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# My Story as a First-Generation Student from Vietnamese Immigrant Backgrounds and Implications for Asian American Students

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MY STORY AS A FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT FROM VIETNAMESE IMMIGRANT  
BACKGROUNDS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

A Thesis Presented

by

Duy Nguyen

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

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for the Degree of Master of Education  
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## ABSTRACT:

Expressing myself in my own voice has never felt so liberating and uplifting, especially when it comes to writing in the academic world. Thanks to the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) methodology of Dr. Robert Nash, I have a chance to share my voice from my perspective as a marginalized student. Neither of my parents went to college. What does this mean for me as an Asian American first-generation student? What does my background say about me, specifically as a student and generally as an individual person? What are some of the obstacles and opportunities in my journey and in my education? How do my own stories connect to others from similar backgrounds, and hopefully to others from different backgrounds as well? What do I want my readers to take away from my own learning experiences?

In my thesis, I discuss my experiences as a first-generation student from my Vietnamese background. I describe in detail about my family backgrounds, some major events in my childhood, and how these changes shape who I am today. In order for me to move forward, I need to pause and rediscover my roots, my heritage, and my family's values and learn to appreciate them. I discuss my experiences of going to high school and college in the U.S. I also explain how I experience the issues of race and social class when living in the U.S. I address some of the obstacles that I face as well as the opportunities that arise throughout my journey. What have I learned from these experiences thus far?

I believe that sharing my story gives me the opportunity to connect with other students, educators, and administrators in higher education. This will allow us to acknowledge some issues that students of color have and how we can work together to address these issues. Based on my experiences, I have made some recommendations for students of color, especially Asian American first-generation college students. I also have some recommendations for educators when working with this marginalized population, specifically students from underrepresented groups and students from first-generation backgrounds.

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## Introduction

As we currently live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have experienced many changes in the U.S and around the world. One of these changes is the increasing number of populations from different ethnic and racial groups in the U.S, specifically Asian Americans. According to 2015 Census statistics, the estimated Asian population in the U.S is over 18 million people (U.S Census Bureau, 2015). Although, Asian population is the fastest growing racial group, Asian Americans have often been excluded in higher education research, policy, and practice (Museus, 2014). There are different racial identities among Asian population; not all Asians meet the same expectations in terms of academic achievement (Endo & Rong, 2011). Xianglei Chen suggests that approximately 30% of college students are first-generation students (Chen, 2005). First-generation college students are less knowledgeable and less prepared for postsecondary education than other traditional students (Davis, 2010). First-generation college students often come from a lower socioeconomic background (Croom & Marsh, 2016). Students of color from low socioeconomic background are more likely to have lower academic performance, diminished self-esteem, lower rates of college matriculation, and less probability of gaining employment (Valencia, 2015).

I am Asian American; more specifically, I am an Asian American first-generation student. What does it mean for me? It means that I may not have equal access like other traditional students because I come from an underrepresented group. It means that I have a different identity because I come from a different racial group. Or it simply means that I'm not a traditional white male college student.

My thesis is written with several purposes. First, I hope to illuminate several common themes of being an Asian American adolescent such as family connections, socio-economic class, racial identity, and struggles. Second, I would like my story to show what being an Asian American first-generation student means, and how educators can develop a more holistic and intricate understanding in order to serve this population better. Third, I want to add my little narrative to the big picture of what it's like to be students of color and to connect with others in higher education.

In Chapter 1, I discuss my family backgrounds, how I reconnect back to my own roots, and how much I appreciate my heritage. I share my grandma's experience during the Vietnam war and what it means for her as a woman living in the war. This is an important event in history because the war affected and changed many lives in the country. In Chapter 2, I talk about what my grandma did during the war, how she struggled to keep her little business, and how her business led her to meet my grandpa. I admire her courage and her work under the harsh condition. Because of the war, my family's story would never be the same. In Chapter 3, I explain about my parents and their experiences living in poverty. Because they couldn't afford college, they would work hard to give me a better opportunity to get a better education. I also talk about my

parents' divorce and how it added an extra difficulty in my childhood. In Chapter 4, I share a brighter event about how my mom met my stepdad from America, and how that opened an opportunity for me to go to America later. I also mention the Vietnamese New Year-Tet as one of the biggest festivals in Vietnam, our culture, traditions and customs.

In Chapter 5, I explain about the journey of my stepdad to America after the war and how he only had one choice: to travel by boat. Like many immigrants, he had to sacrifice in order to search for freedom and better opportunities in America. I also tell my experiences and how I felt when I first came to America. I know for a fact that America is not the same as Vietnam in terms of culture, traditions, customs, food, weather, language, schools, etc. In Chapter 6, I discuss in detail my experiences in high school, how I felt because of how I look and talk differently than my classmates. I describe some of my struggles such as learning English, making new friends, feeling lonely because I am different from my friends, and trying to adapt to American way. I also share some little achievements such as participating in several high school musicals as a backup singer and dancer in *Footloose* and *Grease*, getting good grades in junior and senior years.

In Chapter 7, I explain how much I enjoy music and how I find it helpful to cope with stresses and refresh myself. Music allows me to express my creativity and how I like to sing and dance along with the songs. I would also like to share some of my favorite Vietnamese songs and poems to introduce Vietnamese culture. In Chapter 8, I describe my experiences at UVM such as going to college as an Asian American first-generation student, adapting to college environment, and struggling in classes. I also talk about how my mom had a kidney disease and how that experience affected me. I discuss my failures and successes that I have had in my education and my journey. What do I take away from my own successes? What do I learn from my failures in order to move on? In Chapter 9, I discuss my plans of applying to graduate schools and how I got accepted into the Interdisciplinary program at UVM. I explain how I met Dr. Nash and how he inspires me to dream of becoming a scholar in higher education. In the last chapter, I provide some recommendations for Asian American first-generation college students. I also have some recommendations for educators when working with students of color and students from first-generation backgrounds.

### **Using the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) methodology:**

One of the reasons that I chose the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) methodology is that this method encourages me to write a scholarly paper and tell my story in my own voice. I have the opportunity to discuss my experiences as a first-generation student from a Vietnamese immigrant background. Where do I come from? What are some of the obstacles and opportunities in my journey and my education? How do I find my meaning of happiness? What have I learned along the way? What do I experience about race and social class in American school? From sharing my

experiences, I hope to connect with other students of color and provide them with some insights from my failures and successes. From sharing my stories, I hope that educators will be able to broaden their perspectives in order to work with this underrepresented group more effectively.

Another reason is that the SPN method is unique. In school, I have learned to not use the “I” in formal writing, especially in scholarly papers. The “I” has nothing to do with the scholarship when writing research papers; even though I’m the one who is doing the research. Do I have something scholarly to say? Who would listen to my own voice in my writing? Who cares about my personal stories and experiences? After I discover the SPN method, something has changed. SPN makes me question all of that. In fact, SPN allows me to share my own voice in my own stories along with the supporting scholarship. In *Our Stories Matter*, Robert Nash & Sydnee Viray explain:

*What our SPN students through the years all have in common, despite their many salient differences, is the similar conviction—expressed by the scholar-teachers above—that their lives truly matter. They signify. Their voices are resonant and important* (Nash & Viray, 2013, p.16)

In *Writing to Change the World*, Mary Pipher also encourages us to share and write about our experiences: “I urge you to write your own stories, to tell us what in your history made you the person you are today. The deeper you explore your own life, the more ways you will discover to connect yourself to the great and universal human stories” (Pipher, 2006, p.64).

I believe that we each have our own uniqueness to share and to connect with each other. Our stories are important because they are all part of our human-nature experiences. Along in my chapters, I also have some insights and universal ideas to connect to a larger general audience. I believe that the more I am willing to open up and connect with others, the larger my connection circle will expand. And so, are you ready to roll? Let us begin!

## Chapter 1: Finding My Roots

*Belonging is being emotionally encircled by your relationships with others. The ribbons of belonging tie you to the places that you call home. People belong to us not as possessions but as essential ingredients of our lives. The many ways of belonging gladden our hearts. Connections near and far, known and unknown, plant seeds of trust and security. The personal restoration granted by privacy and solitude complements the fulfillment found only in community. Grateful for all the relationships that ground and center us, we reach out toward the world (Marietta McCarty, 2009)*

It started to rain. Outside, the clouds were getting thick and dark. The raindrops seemed to cover all over the trees and grass. “Duy, run upstairs and close the window,” my mom shouted, “Hurry up, before the water splashes over the desk.” “Yes, mom,” I responded and hopped upstairs as fast as I could. As I walked quickly to the window to close it, I could see the light-breezing wind easily blowing these droplets slightly to the right, toward the window. I came closer and I could hear the sound of rainwater tapping over the window clearer and louder. The rain became heavier, everything was washed away by millions of raindrops. Just a few minutes later, it was literally not raining anymore—it was pouring outside. “What a big rain for today!” I thought. For a moment, I somehow enjoyed observing the whole scenery of this rainfall. “Look at the gusting wind and how it’s swinging some little branches on the trees and shattering some leaves down,” I murmured. I looked lower down to the left corner, suddenly I noticed something at that particular moment. It was a little oak tree. Yes it was a little tree. Why did I even pay such close attention to a little tree this way? What was special about this little tree for me at that moment?

The tree still stands right there, in front of my eyes, and across from my window. And yet, everyday I forget to notice it and observe it carefully, or long enough just to count how many branches on this little tree. It is only a little tree, but it looks so strong, so independent, so tolerant... and the fact that it braving all the storm and wind is astonishing. My mind stops for a second. Am I still thinking about the tree? Why am I spending time focusing on this little tree longer than usual? What is it about this little tree right at that moment? It is standing there still and facing the harsh whirlwinds on its own. “And not just one day, it does that many other days,” I reflect. The fact that the tree, bearing it all under different changing weather conditions, which makes me wonder more about nature. “Aha, this tree is totally connected to the ground. It must have a deep root,” a little voice inside me whispers.

