

## My Notes

# LIFELONG DREAMER

## — Vietnam Boat Person

by Mary-Beth McLaughlin

Nancy Pham says that she had been a dreamer most of her life.

Her dreams have taken her from a crowded refugee boat in the choppy seas off war-torn South Vietnam to the quiet confines of a former church in suburban Toledo where she'd opened her own beauty salon.

She's still navigating choppy seas — any entrepreneur trying to launch a new business in tough economic times knows the going isn't easy. But she exudes a quiet confidence.

"I'm already a success, because I've already done what I wanted to do," said the owner of the Fifth Avenue beauty salon, which opened three months ago at the corner of Sylvania and McCord Roads.

Such confidence is born from a lifetime of beating the odds, starting at age 13, when the Vietnam War came to the city of Saigon where she lived with her family.

Confidence also comes from having survived a 15-day boat trip with her husband and two small children, one of whom was so sick, she feared she would have to bury the child by tossing her into the sea.

And still more confidence comes from having survived ending up in Oak Harbor, OH, with no job or money, not speaking English, and not even being sure of the size of the United States.

Speaking in soft, accented English, Mrs. Pham retold her story quietly. Only the long pauses and heavy sighs gave away the pain of surviving during wartime. From 1963 on, there were sandbags in the living room where the family ran during bombings that occurred every night.

"I was not afraid of it. Sometimes, I would just sleep in my bed and you could feel the whole house shake. It was really, really noisy," she said. "And then I would get up in the morning and I was not scared. I would feel wonderful I'm alive. And I would walk around the neighborhood and check and see who is alive and who is dead."

But life went on and Mrs. Pham did the “normal” things: graduated from high school; learning shorthand, typing, and English, and getting a job as a secretary at Macvee II, a company associated with the U.S. Army.

She met and married Chinh, a man 11 years her elder, who was in the Navy. They had two children, Huy (renamed William) and Trang (renamed Jenny). After Jenny was born in 1973, Mrs. Pham quit Macvee to become a full-time mother.

Although it was nerve-wracking to ride on buses or go to hotels where Americans stayed — both were prime targets for bombs — the South Vietnamese people love the Americans and Saigon thrived with their presence, she said.

But in 1972, the Americans started their withdrawal, and things began to change. By 1975, with Saigon on the verge of falling, all former and current Macvee employees were promised safe passage to the U.S. if they wanted.

Mrs. Pham’s sister, still a Macvee employee, typed up the forms for the whole family to leave.

Their mother, who did not speak English, but already had moved once to escape Communism, was determined to leave. But Mrs. Pham hesitated.

“I worry, what will I do over [in the U.S.]? We have money, and a business and a house, and I thought, I never did anything to the Communists, they won’t do anything to me. So I don’t go,” she said.

So while her sister, mother, and remaining family members headed for the ship in the harbor, Mrs. Pham stayed with her two small children — until her husband arrived the next day and demanded to know why they hadn’t left.

Brushing aside her arguments, he loaded the kids in the car with clothes and borrowed milk, told neighbors they would return the next day after a visit to her aunt, and set off for the harbor.

Mr. Pham ignored the restrictions on service personnel leaving the country and boarded the boat with his family.

On April 29, 1975, the ship pulled out of the harbor as the radio blared news that Ho Chi Minh was now in charge of Saigon.

Pausing while lost deep in memories, Mrs. Pham whispered, “It seems like yesterday.”

They had no idea where they were going or how long it would take to get there, she said.

There was no roof, no room to move, and canned Army rations included raw fish with a worm inside. And there was no milk for 10-month-old Jenny, so they fed her sugar and water. But as days went by, Jenny became weak until she all but stopped moving, and her mother thought she had died.

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### GRAMMAR & USAGE

Direct quotes in an essay make the writing and the person being quoted seem more real. Quotations can be part of a longer sentence that describes how the words were said: for example, *Pausing while lost deep in memories, Mrs. Pham whispered, “It seems like yesterday.”*

# Getting to Know the American Dream

## My Notes

“I don’t know where I’m at. Even if there had been a coconut floating by, I would have had some idea. My husband was crying and I was running from one room to another but there was no medicine,” she said.” We were just hoping they would stop somewhere.”

