beaten. It hurt terribly. I tried to get out of her hands. She was angry. She pulled my clothes off and beat me harder. The first time and only time I was naked in front of everybody. Nobody saved me. The rod was made of bamboo. It was not bigger than an adult little finger and about three feet long. After she was tired from hitting me, and Thai had cried a lot, she stopped to hold Thai. I put my clothes on. She told me to shut up. I was so afraid of her from then on. I was quiet and never said anything about the tiger cage. When I was 50 years old, I asked my father about the tiger cage. I found out the cage was made by bamboo about four feet on each side. It was used to punish soldiers who broke discipline.

After that day, I knew I had to hold my emotions from my mother. I am an artist and writer. I have feelings for everything. I have a lot of love. With me, love had to be touching. That was the reason I wanted to hug my mother. The spanking kept me away from her. That was the way she wanted it. Like many Asian people, she loved sons more than girls. I was the one with a family, but felt like an orphan. Myself, I really talked to Mary at the age of seven. I had to find someone to talk with. I found Mary. I started talking to her daily. I asked her for anything I needed. I told her what happened in my life. She has touched my life from the age of seven.

### ***What did you eat?***

The main Vietnamese food was rice. We have steamed rice three times a day. We can eat rice with anything, beef, pork, chicken, shrimp, fish, boiled eggs, or steamed vegetables in fish sauce. When we had nothing else, we ate rice with tea and fish sauce. If we are sick, we have rice soup. We have chicken rice soup for the rich or for special occasions. Poor people cook rice soup with beans and eat with sugar. In the country, fish rice soup, with a little black pepper, was good for a late dinner. When I taught in Phu Lam and stayed with Han, Thao and Yen, one of our friends gave us a big bowl of fish rice soup. We ate all of it to the last drop. The next day he told us that it was snake rice soup. It was delicious. We had many kinds of rice. The rice, planted in the water fields, was tender. The tender rice was easy to chew. Tender rice has a good taste. The round rice was hard even after it was cooked. It absorbs more water and makes more rice than the long rice. The rich eat jasmine white rice. It was tender after being cooked, easy to chew and has a good taste. The poor eat the old rice. It was cheaper and does not smell good.

On special occasions, we have sweet rice. The day of memorial of grandparents, we had mung bean in sweet rice, and banana, after the rosary prayer. The rich like sweet rice with fried dried shrimp, Chinese pork sausage, and soy sauce. At reunions, we have peanut sweet rice with pork roll slices. At weddings, we have red colored sweet rice. At engagements, the red sweet rice was packed into small square shapes to give to relatives. On New Years, we have sweet rice cakes. They are made with one layer of rice and one layer of mung bean with some pork and another layer of rice. It was wrapped with banana leaves into square shapes. During the time of waiting for New Years, people cook the rice cakes. They had to boil five to six hours. We have a kitchen god. On New Years, he goes to heaven to report to about the family, where he has stayed with for the whole year. On New Years, people abstain from many things: sweeping the floor, afraid of losing money, no cooking so as not to work hard the whole year. The sweet rice cake was used for a quick meal, when people come for New Years greeting and blessings.

Vietnam has a lot of fruit. We have ten different kinds of mangoes. The soft kinds are eaten when ripe. They are sweet and tender. The crisp kinds are big when we eat them, before they ripen. They are a little sour. They are especially, eaten by pregnant women. There are many kinds of banana. You plant the tree one time and it keeps going on and on. You do not have to take care of banana trees. Maybe once a week you need to look and see which bananas are ready to be cut down. All bananas are used to eat, but some kinds can be fried or steamed. Another can be offered on the altar. The small banana was very expensive. My mother likes the small ones. She said it tastes better. One kind of banana has seeds as big as a black pepper seed. People use it for a kind of medicine. After the banana has flowered, we cut the bud off, slice the bud, and eat with noodle soup. Banana bud slices, mixed with a little steamed shrimp and salt and pounded peanuts, with some herbs, was a special dish. The trunk of the banana tree can be sliced and cooked with some rice for the pigs, instead of feeding them vegetables.

We had two kinds of oranges: yellow and green. The green has more juice and was sweeter than the other. The size of our apple was smaller than a lime. It has one big seed. People eat them raw. We had one good apple tree right next to our pond. Cung liked to climb on it to pick the yellow apples and throw them at us. I once went down the steps to pick the apples and fell into the pond. We also have pineapple, papaya, and many kinds of coconuts, mangos, jackfruit, and durian. Anyway, Vietnam was an agricultural country so it has many kinds of fruits.

For a long time, Vietnamese drank water from ponds and the river. We needed tea to make the taste of the drinking water better. My mother picked branches of tea in the back yard. Boiled with rainwater, it makes a good tea. When I grew up, I loved this kind of tea. In the United States, I miss a cup of fresh tea. The yellow, green tea color was still in my mind. That was the reason I like the colors of yellow and green. They are special colors in my paintings.

All along one side of Vietnam was the coast of an ocean. That was a source of fish. We eat a lot of fish. There are many kinds of fish from rivers. They are kept alive in buckets at the market. You can buy which ones you like and they will clean them for you in just a minute.

There are carp, mullet, bass, black carp and catfish. The rice field crab was the size of a foot. It was also the size of the big toe and very cheap in Vietnam. After cleaning, we pound them, raw, into tiny pieces, and mix them with water. The crab juice was then cooked with vegetables and salt. It was good on steamed rice, on a hot day, for both the rich and poor.

Fish from the ocean are put on sell at the market a lot. When I was in high school, my mother sold ocean fish. There are all kinds: small whale, butterfish, sawfish, mullet, ray, salmon, snapper, gizzard shad, lizard fish, mackerel, tuna, sea crab...etc. The fish that was not sold was mixed with salt, covered and left for a while. That makes a good fish sauce. Fish sauce was used on most any dish during a Vietnamese meal, even in the United States.

I have to say we eat all kinds of fish, from the big whale to a little goby. All of which have a different taste. Dry fish was very useful to the Vietnamese. On a rainy day in the highlands, a meal, with steamed rice and fried, dried fish was fancy. In Vietnamese family, the food pantry always has some dried shrimp, even in the U.S. Dried shrimp could be cooked with spinach, squash, beans, or even pumpkin. We always had vegetable soup at the meal.

In Vietnam, water buffaloes and cows are valuable helpers, since we do not have farm machinery. Beef was expensive. Pigs and chickens we can raise at home. My parents lived in Saigon from 1960 to 1991, and they raised rabbits and chickens in the back yard, for food. We have a lot of rice fields in our country. The rice field rats are about the size of a little baby's arm. They eat rice from field to field. On harvest days, the farmers get a lot of them. I saw them, already cleaned, for sale in the market at Phuong Lam, where I taught. Another source of meat was the country deer (dog). My brothers always teased me by telling me the special dishes were dog meat. Those times I had to go to somewhere else to eat.

### *The first home*

Our first home, I can remember was in Thai Binh City, when I was three to six years old. The front door was made of thick wood with many pieces a foot wide. All of them were taken out in the morning and slide back at night. I tried to help once and I fell on a piece of wood, on my finger. Now, my left middle fingernail was different from all the others. On the high part of one wall was a glass shelf to put all kind of yarn and winter items: sweaters, hats, socks, and gloves, for sale. On a lower shelf, were put notebooks, paper, lamps, apples, oranges, grapes, candies and sugar. On the lowest were gasoline, baskets, stoves, pots, and pans. On the right side, in the middle of the room was a glass stand showcase, where mom put expensive and other things which were easy to loose, such as: needles, thread, pens, ink, colors, cigars, cigarettes, perfume and make up. Back of the case was a wood bed, which was a big box to put merchandise. Next to the bed was a wall with a window and a door, which led to the next room. My parents stayed in the next room. The other room was very large. On the right was a small bed for Cung and his table under the window. To the right of the window was a table and chairs for aunts to sit to knit. Next to that, there were a couple of beds for us girls and our aunts. The maid, Huong, slept on the floor next to the table.

Out of the back door was the kitchen with half a roof. The door to the right led out to the empty land next door. The bathroom cleaner used this door to get in. He collected the dung

and put it in a covered bucket, which was placed in two bamboo baskets. When he walked on the streets, I couldn't recognize him. The water seller carried water from river into the house by this door, too. The water was stored in many big vases to keep the dust from coming in, and to use later. To the right of the house was a very big covered pond, which was built up with bricks and cement to save rainwater. The rainwater was collected from the metal roof, which let it run into the pond. It was higher than me and the maid had to step inside to climb down to clean it. This water was use for drinking and it kept the house cooler. At the end of the kitchen was a small house to rent.

### *The "rules" in your house*

Yes, there were a lot. Obey all adults and never talk back to them, no matter what they said. When someone came to the house, whenever you saw them you had to fold your arms and bow your head to say hello. When you walk passed an adult, you had to bow your head and back, to show yourself lower. When you talk to them, you don't stare at their face. You don't touch anything not yours. Don't bother them when they rest, even your parents. Don't ask too much. Only talk when someone talks to you. When you answer questions don't talk around and waste their time. When you give something to someone older than you, you have to handle it with both hands, with the face down. No arguing or discussing with adults. Don't wave your body when had something unsatisfied. When parents or adults tell you something, you had to listen quietly and answer quickly so they wouldn't have to wait. If they asked you to do something, you didn't like, just act happy to do it, because of them. Don't make excuses.

With your brothers and sisters, don't bother them. Don't argue. Don't compare and complain. If you are older, love and take care the younger. If you have something and you do not want the younger child to take it, do not let them see it. If they cried for it, you had to give it to them.

When you stand, don't put your face up to the sky. Stand straight; don't lean like you have no backbone. When you walk, don't move your hands and body like a dancer. Don't walk fast like a ghost is after you. When you smile, don't show all your teeth as you might scare someone. Smiling with the lips closed was safe for the good girl.

When you sit, find a chair lower than an adult or behind them. Don't cross your legs. Don't shake your feet. Don't sit with the legs open. If sitting on a mat, don't break the things knitted there.

Before you eat you have to make a cross and say "Our Father" prayer with all people at the table. When you eat, you have to offer from the oldest to the older close to you. You have to wait for those older than you to get from the good dish before you can pick your food. Don't eat only the good thing and leave the bad for someone else. Don't put your chopsticks on the bowl of soup like you clean them. Before giving your bowl to ask for rice, you have to look at the rice pot to make sure the rice is available. As my mother said, the old, such as my parents, and the youngest, as my younger brothers and sisters needed more nutrition. I

needed to save the good food for them. When someone, a stranger or relative, offered you food, you had to say thank you, I am full, even if you are starving.

From when I was teenager and on up, I couldn't have a nap because a girl who sleeps during the day was not a good girl. My mother, all the time reminded us, to 'take it easy when you eat, cut down the hours of sleeping, and not hurry to put your back down. Who could do it this way, should be a good girl'.

Before bedtime, you have to hang the mosquito nets for every body. You have to make sure the edge of the net is under the mat neatly. Do not forget to kill all the mosquitoes in the net. The pillows have to be ready for every one, and you have to pray the rosary before going to bed.

Those rules still go on and on, and continue until now. When I was teenager, my mother talked about what the girls did wrong after the daily rosary. Once, when I heard my Aunt Tinh talk about my mother, I told her "because you talk about my mother, I won't come to your house". My uncle, Long, sitting close, heard that. He stood up, took a rod, asked me to lie on the floor, and spanked me three times. This was because of I talked back to an adult. My aunt was older than me by seven years. By Long's order, I had to apologize to Aunt Tinh. I was 24 years old at that time.

### *Share room*

Vietnam was an agricultural country. The main source of produce was rice. It was planted by the old ways and depended on the men's labor. To take care the large fields, we needed a large number of working people. Because of this, people tried to have lots of children. A piece of land was divide among many children and work on. Land was used to make money for living. That's the reason we never had our own room. Having your own bed was lucky. I had to share my bed with my sisters Phuong and Vinh. When we were young, we had to share a blanket, too. Vinh was two years younger and Phuong was two years older than I. Vinh did not like me, when she wanted to argue I kept my mouth shut. To be better, Phuong was in the middle, Vinh and I were at the s of the blanket. Because of us moving, Vinh and I were cold all the time. Phuong was the only one who had a blanket. In the North, only my parents had a room. We slept in a big room with many beds. In the South, a large room in front was divided from the couch and bed by a screen. It was a kind of divided living room to bedroom.

### *Pets*

Yes, we always had cats and dogs. My mother likes pets with a yellow color. I do not know where it comes from, but Vietnamese prefer white, then yellow, next striped, and the fourth was spotted. That was the taste of color for pets. My mother's cat looked like a little tiger, with yellow and white stripes. She liked to lie under Thai's bed for a nap. Mice would have to be careful, she could jump up and catch them. Whenever she caught a little mouse, she would let it loose and catch it back, again and again. When the mouse was really weak, she

would eat it. Sometimes, she ate only the head, sometimes a half. People said, she ate the head when it was beginning or halfway through the lunar month. Once, she had babies in my drawer. I put them in a box and cleaned my clothes. She carried them by mouth, one baby to another, to the next drawer.

My mother likes Chihuahua dogs, because of they look clean. This kind of dog was mean, but we needed it to help keep the house clean. Cats and dogs are used to eat the leftovers from the young children's meal, which included chicken and fish bones.

When I was fourteen, we lived right where the open market was at our front door. We had a dog named, Mino. Once, my mother told her that we did not have money to buy something else, besides rice. The dog went out for awhile, came home, and dropped in front of my mother, a piece of meat. Surprised, my mother took the piece of meat and went out to the market and ask who's meat it was. The old woman who sold vegetables, next door, had lost that piece of meat. She had bought it that morning and put it in the basket set behind her. The story was told throughout the market. It was not very long before someone wounded Mino by a big knife cut on her back. People did not like her stealing. My mother sold her. When people came to take her, she cried. I had to go to my grandma's house to stay awhile, from missing her.

### ***Starting school***

At the age of six, my parents let me walk to a kind of school with my brother Cung, cousin Loat, and sister Phuong. I said a kind of school because this was not a school. It was the house of the teacher. He used one room for school with all the ages from preschool like me and the fifth grade like Cung, in the same room. My parents paid him to teach us. Coming to the house, from the gate, we could smell urine. We had to pass the garden with a row of vases used to collect the urine for fertilizer. The vases were outside and used by both boys and girls.

We had no books. The only thing we had was a notebook. With the little children, like me, the teacher wrote one letter, a, b, c...etc. on top of a page. I would copy the same letter, under his letter, and fill up the page. When I was done, he graded my writing and I then had another letter to copy on the next page. Phuong, my older sister, copied a sentence from the blackboard, to her notebook for a full page. Cung was the oldest in the group. They copied math problems from the board and solved them. They also copied some French meaning into Vietnamese, to study at home. They had to write dictation, too.