Now, I wonder what does it mean for me? What is the connection for me? Where are my roots? Where do I come from? Where does my background come from? What is my background anyway? Who am I? Why am I me, and not somebody else? However, I understand one thing: just like a tree, I am also connected to my own roots. Thich Nhat Hanh (1995) explains about the connection of our family and our own roots:



*When we respect our blood ancestors and our spiritual ancestors, we feel rooted. If we can find ways to cherish and develop our spiritual heritage, we will avoid the kind of alienation that is destroying society, and we will become whole again. We must encourage others, especially young people to go back to their traditions and rediscover the jewels that are there. Learning to touch deeply the jewels of our own tradition will allow us to understand and appreciate the values of other traditions, and this will benefit everyone (p.90)*

Have you ever wondered how to find your roots? Where to begin? At least for me, the answer comes right away, from within my family. “Let’s see, the history of my family. How many members in my family?” I count in my head, “My grandparents, my parents, my aunts, my uncles, my cousins...” Then, I count the family members on my mother’s side. Next, I continue counting the members on my father’s side. You can guess the idea and how the list could go on. Before I know it, I would have to write another three pages, just to list all of their names. I stop and think, “Isn’t this too long? Nope, I’m not gonna use this listing approach. Another question. Who are the oldest members in my family? Yes, my grandparents. I could ask them to explain more.” However, my grandpa is an introverted person. I could recall a few times; I was trying to ask him about his experiences during the Vietnam War, his stories during this time, or even how he met my grandma. One time, I asked him, “What was it like when you were living in the war?” My grandpa slowly answered, “Life during that time was tough. Many families had to be separated. Food was scarce and many were starving, especially children.” Then I would go on and asked, “What was the tough life like? What was your experience like? How did you and grandma meet?” My mouth was full of questions and I felt like I didn’t get enough answers. My mind was asking, “Could you tell me more? Could you tell me more...” Until my grandpa had to stop me, “Ask your grandma. She can explain in detail better.”

My grandma, however, on the opposite side, is very extroverted. She would give a lot of advice to her kids and her grandchildren. I too, have gotten advice from her. Oh, not just one opinion but many invaluable opinions from her living experiences. Nevertheless, I have learned many important lessons from both, my grandpa and my grandma. But if I have to weigh it out, I would say I have received a lot more advice from my grandma. One of her stories that fascinates me is the first time that she and my grandpa met. Why? Because without the beginning of that love story, there would be neither the birth of my mom, nor mine. I heard her story several years ago, but I could only remember the details vaguely. This time, I decide to bring a pen and a piece of paper to take notes. I am on my mission to explore more about my background and my roots. Next stop, heading to my grandma.

In her usual natural-classic look, my grandma was wearing a versatile blouse with black floral prints on one of her favorite colors—purple, matching well with her black pants. Walking her way to the kitchen to make her favorite kind of drink—tea. I asked for a small cup. It had a dark green color with a bit of a grassy aroma, added with the savory

vegetal flavor. It is called “Fukamushi Sencha” or something. I’m not an expert on tea. “So grandma, where were you during the war?” I asked. “I was in a small province called Tien Giang, in the countryside part,” my grandma recalled, “fortunately enough, the place where we lived didn’t have a lot of fights going on. My mom has nine kids and I am the fourth one. I remember every day my mom had to wake up at dawn and go work on the rice field. I was old enough to help take care of my younger siblings. Babysitting them was definitely not the fun part. I had to run after them all day, trying to make sure that they were safe. They were so active. For example, one minute, they were standing by the table. When I turned around to do something, then looked back, they already stood by the front door. I had to make sure that they didn’t run far outside because it would be too dangerous. A few times, I couldn’t find my younger brother. He had almost made me faint and my heart was about to jump out. I searched all around the front yard, and went around the back. I was calling and crying. Then, he came outside after hiding behind the bamboo trees.”

My grandma continued, “Our house was a tiny little one. When we slept, everyone was cramped together in one place. We used a pallet bed. We didn’t have much food either. When we ate, we had a small rice bowl and we divided it into 9 parts. My youngest brother was always hungry. We didn’t have any nutritious food. However, we were still thankful that at least, we had some food. My mom ate only a little bit because she reserved the best part for her kids. Nonetheless, she had the strength to work hard and raised all of us. Sometimes, I have to wonder where her energy came from. My dad went to the war, and rarely came home. So, we spent a lot more time with my mom. I remember one time, we heard a bomb exploding somewhere. My mom gathered all of us and we ran to the back. We had a little tunnel in the back and everyone quickly crawled inside. We would sit and wait for a while, and my mom tried to comfort us. I was still young to think and fear about tomorrow. All I knew was that we had today to be safe and to be alive. When we heard the noise slowing down, we began to crawl outside. Living in the wartime allows me to appreciate and value the meaning of peace even more,” she took a deep sigh.

I sat quietly and listened to her words, her feelings, and her thoughts; allowing myself to be in touch and to be, once again, connected back to my own roots. Patrick Lindsay (2014) reminds us how it’s worthwhile to rediscover our own roots:

*Go back to you roots. Rewind your life. Spool through the memories. Relive some of the highlights. Recall some of the characters who traveled with you. Revisit some of the places that helped form your views. See how far you’ve traveled. Discover the things that matter. Cherish them (p.36)*

## Chapter 2: That First Moment

*With experience we realize the importance of patience. Too many decisions are reflex actions. Take the time to ponder. Put things in perspective. Allow situations to develop. Sense the patterns of things. Wait until the moment is right. Then be decisive (Patrick Lindsay, 2014)*

As my grandma took a sip of her tea, I quickly jotted down more notes. “Please tell me the time when you started your noodle-soup business,” I asked, “one of my favorite types of food is your home-made Vietnamese noodle soup –Pho.” My grandma chuckled, “it’s not the type of business you think. When my siblings grew a little bit older, I decided to do something to help the family. But what could I do to make a little money and still stay at home to watch my younger siblings? While I was thinking, my youngest brother stopped and told me that he was hungry. Cooking? All my siblings love Pho. I could cook and sell Pho in front of the house. There was no one selling Pho around here. Our house was only a 15-minute-walk-away to the road, plus many people passed by often. Then, I took some money that I saved over a couple years. I went to buy some small tables, chairs, and the ingredients for the soup. I set everything up in front of the house. I tried to make it a quick set-up and a quick clean-up. So when something dangerous happened, I could take everything inside quickly and close the door. I remember the first couple days; there were only 3 or 4 customers. I was worried that I didn’t make enough to cover my expenses. During the first week, the highest number of customers who visited per day was only about 7 people. It didn’t even reach to the number 10. Was this meant to be a not-so-good start? How could I make enough to cover the expense if it kept going like this? I started to wonder how long this little business could last.”

For a second, I was surprised. My grandma makes the best home-made Pho. Every time she cooks Pho, it tastes the same ...Delicious. I mean, a bowl of noodle soup with richly seasoned broth and rice noodles. She adds a fair amount of ingredients and seasonings to allow for its tenderness and to make it not too spicy. A couple pieces of thinly sliced beef and chicken are added to the soup, and topped with cilantro, Thai basil, lime juice and vegetables. The only word I could use to describe is... Yummy. Every time I eat Pho that she makes, I always ask for a second bowl.

My grandma continued, “One day, when I was sitting in the front, I heard the sound of a shooting. I quickly moved the pot inside, took the tables and the chairs in, and closed the door. For that whole day, I couldn’t sell anything at all. However, my patience was strong enough to keep me going. I also listened to my mom’s advice—to cook a medium amount and tried not to have many leftovers. In the third week, things got a little brighter. More customers stopped by. The average number of customers went from 14 to 18. My neighbors liked my food enough, so they supported me and they came a few times a week. Then word-of-mouth spread around. I started to gain more customers. The

following week, I was able to make enough to cover the expense. Little step by little step, I was able to start saving.”

“So grandma, how did you and grandpa meet?” I asked curiously. My grandma thought for a second and responded, “Because of the noodle soup. It was a rainy afternoon, and he stopped in front of my house. While waiting for the rain to slow down, he ordered a bowl of noodle soup. He ate and didn’t say anything. After he finished, he said that he enjoyed the food. It was still raining heavily. I asked him where he lived and started the conversation. I found out that he didn’t live very far away from my house, but how come we had never met? He told me that he joined the military a few years ago. Now, he came back home for a couple days. We talked for a while, and then he left. The next day, he came back to eat Pho again. He told me that he had to go back to his unit later this afternoon. He took out a small bracelet and gave it to me as a gift. I knew we had some feelings, but it wasn’t the type of formal dating relationship or anything. I was busy taking care of my younger siblings and my little Pho business. He was also busy with his travels. Five month later, he came back, stopped at my house, and ate Pho again. Before he left, he gave me a small silver ring and asked for an engagement. I didn’t say “yes” because I was still not ready, but I kept the ring as a gift of memory. Time passed by. He had not come back for a few years. In the 1968 Tet Offensive, as the fights got worse, in my head I prayed that he would be fine. Two days later, I heard my neighbor said that he got an injury, but we didn’t know how bad his injury was. Again, I prayed that he would make it through and be able to survive. I had not seen him for several years.”

I could see her eyes a little bit teary and puffy. I could hear and understand her feelings as she was sharing with me. In *How Philosophy Can Save Your Life*, Marietta McCarty writes about empathy:

*It is the use of one’s imagination to project another’s life into our own. Such pure feeling moves rapidly, barely discernibly...from feeling for you, to feeling with you, to feeling as you feel. This intimate identification that blurs the distinctions between us gives birth to compassion, kindness, and love. Acts of empathy lift our burdens, shining new light on lusterless days. Though we parade about in different bodies, we all know salty tears, anxious hearts, drained spirits, and weary footsteps. Empathy acknowledges this sameness; while it requires a leap out of my life and exposes me to your pain, empathy fine-tunes my heartstrings (p.134)*

My grandma resumed, “Time keeps going. Then, on an unexpected afternoon, I was in the back, cleaning some dishes. I heard a voice calling my name. A familiar voice. I walked to the front. Your grandpa was standing in front of the door, asking for a bowl of noodle soup. I ran over, cried and hugged him. I knew he was going to be fine. We were going to be fine. He stayed until the evening to help me clean the tables, chairs and everything else. Two months later, we got married. Our wedding wasn’t like the typical type of weddings you see now; neither in the church nor at a restaurant. It was a plain

wedding at home. There were a few members from both sides of the family, and some friends. I was trying not to cry during my precious moment. For some reason, I couldn't hold myself and my tears kept flowing down on my face. I had a little make-up, so I had to run to the back to wash my face a few times. Your grandpa kept asking if I was okay and everyone looked a little bit confused as well. It was a moment that I could not forget. Later, everyone stayed and ate my home-made Pho."

