

Vietnamese Boat People – Dr. Lindsay Vo

I want to share my and my family's lived experience. Since a young child, I knew that my family's history is a huge influence to who I am as a person. Both my parents were considered boat people. They were born and raised in war-torn Vietnam. My grandfather fought for the Southern Vietnamese Army and was granted asylum, along with my eldest aunt, after the fall of Saigon in 1975. My parents and their families were unable to follow them, but awaited to be sponsored over. But the thing was, they were known as families of Southern Vietnamese soldier and were at risk for persecution, being sent to re-education camps where they could be tortured, raped, or killed. In the 1980s, they decided to try and leave Vietnam by boat, as thousands of others had done. They attempted 9 times and for several of the attempts, they were caught by soldiers and were put in jail or re-education camps. One time, my dad decided to escape the jail barefoot running through the swampy jungle in the middle of the night, when mosquitoes were so thick that he couldn't even see past them. He was so tired and his legs were so cut up by vines and brush that he collapsed in the middle of the jungle and was fortunately found by a nearby villager who nursed him back to health.

Each time costed about 1 gold bar for each person, which I don't know how much that was at the time, but it cost a lot. My grandpa and eldest aunt were in the U.S. working a factory job 70-80 hours a week to pay for my parents to escape. So, they tried 9 times and finally by the 10th time, they were able to get out onto a boat with probably over a 100 people in a small fishing boat. They said it was so full, the sea water was inches from the edge of the boat and people had to regularly shovel the water out of the boat. They got on the boat with just the clothes they had on their bodies. It was so crowded, no one could sit down. They weren't able to move and people had to urinate and defecate right where they stood. They were out in the ocean for 3 days, which was longer than they had expected. They found out the person who was steering the boat had gotten lost because the first night, they had a storm and the waves were so great, they were taken a different direction. My parents later found out that the captain, I guess we will call him, had known he was lost since the first night but was so afraid of letting everyone know, which would mean that they would die, he just kept quiet. So it's the third day, no food, no water, and essentially no sleep, people started hallucinating and worrying. I also forgot to mention that there was also fear that they would be picked up by Thai pirates who were known to torture, rape, and take Viets as slaves. My mother told me that the skies were all clear that 3rd day except for one group of clouds in the distance. She said she saw that the clouds had resembled Lady Buddha, which was one of the buddhas she had prayed to during this trip. She had prayed, bargaining that she would give up meat for a whole month if they would be able to get through this. Then not but a few hours later, they spotted a ship in the distance. People on the boat paddled feverishly towards it, hoping it wasn't a Thai pirate ship and they were right. It was an oil rig boat from the Philippines. The boat picked everyone up, gave them water, food, and took them back to the Philippines where they stayed a refugee camp for a year, waiting to enter the United States.

At the refugee camp, they were taught English and some skills to use when they would be taken in by the US or another country. When they finally made it to the U.S., they were in their

mid to late 20s. They stayed with my aunt and grandpa, got factory jobs, then were able to finally afford a place of their own to rent. Then they started sending money to Vietnam to try and help others come over, like my aunt and cousin, who eventually came to stay with us before getting their feet under them. About half of my mother's family were able to come over either by boat or by sponsorship, which under the McCain amendment, my grandpa was able to sponsor his children and their families over to escape potential political prosecution.