The war came to the city. French soldiers were prohibited from leaving the camp. The city had fewer people around. At night, we had to sleep under the bed and put all things on the bed to prevent being hit by bullets. Communists came to the city and stayed at the homes of people they knew or relatives. At night, they attacked the French soldier's camp. Another group of them, put things such as beds, tables, chairs, ...etc on the street, as barricades, for easy to withdraw. Of course, people move them back into their house in the morning. There was nothing in front of my house. We did not open the store that day. We walked to school.

There was a note on the gate door. Cung told us there was no school. Then we walked to the field to see the dead people.

I didn't go to school. To make up for what was missing, my father had a small math book and he taught us at home. Our home school was only math and writing, which I copied the prayer "Hail Mary or Our Father..." and so on. In the South, we moved a lot.

My first real school year was the second grade. The school was for children whose parents work for a railroad company. My parents did not work for the railroad, but in the military. Because of this, they let us go to their school for free. There were three rooms for three classes: first, second and third. At that time, Cung, my older brother was twelve years old. He was in the sixth grade. My parents sent him to a private boarding school at Thu Duc (twelve miles from our home). The school was taken care of by the Catholic Congregation of Priests and Brothers. They ran the school with the purpose to train and guide the young boys who wanted to give their life to be Brothers or Priests of their Congregation. Anyway, Vietnamese parents are concerned about a boy's, more than a girl's, education. When we finished the third grade, we graduated from primary school. There was only one free elementary school, with fourth and fifth grades, in town, since 1958. Students, from all the villages, who wanted to continue in school, had to arrange to come to town to take exams. The best were then chosen. There was only one private school for sixth and seventh grades.



*Loan Vu in her white school cloths with school ID, "Gia Long" from 1965.*

When we finished the sixth grade, my mother decided that was enough for girls. I was sent to learn to be a tailor, for a year, with the nuns. My Uncle Long heard about that. He came and pressured my mother to give me a chance. If I was chosen, in Gia Long, a free high school in Saigon, I could stay in school. Every year about 2,500 to 3,000 students took the three-day exams so they could choose the school they wanted to attend. Each school could take 400 new students, in the sixth grade, from the top scores in the exams. The limit for each class was 25 to 30 students. I was lucky. I was chosen to attend the government girl high school, Gia Long. It was the best, special high school for girls, in Vietnam. I thank God for helping me in the exams and I thank my uncle for pressuring my mother. That helped me to continue in school until the twelfth grade. Without education, I do not know how I could be the leader of the family, until now.

All schools I attended were special, so they were different from the schools where I taught, in Vietnam. Vietnamese children are unlucky than anyone in the world. Going to school was a dream and having a good teacher was another dream.

### ***How did you get to school?***

We lived not very far from school, from one to six miles. Going to school was always a dream for me, so it didn't matter how far it was. My transportation was by bus, bicycle, and walking. As a teenager, I went to school by bus. The streets in Saigon are always crowded with bicycles and motorcycles, and the bus so crowded. I preferred to walk home, the six

miles, after school and save a little money for something else. When I was older, I biked. In the United States, I biked to school and biked home for lunch and back to school again.

### *Teachers*

In 1954, The Communists took the North, we ran to the South, because my parents had lived with and knew them very well. All my teachers were from the South and they did not know anything about the Communists at that time. They thought we were stupid to run away, while their men went to the North, to save the country. My fifth grade teacher had her roots in the South, a rich Catholic and educated person. Her name was Quy Nguyen. She was a very nice lady. Her husband and her sister's husband went to the North. She treated us very different than others. The Vietnamese education system followed the French system. Math was a subject you had to be good in if you wanted to stay in school. In high school, I liked Mrs. Mai Nguyen. She was my music teacher because of her talent in playing the violin. Math was my favorite subject and Mr. Minh Nguyen was my favorite math teacher, in the eighth grade. Tuyet Nguyen was my special math teacher in the eleventh grade.



*Loan Vu and Boyd Nigh: Wedding reception, with Dr. Sun Woodrow, Math Professor.*

In the fourth grade, we had to analyze word problems, in French. Cuc Nguyen was my teacher. I didn't like her at all, because if we said wrong she would spank us. Once I had to open my hand for her to spank with a thick hard wooden ruler. It hurt, and all my class got spanked, at least once, like me. Many were spanked every day. It was terrible.

At SMSU, here in Springfield, Dr. Sun Woodrow and Dr. John Kubichek were my favorite math teachers. Dr. Northtrip and Dr. Truman were my favorite Physics teachers. Dr. Hill and Mr. Hatcher were my favorite art teachers.

At SMSU, one of my art history teachers was Dr. Strickland. Once, I needed permission to get into her, "Women in Art" class. She asked what for. I told her Vietnamese women had talent in art, with embroidery. If I studied that subject, later on, I could write and help our women be involved more in art. She asked me why do I want to change people, just let them be the way they are, and she didn't let me in that class. I didn't like her at all.

### *Musical instrument*

I studied guitar once, when I was in training to become a teacher. After about four months, I had to quit, because I didn't have time to practice. My son is fourteen now and he has played

guitar for over three years. From my encouragement, my son practices a song ten times daily, at home, and once a week with the teacher. Sometimes he forgets and it isn't bad at all.

### ***Special occasions celebrated***

During Easter and Holy Week, every afternoon the church had a program. Anyone who wanted to could sing a prayer, which was written in the 15th century. On Good Friday, we had the Way of the Cross, around the church. After everybody came into the church, the story of Jesus was continued by many people singing, with drums. There were prizes, with a little money, for those who sang best of all. From 11: 00 p.m. until midnight, a procession, with the body of Jesus in a glass coffin, went around the church. Everyone would mourn with a white piece of cloth tied around his or her head. It really gave a feeling of pain in my heart, as a teenager. From midnight and through Saturday, people would visit Jesus' body and kiss His feet, on the coffin. Popped rice was poured on the glass coffin, over the feet. It attracted children from very little to age twelve. They waited in line all day and each time they would pick a handful of popped rice. People believed the rice could heal the sick. It was really sweet when a little boy of seven held some rice in his shirt all the way home for his sick grandma, as a special gift. The old lady was in bed for weeks, and from the compassion of her grandson, could stand up and was well after a couple of days. That lady was my grandma's sister. Nobody in the village wanted to miss kissing Jesus' feet, on the tomb. In the Tan Viet neighborhood are Catholics from Thai Binh City from the North, who live in Saigon. All people from the neighborhood celebrate Easter. That meant that on that day we had a special meal or special dish, usually for lunch and dinner.

On Christmas, the church was decorated with colorful star lanterns. After 1975, Communists changed money, from VN\$500.00 old money to new VN\$1.00 bills, with a limit of VN\$200.00 new money, for one legal family with papers from the government. Like all Vietnamese in the South, we had no savings left. We made lanterns and cheap toys for a living. On Christmas, we did not have enough lanterns for sale. After church at midnight, we usually had chicken rice soup.

### ***National holidays***

This would be New Year's Day. This would be the Lunar New Year. It is usually in February or March of the Sun calendar. This was the biggest event of the year for the whole country. School was busy with a New Year's Magazine a month before, and had a week holiday. Many offices closed for three days. That was a special chance to pray for good luck for all the year. Catholics go to church on the first day to thank God. The second day to pray for parents and family peace. The third day to pray for the deceased. Everybody goes to Midnight Mass in the Catholic Church on Christmas. They go to the temple to pick a wood stick from a box for future telling, on New Year's, for the whole year. The celebration was for three days. If you are poor or rich will show on these days. The younger people have to go to greet the older at their home: first day to parents, second to uncles, aunts, and the third to teachers. You bring your best wishes and a present, such as a sweet rice cake or a box of good tea. You may bring, before New Year's Day some meat, poultry, rice, sugar...etc. That helps the older people to have something already to celebrate New Year's. The older people

will thank you and give you back best wishes and some money. That's called 'Lucky Money'. When I was young, I loved New Year's, because this was the only chance we had to get new clothes. We got money from everybody and the only thing you had to do was bring some tea, say best wishes and thank you.

The sweet rice cake and fire crackers are always part of the Vietnamese New Year. The cake is square, with sides seven to nine inches and one to two inches high. It's wrapped in banana leaves, for the color of rice should be green by nature. The bottom and top is made of sweet rice to represent the earth and sky. The layer of bean (green bean) represents trees. The middle layer is meat (pork) to represent the human species. This cake was taught, from God, a thousand years ago, to Tiet Lieu, which the Good Prince gave to the King on New Year's Day. The King was satisfied with the explanation and the tender taste. The King gave Tiet Lieu his throne. He then ordered the people to use the cake as an offering to God and then eat later. The cake was tied up tightly, cooked for five to six hours, then pressed, for it to dry. This was so it could be kept a long time, and used during the three days celebration, to avoid bad luck.

New Year's was a National Holiday for every Vietnamese. During the war years, the North and South had to come to an agreement on a cease fire on New Year's, so the people could celebrate in peace. In 1968, the year of the Monkey, The Communists broke the agreement, fired on Hue, and buried around 6,000 people alive. Speaking of the Lunar New Year, we have twelve animals for each twelve year cycle, we have: the rat, water buffalo, tiger, cat (rabbit), dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig. The time in a day was the same, two hours for each animal. For example, from 11:00 a.m to 1:00 p.m was the horse.

### ***Recall a fond childhood experience.***

In 1950, we knew that the Communists would come to the city and fight with the French. The rich people in Thai Binh, with the advice from the Catholic father, ran to villages nearby. One family, who had only one son, came to live in our house. The mother tried to help my mom out, so she could take care of the family, as my sister was just recently born. I don't remember, but in my memory, there was a lady who fed me, gave me a bath, held me, and put me into bed, who had a good smell. I did not know who I was looking for. When any lady came to my house, I tried to be close to her so I could smell them better, with the hope of finding that woman again. My brother always teased me, all women, were my mother. After I grew up, I thought that smell was from my mother. I tried to be close to her, and I could not get the feeling from her.

When I was five years old, I loved my grandpa very much. Any time he came to see



*My painting named, "Tet (New Year) of the Monkey 1968, at Hue". communists broke the New Year's cease fire at Hue and buried around 6,000 people alive. The woman is praying before the mountains of bones, of the unknown people.*

us in the city, I was the one who cried when he went back to the village. Once, when he was in a rickshaw, I ran after him. After a long way, my father biked to catch me. He held me on his lap and rode home. That was the last time I saw my grandpa. I don't remember much, but not long after that, my father left. My mother then left everything and took us to look for my father. We went to the South. About a year later, I heard my grandpa had died. I cried, for missing him, every night for over a week.

When my son was two, I went to work all day. Once, I asked him if he missed me. He said yes. To test him I ask what have you missed, like you missed my eyes, my hand...etc. He thought a moment and answered that he missed my smell. He was right. I missed his smell, too. Recently, I asked my dad about who took care of me when I was little. Who I did not remember and I could not find out. My father told me that was the lady who stayed in our house for about a year. She had no girl and loved me. Now, I know and I don't need to find out that feeling. One proverb says: 'Loving someone is the feeling when you're with that person'.

Every day, I saw my older brother and sister studying. My father was my first teacher. There were three of us: Phuong, me, and Vinh. My father always pushed us to work harder. He gave us a prize for studying a prayer, which he chose. The first got VN\$10.00, the second got VN\$7.00, and the third got VN\$5.00. Of course, my mother always tried to borrow the money from us and pay us back with clothes or something we needed.

Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, was the one who touched my heart and ended my tears. The one I could talk with, ask of and cried with, for what I felt was difficult. For what I thought I could not lived with, anymore.

***Recall a sad, frightening or unhappy experience that you had as a child.***

I was frightened of falling down, because I had fell down, in a muddy rice field once and in a pond twice. My experience was, after that, it's hard to be up as before.

I was frightened of noises at night, because Communists always came to our village or city at night. My parents had to go to meetings and we had to lie under the bed to be safer from the fighting at night. I didn't like to leave the house at night. It's scary to meet the fighting in the streets.

My mother beat me, when I was seven, because I asked something, which I had heard from somebody else. That made me afraid to ask because I was afraid of being beaten. It really hurt. I am unhappy having to go to bed without a blanket or cover, because of when I was a child; I had to share blanket with two other sisters and couldn't get a good sleep.

I am afraid of being sick. I had small pox when I was little. The scars are still on my face.

I hate steam, because after the small pox gone, my mother held me over a steaming pot of boiling water, covered with a blanket. It was hot and I was four years old. I squirmed violently, on her pregnant stomach. All she wanted was to make me quiet, while what I

wanted was to get out of the heat. I did not listen to what she said. She was angry and put me down in the hot water. Part of my skin, under my bottom, was burned. I was in bed for another month. I said in bed but my aunt told me a bad story. I was in a big, bamboo, flat basket on the bed. In the basket was a layer of bamboo paper, a layer of cow dung charcoal, and on top was a piece of rag. That was what I lay on. All of those layers were to help absorb the water, which came out of the wound on my bottom.

I had small pox the same time my mother was pregnant. She delivered a beautiful boy but he died in a week. The next year, she had another son and he died the same as the one before. The image of the woman crying for her baby, the day of the bombing, came to her. My mother became crazy. At midnight, she woke up pushing a heavy vase of water down. She took all her clothes off. My father was the only one who could handle her. She talked about her babies in heaven. My grandpa came to see her in bed. She kicked him and he fell down. She wanted everything in gold color. The mattress, pillow, and towels were with gold color. Her bowl was brass. She ate only the chicken egg yolk. I was scared of her. We stayed in an old, small, empty pagoda next to our house. After that, I was scared her craziness would come back. Thank God, she was healed in about half month, and it hasn't come back.

I hate to see children hungry, cold, sick, or being beaten.

I don't like people saying to someone, 'go to the hell'. I have to worry about how to save them, all my life, until now.

### ***Best friend***

My best friend, when I was little (four to six), was an imaginary friend. We liked to sit on the pavement, next to the street, at night, under the city lights. We sat there to watch people (I didn't know those were the shadows) rushing to the sewer and gone. Once, someone told me those people were going to hell. We sat there and counted, to know how many people went to hell every night. After my mother knew I sat there, she prohibited me, and I sat in a chair close to the door. We watched and counted the bugs flying around the mantle lamp, until they broke their wings and fell down. The number of bugs flying was many, and almost all of them had broken wings, later. When I grew up, I had Mary to talk with and my best imaginary friend was gone.