In *Be Happy*, Patrick Lindsay encourages us, especially young adults to appreciate and honor our own heritage:

*Trace your family tree. It's a fascinating exercise. It gives a feeling of continuity. It answers many questions and poses many more. Show your heritage. Reveal your tribe. Draw the world closer together (p.82)*

What I have learned is that it will never be too late to explore your backgrounds, your roots, and your heritage. It will give you a chance to refresh yourself and allow you to reconnect to your own identity. Knowing and understanding where you come from can be a stepping stone for you to go forward. I learned to appreciate and treasure the values of my own backgrounds and my heritage. Whenever I get lost somewhere in my journey, I am reminded to reconnect with myself and my own roots. This is what I call "connection bonding." It doesn't matter how far or how much I have traveled, I always carry these values of my family backgrounds. From the stories they tell to the advice they give, these will go with me on every single step of my way. I know that home is a safe haven, where I can feel comfortable, peaceful, and truly connected. It is a place where I can quickly find my first connections. From there, I will continue to grow and build many more connections as I go on my way.

My other lesson is that when you hold on to your hope, your belief, and your faith, they will give you more courage when facing adversity. How my grandma kept her hope, her belief and her faith gave her the strength that she needed during the harsh time of war. I learned many invaluable qualities from my grandparents such as patience, courage, determination, work ethic, and kindness. They also taught me how to stay positive and faithful during difficult times. These traits will be a great asset for me in continuing my education, my work, and my journey.

### Chapter 3: When It All Falls Apart

*We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be change. For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement (Viktor Frankl, 2006)*

When was the last time you heard your friends talked about education..., not about your education but about your parents' education? The first time I hear this type of conversation is my first semester in college. More accurately, it is the first week of my first semester of my first year in college. I remember going to my first class of Calculus in Fall 2009. I came to class 15 minutes early and I sat in the third row. While waiting for the professor, I thought I would make a couple new friends. I turned around to my classmate and introduced, "Hello, my name is Duy." "I'm Tim. Nice to meet you," he went on, "What year are you? What is your major?" "I'm a freshman. My major is business. And you?" I asked. He said, "I'm studying Biochemistry. My dad is a pharmacist, so I'm thinking about the healthcare field." The person who sat next to Tim smiled and said, "Hi, I'm Hannah. I'm studying Counseling. My mom is a counselor at Johnson State College." The person who was in front of us, turned around and said, "Cool. My dad also works at a college. He is an Economic professor at University of Maine. I'm Alex. I'm studying Computer Science." I looked and listened. I was surrounded around a group of friends whose backgrounds are in... higher education.

For these students, it is customary to have parents who have attended college and for them to follow their parents' footprint. I quietly reflect about education, both my education and my parents' education. "My parents only finish...high school," I ponder, "Do I feel a sense of intimidation from my friends' parents and their education? In other words, do I feel humiliated about my education and my parents' education?" Then I stop and comfort myself, "Stop that thought. Stop going in the negative direction. Now, I'm in school. I'm here taking my classes and getting my education." Even though, my parents didn't attend college, they have had their own education. Although, they don't have a lot of lessons learned in college, they have learned many lessons in their own lives. My parents also work hard and try their best to ensure that I get a better education. Pamela Aronson (2008) explains the barriers experienced by those from working-class when going to school:

*Youth from poor or working-class backgrounds and those whose parents did not attend college are disproportionately likely to drop out of high school, end their educations at the high school level, enter community college or vocational programs, or have difficulty completing a bachelor's degree... we can picture class differences in college pathways as shaped by a funnel that disadvantages and filters out deprived young adults at each stage of the postsecondary education process. Class-based differences also emerge in the subjective interpretations of*

*the goals and outcomes of postsecondary education, which can reproduce or begin to transform inequalities (Aronson, 2008, p.49)*

In her early twenties, my mom Yen didn't have the opportunity to attend college. She has four younger siblings and she is the eldest. Being the oldest means that she has more responsibilities such as taking care her younger siblings, helping her parents, and maintaining the house. When she finished high school, she didn't go to college because her parents couldn't afford to pay for her education. At that time, many women were encouraged to stay at home and do the housework. And my mom was one of them. Every morning, she helped her mom with her little business such as setting up tables and chairs, preparing the noodles and vegetables, etc. Then, she took her brothers and sisters to school. She also took care her youngest brother. When someone in the neighborhood asked to deliver the food to their houses, my mom would deliver the food. In the evening, she prepared meals for her siblings. Then, she helped her mom with the clean-up at the end of the day. That was a typical day of her housework. These works not only kept her busy but also kept her away from going to college.

No matter how busy life was, everyone usually gathered together in the evening; a social family-gatherings if you will. My mom would ask her siblings to share about their day at school. Knowing that everyone was busy and sometimes stressful, my mom always started a little joke to make everyone laugh. Telling jokes and laughing are examples of her way to create happiness in the house. Having a sense of humor is one of the characteristics that I inherited from her, without a doubt.

My dad Phuoc has fewer siblings than my mom; just him and his older sister in his family. In his early twenties, my dad didn't attend college either. He worked as a deliveryman for a local textile company. Everyday, he organized all the packages and went to different places to deliver these items. He often joked that his job made him to be an active person because he was constantly moving around. Therefore he could be excused for... not exercising. My mom told me that she met him through a friend's connection. My dad was the one who made the first move to talk to my mom. They started to have endless conversations about different topics from their hobbies, day-to-day activities, and favorite types of food to snoring habits. Then he took her home and introduced her to his mom and his sister. The first time she met his mom and his sister, it didn't go as smoothly as she had expected.

My mom explained to me, "When I first met his mom and his sister, I was talking more than I was asked. I'm a little talkative. When his mom asked about my work, I went on and on about my everyday activities and my siblings. When I was talking, she stopped me a couple times. After a while, his mom and his sister stood up, they didn't say anything and went to the back. Then I greeted everyone and left. I had a sense that it was not a good first impression. I thought that they didn't like my personality as being talkative, being straightforward and having a big laugh. Despite that, your dad and I moved forward to marriage. When I lived with my mother-in-law and my sister-in-law, they didn't like my cooking skills. I tried to cook for the family several times, but they

didn't even bother trying my recipes. They also told your dad that I was too noisy and too busy in the house. Once in a while, his sister and I had some arguments, and I had to go back to my mom's house for a few days. Your dad didn't say anything. He is a good son, so he didn't want to upset his mom. Things didn't work out well between his sister and me. It kept getting worse. Until the point your dad had to make a decision between his family and me. I knew he would put his family first, and... he did. You can expect what happened next."

When I was 5 years old, my parents separated. I was still too young to remember everything in clarity. However, one thing that I could recollect was that I was living with my mom and without my dad. I remember vividly my mom packed all her stuff and took me back to her mom's house. In the first few days, I was relentlessly asking my mom, "Why are we here? Why don't we live with dad anymore?" My mom just gave me a brief answer that she and my dad didn't live together anymore. Once in a few months, my dad stopped by to visit me. Sometimes, when he visited, he brought me some candies and toys. I asked him many times, "Why don't you and mom live together anymore?" He also gave me a brief answer, "Your mom and I don't live together because we are separated." Separation? What does that even mean for a 5-year-old kid? I didn't get it at the time.

In the article "The long reach of divorce: Divorce and child well-being across three generations," Paul Amato and Jacob Cheadle explain the effects of parents' divorce on kids:

*Experiencing parental divorce as a child appears to increase the risk of a variety of problems in adulthood. Compared with adults with continuously married parents, adults with divorced parents tend to obtain less education, earn less income, have more troubled marriages, have weaker ties with parents, and report more symptoms of psychological distress (p.201)*

When I was in second grade, I started to realize that I didn't receive the full benefit of having both parents like most of my friends did. Many of them had the supports and resources from living with both parents. One example was when my teacher gave us a list of books to be purchased for class. I went home and showed the list to my mom. I asked her to take me to the store to buy the books quickly, so I could bring them to class tomorrow. My mom didn't feel well that evening. She told me to wait for the next day and she would take me to the store. I didn't have my dad by my side to ask for help. The result was...I had to wait for my mom. The next morning, when I went to class, I didn't have any book. A couple friends showed me the books and said; "My parents bought the books for me yesterday, including these extra books." Another friend said, "Look at my books. My dad bought these for me." Then they asked about my books; I told them that I didn't have any book yet. Some of them laughed and said, "You are late." In the evening, I went home and rushed my mom to take me to the bookstore. I wanted to get new books, but my mom told me to buy used books to save some money. At that moment, I felt upset and thought that my mom didn't care for me much, compared to my friends' parents. I blamed my mom for not living with my dad and I blamed my dad for



not living with my mom. I blamed my parents for not living together, so that I could be better off like my friends. I was still little to know that used books are also books and can be as useful as new books. I was still young to understand that my mom has worked hard to give me the opportunity to go to school.

On the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival, which is a special holiday event for children. All the kids are excited to parade on the street while carrying their colorful lanterns with different sizes and shapes. And I am not an exception. In fact, I was very eager to wait for this special holiday. The day before the event, I wanted to get a little star-shaped lantern. I asked my mom to buy a little lantern for me, but she shook her head. Instead, she made me a little lantern in order to...save money. She used a couple pieces of posters and some little bamboo sticks. She cut the poster into a star shape and glued the sticks together. Twenty minutes later, I had a little hand-made-star-shaped lantern. Although, my mom didn't buy me a lantern, I still felt happy because I had something to show my friends. I was carrying a little piece of art that my mom made for me.

