
Tuan Nguyen

Journey at Sea



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Tuan Nguyen greets five athletes at the Ergo Rehabilitation Fremont Center with a charming smile and a warm welcome. Mr. Nguyen has worked in the Bay Area as a certified athletic trainer for over ten years. However, Mr. Nguyen grew up in Saigon, Vietnam after the Vietnam War in 1980. At the age of fourteen, in order to escape from joining the Red Army, he traveled on a boat to seek freedom in America. Mr. Nguyen survived being attacked by pirates out at sea, endured an Indonesian concentration camp, and persevered in order to enter the United States. Mr. Nguyen hoped for better economic opportunities in the country he called the "Promised Land."

Before entering the United States in the year of 1980, I grew up in a place where life did not mean much to anyone. In Saigon, Vietnam there are two separate classes of society: the rich and the poor. The city I grew up in was very crowded and overpopulated. At the age of six my father sent me to a Catholic boarding school. Going away to a private school was very difficult for me because I always missed my family.

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I was only allowed to come home one time during the school year and that was just for a week. There is no place like home!

Being the oldest child in my family, my father believed it was better for me to leave my native homeland of Vietnam and seek a better life. When Vietnam lost the war in 1975 to the Communists, my father knew that it was time for me to leave. One night he woke me up at 2:00 am in the morning and said, “We are going to visit grandpa and grandma on the other side of town. Pack your belongings and get dressed, and we will drive to the coast of Vietnam.” I was confused because my grandparents did not live here. I soon realized that this trip was not about visiting my grandparents at all. He was actually taking me to a place that involved leaving my native country. When we arrived at the coast, there was a line of people trying to leave the country as well. My father and I stood in line for hours to wait for my name to be called. Finally, I boarded the wooden ship numbered 0351. These numbers are very ironic because they

add up to the number nine which is a lucky number in Vietnamese. The number would turn out to be anything but lucky as I nearly encountered death on my journey to claim freedom.

I was on this small wooden ship with 272 other passengers. Our journey would last a total of seven days and seven nights. We had no food and very little water. I was very sad when I got onto the ship because I was the only child without a family. All of the other people were with their families. There were people on the ship that were so thirsty that they drank ocean water. Many people died on the journey due to dehydration. Out on the Pacific Ocean, pirates from Thailand boarded our ship and threatened us with their axes and guns. I was very frightened when I saw these men board our ship. These pirates not only robbed us from all the valuables on the ship, but they raped all the women who were on board as well. I felt very fortunate that I was the only child on the boat who was not harmed or beaten.

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The next two nights, we were again attacked and robbed by pirates roaming the Pacific Ocean. I will never forget those pirates out at sea or the inhumanity they imposed.

After these three nights of hell and distress, the next morning we came across a United States submarine. This submarine was a savior for us because the men on the submarine provided us with food and water. We had not had no food or water since we left from Vietnam. Although I was the last person to get rice and some water, I was thankful to the United States. After the food and water was given out to the members of the boat, the submarine left us at sea. We continued our voyage and after days out at sea, our ship finally made it to Malaysia. When the people saw the coast of Malaysia from our ship, the men and children jumped off the ship and swam to shore. At first I was cautious of getting into the ocean water but then I, too, started to swim toward the shore. As I was swimming, I looked up and witnessed the

Malaysian officers shooting the men as they came to shore. I began to swim rapidly back to the ship. I felt as though, at that point in time, I was swimming for my life. When I got back on board, I was very tired and exhausted. That night, the Malaysian Navy came on board our ship and told us that they were taking us to Indonesia waters. I did not know what was in store for me.

We traveled for two full nights until we arrived in Indonesia. We received coffee with some sugar and a bitter tasting soup. They put everyone that was on the ship on a boat that was headed for Letung, a small Indonesian island. Out of 272 people, 260 people survived the long, grueling voyage. When we arrived in Letung, the native people looked upon us as though we were from Mars. We had received little food, and a man who was on shore tossed me some rotten tuna. Although it tasted horrible, I had to eat something for my stomach.

“I agreed to going to the United States and found a sponsor family from Ogallala, Nebraska.”

I had to quickly learn how to survive in Indonesia, and the first thing for me to do was to learn the native language. There, I found a family that allowed me to live with them. I had to wake up every morning at 4:00 am to fish for tuna with the family. Besides learning the Indonesian language, I also had to adapt to their culture and religion. I learned a lot about the Muslim religion because it was the native religion of the country. The tuna that I caught in the Pacific Ocean was sold in the local markets where I made money. I did what was asked from the family because they were giving me a place to stay. During my short time with the Indonesian family, I learned how to properly climb up a coconut tree and chop down coconuts.

The United High Commissioner Office was in charge of refugees like myself. They moved me into a refugee camp of 10,000 Chinese and Vietnamese refugees. I learned to speak and write Indonesian in two months. At the refugee camp, I received care packages from different Catholic Churches that contained tuna, rice, and spam. I stayed in this refugee camp for ten months where all I could do was eat and play

with other teenagers like myself.

The United High Commissioner Office had an organization where families from a variety of different countries adopt a child that was at the age of fifteen or younger. They told me to choose three countries that I wanted to live. Randomly, I chose Switzerland, Germany, and France. The United States was not a consideration until they found out that my father was reported as aiding the United States during the war. The United States interviewed me and agreed to find a family for me. I agreed to go to the United States and found a sponsor family from Ogallala, Nebraska.