I was seven and Doan was 18 years old when he came to the South, alone. He studied in Hanoi and his family was in a village. He was in the same battalion as my dad. Dad brought him home. The house had one large room, with four walls, many doors and windows, and a roof. Five or six families lived in that house. Each family had space enough for beds, a place to put a trunk or suitcase and a wood stove, about the size of a small bucket. Doan played guitar and had no friends. After



*My oil painting, "Mother and Child", my best friend from the age of seven.*

dinner, Doan called me to sit next to him, while he played the guitar and sang a sad song, of missing Hanoi. I was the only audience and quickly fell asleep. He hung the mosquito net and put me in bed. About a year later, they made more houses and we moved to a new place, with more privacy for each family. Doan came to see my family once in awhile. When I was twelve, Doan asked my mother, if he could marry me when I grew up. My parents denied this because I was so young. Later he married my dad's friend's daughter. When I was sixteen, he came to visit my parents once and after that, I never saw him again.

### *First present to my father*

My mom's store sold yarn imported from France. She also took orders for knitted items from people in the city and neighboring villages. She made them or hired someone, to knit for her, under her guidance. Some of the rich did not want the leftover yarn. My aunt taught me to make a doll from it. I made one in red with black eyes and black hair and I gave it to my father. He tied it to the two brake wires at front of his bike. When we left the North to escape to the South, we left the bike at our home in Thai Binh, North Vietnam. Ever since I was young, my transportation has been the bike. I have owned my current bike for twenty years. I got it when I was in the United States a couple of years. Anytime I ride the bike; I remember that red yarn doll I had given to my father. Probably, he doesn't remember it now.

## CHAPTER THREE – THE TEEN YEARS

### *The school system*

Before 1954, the South was far away from Hanoi the Capital (in the North) and Hue (in the Middle), and the South was new silt rich land. The fields were rich in harvest, fruit was heavy on the trees, and the rivers were full of fish, on the land wild deer, rabbits, and birds everywhere. People in the South had an easy life. They were not much concerned about education. Why did they have to study hard, to have an easy life, when they already had it? School was for the rich only. In 1954, a million people from the North ran to the South. They lived right around the Capital before leaving. They knew the value of education. They knew the new government needed people to run the country and they wanted the best education for their children. They totally changed the face of the South.

The Vietnamese took over the government from the French in 1954. That is why the school system in Vietnam is organized like the French. Before 1954 and the Geneva Treaty, there were two free government high schools in the South, two in the North, and two in the Middle. Schools were not for everyone. All subjects were in French. There were many exams. If you didn't get at least 70 per cent on each exam, you could not move up. There was one for girls, Gia Long, my school, and one for boys, Petrus Ky. After the Geneva Treaty divided Vietnam by the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel, the North people moved to the South two new schools: Trung Vuong for girls and Vo Truong Toan for boys. They were all located in Saigon, the new Capital of the South. The government of the Republic of Vietnam held power in the South and the Middle. The schools in the Middle stayed at Hue. Each school had eight to fourteen classes for each grade from the sixth to the twelfth grades. There were two Catholic schools; one for girls, which was run by nuns and one for boys, which was run by brothers from the church. They were very expensive. My school was two miles from the Capital.

Each group of people from the North had a leader who was a Catholic priest. They made up their neighborhood for the most convenience with the church, parish office, Father's house, school, and the nun's convent. Not far from there was the open market. The houses and streets were setup by the Father. The fields were outside the village or neighborhood. In the village, almost everyone knew if new people came in. More Catholic schools were built where a new village was established, by the North people. Those schools were private and full of students from the neighborhood. They made a good living.



*Going to school as a teenage in uniform, 1970.*

Later on, the school system dropped many of the exams. Students only had one big exam for the whole country. It was given on the same day and with the same questions. Students had to pass it in order to graduate from high school.

When the Communists took the South, they governed all the school system. They changed all schools, which had become public, for a time, back to private schools. Now, there are no public schools in Vietnam anymore. Everything worked with money. Even under the control of the French, there were two public schools in each part of the country, to give the best students a chance. Under the Communists now, there are no public schools. A person like me would have no chance now in Vietnam.

### ***The guidelines for dating***

I studied at a girls high school. There were no boys. The truth was I had no chance to meet boys as a teenager. Myself, I met a boy when I was twenty. He was a college student, my friend's cousin. He was Buddhist. Like all families at that time, in the Catholic neighborhood, my parents gave rules. If you go out with a boy, you had to have someone with you. I was one when my friend dated. You couldn't let a boy come home, but only the one you should choose to be your husband. Actually, Saigon was very crowded but it was small. Everybody knew whom you went out with. Usually, the date was arranged, by someone's relative. My aunt arranged for me to meet Vinh. She made a chance for me to meet him at her house. We had dinner at her house many times. We went to eat out once. He asked to marry me. I didn't feel anything and answered no. He told his family to choose for him someone else. He married and had three boys. They are in Vietnam.

In the war, boys had to go to the field and were killed easily. Girls, growing up, needed to marry. If someone arranged one, that was good. Almost all the people I knew got married from an arrangement. I let Tan, the only male I met at the Japanese School, come to my house and meet my parents. Both families were Catholic and came to the South in 1954. We were all grown up, but his mother was very old. My grandma said he was too old for me. He was eight years older than I was, but he looked very old. We are friends. Now he lives in Seattle, Washington. He is still single.

### ***What Teenagers do for entertainment***

We were in a war. Boys had to study hard to pass the exams. If he passed, he needed to study harder. If he failed, he had to go to Quang Trung, Thu Duc, Nha Trang, or Da Lat to be trained, or the police would come to search your house and take you there. When boys got out, they went home to see their family, and to meet someone arranged by the family. They could meet girls anywhere. Some males had one wife at the place where they trained and another in the battalion, where he worked. Once, I met a male in a suicide squad, when I was waiting for the bus. He asked me to have a fruit juice drink right there. Out of respect to what he had done for our safety, which I had at that time, I stayed a little longer to talk. Before I took the bus to go home, he asked for a date the next day. The next day, I had come and had a sugar cane juice not far from him and felt sad. I did not show up. My family wouldn't accept him. He did not have much education and no future. I adored him but I could not be with

him. I was afraid to face the death of the one I loved. I couldn't wait longer. I left while he was smoking his third cigarette.

Girls had an easier life than boys did. I liked to go to church and pray for my father and all the men, I knew to be safe in the fields. Once in a while, in summer, I went to movies with my aunt and cousins. It was a good time but I didn't like it much. The reason was we had to wait in a long line for the tickets. The theater was too crowded and full of smoke. People stood against walls and at the back. After the movie, we usually stopped at the eating stand, for some food, like noodles or ice cream. It was a lot better if you had a shower to clean off the smell of smoke and then talk about the movie. I liked to shop too, but just look, not to buy.

In Vietnam, it's hot all the time. Schools usually get out at noon and you need to go home quick for lunch. In the afternoon, it's very hot outside. If you don't have to work at that time, you should like to have a little nap. You needed to finish homework soon, because at night you couldn't study with the mosquitoes.

In summer, if I could go to library to study, it was the best. We had a main Saigon Library, Abraham Lincoln Library, and London Library in Saigon at that time. All of these had tables, chairs, and air conditioners. Of course, it was usually full when I came. I wanted to get the same education as the males. I had to study hard like them. I studied at the church. There was no air conditioner, but I could find a quiet time without anyone bothering me. If I studied at home, I had to do work and after work, I would fall asleep. Find a place to study, in Vietnam, was a big problem for a poor teenager like me. Rich people have an air conditioner at home. Many of my friends had a tutor. I was a tutor, myself.

### *My closest buddies*

In the seventh and eighth grades, my best friends were Huu Hanh and Ngoc Minh. We liked to read and every week we would borrow two books from library. The three of us decided what books we wanted to read so we could share them. After only two years, we read almost all the books we liked, from the library in our school. We also were together during recess.

If we had a little money, we bought some fruit and shared. Ngoc Minh had a boyfriend. She brought many interesting books to share with us. Those books we could not find in the school library. We took a picture together, at a fancy photographer store, in Saigon, too. The literature teacher in our eighth grade recognized the closeness of us. She separated us. She also asked Minh and me to cut our long hair, even if I had it tied up when I was in school. Ngoc Minh had to stay in the eighth grade. In the ninth grade, Huu Hanh chose science and I chose math. Once in a while, we met each other in the schoolyard. In the summer, when I went to summer school to study English, I once met Ngoc Minh on a pedicab. She was dressed up like an adult. She asked me if I wanted to be a dancer or a waitress at an American bar. Looking at the small pox marks on my hands, I told her 'Look at me. I am not beautiful like you. I don't think I could do that'. After that time, I never saw her again. After another year, I did not see Huu Hanh around anymore, either.

After the sixth grade, I went to summer school to study English. On the bus, I met Cuong Pham. We were in the same grade at Gia Long High School, but a different room with me. In the twelfth grade, I had to change from math to science because the math was too difficult. I was in the same class with Cuong. We were best friends. I could talk with Cuong about anything I worried about. Anything I could talk only with Mary about. We were in touch with each other. Before the day I left Vietnam, I went to her house and said good bye. I kept in touch, but then she left Vietnam, too. After that, I did not get any news from her. I wrote to her many times. Her father answered me. He said he would mail my letter to her, but I never got her new address.



*Friends reunion in California, from left: Yen, Han, Thao, and Loan Vu.*

We didn't have a phone. All my friends lived far from my house, four to five miles. We talked together 10-20 minutes a day, at the break. If I talk about my closest buddy, I have to say that's Mary. She was the one I shared all my sadness and happiness. After talking to her, I felt safe and protected by her. I can tell I always had her and I got through my teen years okay, because of her.

### ***Friends reunion***

In California and Houston, Texas, they had a reunion of my Gia Long High School, the school not just my class. Talking about the school, it's kind of too large. I like something small and closer. That's the reason I haven't attended any reunion.

In the summer of 2002, we had a reunion of our teacher's group, from Saigon to Phu Lam. Four of us Yen, Han, Thao, and I met in California, after not seeing each other for 22 years. We had ten days together, to go around. We went to Glass Church, a Museum, Ocean Beach, Disneyland, and a casino. It was very nice when we could sleep in the same room and talk. We talked a lot about what we had done when we lived together, before, in Vietnam.

### ***Work as a teenager***

Yes, I usually helped my sister with the job of tailoring. She cut and I sewed. At age sixteen, I was a teacher of third and fourth grades during the summer. After that, I tutored three boys in my neighborhood. I kept a little money to buy math and physic books, because I loved to read the way to solve problems. The rest I gave to my mother.

### ***Transportation stories***

Yes, in 1963, after nine years, we left the house in the North. My mother took all the savings to buy a house. I had to go to school by bus. The bus was very crowded, like fish in sardine

cans. Not far from me, one man was trying to steal the wallet from the back pocket of another man. I suddenly remembered the story of, if you say or did something to let the owner know the stealer will seek revenge on you. They could beat you up or kill you. I was scared. The bus was very crowded, but I felt cold. My hands held the handle hard. I did not know what to do. Without trusting myself, afraid, I made a signal to the owner. From one bus stop to another, I kept asking God to do something. Fifteen minutes later, the owner stood up and got off. I was happy, as he saved my life. I talked to Minh. She took the same bus to school, like me, but to a different class. She had the same situation like me once, too.

### ***Favorite book, radio, actress, or movie***

We had a radio, a small one. It couldn't get many channels, besides there was only one in Saigon. We didn't have a television in Vietnam, and of course, all programs were commercials and propaganda. I liked to read. My favorite book was a translation of "In Family", by Hector Malot. Besides the story, the rest had something related to my life and I could learn from them in many ways. Girls needed to be trustful, to affirm, have will, have wishes, courage, firmness with purpose, and not be disheartened. The men needed courage, be kind-hearted, and loving. To be a success one needed to be deliberate, wise, not unexpected and not awkward or clumsy. To find work a person needed to be smart, secretive, and faithful. Ladies need to be kind, sweet, gentle, pure and noble of mind, straight forward, and pretty.

I liked cartoon movies, in English, because it's from drawings. I liked movies, from the French, with actress Brigitte Bardot. She was my favorite. In the Vietnamese culture, anything the girls did was serious. Her role made things become more simple, relaxed and not serious anymore. I liked the roles she played. The role of a woman, not much about how bad she was. She had a sweet heart, love, happiness, and hope. She would become good at the end. Watching a movie with her in it, I always had a special hope for my future. The future where I had a wonderful life.

### ***People, who influenced me as a teenager***

When I was teenager, there were two well known people; Ngo Dinh Diem, who was president in Vietnam and John Kennedy in the United States. Jackie was Kennedy's wife and Mrs. Ngo Dinh Nhu (the President's sister-in-law). There were many rumors about Kennedy's relationships with other women. Jackie always kept herself happy and noble in her honorable position. Le Thuy (Nhu's wife) tried to help the country in many ways. The assassinations happened and both men died. Jackie remarried. Le Thuy stepped into the shadows. She forgot herself as a young (30's) beautiful, intelligent lady. Both ladies impacted me, in the role of women, with husbands, family, and country. I told myself, I would act the same way as Jackie, if I did not agree with my husband, in front of the public. If my husband died, I would step into the shadows, with my children, like Le Thuy. She has done just like the way of, "Catholics in Religion and Confucian in Culture". I told myself that, but I do not know if I could do it myself or not. Of course, saying it is easier than doing it.

Vietnamese were taught at home, school and church based on, “Religiously we are Catholic. Culturally we are Confucian”. In Religion, the teaching was the same, but culturally it was different, for boy and girl roles, in family and society. That’s the reason they had different schools for different sexes. I had been taught and beaten. I didn’t like it. More than that, I was afraid of being spanked. The way to avoid it was to do what was the best. I was a teenager, a little smart one. I liked to read what I wanted. More so than memorize word for word the lessons of the way to live, the way to behavior, the way you had to do, in the role of a woman, in the family. Anyway, the time it took to memorize, by heart, helped me have more patience. It also kept me away from the temptations of society during war. Where there were many ways to make easy money and to ruin a girl’s life.

The Buddhist monk burned himself, in 1963, because of Religious problems. Not long after that, President Ngo Dinh Diem was assassinated. Then, the Buddhists monks kept their strike even more than before. My school was next to the Xa Loi Temple. In my school, 80% were Buddhists. I learned from many speakers. They talked about your rights and your responsibilities. Those made us step out to strike. I said step out because only one step out the door of your classroom made the total meaning. Once, I heard one of my teachers talk about your choices. Probably, I heard about choices before and did not notice about it. That time was different. We thought, discussed about it and we quit the strike. We were more serious about studying than ever before, even when students were on strike right outside of our school. That event helped me to become a member of a Vietnamese human rights group. Also, with the ‘Vietnam Voice’, I worked on.

## CHAPTER FOUR – ADULTHOOD

### *What did you want to be or do after you finished your schooling?*

When I was young, I liked to draw. My family didn't like for me to be an artist. When I was a teenager, I wanted to go to Japan to study to be an engineer. I couldn't go, so I attended Saigon Law University and studied the languages: English, French, and Japanese.