In the evening, I went out to see my friends. "Wow, many beautiful-colorful lanterns around me," I was amazed. One friend was carrying a butterfly-shaped lantern; another friend was holding a fish-shaped lantern; one other friend had a moon-shaped lantern; the other one brought a star-shaped lantern. One friend looked at my lantern and asked, "What shape is your lantern?" "It is a home-made-star-shaped lantern," I answered. He laughed and taunted, "Your lantern doesn't look like a star shape at all. It looks more like a... flower." My cheeks started to turn red and I didn't know what to say at that moment. I could only feel poor for my mom's effort. Where was my dad to stand by my side? I became... speechless. Though, I kept holding my lantern and walked forward. Five minutes later, I told some of my friends, "I'm happy with my lantern. This is a special lantern that my mom made for me." I tried to focus more on the positive side of the holiday. I tried not to let that friend take away my moment of happiness. I was trying to enjoy my little festival. Later I came home, I told my mom about my friend insulted my lantern and how I reacted. She looked at me in the eyes, smiled and gave me a hug. I didn't hear any words from her. However, I was feeling warm, from a love of a mother for a son.

## Chapter 4: Two Mothers

*Change is the only constant in life. In nature, in society, in relationships, at work, things change. And they change constantly. See it as part of the larger picture. See it as normal. Don't fight it. Adapt to it (Patrick Lindsay, 2014)*

By the time when I was 8 years old, my mom began her new relationship. She met a man, who is now my stepdad Dien, through the introduction of her aunt. He immigrated to the U.S back in 1979 by boat, a few years after the war ended. He had been living in the U.S for about 18 years at the time he met my mom. My mom's aunt knew him as a friend and had a close connection with him. She suggested him to visit Vietnam and meet my mom. During his first visit, he stayed at our house for a few days. They talked and tried to understand more about each other. He asked many questions about my mom and her family; my mom asked many questions about his work and his life in the U.S. All they were trying to do was...find the chemistry. And it didn't take them that long. He likes my mom as a candid, optimistic and caring person. My mom likes him as a thoughtful, determined and humorous person. Like a domino effect rolling in love, one thing leads to another. Before they could proclaim it, love has already opened their hearts.

A few months later, they got engaged. They decided it to hold the celebration at home. It was kind of their keep-it-simple idea. Everyone in the family gathered together to help cook a number of dishes such as fried rice, roasted duck, BBQ pork, fried shrimp, and my favorite grandma's recipe—Pho. I also volunteered to help out; my job was to wash the vegetables. The moment everyone was waiting for—my mom in her white dress stepped out from the room; walked with my stepdad in his black suit. He kissed her on the cheek, and everybody applauded. Everyone in the family enjoyed each other's company. One of my favorite parts about this celebration was the time period; it happened just five days before the Vietnamese Lunar New Year—Tet.

The day after the engagement, we took a trip to Vung Tau beach. We stayed there for two days. It was my first time going to the beach, so I was beyond enthusiastic. On the bus, I was imagining all about the blue ocean with many moving waves, the golden sunset, the tropical breeze with fresh air. However, when we got there, it was not sunny—it was raining. We had to stay inside and waited until the evening. When I walked along the beach, the water didn't look as blue as I thought. That evening was not sunny, instead it was cloudy. I walked a few steps further and saw some small garbage bags that someone forgot to pick up. My aunts and uncles ran and jumped into the water. I walked a few steps toward the waves and stopped. I thought the water was cold and another bigger reason...I couldn't swim. I stood for a while and stared at the waves. My mom told me to stay close by and she encouraged me to practice a little swimming. I pushed my hands and legs; trying to float on the waves. After a few trials, I had drank a lot of sea water; I decided to come in. I sat down and played on the sand for the whole

evening. The next day, my mom suggested me to practice some swimming again. I ended up with the same result—drinking lots of sea water. My mom gave me a positive look, “The more you practice, the better you will get.” In the afternoon, we drove back home. That trip made me realize that I needed to take my swimming lessons soon.

The next day, everyone was eager to prepare for Tet. We cleaned and decorated the house to welcome the New Year coming. Tet is one of the most important festival events in Vietnam. It is a special opportunity for family members to reunite; no matter where or how far they live. At home, people offer a five-fruit tray (such as mango, papaya, orange, pineapple and water melon) on the ancestral altar. It shows a sign of admiration and gratitude to their ancestor. People also put some flowers such as a peach branch and an apricot branch. People gather together to make traditional foods such as Banh Chung (a square cake made of sticky rice stuffed with beans and pork), Xoi Dau Xanh (sticky rice with mung bean), and Tet Jam (candied fruits such as ginger, carrot, coconut, pineapple, pumpkin, lotus seed and star fruit). When introducing about Vietnamese culture, Tet is the most popular cultural holidays of the country. Especially, it is known for the celebration of the rich history, customs and traditions of Vietnamese people.

The day before Tet, my mom bought me some new clothes. On the first day of the New Year, we all dressed up nicely to greet each other. I said my happy wishes to my grandparents, my mom, my step dad, my aunts and uncles. Then they gave me little red envelopes with money (it’s called lucky money). We ate, talked and enjoyed social activities. After that, we visited other relatives and friends. We told jokes, played games and ate again. The whole idea of Tet is celebrating the New Year, wishing a better-coming new year, and saying goodbye to the old year.

As you know, people often say “Time flies when you have fun.” Two days later, my step dad came back to the U.S. He started the visa application to sponsor my mom to the U.S. One day, my mom told me that she would be leaving me to go to America soon. She would be living far away from me for a few years. I didn’t even know where or how far America was. I held her hands and asked her to stay with me; I didn’t want to live far apart from her. She said that it was the only way for her to provide a better opportunity for me and the family. I didn’t understand what she meant by the word “opportunity.” She explained that when she went to America, she would be able to have more opportunities to support me. She then gave an example that she could buy me a brand-new bicycle that I had wanted for a long time; and other things for me that she couldn’t afford when living here. My eyes brightened up as I heard about a new bicycle. I thought to myself, “I like a new bike. I think I like this opportunity now.” At that time, I had no idea that I had to pay a price of living far from my mom in exchange for the opportunity. I had no idea how much I would miss her when she left me.

Within less than ten months, the visa process was completed. That day had come; the day I had to say goodbye to my mom. My cousins from both sides of the family gathered to see my mom. We had a small party for her in the morning. Everyone wished

her a good trip and good luck on her journey. Then my mom took a lot of pictures with me and the family; something to remember and to look at when we were not living together. Whenever I missed my mom, I often took out these pictures to remind me that she is close in my heart. I remember my mom talked to her younger sister to take good care of me while she was away. I called her aunt Quynh and my mom told me to call her...mom Quynh—my second mom. In the afternoon, we were on our way to the airport in Saigon. On the car, I was leaning over my mom's shoulder as she gave me much advice: listening to my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, studying hard, eating more fruits and vegetables, etc. She went on and on...until I fell into sleep. When I woke up, we arrived in Saigon—the city with many people, motorbikes and cars, tall buildings, and houses next to each other. Lots of traffic going on and many different noises such as people talking and selling things, the noise of vehicles moving around, and all the sirens. My first impression about the city was described by one word “busy”—everyone and everything looked so busy. Our car was moving slowly to the airport. Then we got off the airport and took the baggage out. My mom hugged me tightly. She started to cry and as a result I started to cry too. She swept my tears and said, “Remember your opportunity.” I stood there watching her walking further and further away from me.

When I got home, I cried like rain. That whole evening, I didn't want to eat anything. My grandma cooked some noodles soup for me, but I shook my head. My mom Quynh tried to comfort and appease me. She said, “Your mom will bring you the opportunity. She will also buy you a new bike. If you listen and eat, she will come back to visit you soon.” Then I started to pick up the spoon and ate.

When I went to school, I felt like an outsider in my friend's group for several weeks. Especially, when they talked about their new gifts and how their parents bought them these gifts. One day, we were discussing about gifts. “Look at my new backpack. My mom just bought it for me. Last week, I told her that my backpack is old and has some holes inside. She went to store and got me a new one right away. She picked the best one in the store for me,” one friend boasted. Another friend was pompous, “Do you like my new shoes? My parents bought them for me on my birthday.” Another one showed off her hat and said, “My dad bought me a new hat. Now I have 3 hats with different styles. I don't have to wear the same hat to school everyday.” I didn't have anything to show them, so I remained silent. I felt lonely around my friends because I was the only one who was not living with my parents. My dad left me when I was little and my mom also left me when I was still young. I didn't have the privilege of living with both parents like many of my friends.

When my mom arrived to the U.S, she gave us her first call. She talked to her parents and told them she arrived safely. When she talked to me, she was crying, and I also did the same thing. We were not able to say anything because we all were crying. The only words I could hear were “Be good and take care.” Then she hung up. Two weeks later, she called again. I told myself not to cry this time, so that I could talk to her more. This time, we cried a little and we talked more about my school work and my day-

to-day activities. My mom asked, “How is your school?” “My school is good. I finish my homework for today. Yesterday, my teacher gave me the test back and she said that I did well. I got a score of 9. This afternoon, I help mom Quynh with some cleaning. I try to be good, so you will come back to visit me soon,” I answered. She went on, “Did you eat more fruits and vegetables? Did you exercise daily?” I hesitated because I didn’t eat as much vegetables as I should, but I would say yes to make her happy. I asked, “How are you doing in America?” “I’m still adjusting to everything from the time, the environment, the schedule to the weather. It is very cold and I’m wearing three layers right now. There is snow here,” she replied. I thought about how I was wearing a T-shirt and I still felt hot and sweating, compared to her wearing three coats. I wondered how far my mom was living away from me. The first time I heard the word “snow” I had no idea what it was, what it looked like or smelled like. I barely could come up with an image of snow until my mom explained to me that snow is cold like ice.