“I kept thinking, ‘If she dies in the ship, we’d have to throw her in the ocean,’” Mrs. Pham said.

But in the first of what she called “miracles,” the ship carrying the Phams stopped at Subic Bay, The Philippines, after 15 days at sea.

The family boarded another ship to Guam, and eventually was sent to a camp in Pennsylvania, where they waited for a family or church to sponsor them.

Many families requested sponsors located in sunnier climates like Florida or California, but Mr. Pham couldn’t wait.

“I did not know how big the U.S. is and I was worrying about everything. I wanted to get out and see what outside world is, and so I tell my husband we have to get out and make a living,” she said.

Her mother moved to New Jersey, her sister to California, and the Pham family was sponsored by St. John Lutheran Church, in Rocky Ridge, near Oak Harbor. On July 16, 1975, the Pham family boarded a plane for Ohio.

Nancy said she was anxious, having been told Ohio was full of snow and ice and cold.

“I’m such a worrier, that I looked down, picturing snow and ice and no living thing,” she said.” I look down and everything was so green and there were mountains and rivers. I feel so happy. I feel like I’m a bird, like I’m a fish. Everything is so beautiful and I think, ‘I can make a living.’”

The Phams stayed with an Oak Harbor family for two weeks, then moved when the church found a house for them to rent.

Chihn found a job at Glasstech, Inc., within two weeks, while Nancy took English lessons. But Nancy said she quickly knew that life in a rural community wasn’t for her, and started urging her husband to move the family closer to Toledo.

Eventually, Mrs. Pham borrowed money from her brother and the family bought a small house in east Toledo.

She sewed clothes for a next door neighbor, made and sold egg rolls, cleaned people’s houses, and worked as a lunchtime waitress. Along the way, she had Thomas, now 10.

But always, always she was dreaming.

“There was a lot of things I want to do, but I have no money and I can’t stand it,” she said.

“I’ve always had my dreams. I dream all the time and I think I can do anything,” she says. While working as a waitress she said she dreamed of someday having her own business.

She became a student at Ma Chere Hair Style Academy, and later a manicurist, renting space at Paul & Co.

Louise Hedge, owner of Ma Chere, said she never had any doubt that Nancy Pham would someday have her own shop.

“I’m not surprised because that was her goal. She really wanted it and kept telling me that,” Miss Hedge said.” She was an excellent student because she had a lot of personality. I don’t mind having them when they really want it.” Mrs. Pham remembers having difficulty with the language, and over-compensating by taping lectures and memorizing them while she made egg rolls.

She spent most of the 1980s working at Paul & Co., but always dreaming of her own shop.

“I like to be my own boss and I want to treat employees fair and equal. I like to take and give. I don’t want people who only take and don’t give,” she said.

This year, Mrs. Pham got to be her own boss when her husband noticed that the church at the corner of McCord and Sylvania roads was up for sale.

He wanted to open a restaurant in the old church, but after Mrs. Pham convinced him that would be too much work, she broached the idea of a beauty salon.

Donna Pollex, an agent with Loss Realty Co. who handled the deal, had nothing but praise for the Phams.

“They are fantastic people. They’re very dedicated and very honest and try to please people and I wish them lots of success,” she said.” They just brought themselves up from nothing and I know they will be successful. The hours she puts in are incredible and it’s really a family affair. The husband does the yard and the daughter handles appointments and both sons also help out.”

“They are very, very hard working people,” she said.

With the help of workers, the church was remodeled into a beauty salon which opened about three months ago.

Mrs. Pham said she doesn’t worry about whether her business will be a success.

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“What you want to do, you should do. You may lose money, but you do not lose what you want to do,” she said. “I don’t worry about being famous or about being rich. I ... want to have a beauty salon for everyone.”

It is an attitude that sits well with her eight employees.

Madonna Fong, a hair stylist at Fifth Avenue, said she has been in the beauty business for 16 years and has worked at a lot of salons that have been “temples of egos.”

“[Nancy] is very kind, very caring,” she said. “And she has such a great sense of peace in herself.”

Mrs. Pham said if she seems peaceful, it’s only because she still has dreams.

“If I stopped dreaming, that means I already died,” she said.

*Mary-Beth McLaughlin is a newspaper journalist for the Toledo Blade.*