### *Goal change*

My goals changed many times because of the Communists. In 1972 Americans withdrew from Vietnam and cut off financial support. Everybody could see the Republic Government in Saigon couldn't fight against the Communists, from the North. The Communists were fully supported by China and Russian. My family had experience with the Viet Cong (Communists) before. My uncle called a meeting, with me, in front of all family members, and said: 'the war now was different. We cannot win against the Viet Cong. Under the Communists, we will have no law. That meant they don't use lawyers. Children and the sick are always there'. Looking at me, he continued: 'You have to study to become a teacher or a nurse'. Yes, sir, I said. I went to the hospital where my friend was a nurse. The blood and dirt scared me. I decided to become a teacher.

I tried another exam. This exam was more difficult because I had to deal with males and I had oral exams. If a male gets into school, he can stay in school to finish, get a job, and wouldn't have to go into the army. Another oral exam scared me. My mother always told me I was ugly. I did not think I could be chosen.

I need someone to talk with, to ask for help. I went to the church. The place I always study for the exams. I needed a clean place. I went to confession. I felt better. I told Mary that I was afraid and had no hope. I didn't know about my future. Could she please ask God for me, so I could have some blessings from him. I found myself at peace. I was ready for the exam. The day they put up the results my name was on the oral exam list. I was one of the 800 out of over 6,000 students to be accepted.

The oral exams came. I did not have any nice clothes. All my clothes were the white uniforms, from Gia Long High School. There was no choice. I wore what I did when I was a Gia Long student, without make up. Well, all I had was lipstick.

The man asked me to read a paragraph, of composition, from a textbook. He then asked me the meaning of it. He wrote something down, in his notebook, after all of my answers. After that he read a sentence and asked me to write it on the board. That was all. I gave him a smile, said thank you and went out. One more time to check the results. My name was on the list of 600 out of 800 who had the orals. I didn't go home right away. I went to the church to thank Mary and ask her to help me thank God.

My time in College was fast and the time in was more serious. Before being sent to be a teacher at someplace, the national police checked your record. Some students in my school were being caught, because they had been involved with Communists. When I was in the

Social Group, I had a friend named Than, in the same class. Than had a country look. He liked to talk with me. Once he invited me to go to Cho Don Market. I did not go because I did not know where it was.

When the Communists took the South, Than wore his uniform of the Communists Army. He went to school with a gun at his side. Lucky, I did not make a close friend with him. We had to study one month with a Communist group and had an exam. My father was afraid of the Communists, which made me scared of them, too. Afterwards, I found out they are all dumb, and all they know is limited. After a month in school again, each class had to make a poster. People bought books about Ho Chi Minh, about the Communist Party, and studied for the written exam. I did not have money and I did not care about the new people, but I needed to know something for the exam. The day before the exam, I took my lunchtime to go around and read through almost all of the posters. That was enough for me to do the test. All thousands of us graduated and transferred to teaching jobs, in schools around the country.

I was okay with the job as teacher. Students liked me and I liked children. All of them are beautiful, with their big eyes, open, looking at me like the deer eyes. I fell in love with them. I taught 70 miles from home. It isn't very far here, but in Vietnam, under the control of Communists, it was very far. In the beginning, I went home every weekend. As the price of transportation went higher, I went home less and less.

I needed more money. I was in a business where I bought and sold tea, on the black market, to make enough money for living. Later, I had money to escape from Vietnam.

### *External circumstances that interfered and made it difficult to reach goals*

In our big family, with all of us in school, we were not rich or poor. I was twenty years old in 1967, when I finished high school. In Saigon, the Capital of South Vietnam, during the war, there were a lot of foreigners. It was a place a young woman, who knew English like me, could make a good living. Once, I was looking for a secretary job, in a Foreign Company, from a newspaper advertisement. I followed the directions from the newspaper and found the place easily, because I had grown up there. It was at a hotel and I knocked at the room. The young Korean man who was doing the interview had a towel wrapped around him. I walked around the room to look at all the college diplomas and licenses, while he walked into next room. He came back to me with coffee in his hand and still in the towel. Look at him, I asked if he was to interview me dressed like that. He said yes because of the hot weather. I felt hot, a higher voice, you have an air conditioner, please, police. He said what's wrong. I answered, "you have no education, I don't want to work for you". He was mad at me, and took his Master Degree and put it on the table in front of me. I glanced at it, but I couldn't except a boss like that. I walked out and never thought about working with a foreigner again. Even though they paid three times more than the Vietnamese did. I worked at the Japanese school, where I studied Japanese.

When I studied at the Pedagogy College to be trained as a teacher, I still drew when I had time. My friends enjoyed watching what I did. In school, we had to work with some social work. They asked me to draw. I studied. What I did and had done was the idea of what my

family wanted or I want they wanted me to become. I did not want to be a troublemaker for my parents. I couldn't and I didn't try to go with what I wanted. I am a big girl. The oldest had education and stayed home. I had to show up the picture of a good girl; the model for seven brothers and sisters younger than me. I needed to study something that helped me make money.

Finishing high school, I studied Japanese, with the idea of going to Japan to study. The day I was chosen, I quietly dropped out, because my family did not have enough money for me to finish the program in three years.

I studied Law and at the end of 1972, my uncle again, told me I had to choose to be a nurse or teacher. This was because Communists would take over and they don't use lawyers. Once again to be chosen from the top students, I took the exams, which were in two parts: writing and oral. I got into the Saigon Pedagogy (teacher training) School for two years.

In 1981, I escaped from Vietnam to Malaysia, and in 1982 to Springfield, Missouri. I became a student again at Southwest Missouri State University. I studied to have a major in Computers. At that time, I clung to English, with a small thread. It was hard. I changed to Physics and tried to be an Engineer. I worked better in Math and Science, such as Physics, than in Social Studies, such as Psychology. Then, I got married. I had more responsibility with the role of wife and sister of two young high school siblings. I changed to be a teacher in Math. Then I had a baby and then part of the business in a restaurant.

John, my only son, needed me. Before, I studied with the hope I could make money. One day, someone asked me, if I won the lottery what would I do. My answer was, I would buy a small house, study art and stay home with my son and paint. My husband encouraged me with the best reasons. I am married, I belong to my husband. He let me do what I wanted to. I changed majors for the last time. I put all myself into my art. I graduated in 1996, with a major in oil painting. At the end, I got what I wanted. After that, whatever people think about me, for myself, I am a millionaire.

### *Leaving my parent's home*

I grew up in a big family, with three generations, very close together. Actually, we do have nursing homes, but I haven't been to one once. In our culture, the family takes care of the old. Even soldiers who died in the field were brought home before the funeral day. Everyone I knew, in Vietnam, died at home. The home was very important. Vietnamese consider the house, which you rent, isn't your home. Only the house you own could be your home. To own a house was the first order in your life, because from there you could have a home. It was more important than your job or your career. After my brother, my sister and I were born, my parents thought about a home for their children. They planted 100 trees around the house and ponds. The China tree grows very straight. My dad told me, after 15 to 16 years, those trees could be high enough to cut down, to make the house frame for us. I asked him how about around the frame. He said the brick maker could make bricks. The only thing we had to buy was the roof metal or red roof brick. It was common for three or four generations to live in the same house. Girls do not leave their parents' house until they are married.

When I was chosen to study at Gia Long High School, Vinh and I stayed with my aunts, for school, while my family moved to the highlands. After about two years, my family moved back to Saigon.

In 1975, I taught far from Saigon. I had to move, but it did not mean I left my parents' home. The Communists do not think like traditional Vietnamese. They crossed my name out of the family's members certified papers. When I came home, my brother told me I had to go to the village office to report. It made me mad. I told him I would not report and I was ready for whatever happened. I said that, because in Communist society, your neighbor was the officer's watcher. What happened in your house, they would report for credit. I had not married. In Vietnamese culture, I belonged to my parents. My family was still my roots. Under the Communists control, it changed. Everything goes to the Party. The Party was the focus of the people. They destroyed human beings. You are only one of millions in the world. You are nothing special, no love, no trust, no power, and no choice. They want you to become a donkey with covered eyes and go where they want you to go. I did not think I could stay longer. I did not want to go home. I knew a secret group. They wanted to stand up and fight against the Communists. That was the reason I let a male in that group stay in my apartment. I considered myself one of them. I thought about leaving the country. Communists try to break you out of the family, but when you are against them, they do not let your family alone.

I left my parents' home, for teaching, from 1975 to 1981. In the beginning, I came home every other week. The price went up on everything. I started coming home once a month. After I had my business with tea, I came home once every month. In the Communist society, everything belongs to the government: your land, your house, your car, your company, your produce...etc.

Each city has its own different produce. Phu Lam has beans and rice. Bao Loc has tea and coffee. Your produce you could only sell in your city. If you brought it to another city, the government could collect it. There are many produce control stations on the highway. They checked everything to make sure none of it could get out of the city. They could collect from two to five pounds and up of produce, such as coffee, tea, bean, rice; they also collected a large amount of any produce, which wasn't from your city. They could check your house or your carrier any time they wanted to. People sold to the government in cheap prices and were paid later. Others sold in the market for the best price they could. Many people bringing produce went past the stations from another way. They could bike, walk, or get lost in the jungle.

In 1976, I taught in Phu Lam Elementary School. I got \$VN50.00 a month from the government. That was enough for me to buy 20 pounds of rice or five pounds of pork chops, in the market. I lived in a home for schoolteachers, so I did not have to pay for bed and board. Four of us, from Saigon, made a group: Thao, Yen, Han, and me. In 1977, Han's sister was killed. She was a dentist at Cho Ray Hospital in Saigon. Her best friend was a doctor there. One evening, she and Han biked to the hospital to see her friend. She had an allergy and the doctor wanted to give her a shot for it. A Communist northern doctor ran in and said



*My oil painting, "Why I left Vietnam", from the Vietnam Voice series. A small boat, with more than 200 people, sea sick during a storm. Loan Vu was one of them chosen to die or have freedom.*

let him give her the shot. After the shot, she could not breathe and died in a half an hour. The doctor afterwards said he was sorry about giving her the wrong medicine. After the funeral, Han quit teaching and left Vietnam. Thao got married. Yen was transferred to another school. I made a new friend. Nu had grown up from there. She was married and had five children. She lived in the business zone. She let me stay in her house free, for a while. After that I rented a small room for \$VN50.00 a month. I let two other friends buy tea from the Bao Loc carrier. We sold a couple hundred pounds of tea a day. People bought our tea and transported it to Saigon.

I taught in the morning and did the business in the afternoon. From my business I made \$VN30.00 to \$VN80.00 a day. I met a man, against the Communists, from this. He was one of the people who carried tea for me. The black market helped me make money.

In 1980 I came home and knew that Thu, my younger sister, had been out of school. This was, because of her age: she wasn't in the right grade. Thu had been in the hospital for a while. That made her behind in school. One reason the government tried to keep people from school was that people who had a higher education were harder to control. Due, my younger brother, was fifteen. This age was on a list of soldiers to conquer



*In Bataan, Philippine refugee camp, 1982, Loan Vu is the fourth from the right in the back row.*

Cambodia. Thai was another brother of mine. He escaped from the re-education camp. He could not go home. He lived in one of his friend's home and was in danger.

My parents were afraid for each of us. I thought about escaping from Vietnam.

The room I rented was in front of a church. I went to church every morning. The only person I could talk to was Mary. A man I knew fought at Dalat against the Communists. They ran away after that. For safety, he stayed with me for a while. I had my nephew, Tien, with me at that time. I was scared of the secret police being around all the time. If they knew my friend in the group, I would be in jail the rest of my life. All I could do was pray.

New Year's of 1981 came. I was ready to go home to celebrate with my family. When at church, I had a feeling of Mary telling me something that time. Before I went home, I asked the secretary to make for me two more special business papers, from the school, besides mine. One with Thai's name and, another leaving the name blank. It happened I left Vietnam with Thai, Due, and Thu three days later. For two days, we went around in the country. Sleeping and eating at the open market. On boat, without drink or food, I only prayed. We landed in Malaysia after three days and nights on the Pacific Ocean. We were in Pulau Bidong Island Camp a year, and in Bataan, Philippines for another six months, before coming to the United States.

We were in Springfield, Missouri, in the United States, on May 31, 1982. The reason we came here, was because my brother sponsored us under the USCC (United States Catholic Council). In 1991, my parents came and have lived with us since.

***When and how did you meet my spouse?***

I am married. My husband's name is Boyd Francis Nigh. I met him at SMSU. A couple days after coming to the United States, Sister Pat told us to go to English as a Second Language classes at Sacred Heart Catholic Church. After a month, the class closed for summer vacation, for a month. The Sister sent to our home a couple of volunteers to teach us, twice a week, for two hours. It was a week before I was able to say the alphabet, in English, correctly. I was able to read an old piece of paper in a week. My brother, Giap, suggested I go to Southwest Missouri State University (SMSU). I asked Cung, my oldest brother, to give me US\$300.00 for tuition, for part time classes in the fall. I was a student at SMSU, in August 1982.



*With the orphan group in the Philippine refugee camp, 1982. Loan is the first from left.*

In January 1983, I was in my second semester. A computer class assignment was not too hard, but I worked on it for an hour. I couldn't believe myself. Looking to the next computer, there was an American male doing the same problem as me. I asked for help. He showed me what I had to do. Before he left, he asked me to go somewhere, on the other side of National Street, to drink a soda. A couple of hours later, he came back, and helped me finish.

He asked me to go for a soda. I said yes and we started to walk there. I changed my mind. I wanted to go home. He asked could he walk me home because it was dark. I said yes. Again, he talked about the place to drink a soda for us to go there. I said yes and changed my mind again and again. At the end, he walked me home and I invited him in for some rice with chicken. After that, he helped me correct my writings in English classes. Last summer, I went through my old stuff. I still had my papers from English 111 class, when I was here for about a year. I appreciate him, for my English, is

a lot better now. Some papers, he asked me to rewrite and rewrite again and again. He wouldn't mind if I had to rewrite a paper four or five times.

He was the only one to ever give me a dozen red roses, on my first birthday after I knew him. He was also the only one who encouraged me in art. Anyway, he was in many of the 'only ones'. He was a nice person, but my family didn't like him.