The first few months after my mom left, I didn’t even want to think about opportunity. I would rather living with my mom than having the opportunity. During those months, mom Quynh had been explaining to me about how my mom left and how she would provide a better opportunity for me later on. I had no choice but to listen to her. I could never imagined a little kid like me would have the opportunity to go to America later. I could never imagined what better opportunities would be like. I could never imagined what living in America would be like. All I knew was that I was so young and I was scared of new changes.

In *30 Lessons for Living*, Karl Pillemer explains that we are the only one who can choose happiness for ourselves. It doesn’t matter whatever circumstances or situations that we are in, we are the one who make happy choices for ourselves:

*Happiness is a choice, not a condition. Happiness isn’t a condition that occurs when circumstances are perfect or nearly so. Sooner or later you need to make a deliberate choice to be happy in spite of challenges and difficulties (p.244)*

I have learned that sometimes reality doesn’t turn out exactly the way we want it to be. That can make life more interesting if you choose to look at it that way. Instead of spending your time and energy on the negative side, why don’t you give it a chance...to refocus on the positive side? Let us dare to choose to be happy. You will be amazed how it can actually turn out; just like upside down and inside out. Although, my parent’s divorce wasn’t something that I expected, I tried to accept it. When my mom left me in Vietnam, I was feeling sad and anxious. Later, I learned to embrace the pain instead of hiding and running away from it. I realized that being positive would give me the courage to move forward.

Another point, learning doesn’t only take place at one specific location—the classroom. In fact, learning can take place anywhere and everywhere around you. It’s important to learn inside class as well as outside class. For example, I learned my first swimming lesson on the beach. Keep exploring. Keep the learning going along your way

because you know it never stops. It doesn't matter whether you are a student or an adult, there are always new things to explore and learn. Because exploring and learning open new doors for knowledge and enrich your experiences at the end.

## Chapter 5: Welcome to America

*O say can you see, by the dawn's early light,  
What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming,  
Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight  
O'er the ramparts we watch'd were so gallantly streaming?  
And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,  
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there,  
O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?*  
(Francis Scott Key)

How do you usually travel from Vietnam to the U.S? When asking this question, I assume that many people would not hesitate to come up with the answer “by plane.” And that’s correct. That’s exactly how I traveled from Vietnam to the U.S. In 2003, my mom took the Citizen Naturalization Test, passed it, and became an American citizen. She immediately started the visa process to sponsor my grandparents and me. By the end of 2004, the process was completed. My grandparents and I took our first flight to the U.S. I remember when we arrived at the Chicago O’Hare International Airport, I was astounded. My first impression was that America is a big country. The first time I saw many skyscrapers and modern architecture, I was stunned because I had never seen anything similar in Vietnam. I saw many tall Americans walking by. Some people have blonde hair and blue eyes. I couldn’t believe that a little boy from a small country like me...going to America. For some reasons, I couldn’t picture myself coming to the U.S to see my mom. However, I forgot to do one thing at that moment—to pinch myself to remind me that I was awake the whole time.

America is the third largest country by size in the world with a population over 318 million people (National Geographic Kids, 2016). To me, America is more than just a big country. There are many wide and open prairies, rivers and mountains, besides all the big cities. There are many diverse groups of people from all over the world with different cultures, languages, and customs here. Many immigrants (including my family) come to the U.S—in search of freedom, opportunity, and a better way of life. America is known as one of the greatest countries in the world. It is the “American Dream” that inspires us all to name our own dreams and work towards achieving our dreams. For sure, America is unique in her own way.

The first time when I saw my mom after seven years apart, I didn’t know what to expect. She looked skinnier in person than in the photos she sent me. My mom couldn’t recognize me either because when she left, I was still a little kid. Back then, we didn’t have Facebook or Skype like now. The main communications were talking over the phone and sending letters. I remember my mom stared at me for a while, touched my face and hugged me tightly. “I miss you so much,” she cried out loud. My shoulders got wet because of her tears falling down. I was mute. We couldn’t say anything and all we did was hugging still for a while. I knew it was a surreal moment because I could feel her

warm touch and wet tears for the first time after several years away from my mom. I was in awe.

However, my stepdad's journey to America is a different story. He didn't travel by plane, instead he went by boat. After 1975, the Communist from the North took over the South Vietnam. Many South Vietnamese soldiers were put in concentration camps; some managed to escape the country. My stepdad had to run and hide in different places. After a couple years, he and his group of friends started their quest—finding a new freedom. From Qui Nhon, they began to sail to America. It took me one and a half days to travel from Vietnam to America by plane. Could you guess how long it took them to travel by boat? It took them 8 days and 7 nights. They were floating on the ocean for over a week. My stepdad said that there were 50 people on his boat; 4 kids, 28 men, and 18 women. Each adult had 2 small cups of water and a small portion of bread for their meals. The kids had a little more food. During the first couple days, some women and the kids panicked because they were sea-sick. They were crying and they were all desperate to go back home. Some said that they didn't care about being put in the concentration camps if going back. Some even said they would rather die at home than die on the ocean. Finally, my stepdad had to come up with a trick to calm some people down. He told them that the captain was turning the direction back home; when, in fact, he was not. He tricked some people, so that they would calm down in order to make the boat safer. My stepdad also couldn't express enough how fortunate his group was because they didn't see or had to deal with any pirates. He heard stories that many people got killed or fought with pirates when they were on the sea.

For the first four days, everyone had a little food to eat. On the fifth day, the food supply started to run out. At that point, my stepdad had to be extremely careful on how to spend the food amount left. He only gave out a tiny portion to the sick and the kids first. Everyone else had to wait. When there was not enough water, many had no choice but to drink sea water. They could only drink a little bit because if they drank too much, they would be dehydrated again. On top of that, no one could brush their teeth or take a bath. So you could imagine what the smell would be like after seven days. Not to mention the cold nights of the ocean, the quivering winds and the heavy rain along the way. They used a compass and a map for direction, but they could only see the open sea in front of them. There was no sight of land to be found close by. They had no idea what would happen next. Some people did carry a small prayer book with them to pray. My stepdad said that when he decided to flee the country, he knew that he had nothing to lose. He accepted the fact that he had to face his own fate at any point. On the seventh day, they were still floating on the sea. Their spirits and strength were diminished; they became hopeless and helpless. Not until later in the evening, they heard a siren of a freighter. Everyone was crying out loud for help. Eventually, they got rescued by the Canadians on the ship. My stepdad believes that magic does happen. He believes that God somehow listens to his call. I admire my stepdad and those people for their bravery to search for freedom. I can't help but wonder about their vulnerability, their willingness, and their



courage to take these risks. After all, “freedom isn’t free” and many people have to fight for it.

I have to admit that the weather in America is much different than in Vietnam. Especially, it is very cold in the winter in Vermont. What’s the word that I’m looking for to describe its coldness? Frozen. In Vietnam, there are only two seasons: rainy and sunny. The most interesting thing is that there is no snow. In Vermont, I can see the change of four seasons clearly; from the blossoms of spring, the humid air of summer, the falling leaves of autumn to the frozen winter. When I arrived in Vermont, it was early December. As you know December is one of the coldest months in the winter. So I was very cold, particularly during that first week. Even though I wore three layers, my hands still felt a little shaky. All I wanted to do during the first few days was to cover myself in a blanket and eat hot home-made Pho. When I saw snow for the first time, I was very surprised. I saw everything covered in the snow from the trees, the houses to the streets. I didn’t know why there is so much snow around here. How is it possible for all the snow to come here? I mean, I could use the scientific method to explain that water freezes at 0°C. For some reasons, I just couldn’t grasp the whole concept that there is so much snow in Vermont and there is no snow in Vietnam. Perhaps I was so new to Vermont and I was trying to adapt to a new environment.

When I think about American food, the images that come to my mind immediately are McDonald’s and Dunkin’ Donuts. They are referred as “fast food.” The idea is that Americans are all busy and work a lot of hours, therefore they need something quick to eat as they are constantly on the go. When I eat Vietnamese food, I usually have a small bowl of rice with different combinations; for example rice with stir fry chicken or stewed pork or vegetable soup. The point I’m trying to make is that it takes longer to cook these types of food. I remember the first few months in Vermont, I used to eat a lot more rice than now. When I came to school, I always brought a small container of rice for lunch. While it took most friends 20 minutes to eat their lunch, it took me 30 minutes for my lunch. I was a little worried about how slow I ate and how I was going to be able to adapt to this “fast environment.” I told my mom and she said, “You should try new things; maybe buy food at school a couple times a week.” I always gave the same response, “Maybe some time later.” Although I wasn’t sure when would be a “later time.” I was shy to try new things. I thought that I would not be able to survive without rice. Until two months later, one day, my mom brought home a bag of McDonald’s hamburger and French fries. “Today, I don’t cook any rice. Why don’t you bring this bag to school for lunch?” I held the bag and frowned. During my lunchtime, I opened the bag and started eating. First bite...sounded a bit strange; second bite...started to taste the juicy and seasoned patty; third bite...felt loving it. It wasn’t as bad as I thought. In fact, it was more delicious than I expected. It was the first experience that I learned how to try and enjoy new American food.

Prior coming to America, I had learned some basic English. I learned about writing, speaking and listening skills. However, practicing English in Vermont is a whole

lot different. The way Vermonters talk and pronounce are unlike how I was taught in Vietnam. I can't forget how I always had to carry a small notebook and a pen with me around for the first twelve months. When some people talked to me, I thought they spoke too fast. I could see their lips moving, but I couldn't follow up with all the words coming out from their mouths. My eyes and my ears had to pay double attention when talking with someone. When I talked to some people, they didn't understand my accent clearly. They often asked me to repeat the words a couple times. Sometimes, when they still didn't understand, I had to write the words down and show them, then they knew what I was trying to say. When I practiced English, I would say that my tongue did the most exercise because of all the pronunciation and the repetition. For example, one time, when I was eating lunch at school, one friend asked, "What are you having for lunch?" "I have rice with some vegetable and meat," I said. "You have vegetable and meet? Meet who?" he asked. "No, meat not meet," I tried to pronounce the word slowly. I wrote down the word to show him. Then he could understand what I was trying to say. During those months, a pen and a notebook were my best friends of translation. At home, I learned English from watching cartoons. It was the easier way for me to learn new vocabularies, the pronunciations, and listening skills. I often joked to my mom about how I was a teenager and still watched cartoons for little kids. Until now, she still tells me, "You will always be my kid."