My first step into the United States was to undergo a physical inspection for clearance into the Promised Land. After I cleared the physical examination, the United States Government picked me up from Indonesia where we boarded a ship to Singapore. From Singapore, I flew on a Quantas 747 plane to Hong Kong and then flew to Guam, to Hawaii, and finally to Los Angeles. I stayed overnight in

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Los Angeles and had my first taste of American food at Kentucky Fried Chicken. I felt like I was in Heaven while I sat there eating my Cajun rice in Los Angeles, California. The next day, I flew to Denver, Colorado and then landed in Nebraska. When I got off the plane, my foster family was waiting for me. Robert Temple and his five children were there to sign legal papers for myself. He gave me a Big Mac, french fries, and a coke from McDonalds. We drove a half hour into a little town called Ogallala with a population of 6,000.

Once I arrived in the United States in 1980 at the age of fourteen, I experienced an enormous culture shock because I could not speak the English language. The biggest challenge for me was trying to communicate and understand what people were trying to say to me. I had to adjust and adapt to American culture, food, and way of life. Growing up in a small town that was predominantly caucasian, I had to ignore the prejudice and racial slurs. One time, I went into a restaurant and a Caucasian man yelled, “Go back to your own country!”

I was extremely shocked and hurt from the ignorance of the man. I worked hard no matter what they thought of me. I knew that it was important to receive an education because that is one thing that no one can take away from you.

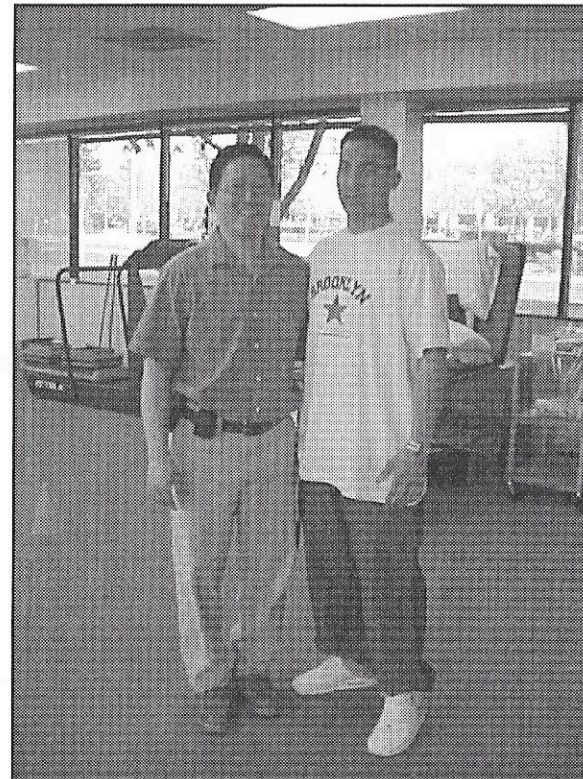
I feel very proud to say that I graduated from the University of Nebraska, majoring in athletic training and landed an internship with the World Champion San Francisco 49ers in 1991. I presently work at San Jose City College and in two private physical therapy clinics, dividing my time between these three locations. In addition, I am also the director of sports medicine for the East-West Shrine Game, a football game for college stars that is played annually in January. In my spare time, I enjoy spending time with my wife Hyunjoo, and playing with my two sons, Kovi, 3, and Brandon, 2. My goals involve raising my sons to be true citizens in this great land of opportunity. One of my accomplishments in life is that I sponsored two of my brothers from Vietnam who, like myself, served time in a refugee camp to immigrate to the United States.

“Life is a beautiful thing that I cherish every second, minute, and hour of my life.”

Before I came to the United States, I did not know much about America. However, when I entered the United States, I felt as though I was in Heaven. My life is significantly better compared to my native homeland of Saigon, Vietnam.

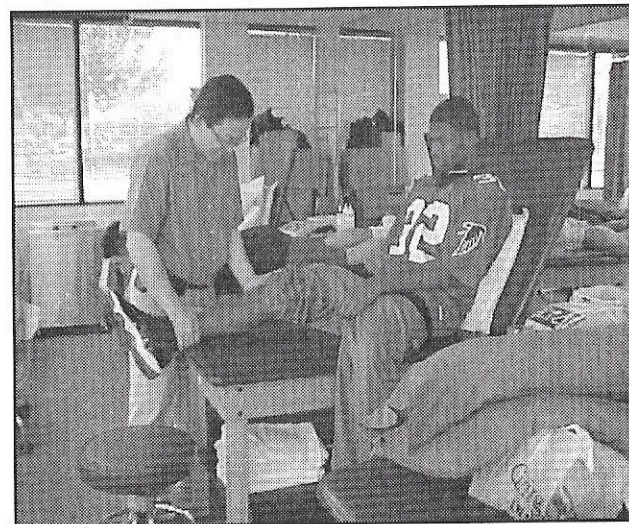
I am very fortunate to live in America because it is a place where freedom reigns. I love America because it is full of many diverse people who have their own distinct culture and beliefs. I will never forget the hardships I faced in order to get where I am today. If there is one lesson I have learned throughout my life, it is the appreciation of life. I never take anything for granted. I am thankful that I have food to eat everyday. I will never forget the pain I have endured throughout my life and feel as though my experiences has made me a better and a stronger person. Life is a beautiful thing that I cherish every second, minute, and hour of my life.

By Brandon Ting





There are smiles from everyone as Tuan has a photo taken with his family members.



Tuan works on this athlete's leg at the Ergo Rehabilitation Center in Fremont, California.