One day, Boyd showed me a piece of rosary beads. He wanted to know what it was. It was a shock for me. This piece of old, broken rosary, which he had gotten somewhere and kept. How long had he had it? He did not remember. It should be a long time. This piece he remembered, in the many little things, in his belongings. How many times had he moved? It was a sign from my Mother Mary. Until the day I met him, I have broke and lost over ten good rosaries. I have lost many rosaries made of stone and silver. The piece he showed me was cheap, old and only a piece less than half of a rosary. The piece followed him from the time he was in the Navy. It could have been from 1976, almost seven years prior. I told a brother in the congregation about it. I talked about my thinking. God let him do this for me. Does God want me to spend more time with my rosary? Does saying the rosary make God happy? Is that the reason Mary led me here to show him about it? I looked at him, with the piece in my hand and a lot of questions on my mind? Who was he? Did he bring a message from God to me? Was he the one to chose?

In Vietnam, a girl could marry from the age of sixteen. My parents wanted me to finish school, but they worried about my marrying. Especially when I was around thirty. People felt bad for me. I didn't think about it. At least once, I was ready to accept marriage. Then the thinking in my mind changed. I thought I was not ready. The war, the death, the role of wife and mother, all of which made me scared. I knew if I wasn't to be a nun, I had to marry sooner or later. All the men who came into my life were good, but I had no feeling. I needed help. Who could help me? I had no one I could trust besides Mary. At the age of 19 or 20, I tried to be a nun, but the nun did not accept me. She said if I had a boyfriend, she would take me. It made me confused. I came and asked Mary to choose for me a boyfriend, and later a husband. From that time, 1968 through 1983, many times I repeated the asking to remind Mary. This big thing I put in Mary's hands. I asked her to find for me the right man. Did the piece of rosary, which Boyd asked about, was that the sign? Many, many times I asked Mary about that.

To explain, I asked a brother in our congregation to write for me the prayer of "Hail Mary", in English. I also cut a picture of Mary out of a calendar. I framed the picture, in a frame without glass, I found in a junk room, where I rented an apartment. I gave both to Boyd and told him, when we pray one on the paper, go with one piece on the rosary. Both of these we use to pray to her to the glory of God, The Father, because she was the Mother of Jesus and mother of all of us. I told him we could ask her for anything. I also showed him how to make the cross before praying and he tried it. I told him he could try by, everyday making the cross and saying three "Hail Mary's" in front of her picture. You can ask anything and it will work. Once more, I encouraged him to try. After that, I asked and knew he did try it every day.

My family believed in the old traditions and they didn't accept for girls to get married to a different race. My oldest brother, Cung, graduated in the United States. He accepted our friendship. He liked Boyd, but talking about marriage? It was hard for him to decide. Cung said, we came to their country; we could not deny their relationship. Boyd was not Catholic, which was another problem. Boyd then went to church with us at the SMSU Ecumenical Center on Sunday, to the Roman Catholic Mass. He was also driving me to rosary, in the Vietnamese community, from home to home, every Saturday evening. We were friends for about two years. Boyd gave me a ring. I took it, returned it back, later, and then took it again. I was confused. I did not know him much.

One day, he wanted to know more about being a Catholic. I told Cung, my brother. He told me to talk to Boyd about that. He wanted to make sure that was what Boyd wanted to do. It wasn't my requirement for marrying and it wasn't connected to the wedding of mine. Boyd went to St. Agnes Catholic Church office and asked about how to become Catholic. The Father asked him what for. His answer was he wanted to marry a Catholic girl. The Father told him if that was the only the reason then Boyd didn't have to. The Father would help him without becoming a Catholic. In the end, Boyd wanted to know about Catholicism. After six months of attending classes, Boyd was baptized on Easter, 1985, in St. Agnes Cafeteria. This was because the Church was being remodeled.

What he studied about was the basic, which a Catholic needed to know. He also learned that to have a wedding in the Catholic Church, we had to let the church know six months ahead. The Church also wanted the couples to do a test. The scores helped them know their thinking about the new family, which they were going to build up. That was a good idea. We did the test. Then we attended the classes for couples going to marry. I liked to learn and there were many things new to me in this new land.

The class was almost over. Boyd asked me to go to the courthouse to find out if we needed to do the blood test before marrying. People told him to ask the judge. The answer was no. They talked so fast. They told me to put my hand up. When I got home, I find out, I was married by law. My God, I was married without anybody. I just went to do the blood test and at the end was married. All my life I was afraid of getting married. Now I was married in 15 minutes without anyone from my family. I felt guilty about it. What I could tell everybody. What would my family and my friends think about me? I couldn't hide it. I had to tell Cung about it. Cung was a Catholic priest. He was never married. Over a week of thinking, I called Cung and kind of confessed. I told him about what happened in the courthouse. About how I did not know something should be so important but how simple it was here. (Note: When my husband read this, he explained to me that we had not gotten married in the courthouse, but only got the marriage license. All this time, I had thought we had gotten married.)

## *Wedding day*

Our wedding was at St. Agnes Cathedral, on September 7, 1985, by Father Tom Reidy, Father Dinh Vuong Can, and Father Ephrem Vu Khiem Cung. The Maid of Honor was Mary Lou, my new sister-in-law and the best man was John, Boyd's friend from the Navy. Loat Vu, my cousin, gave me away. Two little Vietnamese girls walked in front of me, wearing red Vietnamese dresses (ao dai). The singing was from Vietnamese children. After the mass, we had the reception at St. Agnes Cafeteria, with catering from Leong Tea House, a Chinese Restaurant. I wore a white wedding dress with a long train for the Mass in the church. At the reception, I wore a Vietnamese traditional wedding dress, the red ao dai and white covering, white pants and a yellow covering on my head. The red color was a symbol of happiness. There was Dr. Sun Woodrow from the Math Department, Dr. John Northtrip from Physics,



*In Vietnamese traditional wedding dress, from left: Aunt Violet, Boyd Nigh, Loan Vu, and Betty Nigh, mother-in-law, from the left*

Dr. Fisher from Psychology and about 200 Vietnamese guests at our wedding. Our wedding was on Labor Day weekend September 7, 1985.

After the wedding, we went to the Ramada Hotel, in town. Because of the wedding, I did not have time to study, from the beginning of the semester. I needed to study so I wanted to go right home the next morning. I did not know I broke the plans, which Boyd wanted to do for our honeymoon. Monday was Labor Day and on Tuesday morning, I was in class like normal.

The apartment Boyd and I lived in was about four blocks from my brothers and sister. After school, I went home, to the apartment on Madison, where I lived with Giap, Due, and Thu, to take care of my brothers and sister. Giap was 24 years old at that time. He went to school, worked, and never took care of anyone, beside himself. There were many readings; I usually found a quiet place in the library or Hill Hall, to read after school. One time, after cooking and helping Thu with her homework I cleaned until two in the morning. At that time, Boyd was studying for his Masters Degree. He worked as an assistant. He came home and never saw me. At two o'clock in the morning, I wasn't home. Boyd worried until he called to Madison Street and got my answer. I told him I had came home. He didn't like it much, he told me, the place I lived, with him, was my home, not the other. After that, I understood and tried to come home around ten.



*Wedding of Boyd Nigh and Loan Vu in St. Agnes Cathedral, Springfield, Missouri, September 7, 1985.*

After being married six months, Boyd agreed to rent a small house, so Due and Thu could move in with us. In Vietnamese culture, the groom has to pay for every thing. Sometimes the family of the bride asks for money: that meant they could ask for anything, before losing their daughter. My parents weren't here and my brother didn't ask for anything. Paying for the wedding was normal. Boyd paid for our wedding of about \$3,000. He always said he bought a wife and after six months, he had to married all her family. He was right, in 1987, we bought a big, old, house. Tien, Vui, and my nephews stayed with us. In 1988 my sister-in-law and her three children came and lived with us for a year. At one time, there were 14-16 family members living in four apartments in our house. In 1991, my parents came and live next door to us now.



*Twelve of these people from this lived with us, in a large apartment house. Loan Vu Nigh is the second, in the second row from the left.*

### ***My child***

Now, we have been married for 18 years and we have a son named John Gio-An Vu Nigh. John was born on March 21, 1989. This was the Year of the Snake. In our culture, we count the day you became pregnant, as the day you first come into this world.



*Loan Vu Nigh, John Vu Nigh, and Boyd Nigh on John's Baptism Day June 11, 1989 at St. AGnes Cathedral, Springfield, Missouri.*

The end of 1988, in the moon calendar, was the beginning of March 1989 of the New Year. Since 1988 was the Year of the Dragon, this means John was conceived in the Year of the Dragon, with the tail end of the Snake. Boyd was born in the Year of the Dragon March 11, 1952. Counting the day he was conceived, he should be the Year of the Cat with the end of the Dragon. I was born in June in the Year of Pig. Meaning the head was dog and the end was a pig.

In 1986, my father, in Vietnam, wrote me a letter asking about my children. I wrote back to him, and said I did not know why, but I had no sign of being pregnant, after being married for more than a year. I also asked him to pray for me. The next letter I got from him, he said I would get pregnant with a son. Also, I had to give my son to God, to become a Roman Catholic Priest. His saints name was John The Baptist.

The letter I got was in 1986. At that time I was a full time student, with a Major in Physics, Minor in Math, took care of a family of four and worked part-time in the SMSU library. One

day while biking to school I fell down. After that I had my period a lot and for over a week. I went to see the doctor at the SMSU Health Clinic. After checking me, she sent me to see a regular doctor for women. I went for another check up and both doctors told me that I had a tumor. It needed to be removed. Boyd took me to St. John Hospital. He sat with me, in the room, while studied, I was busy with the homework from my Physics Lab. The Catholic Father came to see me. He asked what I was doing. My answer was, I am studying. I continued, if I am still alive, I still have to study. He asked was I afraid. No, I answered him with a smile. Going on I said I am ready anytime God takes me and I asked him for confession. He gave me the blessing and I said good bye, with another big smile.

On the paper, they would remove the tumor and tie off one of my ovary tubes. They suggested tying both to be more secure. No, I wanted a baby. I still hoped for the one side. They did not put me to sleep. One nurse was next to me to make sure I was O.K. Suddenly I felt I couldn't breathe. I told the nurse and I was gone. From my place up in the air, I looked down on my body. I had no feeling. I seemed to have no contact with my body. When I turned to go to the place I had to go, I woke up. The nurse gave me oxygen to breathe. Now I understand, when people wrote about the nothingness of the body. It's just a thing for the soul to use for the benediction, in front of God. The operation should be an hour and Boyd waited outside. He kept waiting and waiting, one hour, and then the second hour. He went to the hospital Chapel to pray for me, with Hail Mary's, like before he prayed with Mary, for us to marry. After four hours, he could see me in the recovery room. I recognized him the same time I was feeling my Rosary, which I always have with me, anytime away from home.

Two years later, in the summer, I had a dream. In the stream, there was a little girl sitting on a leaf. I heard a voice say that was my baby. My answer was no. That isn't my baby. The leaf kept floating, caring the girl away. I was confused looking after her. Suddenly, something from the sky dropped next to my face, it was a beautiful boy. The same voice as before told me that was my baby. I was slow to answer because of I did not know what to say. Like a Christmas ornament bursting apart the boy became a lot of silver and gold little stars, in the air. Like someone waking me up, I had a feeling of having something in my body. Counting from that day, I should have a baby in February.

I asked Boyd to take me to do a pregnancy test in July. It came out negative. At that time I went to confession and went to church every morning. Usually, I don't like to drink, but that time I took the wine after taking Communion. I still remember my happy feeling at that time. I tried to keep that happiness for myself, to The Marian Days in August. That morning, I asked Boyd again to go get a test. My mother-in-law heard what I said. She told me: you were tied off, if pregnant, that was a miracle. I asked again and the result was positive. I was so happy and ready to go to Carthage, Missouri, to thank God, through Mary, for one more miracle I got in my life.

After those happy days, we thought about my son's future. Yes, my father's letter said that it would be a son. The day we had the good news was the day we had only 50 dollars in the bank, after paying on the house. All our savings were gone after the six months Boyd stayed home. Boyd did not like his job at Cox Hospital, the Psychiatric Ward, and he had quit. I was

a student. Due had moved out, with Bon's wife and three children. Two of my nephews wanted to move to Texas to live with Loat, my cousin. Only Thu was with us.

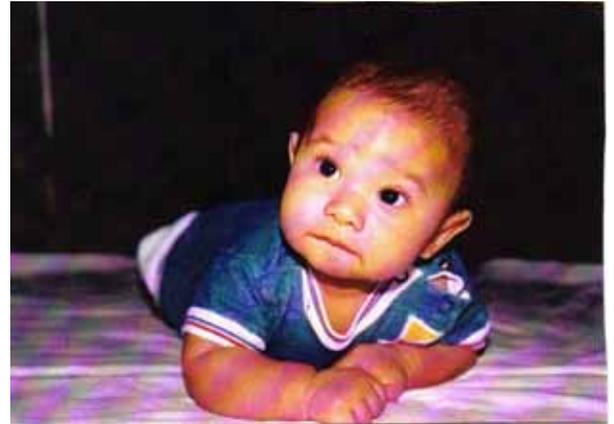
Two week after I knew I was pregnant, we got a job as house parents at Our Home, an emergency shelter for children. We moved to Willow Springs and stayed there for the job, with Thu. We needed insurance for John, my son. I was pregnant so no insurance would accept me and my son as its' clients. I had no choice. The only one I could ask was Mary. I would say 1000 Rosaries to put John under her protection. I felt safer. Whenever I had time, I would light a candle in front of Mary and say the rosary. Each rosary was 15 decades. My life was busy with the children and Rosaries. The Church gave me a very nice baby shower. It was a beautiful reception and helped out with many baby needs.

The doctor looked at the ultrasound screen and gave us a guess of an 80 percent chance that it was a girl. Boyd wanted to look for a girl's name. I refused that idea because the baby already had the named John.

The due day came. The bag broke but I had no pain. After waiting for five hours, the doctor decided on surgery. Boyd was with me during the cesarean, until he saw John come out of my body. He was a boy like my father said. He was a miracle; a healthy boy and I felt O.K. After three days, they let me go home to Willow Springs. That's why John was born in West Plains, while our home was in Springfield. Boyd then got a better job in Camdenton, Missouri. I finished the 1,000 Rosaries when John was one month old. The ten months we worked at Our Home; we didn't have to pay any expenses. We moved back home to Springfield, with our new healthy son and about \$10,000.00 in the bank. Boyd liked the new job, with good pay and all benefits.

I was back as a full time mom and student. John was a happy four months old boy. One day, I trimmed the berry tree in our front yard. That night John did not sleep well. I had to nurse him

every hour. The next day he cried all the time. I went to ask my mother-in-law, Betty Nigh, who lived with us, downstairs. He had no fever and only seemed hungry, she told me. I just nursed him for in ten minutes. Suddenly, I remembered my Dad told me a story about when I was baby. When I was four or five months old, my mother decided to raise the silk worms again. That silk was expensive and the worms only eat berry leaves at the back yard of the fence. After my mother picked the leaves, her milk



*My son, John Nigh, at the age of 3 months old.*



*Walking with 50,000 Vietnamese during Marian Day with husband and son, from left: baby John Nigh holds the flag, Boyd Nigh taking care of John and Loan Vu Nigh carrying the baby bag.*

dried up but she did not know it. I cried a lot until someone told her about it. She had to stop raising the silk worms and I had to go to the neighbor for nursing. John was happy again with a bottle.