The first day when I went to American school, I was very surprised. In Vietnam, students are required to wear a uniform when going school. Boys and girls have to wear a white shirt, black pants or skirts and a red scarf. All students look similar in the same uniform at school. Here, students can choose to wear their own clothes with different styles. They have freedom to express themselves in their own voices and looks. What I didn't understand back then is the concept of "individualism" in American society. The idea of how Americans put an emphasis on the individuals and how we each have something unique to offer in our own ways.

I was shy when I first came to high school. In class, when I didn't understand something, I didn't dare to raise my hands to ask questions. Of course, it was not a good thing for me. I had to wait until the class was over and then asked my teacher. The result was that I often ended up staying late after class to ask questions. I was nervous to speak up in class. It took longer for me to learn because I didn't follow up as soon as I should. I worried about asking the not-so-good questions in class. What if I asked something silly, then everyone would laugh at me? What if others thought that I was not good because I asked too many questions? What if I asked the "wrong" questions? My mind was filled with "what if" and a blank. I always waited for the "right" question at the "right" time to ask, and in fact, it never showed up. I didn't have the courage to speak up for my own learning.

Another example, when we had small groups in class, my classmates were so active to talk and ask questions. I often sat and listened. I could only say two or three sentences while my classmates did the most talking for the group. Back then, I didn't

understand what Brene Brown, in *Daring Greatly*, refers to as “vulnerability and worthiness: facing uncertainty, exposure, and emotional risks, and knowing that I am enough” (p.29). I was usually anxious that I was not good enough. My ideas were not good enough. My questions were not good enough. I didn’t even know what “enough” was. I didn’t know when I would be enough or how much would be enough. I simply didn’t understand “vulnerability” at the time.

What I have learned is that it is always interesting to try something new for the first time. Take the chance you have at this present moment—the only moment that you know for sure, and just roll with it. Don’t wait for tomorrow because you already have today. Embrace vulnerability and take it on with your new meaning because your own vulnerability is distinctive. Also, don’t forget to be grateful for all the things you currently have—because you are unique in your own way. As for me, I know that I am thankful for the opportunity of going to America. I am honored to call America my “second home.” I am also happy to say that English is my “second language.” Last but not least, I am willing to open up and welcome all the possibilities. And you should too!

## Chapter 6: High School Years

*Their stories can reveal the means for achieving success when faced with a number of obstacles set in place by the rigidity and inertia of society, or simply by the roll of the dice of fate*

(Latty Goodwin, 2006)

When I entered high school, I had to retake 9<sup>th</sup> grade in order to learn sufficient English. I was worried that I only knew a little English. I was overwhelmed about the fact that there are millions of English words. How would I be able to know them all? I was scared that I wouldn't be able to do well in school. My high school was not that big, but for some reasons, it seemed so huge and distant to me at first. My teachers and classmates all are Americans. The way my friends interact and communicate is different than mine. The way they learn is different than mine. One obvious thing is that their English is way better than mine. The class structure and schedule are also different. For example, in Vietnam, students stay in the same classroom and different teachers come in to teach at different times. Students have different schedules each day. When I came here, I was surprised that I had to go to different classes each time. The first few weeks, I was lost getting from one class to another class. One time, I came in a class, took my math notes out and prepared to learn Algebra. Five minutes later, when the teacher came in, I found out that I was in the wrong room. I was in an Art class instead of my Algebra class. As a result, I felt embarrassed and ran out quickly. Little moments like these made me concerned even more. How would I be able to fit in? How would I be able to adapt to the American way? There were times that I felt confused and even lost, literally and metaphorically. However, my family's love and support give me the encouragement to keep moving forward in my direction.

I was the only Asian student in my class. There were just a few students of color at my high school, let alone Asian students. For the first time, I started to notice something different about my appearance. My skin color is not white; it is yellow. My hair is not blonde; it is black. My eyes are not blue; they are black. And my accent doesn't sound like an American. I wasn't like a typical high school kid. I was different. These factors heightened up my anxiety level. Richard Valencia (2015) suggested that "students of color who experience academic achievement problems do so because they, their cultures, and their families have deficits or deficiencies" (p.35). I was nervous because of my dissimilarity. I wished that I looked, talked and acted like my classmates. I wished that I was the same white kid. I wished that my parents were white. I didn't understand that I am unique the way I am. It took me several years later to realize this. When I went to class, I often chose to sit in the corner in the back. I wasn't confident enough to raise my hand and engage in class. When I had questions, I always waited until the end and stayed after class. Plus, I didn't know my classmates that well. I also had a hard time remembering their names correctly. For example, my classmate who sat next to me, introduced her name as Cathy. Somehow, I remembered her name as Katy. I kept calling her Katy a few times until she had to correct me. Then, I understood that "Cathy" was not the same as "Katy". As a result, I felt embarrassed again. When I went to lunch, I

often chose to sit in the corner alone. I didn't know anyone much and no one knew much about me. During those times, I was a loner.

My mom usually asked me about my day and my classes at school. I told her everything that happened at school, how I didn't understand some material in class and dared not to ask questions, and how I didn't have any friends. I told her how I was worrying about my performance in school. She comforted me and told me to try to stay positive. She suggested me to take little steps first such as learning 5 new vocabulary words daily, making a couple friends in class, and studying together with them. She said, "I believe you can do these little steps, but more importantly, you should believe you can do it." I listened and absorbed her words carefully. I also thought that worrying wouldn't do any good for me; instead I needed to take some actions. Each day, I studied 10 new vocabulary words. I used a journal to write down my activities and my thoughts in order to improve my writing. I started to read easy books and magazines. At school, I was also enrolled in an ESL class. In my class, I talked and tried to make friend with a couple classmates who sat close to me. I studied together with them regularly. When I went to lunch, I asked to join their group and they all were friendly to let me join. Five months later, my English started to progress and I was able to make some new friends at school.

I met Mrs. Aida in my ESL class. She was my tutor for some of my classes. She was a funny, supportive and friendly person. She is from Bosnia. She told me that when she first came here, she also knew a little English, and how she tried to study, talk and write more in order to improve her English. I learned from her advice that hard work would eventually lead to success. I remember one time in my math class, when the teacher asked some questions to the class. I knew a couple answers and Mrs. Aida told me to raise my hand. I was hesitant because I worried that I would give a wrong answer and feel embarrassed again. My classmates quickly gave their answers and got the extra credits. I thought Mrs. Aida would get disappointed, but she didn't. She said, "Believe in yourself. Other people can help you or even give you wings to fly. But you are the one who decide whether you want to fly or not. Only you know when you are ready." Her words made me ponder for a while. It took me several months later until the spring semester to speak up in class. One day, I decided to raise my hand in class, not because I knew the answers. I raised my hand because I didn't understand some material. I thought that my voice would crack in the middle of my questions and the teacher would ask me to repeat the questions again. Fortunately, it didn't happen. In fact, my teacher commented that I asked good questions. Mrs. Aida gave me a high five after class and felt happy for me because I made some progress.

In 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I met Mrs. Sealey who was my English teacher. She was a caring, attentive and optimistic person. She took the time to get to know me personally. She asked about my background, my struggles, and how she could provide better support. She stayed after class a few times a week to check in with me. She asked about my progress with other classes and tried to connect me with different resources at school. She understood how I was trying to adapt to American school, so she tried to smooth my transition as much as she could. She was attentive to my learning because she cared about my success. She became my mentor in high school. Mrs. Sealey often explained about

the available resources at school and how I should seek help immediately when I needed. Because of her clear communications, I knew where and how to look for these resources. For example, when I worked on my essays for my classes, I usually came to the writing center for suggestions and improvements. When I needed help in my math class, I followed up with my teacher and my tutor regularly. When I got stuck in my science class, I stayed after class and followed up with my teacher. When I came home, I reread my notes in class a few times and tried to do more practice problems. I also followed up with Mrs. Sealey and my tutors a few times a week to talk about my progress in my classes. Doing these steps definitely helped improve my school performance.

In my junior year, there was an audition for the musical *Footloose* at my school. When I walked around the hall, I saw many posters advertising for the dates. I thought it would be pretty cool if I checked out the play. In my mind, I saw an image, “Me performing on the stage? I could only dream about it.” However, these thoughts were just thoughts. I never watched the play, so I knew nothing about it. For some reasons, I kept thinking about these posters for a couple days. Few days later, I decided to ask Mrs. Sealey about the play. She explained that it was a popular musical in the 90s and she even encouraged me to try out. I never thought about auditioning for a musical play. But I love music, so I thought why not? I went to the audition and did some singing and dancing. After the audition, I honestly thought that I wouldn’t get a part, even just a little part. Two weeks later, I checked back and found out that I got a small part as backup singer and dancer. I was beyond surprised. Indeed, I was feeling blissful. I told Mrs. Sealey and my tutor, and they all felt happy for me because doing this activity would allow me to make new friends and learn new things.

When I went to the rehearsals, I met new people and made new friends like Erika, Julie and John. They were very outgoing, energetic and talented students. I even thought that if they made their own records, I would go buy their records and listen. They were cool kids in high school. I felt glad that I could learn many things from them. Because I played a small part, I only had to attend the rehearsals a few times a week. Other people who played the main characters had rehearsal everyday. Two months later, the show began. Before the show, I felt nervous because I never performed in front seven hundred people (Seven hundred people may not seem like a big number, but if you do the math, there are over thousands of eyes staring at you. It’s nerve-racking). I took a deep breath and told myself, “Believe in yourself. Just remember the songs and the steps. It’s gonna be ok.” As the curtain opened up, I started to dance and sing with the group. All a sudden, my nervousness disappeared like a wind. I enjoyed singing and dancing throughout the show. In fact, I was having fun with the music and the dance. It was my first joyful experience performing in front of a big group.