Boyd came home on weekends. My two nephews were back from Texas and Tien and Vui lived in one bedroom. Thu was in another bedroom. Every night, Thu, Tien, Vui and me prayed rosary together, while John learned to walk around the bed. I put him in a stroller and went to church daily. John learned to speak very good in Vietnamese with Thu, Tien, Vui, and me. He had to speak, in English, with his dad, and his Grandma. Even at the age of one and a half, he knew when he had to speak in English and when in Vietnamese. He quit the bottle at one year of age and didn't like baby food. He liked steamed rice, which I would squeeze tight to about the sized of two fingers. He would like to dip that rice in soy sauce which amounted to a big bowl of a meal.

At the age of two, he went to bed in his own bedroom without a diaper and without being afraid, because he had a picture of Mary in his room. John liked to play school with me. We took turns, one was a teacher, and the other was a student. The teacher held a letter of the alphabet and asked the student what word it was. If he said wrong, I reminded him in a whisper. He was happy when he heard me say out loud "Yes" and clapped my hands. That's the way he learned the alphabet, real quick, and also with the song "ABC".

Dr. Sun wanted to sell the business he owned, a Chinese restaurant. My brother Giap and Due wanted to do it. That made three of us to operate the business. We made money, but John missed me. He stayed with his grandma for a while and she was tired. I sent him to daycare and he cried when I left him there. One day, I stayed for awhile. One boy who came before him hid under the table and cried without stopping. Another came after us and cried too. That's made John scared to tell the people he needed to go to the bathroom and he wet during his nap.



*Welcoming my two nephews at Springfield Airport, 1987, from left: Giap Vu, Vui Pham, Tien PHam, Loan Vu, and Thu Vu. Vui and Tien came from Pulau Bidong Refugee Camp in Malaysia. They lived with us until 1994.*

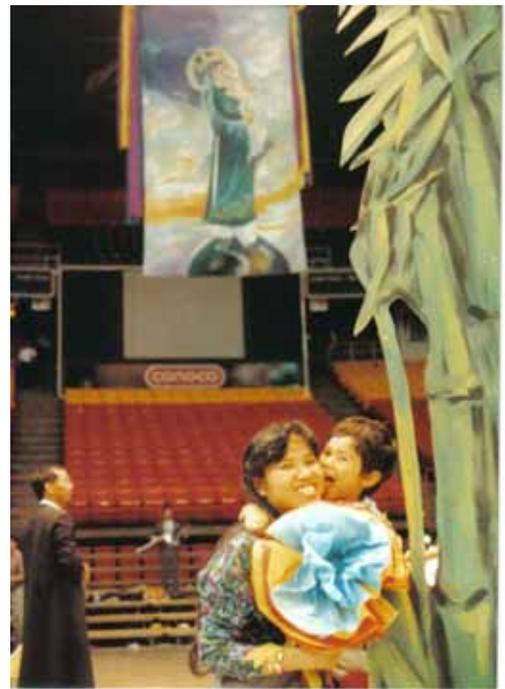
One day, after getting home from work, I asked him if he missed me. He said yes. To test him, I went farther and asked what part of me, he was missing. Looking at me, he asked what did I mean. I told him if he missed my eyes, my hands, smile, feet...etc. I thought of he liked if I fed him or held him. He thought a little and he told me he missed my smell. It made me surprised. How romantic my son was? He should be a writer or a poet later. My God, at the age of two and a half, he could think of missing my smell. I held him and cried. He was surprised and looked at me. Using his hand to clean my tears, he said, "It's okay.", like a big boy.

I have a memory about the Congregation of the Mother Coredeptrix, which was where Cung trained to become a priest. I knew Father Thu, the founder. He asked Mary for help for the Bishop and the Pope would accept his group as a congregation. He promised he would never scratch whenever he itched. Once at the age of nine, I changed John's sheet the night before. Maybe the new sheet had been in the closet too long. John was itchy when he got up. He took a shower but still he itched. I told him Father Thu's story. That Sunday morning, in church for an hour, John held his hands real tight, many times, to keep him from scratching, until we got home. Now, anytime I get itchy after working in the back yard; I remember the day this happened to him. John told me do not scratch. I knew if I scratched it made it itch more, but it's hard to keep the hands off it. John really has a strong mind.

I told Boyd about John missing me. We were argued. I wanted to make money so John could have a better life later. Boyd was concerned about what John needed right now. John needed me right then more than the money later. I thought about that and I knew Boyd was choosing the best for our son. I quit the business, stayed home, and enrolled in school again. John was so happy when his mother was home. He was happy at preschool, at the age of three, at St. Agnes Catholic Elementary School. Mrs. O'Quinn said he liked puzzles. If he had time, he put puzzles together, took them apart, put them away, and started



*John Nigh with his soccer team when in the second grade.*



*Loan Vu Nigh and son, John, were happy under the bamboo tree, after the Vietnamese group meeting with Pope John Paul II at Denver, Colorado 1993.*



*Parents and mother-in-law lived with Loan Vu in the same house. Loan Vu in the second row and third from he right. Loan is between her mother and mother-in-law on John Nigh's first communion day.*

another. At the end of the year, she said he did all the puzzles, which they had.

At six, John was on a soccer team. This was the first time I learned about soccer and more about his friends. I also tried him on the IQ test in the first grade. His score was 141 and he went into the Wings program. This gave him more homework. The sports made him

busy and he handled things very good. As time went on, the Wings program did not have much things of value for him, and he also missed one day a week in his class at St. Agnes School. I wanted him to go on so he could learn more, in the higher class, but he did not like the program that much. Boyd decided let him quit that program in the eighth grade. With sports, John did not like them much as before. He wanted to study the guitar at that time. He started guitar lesson in the fifth grade and practiced almost daily. Anytime, seeing him on his guitar, playing, I remember myself on it before, and I hope he could finish my dream.

The day of our 18 years of marriage, John started his first piano lesson, with my cousin Vi Hang, at our home. The lesson was almost two hours. Vi Hang has been in the United States for over four months. She taught John piano speaking Vietnamese. That's good for him. She was afraid of he might not understand. I told her don't worry about that, because his hands have ten flowers. He said no, only nine. The fingerprints have lines on them. If the lines make a circle, from the middle out, we called them hand-flowers. I have six and Hang has one. In our culture, we believe that they are a gift God gives to you. The more you have, the more easy for you to be successful, in anything you put your hands on. The problem was, that person would be lazy and would not have the patience to finish what he started. John was 14 and in the ninth grade. He needed a lot of help. Many times he felt lazy, but he did the practice, for his mother could be happy.

One thing always hung on my mind, was John doesn't want to become a Roman Catholic Priest, any more. At the age of eight he said that job was hard. I asked him why. He answered, not many people do that job, only Uncle Cung. That's my oldest brother. I never forgot what my father wrote to me about his future. That was out of my hands. The only thing I can do is to ask Mary to help me to pray to God. If God wanted, I believed no way he could not go.

### *Some unexpected turns in my life*

I seem to have a lot of unexpected turns in my life. At the age of four, I did not want to be hot and I tried to get away from it. What did I get? I was burned. At the age of seven, I wanted to know what was the tiger cage and I got beaten. I loved to study, but I had to quit after the seventh grade. To get my Bachelor Degree, I had to start again and again. At least four times I had to quit college, from a year to eight years, until I could finish at SMSU.

To be the good girl, I had to save the food for all my younger siblings and my parents. From that, I never got enough food, which my body needed. It affected my health. I look healthy but my feet swell up sometime. I don't worry much about it but it caused me not to have some control my feet. Sometimes, I suddenly fell down, when I was walking, for no reason. If my mother knew that, she bought a heart of the pig, steamed it, and let me eat it. I would be well right away. That was the only medicine that could help me and I only had it when my feet were swollen. The swelling kept on until an old lady, from the church, taught me a Vietnamese Ancient Therapy. I was young and believed in Western medicine. I did not pay attention to that treatment. While in SMSU, I had to deal with English and studying. I tried to study and did not eat enough. I had stomach problems, headaches, swollen feet, frequent urination, and pain, when only a couple of drops came out. I saw a doctor and took medicine.

I took medicine for months and still hurt when I was hungry and pain when my stomach was full. Tired of medicine, I looked for a book for treatment. I borrowed all kinds of exercise and therapy books from the Springfield libraries. I couldn't find the book, which the lady taught me. I found one or two steps among 35 steps in her method. From that, my memory woke up and I remembered all of what she taught me. I used that method to treat my self and got well. That was Vietnamese Treatment, but the Vietnamese did not know it. The reason was that Vietnamese have a tradition of keeping family secrets.

I am a Christian. I believe God gave a gift that, if I did not use it to make a difference, I could NOT see him when I have to meet him at the end of my life. Because of it, I wrote it in the book named, "Ancient Vietnamese Treatment". On September of 1996, I had an X-ray and found out I have a heart murmur. From then, I know why I had many troubles with my body diseases.

We wanted a simple life, but how many times we had to move, or exactly, we had to run away from the Communists. Anytime we ran away, we left every thing and had to start again, in a new place.

After we married and lived together for over six months Boyd and me had to move, with the other family members. My brother, sister and nephews were teenagers when they lived with us. I tried my best in working, shopping, cooking, cleaning, helping with their homework and doing the laundry for them, but they still were not satisfied, because they wanted more from Boyd. The different culture between my family and husband.

We had left Vietnam for a long time and I knew my family missed Vietnamese dishes. I did understand the difficulty of Boyd when he had to smell the unexpected smell in his own home. I was the child closest to my parents than any of us. I understood my parents more than anyone, but I could not explain for Boyd when my mother opened our bedroom door at 7:00a.m on Saturday or Sunday morning. I understand Boyd wanted a longer sleep on weekends, when he had to get up early for work the whole week. My mother wanted to make sure the male voice, which she heard late at night, was my husband's. She checked on me.

My father was a farmer. He likes to work and to plant. I also knew Boyd likes nature. He liked the lawn in the front and back yard. He liked to look at it and he liked to walk on it barefooted, sometimes. I bought some kind of seed for my dad and told him to plant at the end of the back yard. I also told him Boyd liked grass. I thought my dad knew we didn't have much here so he would not plant a lot. Beginning, he planted on both sides, close to the fence. It grew up pretty. He had more time and people gave him more seeds. He dug the garden larger and larger. Every week Boyd came home, he had problems of the smell and the new piece of garden. He complained to me, but I could not tell my dad to stop, or tell the kids to stop cooking special dishes on the weekend. One day, my dad planted a little leek in the front yard, which made Boyd real mad. That was not enough. Dad still had spare time. He liked to fix the house. Of course, he used Boyd's tools and did not put them back where they went.

At one time, I was painting the “Last Supper”, with a big cross, which I wanted to give back to Jesus, to God, The Father. The ugly cross, where I put all my hurt and my pain. Each layer of paint was one of my pains or hurt in my life. I kept talking to Jesus: “I had tried my best and now, I could not handle it anymore. I give back the cross to you”. From that cross, I let my blood and my energy flow with the stream faraway. I painted Jesus in the Last Supper with his disciples. The background was the mountains with stones one on top of the other. That rock could be any one of us, who works for the glory of God. The one who Jesus could say:



*Loan Vu Nigh's oil painting, "The Cross Return", a religious painting.*

“you are rock... build the church”. I finished the painting when I understood more about my role in life. God wants me to do the best. The rest give to him. He would take care of it.

When I finished the painting, problems were solved. It seemed like God did take care of them. It was a miracle for me. Now, I hang the painting in front of my computer table. I can look at it daily and remind myself, “try the best and let God take care of the rest, but remember, when you let God take care of it, don’t try to take it back”.

### ***Spiritual experience***

Religion has been a great part of my life. Whenever we bought a house, I remembered my parents always reminded everybody the requirement: “close to the church, school, and market”. My parents had bought three houses in their life and all of them were close to the church. Close to the church was the number one of requirement. My father goes to church daily. All of us learned to make the cross before we can call mom. Like my son, I learned to bow my head, in front of Our Lady, when I was five months old. When we are close to the church, I go to church daily and I rosary every night with my husband and son. My parents always said that seeing others go to school, our children would go to. That is what a close school is for.

I lived in the war. From traditions, daily praying to God was an important part of my life. However, religion has been most important to me when we had a big event. I had learned, that if anything I could not solve, and I did not think someone else could help me, all I could do was Rosary, asking Mary’s help, to ask God, The Mighty Father to take care of it, or help me have enough strength for it.

I am a Vietnamese Roman Catholic. If I talk about Catholics in Vietnam, I have to talk about the role of Mary, mother of Jesus Christ. When I get up, the first thing was to make a cross and pray. Before going to bed, I pray. Taking an exam, before reading the first question, I pray. If I to go somewhere, I need a pocket so I can put my Rosary in it. When I have good news, I go to church to thank God. When I am having bad time, the rosary does not stop in my mind. The day I escaped from Vietnam, I had with me two pairs of clothes and two Rosaries. On the boat three days and three nights, I didn't have a shower, didn't eat, didn't drink but the Rosary in my hand kept moving from decade to decade, from one bead to another, not stopping until we landed on the Malaysia beach. Rosary with me, was a master key, which could open any door, the magic wand to ask for any thing I needed.

Like all Vietnamese Catholics, when my son sneezes, I say "Our Lady bless you", while Americans say, "God bless you". I have to say, "I love Mary". I love her more than my mother. In my house, I don't have picture of my mother but I have many of Mary. I talk to her daily, not always ask for something, I talk to her about my son, my husband, my parents, my friend, my painting, my writing... just talk.

### ***Where have you lived as an adult and how did you come to be there?***

When I was in the sixth grade at Saigon, I lived with my aunt but I had an adult role. I had to wash Vinh's and my dirty clothes daily, by hand and iron them. I studied by my self. Nobody helped me. I had to write down everything my aunt bought for Vinh (my sister), and me in a notebook. Each page, I totaled and subtracted with money my parents sent to her. At the end of each month, I had to give the book to her husband. It was hard for me in the beginning. The next months after there were no things wrong at all. When the maid went to visit her home, usually a month in the summer, I took care of her children. In the morning, I had to get up early to get the bread the lady delivered, while my aunt and uncle went to the market for business. I stayed home and took care of my two little cousins, four and two years old. In the afternoon, I washed clothes by hands. I also gave a bath for the two older children. At night, I had to hang the mosquito nets for them.

### ***Types of jobs***

Anyway, I always lived with someone. I lived as an adult when I taught seventy miles from home. I taught and stayed with Han, Thao, and Yen. They taught at the same school with me. I was the oldest in the group so they looked at me as their big sister. We were teachers, from the government, sent to the village. We lived in the nun's house, which the government disbanded and took the property. Fish was very cheap there. I took care of cleaning the fish and picking the vegetables still around, which the nuns had planted before. It was not real good, but good enough for free. Han and Yen cleaned. Thao was a cook and we always had a good meal.

Sometimes, the government bought a pig, cheap, from the people. We had pork. A big piece was divided into around 40 parts, from the principal to the custodian. Each was about half of pound. The Communists' idea was to control all the food. They wanted the people stupid and hungry, so they would obey them and stay alive. Female teachers had their children try to

come first, so they could take a better piece. The days we had pork, I didn't have to clean the fish. Yen didn't like to walk a mile back and forth. Once Han picked the best for her, Thao, and Yen. She told me to pick for myself. I picked the smallest amongst them. All of us were happy with a good meal with pork. Han asked me why I chose the worst piece like that. I showed them a small piece of meat in my chopsticks and said, 'I took that piece, so another child could eat a couple of pieces more, like this'. I added 'the value of a person sometimes weighs from a couple of bites of meat'.

The Communists tried to destroy five kinds of society: (1)-Educated people, (2)-Rich people, (3)-Land owners, (4)-Powerful men, and (5)-Religious men. Educated people were the first on the list needing to be destroyed. That's the reason the education system very bad. They collected and destroyed all the books from the previous reign and had nothing to take their place. They changed money twice, took the land, big houses, temples and churches. They put men of education, rich, power, and religion into reeducation (jail) camps.

I loved children. I loved to teach but I couldn't. I had to lock all my knowledge up and open a tiny, empty closet, from my brain, to teach. I couldn't teach any of the poems from Vietnamese poet's 4,000 years of civilization. Those poems, I learned at elementary, high school, university, and teacher training college. I couldn't teach. I had to teach stupid poems from Ho or a no name poets, which I learned a day before the exams, from the posters. I had to teach Vietnam was a special country, rich like Cuba, China and Russian. I might say Russia was a beautiful country but I couldn't say the United States was a dirty, poor country like they wanted.

I might teach that the woman, who collected the most tools in town, was a hero. But I couldn't teach that the young man who blew himself up, so he could kill an officer (and many children and innocent people), was a hero. Both of them were in the book. The only book used for class. I did not have any history or literature books for teaching. Educated persons have strong minds. They are hard to control. Of course, they do not want to teach a generation to be smarter than them. The education system needed to be bad, that's what they wanted. I couldn't talk, joke, sing, or write.

My life was boring. I asked to teach first grade. They couldn't understand what I said. I could put the Party and Ho away. I taught the children about the beautiful sky, the soft grass, the pretty flowers, and the love of the hen for her baby chick. How hard working your parents were. Your parents are good people. Your parents care for you like the hen hold her chicks under her wings.

Young men in the village went into the jungle, with weapons, and tried to fight against the Communists. There was some fighting around. I could hear the boom of cannons. I went to buy some soup and saw a dead person lying on the curb, in front of the collection office. Someone had fought against the Communists. That dead man was put there and left for three days and three nights. It was the punishment by the local government. About a month later, people told me, the new dead man, left in front of the produce collection office, was the father of one of my student. Coming into class, she wasn't there. I thought she was absent. Half an hour later, she came in, without any difference about, the smooth, a little long, brown

hair, pinned aside, black pant and bare feet. I finished writing on the board, crossed the absent mark off, and stood in front her. The strong, stubborn face looked at me. Her dark brown sad eyes hurt me. I held her hands and no words came to us. What could I say when her father's body was left by the government to lay in the trash days and nights. What could I say when I am one of the persons working for the government. Her eyes weren't innocent anymore.

I squeezed her hand, remembering she studied at home, I told her 'study hard, you have to study hard'. I wanted to say, "you can revenge later", but I held it and said, 'Last night I had a dream, your father told me to tell you that', I lied. I couldn't say what I wanted to say to my student, the six years old little child. I was afraid of trouble. One kid asked me to go out. I said "yes" and went on to check each student's writings. Each class was from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. I had 240 minutes for 30 students. I didn't want anyone of them to miss any day. I had to check both their reading and writing. If I stayed with one more than eight minutes, another wouldn't get my attention. Usually I didn't give them a break. They didn't have preschool or kindergarten. I had to teach them spelling and writing. Some kids I had to hold their hands to follow the letters I wrote by pencil. The fathers were in re-education, in jail, dead, or working from dusk to dawn. The mothers had to work in the fields, take care of the children, garden, do the laundry by hand, and sell things, to bring food to the table, for the children. I know they couldn't make time for the children. I couldn't ask them to come to see me. They didn't have time if I came to see them at home, either. I had to make friends with people around me and ask about students with trouble.

The building belonged to the church. The government took it to make two classes, without a bathroom. I gave them a 15 minutes break. I had to walk around outside to make sure they did not make a mess around the church area. They had to go to some student's home, close by, for their needs. It's lucky Highway One was a high street, so I couldn't see the body of my student's father on the other side.

In the afternoon, I went to buy some salt. One mother, not my students, asked me if the man came to my dream. One second, I thought about the trouble I made. I said I lived in Saigon with electric lights. Here we were without electricity and the dead body of my student's father, on the side of the street. How do you think? I had nightmares. I couldn't believe that they let the family have the body. The time was one day and night shorter. I thought about going to see her mother. But I didn't want the local government to know much about me, so I couldn't do it. A couple of times, my students sneezed and from habit, I said, "Our Lady bless you", which made the students look at me. Lucky, they were all Catholic and they saw me go to church, daily, so I was all right. Anyway, I was afraid of being involved in politics. I had to tell myself, "watch your mouth".

After Han's sister died, Han escaped from Vietnam. Thao got marry and quit. Yen transferred to another school. Nobody knew why but local teachers knew I picked the smallest one. One of them asked me if I wanted to stay in her house free. She also told me to follow another to learn about business. I did what I was told. I made good money. I could rent an apartment, to live and take care my nephew, Tien Pham. I taught, bought, and sold tea, coffee, worm silk thread, and made a lot more money for living, saving, and helping my family. One day, another business lady told me if she was me, she would escape. I did not know how, but I knew someone I could ask. I start praying more and asked Mary for help. One hundred Rosaries, but it didn't work. After I prayed 300 more Rosaries I had a dream of I went to school to study and sat at the back. I saw all different kinds of hair and heads.

I escaped from Vietnam on New Year's Day, 1981. I was student in SMSU in 1982. The first things I remember, in the dream before, were that people in Vietnam have the same straight black hair and it's a lot different here in the United States. After twelve years, and finishing with 200 credits, I graduated in the fall of 1996. My major was in oil painting and a minor in math. From then, I stayed home painting, writing, and housewife jobs.

I have a little trouble when I think of working. I am easy to fall in love with any kind of job or thing I get involved with. The first job I got in the U.S. was cleaning people's houses. I loved it. I never missed a day. After I got marry, I had to quit because of I needed to spend more time with my family. When I worked in the SMSU library, as a student worker, I always had to see my advisor for more money, so I could work more. At the restaurant, I needed all the work done before I went home. Before I gave up the restaurant, my husband and me had a lot of discussions.

### ***Present job***

Now my job is kind of painting and writing. I am usually writing on the computer at night. Sometime I get a couple of hours sleep at night. Same way if I am painting. I like to keep going all night and all day. I love to write and paint. There are many things to write and paint. I want to keep my job with writing and painting, right now, until I can't. I am really



*Graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Oil Panting, from Southwest Missouri University, from left: Khien Vu, Loan Vu Nigh, Vui Pham, and John Nigh, in front of Loan Nigh.*

worried if I have to stop my writing or stop my painting. No, I don't want to end with my brush right now. My project is of painting my life with 50 paintings. I had to stop the stories painting for my house paintings. I painted the ceiling with curved lines and angels and leaves. I also painted the windows with angels, flowers, fishes ...etc. I just finished five windows and two ceilings. I still have sixteen windows and three ceilings, which need to be done before I continuing in my life stories painting. I

hope I can finish them before I am unable to do it.

A job is a task, a regular activity performed in exchange for payment, especially a trade, occupation, or profession. A job is also a specified duty or responsibility. To my husband, there is a big connection from the job to the payment. The same way of thinking as my son. The reason was, I work all day and even almost all night without payment. I don't bring money home that meant I had no job.

Sometimes I ask myself am I working or retired. I have a couple of books, which I almost have finished. On the other hand, my father likes to plant. He plants vegetables in the summer. One special kind of vegetable, which he plants a lot, is bitter melon. In Oriental nutrition, there are yin and yen. Meat and bean are in the yin group. The bitter melon was in the yen group. People need the balance so they stay, in the universe, in balance with yin and yen. Americans say, 'an apple a day keeps the doctor away'. An Asian prescription for high blood pressure and diabetes was:

- One apple
- One green bell pepper
- One cucumber
- A half of bitter melon (one small)
- Two stacks of celery

The easy way was to use the press machine. You could press all the above and drink the juice, once a day. It could help you be healthy. It's also not too bad as a drink.

When I studied for the exams of a junior bachelor. There were many people in my house and the libraries were too full. I had to go to the, "Our Lady Of Perpetual Help Shrine", in Saigon, to study. From there, I met a lady. She taught me the Vietnamese Ancient Treatment, and about the bitter melon tea. With the bitter melon, which my father plants, I pick the leaves and make tea. At the end of the season, I cut all the branches and the roots make tea, too. My father boils the root and branches, which I make into tea, for to drink, daily. It's bitter but it helps for high blood pressure and diabetes. Many Orientals used that tea for treatment. Some Vietnamese Priest at Carthage, Missouri drink this tea instead of water. I give them the tea I make and they like it very much.

The more I pick, the more the leaves grow. That's the job that keeps me busy more in the summer. All the priests are friends of my brother, Father Cung. I am happy when I can give them what they really need. All their life, they serve the Church and people. They helped me learn more about, "Live with God".

## CHAPTER FIVE– *LIFE MISSION*

### *Life mission*

I like art. I spent a lot of time studying math. I never thought about becoming a writer someday. With me, writing a good book was sending your message to others, to the next and next generation. That's the mission. But how about the Good Book.

I am a Vietnamese Catholic who had been touched with a miracle from Mary. The love from me to Mary came from the love of my mother in our culture. Many of my friends don't agree with me, about praying with Mary and putting her picture on the altar. It was so normal when you went into a Vietnamese house to see two altars. One for God with Mary and Saints, and the second with pictures of parents, grand parents...etc. In my house, we have only one altar with Jesus on top. Under the cross, there are Mary and St. Joseph. I had a plan to paint a picture of The Father.

The Father sent his beloved son to us, by many ways. Why he chose through Mary? Does he want to teach us to be humble. I've had many miracles in my life, but the biggest was God letting me know how to be humble. Jesus stayed 30 years with Mary and Joseph as a good son. In the Oriental way, that meant obey. I do not understand much, but I believe no one knows the son as his mother and no one knows the mother more than her son..

Is this the humble way God does? Jesus said to the servants, "Fill these jars with water" (John, 2:7). The voice he used was very gentle so nobody knew besides his disciples, Mary, and the people who poured the water in. He could make the empty jars full of wine, as magic, but he didn't. The miracle was simple as all the miracles around myself. My heart works nonstop. My skin never will be rusted, like steel, and is useful for 100 years. Miracles God made, really quiet, simple to the humble.

How I ask for a miracle? Depends on how much wine I want. I have to carry more water in a big jar than in a small one. I have to spend time carrying more if I want more than one jar. When I asked Mary to help me to escape from Vietnam, I prayed 300 Rosaries. I was given insurance from Mary, when I was pregnant with 1,000 Rosaries. The sweet promise I made with her. Anytime I had a problem I couldn't solve, I asked Mary for help, went on with the commitment and it worked.

Sometimes I thought my mission has been different at other times in my life, but always, was The Way of Jesus. The way of love as God love us as sent his only son to save us. Jesus died for my sins to bring me up so I can call God as Father. Jesus loves The Father. He began the Eucharist so he could present himself in a piece of bread, more humble than ever. From that, he could continue to die for us, to save us, to continuing living in many bodies. All for one purpose, it is the Glory of God, The Father Almighty.

Looking at myself and the back on my life, I have to say, 'Thank God'. I thank God for letting me see all He gave and has given to me in many gifts in many ways. The special gift he gave me was I recognized God in my life and handed me to Mary, mother of Jesus, Our

Lady. Under God wings and in the hand of Mary, I feel safe, have peace in mind, and feel happy in any little event in almost every day of my life. Many happy days in my life as: my First Communion and my Confirmation day. I am also happy in the day to could go to



*Loan Vu Nigh with Goddaughter  
Christine Vu on her baptism day, 1990.*

school, have new houses, not be hungry, can go to church, can teach the good things, can work, can learn a new thing, my wedding day, my graduation day, finishing my first book and first painting.

I thank God for those days I have new life as: landed in Malaysia from the Ocean, to the United States, have my husband, after the surgery, have my son, John, when my parents, relatives came to the U.S. I thank God for becoming the Godmother of four girls, who are DC Fisher, Christine Vu, Teresa Nguyen, and Duyen Nguyen. I thank God for Hang Nguyen and her two children: Nhi Thuy Nguyen and Hai Dong Nguyen who came to the U.S. on April 20, 2003 after over a year of praying, writing, and calling to Vietnam for it to work.

I remember how happy I am when God helps me to control my temper, to confess all the sins I had done and all I fail to do like the little child. I am happy when I can keep promises with God, the vow to Mary to improve my life. I offer to her all my body, soul, talents, ideas, will, languages, and acts. Which she

may consider as her own, and control them as her idea. I don't want today to be gone like many days. Today, now, this moment on should be the day I rise from the death. I ask God and Mary to give me special Royal benefaction for I can improve and live with the will of Jesus and Mary living in me daily, in my life, for the glory of God, forever.

### ***The lowest point***

I couldn't forget the day I had to leave my grandpa, leave my homes, leave my country, and go somewhere I knew nothing about. I was sad when I had to quit school, couldn't go to church, got spanked, got hurt, got hungry, cold, and those days I couldn't touch my mother, when I was little.

I cried on the day my grandpa left us, went to his village. The last day I saw him. I also cried when Communists took the South, when they changed the money. I was in pain when I failed the exam, when my husband left me, when the doctor said my mother was going to die, when my brother, Cung, had a stroke, when I lost my dog. I thank God for those days. He teaches me to know the value of what he sends to me. Those events help me to stand up, to move, to help someone, and not be lazy, to lay around or sit, as my body wants.