In the spring, I met with my counselor, Mrs. Julia to talk about the college application process. She asked me some important questions: What do I want to be? What do I want to study in college? Where do I want to go to college? These questions made me ponder for some time. I didn’t want to be a doctor because I’m scared of blood and medical schools are very expensive and competitive. I didn’t want to be a lawyer because I can’t negotiate and debate. I didn’t want to be an engineer because I’m not that

good at math. I didn't want to be a teacher because I'm allergic to chalk. What else could I do? I didn't know. When I went to school, I asked my friends about their plans. Some wanted to study education; some wanted to study engineering; some wanted to study business. Some friends applied to schools in other cities such as Boston, New York, D.C, etc. Some even liked to move far to the South. I thought studying business was interesting. I also thought applying to schools in Boston was appealing. It would be cool to explore and study in another city. I told my mom that I would like to study business in college. She suggested me to think carefully about my career plan for the future. When I mentioned about schools in Boston, she shook her head immediately. She wanted me to stay local and applying to schools in Vermont. I knew what she meant, so I dared not to ask her again. Going to college in Vermont meant that the tuition would be much cheaper. Gary Orfield et al. (2005) explained "the impact of financial factors from the academic barriers to college attendance faced by poor and minority students" (p.94). Although, I would like to travel to another place, I understood my family's finance. I had to learn to accept the reality. There were not many options available for a poor Asian student like me.

I started to search and apply for local colleges in Vermont. I applied to five colleges such as UVM, Champlain College, Castleton University, Lyndon State College, and Johnson State College. I followed up with my counselor regularly about my process. Mrs. Julia also suggested me to check out the resources at VSAC. I couldn't emphasize enough how important to ask and follow up with my teachers, counselor and tutors regularly. They provided many useful suggestions that I probably didn't know if I didn't ask. This made my application process easier and less stressful. I'm thankful for their help. Without their support, I wouldn't be able to apply to colleges and got into UVM successfully.

In my senior year, there was another audition for the musical *Grease*. I decided to audition again and I also got a small part as a backup singer and dancer. The reasons I did these plays because I wanted to meet new people and make new friends. I wanted to learn new things from my talented friends. I love music and I wanted to explore more about American musicals. These activities opened my eyes and helped build my self-confidence. I would say that at the beginning, I was shy; but each time, I took a little step forward and got better. Participating in several high school plays allowed me to interact with others and learn more about American culture, music, and art.

Later in the spring, I received letters from five colleges that I applied. I found out that I got accepted into five colleges. I couldn't believe what I saw. I read the letters over and over again and they all said the same thing: I got accepted. Needless to say, I was beyond euphoric. I showed the letters to my parents, my teachers, and my tutors. They were all cheering for me. It was an "up" moment that I didn't want to take it for granted. I went over each option with my parents carefully. We talked about each college, the programs they offer, the financial aid, the size, and the location, etc. UVM stood out as the best option. My family and I all agreed for me to go to UVM.

## Chapter 7: Around the Musical Sound

*Music can transcend borders and break down barriers between people and cultures*  
(Ricky Martin, 2011)

I love music. Everyone in my family all loves music. I enjoy a variety of music such as pop, rock, country, ballads, and R&B, etc. When I lived at home, my family usually watched Vietnamese country music, and I watched along with them. As a result, I began to fall in love with country music and appreciate Vietnamese music. My mom often reminds me to keep my Vietnamese root and remember Vietnamese culture. Listening to Vietnamese music is one of many ways to keep a sense of that tradition. Along with that, I also listen to American music to learn more about American culture and art. When I was in high school, I watched popular musicals such as *High School Musical* and *Glee*. I also researched some classical musicals such as *The Sound of Music*, *West Side Story*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*, etc. The more I explore, the more I will learn.

For me, it is important to find a balance between my personal and professional lives. When I work, I do my best and put all my effort into my work; trying to do an “excellent” job, not a “perfect” job. I also realize the importance of finding ways to rejuvenate and refresh myself in order to refill my energy. Music is one example. I exercise and meditate on a regular basis. When I do these activities, I often put on my favorite songs. Sometimes, I even like to sing out loud. When I have a bad day or feel overwhelmed about something, I take a deep breath for a moment and try not to think about it. I watch comedy and listen to music. These activities make me laugh and forget all my concerns. It is a great remedy that helps alleviate my stresses and makes me feel better in some way. I find that comedy, humor, and music encourage me to think more positively, especially during my difficult times. From these activities, I also learn how to be more mindful and present in the moment.

When I listen to a song in another language, although, I don’t understand the meaning, I still can hear the sound and feel the emotions. I think that music has the power to connect different cultures, different ideas, and different people together. Music has the power to transform and bring our differences closer together. I believe that music is a universal connector!

Another of my favorite activities is writing poems. In my free time, I like to write poems. When I feel happy, I like to write poems. When I feel sad, I also like to write poems. In my poems, I write about different topics such as nature, trees, birds, seasons, love, etc. Sometimes, I even write poems about myself. I also think that poems are connected to music in some way. Hopefully, someday, I will be able to transform my poems into some good songs!

The following pages are some examples of my favorite Vietnamese songs and some of my own poems. I hope that you will learn something new.



## Ngày Tết Quê Em

Từ Huy

Tết Tết Tết Tết đến rồi  
Tết Tết Tết Tết đến rồi  
Tết Tết Tết Tết đến rồi  
Tết đến trong tim mọi người.

Ngày Tết đến trên khắp muôn nơi  
Ngàn hoa thơm khoa sắc xinh tươi  
Đàn em thơ khoe áo mới  
Chạy tung tăng vui pháo xuân.

Ngày Tết đến ta chúc cho nhau  
Một năm thêm sung túc an vui  
Dù đi đâu ai cũng nhớ  
Về chung vui bên gia đình.

Tết Tết Tết Tết đến rồi  
Tết Tết Tết Tết đến rồi  
Tết Tết Tết Tết đến rồi  
Tết đến trong tim mọi người.

Ngày Tết đến phố xá đông vui  
Người đi thăm đi viếng đi chơi  
Người ta đi mua sắm Tết  
Người dâng hương đi lễ chùa.

Ngày Tết đến ta chúc cho nhau  
Một năm thêm sung túc an vui  
Người nông dân thêm lúa thóc  
Người thương gia mau phát tài.

## **On the Tet Day**

By Tu Huy

Tet Tet Tet is coming  
Tet Tet Tet is coming  
Tet Tet Tet is coming  
Tet is here in our hearts

Tet's coming to every place  
All the flowers blossom beautifully  
All the kids dress up nicely  
Frolicking and listening to the fire-cracker

On this day, we wish each other  
A healthy and happy new year with fortune  
Everyone can't wait to come back  
To their home and their family

Tet Tet Tet is coming  
Tet Tet Tet is coming  
Tet Tet Tet is coming  
Tet is here in our hearts

On this day, everyone celebrates  
Some visit their family and friends  
Some like to travel near and far  
Some go to temples to offer incense

On this day, we wish each other  
A healthy and happy new year with fortune  
For all the farmers and traders  
To become more and more successful

Tet Tet Tet is coming  
Tet Tet Tet is coming  
Tet Tet Tet is coming  
Tet is here in our hearts

## **Mùa Xuân Oi**

Nguyễn Ngọc Thiện

Xuân Xuân ơi ! Xuân đã về  
Có nỗi vui nào vui hơn ngày Xuân đến  
Xuân Xuân ơi ! Xuân đã về  
Tiếng chúc giao thừa chào đón mùa Xuân

Xuân Xuân ơi ! Xuân đến rồi  
Cánh én bay về cho tim mình nao nức  
Xuân Xuân ơi ! Xuân đến rồi  
Những đóa mây vàng chào mừng Xuân sang

Nghe âm vang bao câu chúc yên lành  
Đất nước gấm hoa yên ấm an vui  
Bao em thơ khoe áo mới tươi cười  
Chào một mùa Xuân mới

Xuân Xuân ơi ! Xuân đã về  
Kính chúc muôn người với bao điều mong ước  
Trong hương Xuân ta vẫy chào  
Kính chúc muôn nhà gặp nhiều an vui

## **Hello Spring**

By Nguyen Ngoc Thien

Hello Spring! Spring's here  
What a joyful time we have  
Hello Spring! Spring's here  
Our wishes for the New Year and welcome Spring

Hello Spring! Spring's here  
Swallow flying in an eager bustle  
Hello Spring! Spring's here  
The yellow apricot flowers await for spring

Hearing all the peaceful and happy wishes  
All places unite in a harmonious way  
All children smile and enjoy this time  
Welcome a new Spring

Hello Spring! Spring's here  
Wish everyone and their dreams come true  
When spring comes, we all praise happily  
Wish everyone a healthy and happy New Year

## **Five Senses of Kindness**

Duy Nguyen

Kindness is like the warm sun  
With its sunshine that lights up the world

Kindness is like the open sea  
With its endless waves that keep moving on

Kindness is like the wonder of nature  
With its friendly environment for all living beings

Kindness is like the green earth  
With its welcoming space that holds us on

Kindness is like the sparkling fire  
With its flames of hope shining through darkness

And when all is gone away  
Kindness is here to stay  
For you and for me all the way

## **Seasons of Love**

Duy Nguyen

Four seasons of love! Four seasons of love!  
Love all four seasons! Love all four seasons!