I pray more on the day I, or someone I know, is sick, dies, travels, have exams, trouble, looking for a job, a meeting, a fight, an argument, and the hateful.

I pray daily for myself, to remember offer to God the beginning of the day and what I do all day. I pray to not sin, lay around, play games, watch TV, talk about someone's mistakes, says something unnecessary, or thinking something not right. I also pray daily to know to love, how to show my love to anyone who touches my life, to pray for me and another, to be good in the role of wife, mother, daughter, sister, aunt, cousin and to be nice like God wants me to.

I won't forget to pray daily for priests, to be holy, for the need of the world. I try to Rosary in the evening at home with my husband and son. I also ask God to forgive all my mistakes, missing part of my duty during the day, and would like God to bless me for a safe night.

The most rewarding aspect

Many blessings as a reward from God in my life are:

My mother had a store and made a lot of money from 1950 to 1954.

I had my First Communion in 1956 at Trung Chanh, South Vietnam.

I had my Confirmation in 1958 at Dian, Bien Hoa, South Vietnam.

I was chosen for the best high school for girls in Vietnam, and could finish high school.

I taught at the Catholic place and always was close to the church, the school, and the market with all the conveniences. It helped my faith grow.

Buying and selling tea and making a lot of money.

Escaping from Vietnam on Lunar New Year's 1981, with two brothers and one sister, and landing in Malaysia safe.

Come to the United States in 1982 and going to the university.

Get married with Boyd Nigh, a nice, smart, caring, loving, and understanding man on September 7, 1985.

We bought our first house in 1986

Have first Goddaughter, DC Fisher, in 1987.

Have John, my son, a smart, sweet, nice, beautiful boy, in March 21, 1989.

Have second Goddaughter, Christine Vu, in 1990.

Publishing my first book, "Mother, I want my better life", in Vietnamese, in 1994.

The first exhibited paintings of, "Vietnam Voice", in 1996, at the SMSU Student Gallery.

Graduated from Southwest Missouri State University (SMSU) in 1996.

Have third Goddaughter, Theresa Nguyen, in 1996.

The "Vietnam Voice" videotape was made in 1997, through the work at SMSU.

Bought our second house in 1996.

Finished the ceilings paintings 1999.  
 Finished the first window painting 2000.  
 Went to New Hampshire for my first public speech in 2000.  
 Boyd, my husband, bought our business, in October 2000.  
 Having a Home Page on the Internet [www.hometown.aol.com/xpressart/vu/](http://www.hometown.aol.com/xpressart/vu/) in 2000.  
 Have fourth Goddaughter, Duyen Nguyen, in 2002.  
 Published my second book, “The Ancient Vietnamese Treatment”, in Vietnamese, in 2003.

***The profound influence on my life***

To get the rewards above, all was from God’s help. The first person who influenced my life was my grandpa. He taught me about God, “Hail Mary” and told me I had to be the bamboo tree when I grew up. My father also was an influence in my life. He taught me to write, read, and to solve the math problems. And he especially taught me, through his life, by going to church, daily, and sometimes twice a day, along with the



*The bamboo used to build the church at Sacat, where Loan Vu was baptized.*

Rosary and studying the Catholic faith.

To learn while growing up, I am trying to be the bamboo tree, as my nickname, as my grandpa wanted me to do. The bamboo tree has many knots where the little branches try to grow at the same time. As many as 40 or 60 knots, and they do not affect the straightness of the bamboo tree. The bamboo tree can be as tall as 40 feet. The rich have cement, wood, steel, and stone. The poor made houses and all household items from the bamboo. The stick of the bamboo could be a fishing pole. The bamboo shoot was a special food when, after cool days, the vegetables hadn’t had time to grow yet. The leaves were used for wrapping the cake, making it look pretty and when unwrapped having a better taste. The root and tree were pounded under the water, to make the soil stay



*Loan Vu Nigh consecrated to Mary in July 1995 at Carthage, Missouri. Loan is in the middle of the front row.*

more solid, for to build a church. One famous church in Vietnam was built in this way in Phat Diem. This very big church was built in the middle of a huge pond, with huge post from the tree. Two people couldn't touch their hands trying to reach around it. Large pieces of marble were sanded by hand to make the altar and floor of the church. The church was built by a Father who had not studied any architecture. The special thing about it was that after 100 years, it had sunk down 10cm evenly. Even now, in my village, people use bamboo trees to make the frame for standing on to lay brick to build the church. I can see bamboo has the strength of steel.

My grandpa used a dry bamboo tree to pull the top of the bamboo tree 30 feet down, so my mother could take the straw bag with Sum's head in it. The bamboo tree is very easy to bend and no matter how low you bend it, it will stand up straight, just as before you bend it.

From the characteristics of the bamboo, I knew what my grandpa wanted me to be. He wanted me to be easy to bend, to be twisted, to be shaped for the use of my own and useful for the poor. But he also wanted me to stand up whenever I could for the right to stand up strong.

The best will, which my grandpa wanted for me, was the strong faith in God. To be as simple and as useful as the bamboo. Is this the philosophy of the farmer, the idea from daily use, and nature? How much I thought about it, how much I needed to pray, so I could keep on it and try to be as straight up as I could, for the poor. Oh, I keep in mind my grandpa's wish for, "THE BAMBOO TREE".

I also remember the lady who took care of and loved me when I was baby. She was the one who made me know how to be thirsty for love. I grew up with my father going to church daily and explaining everything based on God's mercy to me. My father also led me to God with thankfulness, trust, hope, and patience.

Cung, my oldest brother, guided me to listen and work on God's word. From him, I know how to see God in everybody, and anything was God's gift. In many cases, I had to look for the gift many times. I understand how hard it is to find the gift. It should be hard for God to find in me the gift. The gift I like, I say, "that was the miracle". The one I hate, "It's the cross". That's only my thinking. When I think of the gift, I am happy with what I like. The other needs a little time to see the meaning under God's trusting eyes. It helps me to be happy with everybody, even the enemies. Because they are only the delivery from God.

If I have a gift, I need to make it useful. Please don't bury them by hiding it. I don't want the Lord to be too angry with me, when I didn't use his treasure to make a difference for him. Share what you have with someone else. Don't keep them or they will rot or ruin.

## CHAPTER SIX – LATER YEARS

### *Are you presently employed or retired?*

I am not employed nor retired.

After graduating from SMSU in oil painting, my husband let me to do what I wanted to do. All I liked was to stay home to write and paint. I lived in war, with Communists and now my country was still under the Communist reign. I had too many things to write and to paint. All are from my life, my people, my religion, my faith, and my will to help people in Vietnam with the rights, and the freedom. That's the reason I came to the United States. I love the freedom I have here. With it, I can go to church. I can worship God. I can ask the government whatever I don't understand and get answered. Children have the right to go to school. The sick have a right for treatment. The hungry have a right to ask for food.

### *Special role or unique responsibilities as an elder in my community*

In the Vietnamese community, as an elder, I wrote about the “Vietnamese treatment”, and how to “raise children” books. I hope from my books, they help the next generation, in the world, to still keep the traditions and culture of the Vietnamese, like our ancestors did.

I am a member of the Vietnamese choir, with the young choir in church, taking turns singing at Sunday Mass. This could help the children learn more old and new Vietnamese songs. This could help the young to feel easy in a big celebration of Mass anywhere in the world, such as in Rome or in Vietnam.

A couple hours a week, I go to adore the Eucharist at the Adoration Chapel, to pray to God for the people living and dead, for peace, the war, the good, and the bad.

I volunteered to make bitter melon tea, for the Vietnamese Fathers to drink for treatment of high blood pressure and diabetes. This is the culture of Vietnamese. I do not want the young children to forget about it.

My fourth Goddaughter, Duyen Nguyen, is a senior at SMSU. I am the one she came to for help with the introduction of Vietnamese culture to Missouri people at the International Day and Community.

### *My time*

It seems, I am busy for all the day of the week by; working around the house, garden, flowers, front yard, back yard, and work as a wife and mother, cooking and cleaning.

Going to Mass daily, and Adoration on Monday and Friday, each for an hour.

Going to Rosary each Saturday night at 7:00 PM, and staying to practice with the choir until 11:00 p.m.

Taking care of my parents by checking on them at least once a day to make sure everything is O.K. If they are sick, checking more and doing anything they need. If they are in the hospital, I have to stay there because they do not know English.

Working on the computer to check my email or writing.

In the summer, I have to water plants, pick the bitter melon leaves to make tea. I send that tea to many Vietnamese priests and friends in the U.S. They use it for treatment.

Painting and sewing, if I have time.

Thai Binh City has the Van Mon leprosy Colony. It's not far from Sa-cat, my village in North Vietnam. This colony was established from the French before 1950. Now the government's word about taking care of it is not real. The population of Van Mon is about 60 Catholics among 600. Each year, I try to sent about U.S\$500.00 to US\$800.00 to Catholic Father Mai Tran Huynh to help out.

### ***Published works***

The first one was a baby book, in Vietnamese, for Vietnamese mothers to help them raise their child, in another country outside of Vietnam. It shows the way to teach the child to follow traditions of culture and also learn both languages at the same time. The publisher was the Congregation in Carthage, Missouri.

The second work was the "Vietnam Voice" video – tape, which is 30 minutes in length, with paintings and narrative stories in English. Published by Southwest Missouri State University.

The third was my Homepage on the Internet. There are many paintings and writings about human rights for Vietnamese people in Vietnam on the page.

The fourth was "The Vietnamese Ancient Therapy Treatment", in Vietnamese.  
The fifth was "The Vietnamese Ancient Therapy Treatment ", in English.



*Loan Vu and Dr. Hill (Head of the Art Department) and an onlooker during Loan's Graduate Painting Show of her "Vietnam Voice" series at SMSU.*

***What would you have done differently in your life if you could?***

As an artist, I wouldn't do any different, if I could. I am aware of God, the best artist, has done the art-work of my life. Looking back at the work of my life, all I have done was help a little. The main parts have been done by the special artisan –God – with dark, light, shade and shadow. The many of lines, shapes, colors, thickness in the painting make it more value. The carpet with many kinds of thread, knot, and waves would make it more value. My life is rich with stories. I like the way God made me. I don't want to change even a little bit.

***For future generation***

On the afternoon of April 29, 1975, we joined the wave of people moving toward Saigon. Everyone was tired from the baggage we carried. Thai, my brother decided to stop at my uncle's school to rest. My uncle's family and friends were waiting for a phone call. They were getting ready for dinner. In the warmth of the reunion, we forgot about the rain and fighting outside.

*There was a chance. We did not try hard in the last hours to grab it. It's gone.*

The next morning, we got to the harbor too late. All the ships had left the night before. On the way back home, I saw some dead soldiers. One was alive. His dull eyes looked at me. I went close to him. He spoke in a low voice: "Keep the bill of rights. Keep our Freedom". Having his will, I wish for future generation to remember:

*Keep the bill of rights. Keep our Freedom.  
Make a good dream.  
Whatever you do, do your best and stick to it.  
The quitters never win, and the winners never quit.*

Remember God is a rich man. He has too much of everything and wants to give it away. Just ask. "Knock and it will be opened".

Jesus began the Eucharist to be with me and more than stay with everybody, so I can change to be like him—God loves humans like the love of Jesus because we have him- from there we can love everyone who comes into our life, like the love of Jesus for everyone.

Things happen in your life, let them go. It's like water. If it keeps running, we have fresh water. If we hold on to it, it becomes stagnant.

*If you hold the bad, it makes you hopeless.  
If you hold the good, it makes you see another person to love.  
You have a choice to do good or bad.*

## CHAPTER SEVEN – *YOUR SPRINGFIELD EXPERIENCE*

### *How and why did you come to live in Springfield?*

My brother was one of the first 50 Vietnamese who were sponsored by Cardinal Law to Springfield, Missouri. They were Catholic Priests and Brothers who escaped from Vietnam. He was Bishop of Cape Girardeau at that time. When Thai, Due, Thu and I went to the refugee camp, Cung sponsored us and decided to let us live here in Springfield.

I came here for freedom. The reason the government let us come here was because of America's promise to save the Vietnamese who were in danger if the Communists took control of the whole country.

### *Did you feel welcomed when you came to live here?*

Yes, beginning after about a couple of weeks, one neighbor called me and talked to me when I went to school and passed her house. She also gave me a little mirror with the painting of little girl in the back. I kept and used it for eight years before I gave it to my little sister for her to keep in her school bag.

I moved close to SMSU so it would be easy to go to school. Three years later, one day, I was taking care of the flowers and herbs in my little garden. It was on the side of the front porch at the small house, which we rented. One old lady came by and yelled at me "you girl. We don't want you. You caused enough trouble. You need to go back where you came from. We don't want it anymore, go back where you came from..." Opening my big eye as wide as I could, I looked at her and my tears came out.

Boyd, my husband, heard the noise. He came out and yelled back at her, 'She's got enough trouble. You just leave her alone'. She left. I understood the reason was she did not know me, and I came here because I had no choice. If I stayed in Vietnam, I would be killed.

I don't want my children to have trouble, as I did, here. My writing was part of a way to let the world know us Vietnamese and leave us alone.

I had enough trouble, yes. That helped me not to have any anger towards her. Besides, it helped me to have more strength to write stories about what happened in Vietnam, in my life.

### *Do you feel welcome now?*

Yes, that was the only case not good. After, people welcomed me anywhere I went.

***Have people expressed an interest in your cultural background? What opportunities have you had to share your unique perspective?***

Yes, when I was student in SMSU, some teachers had interest in my background. That was the reason I started the project “Vietnam Voice”. My paintings and stories are about my life. It was shown at the Main Library, and Brentwood Library. Sometimes, they show my “Vietnam Voice” on television, too.

To maintain our cultural assimilation we keep practicing it as much as possible. On special days, such as weddings, we have the elders do all the work, like invite people in, pray at the altar, open the box of gifts, ask to have the bride for the son. The invitation for all family and friends was important for the acceptance of the community. The couple, not married, and living together would not be accepted by the community. They would lose friends and relatives.

On New Year’s, even you send the New Year’s card with wishes. You also have to send some gift. The young have to give special best wishes to the elders while you present at their house.

When you have a child you need to teach them the way to treat people, the way to dress up and the way to live for the acceptance of the community.

Above all, of every thing, religion is the first. Education is the next important for people’s life. Remember, education is a large field, which everyone can study only a little of it, from God.

***The message***

I would like to say thank you to Springfield community about welcoming me and my family minorities into your life, work, church, school, hospital, market, and theater.





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Ethnic Life Stories Project

<http://thelibrary.springfield.missouri.org/lochist/els/menu.cfm>