Love it when Spring is here  
A fresh air of breeze awakes everything  
Scented flowers blossom under the sunshine  
All colors dancing as the wind blowing  
Those birds singing their songs of joy  
Spring goes on and love goes on

Love it when Summer is here  
Schools are closed and students are away  
Everyone enjoys the outdoor and let us explore  
Maybe a vacation, even if near or far  
Heat things up and mix things up  
Summer goes on and love goes on

Love it when Fall is here  
Back to school, teachers are in and students are in  
The trees look bald without green leaves covering  
Clouds wandering around as the days get darker  
Cool air is up before the cold returns  
Fall goes on and love goes on

Love it when Winter is here  
Snowflakes flying in all directions  
Things are covered in the color of white  
Stay inside cause you know it's cold outside  
Let us sing and wish the happy holidays  
Winter goes on and love goes on

Four seasons of love! Four seasons of love!  
Love all four seasons! Love all four seasons!

## **I Am...Me**

Duy Nguyen

I am an Asian American  
Growing up in a small town in Vietnam  
Living without my parents since an early age  
Raised in the love of my grandparents and dear ones  
Childhood is like a crystal of sweet memories  
Innocent and fun in many ways  
Going to the river and singing along  
Watching the sunset reflected on the waves  
Feeling uproarious, buoyant and peaceful  
Flying the kites up in the sky  
Letting the wind blows and see how far they go  
Nights come with thousands twinkle little stars  
Filling my dreams somewhere in the air  
Time goes on and on

I am a first-generation student  
No one in my family knows about college  
With my hard work, determination and patience  
Going to college with a sense of anxiety  
Having lots of failures as well as successes  
Falling down and getting up many times  
Still trying to move forward with my steps  
Inside my heart and my head  
I have my hope, dream and faith  
Knowing that tomorrow will be another day  
A better and brighter day for all  
Time goes on and on

I am a person  
Enjoy travelling to places near and far  
Like the outdoor activities and being active  
Explore new things and learn something  
Also doesn't mind to take a nap sometimes  
Cooking Vietnamese food and trying American recipes  
Not forget to pose a picture here and there  
Reading, listening to music and watching comedy  
Humor and optimism for happiness  
Time goes on and on

After all you are not me  
And I am not you  
So I am...me

## Chapter 8: My UVM Experience

*So we need to take a chance and learn as we go. We learn from both success and failure, benefit and risk. Regardless of the outcome, we will emerge from the adventure transformed*

(Robert Nash & Jennifer Jang, 2015)

I am a first-generation student. Even though my parents wanted to help me with the college transition, they couldn't do much because they knew nothing about college. When I went to college, I felt anxious because everything was different and how I tried to adapt to a new college environment. I didn't know anyone. I had no clue about college classes. There I was, confused and lost again. Jeff Davis explained that "the typical characteristics of the first-generation student experience are present: the lack of preparedness; of self-confidence in the academic environment; and of a clear, straightforward plan for getting from point A to point B, academically speaking"(Davis, 2010, p.174). I remember the day when my family drove me to college and brought my baggage into my dorm. My mom and grandma held my hands and started to cry, "We will miss you." I comforted them, "I will be fine. UVM is not that far from home. I will come home regularly." I couldn't imagine how long they would cry if I went to college in another state. I shared the room with two other roommates, Mike and James. Mike is from New Hampshire and James is from Maine. They chose UVM because they both love skiing. Unlike me, they were very quick at making new friends. In the first few weeks, we went to dinner together several times. Later on, they started to go with their group of friends more. I was a slow and shy type of person. What could I say?

The first day when I went to my classes, I felt like it was a journey. I got lost going to different classes several times. I walked slowly and looked puzzlingly. I asked some people for direction and I still ended up going to the wrong class. I also had to carry a map with me. I felt like I was back in high school again. Worrying. Confusing. Numbing. These are the words that I would describe my feelings during that time. My first impression of college class was Economics class. There were over a hundred people in the classroom. The professor was standing on the stage and doing all the lectures. Everyone was watching and listening. There was no interaction between students and professor; except some students in the front asking questions at the end of class. When I went to classes, I always sat in the back. Sometimes, the professor explained things so quickly that I was unable to follow. I didn't understand some material and I dared not ask questions in front of the big group. I started to worry how I was struggling in some classes. Russell Endo et al. (2011) explained that "in much of the existing literature on Asian Americans in education, Asian American voices and experiences have been largely silent" (p.107).

I met with my counselor, Jen, and she suggested to check out the resources at the ALANA center. I came there and met Maria who was working there. She was a friendly, empathic and conscientious person. She asked a lot of questions about my background. I told her about my classes and how I was struggling in some classes. She listened



attentively and encouraged me to check out the resources at the Tutoring Center and Student Support Services. I also told her that I wanted to be involved on campus, but I wasn't sure which club to join from a hundred different clubs at UVM. She suggested to check out the Asian American Student Union (AASU) club. I came to the meetings and met other people from Korea, China, Japan, etc. That was my first step toward building connection at the ALANA center.

I visited the Tutoring Center and scheduled regular appointments with the tutors for some classes. I asked them about studying strategies for exams and writing tips for papers. I asked a lot of questions. They gave me a whole list of different resources available on campus. I started to make some study plans for myself. In class, I made friends with a few classmates who sat close to me. We scheduled times and studied together. In small classes, I asked questions and engaged more. In some big classes, I was still shy to ask questions. But I scheduled appointments and came to professors' office hours regularly. When I had questions, I followed up and emailed my professors as quickly as possible. I took initiative to follow up with my professors and classmates. I did better in some classes than others. However, my efforts showed that I made some progress in my courses. Taking these extra steps definitely helped improve my performance.

I met Harriet from the Student Support Services. She was a supportive, outgoing and funny person. She helped and explained to me about work study, financial aid application, classes' registration, and different available resources, etc. I also applied to be part of the TRIO program. She encouraged me to be more involved on campus as well. For example, she suggested to do more planning activities in the AASU club. She explained that taking more responsibility would allow me to gain valuable skills such as leadership, organization, communication, and teamwork.

My first semester wasn't as bad as I thought. Although, I did average in some classes, I learned many new things about college life. I learned how to organize and start schoolwork early, how to plan and use time effectively, how to follow up and ask questions with my professors and friends, and how to utilize available resources on campus, etc. It was a matter of work ethic, determination, patience, resilience, motivation, and a little luck. In the spring semester, I started to understand more about the "college environment." I was slow but I took the extra steps to seek help when I needed. I knew that the journey is long ahead and I need to take one step at a time.

In the AASU club, we were planning a weekend trip for the group. We had 2 affordable choices: Boston or Montreal. The majority voted to go to Boston, and there were about 20 people signed up for the trip. However, for our budget, we needed some extra funds. We brainstormed, talked to each other, and we came up with an idea to bake and sell cookies for fundraising. Everyone agreed to volunteer and helped out. We made 50 cookies and sold them on campus. We got some extra cash, but we still didn't meet the budget. We decided to bake and sell cookies again. Unfortunately, this time we sold less than the first time. We met and talked again. Each person agreed to contribute some money to the group funding. Finally, we met the requirement for our budget and we

could afford a trip to Boston together. These activities allowed me to gain experience in teamwork, planning skills, organizational skills, and interpersonal skills.

When I came home, my mom had a bad news. She had a kidney disease. I didn't understand what she meant until she explained that she had a kidney failure. One of her kidneys wasn't functioning well and the doctor recommended a surgery. The problem was that she had to wait for a kidney donor and we didn't know how long it would take. I was very shocked and speechless. I thought I would tell her my little news about my classes' improvement and now another major news got in the way. I wanted to help her but I didn't know what to do. All I could do at the moment was to pray for her health. Everyone was worrying, especially my grandma. However, my mom was the only one who remained calm. My mom is a strong woman who always carries on extra responsibilities with an optimistic mind. She didn't complain or panic much about it. My grandma worried a lot. Everyday, my grandma would call and talk to her children and relatives in Vietnam for hours. She asked them to check with different hospitals and other people they knew for a kidney donor. She asked and followed up with them daily. She called and prayed, and then called and prayed again. I admire her relentless effort with gratitude. We didn't hear anything back and we didn't know what to expect next. In the meantime, my mom had to go to the hospital regularly to get a dialysis check-up. We were living day by day. Until a few months later, my aunt Quynh from Vietnam called and said that she found a kidney donor who matched with my mom's blood type. My mom had to go back to Vietnam to do the surgery. She stayed there for a few months. I'm a person who believes in faith, so I prayed for her health and her surgery. There was nothing else I could do for her other than that. Sometimes, I felt helpless because I couldn't do much.

One of my failures was failing my Geology class in my sophomore year. I was struggling in the class and I failed several tests. I wasn't able to focus all my energy into studying because of my anxiety and my family's situation. I talked to my counselor and she told me to withdraw from the course. I didn't listen to her advice because I was stubborn. I didn't want to withdraw from the course because I didn't want to take an extra summer course. I thought if I tried hard and hoped for the best, then things would turn out fine. In fact, things didn't turn out fine. My mom was sick, so I didn't want to tell her about my grade. I didn't want her to feel disappointed. She has always worked hard and wanted to provide me a better education. I owe her many things and now I owe her more. On the other hand, I couldn't hide this fact forever. I didn't know when would be an appropriate time to tell her. What would I tell her? How would I say this to her? What was I supposed to do? I was scared. I have earned some A in some classes, but how come getting an F was ten times more terrifying? I had some successes but now I felt like this one mistake was so big and would overshadow all my successes. I made a dumb mistake. I thought the door of opportunity would close and lock me out. I thought my future would become blank. I thought it would be the end of the world. All I wanted to do was to run away and hide from my family, friends, and the rest of the world. I wanted to be alone in the dark corner. I felt like nothing more or less than a failure. I thought I was a looser.

It took me a long time to learn from mistakes in a positive way. I didn't view mistakes as an opportunity for improvement. I was scared, upset, and numbed. I didn't know how to get back up and move on after falling down. I was down and stumbled around with my mistake. I took myself so seriously that it didn't do any good, except gave me a depression. It was a learning lesson for me. My advice is that mistakes are inevitable and you should view mistakes as an opportunity for improvement. It's bad to make mistakes; it's even worse to linger in your mistakes. As long as you know and learn from your mistakes, you should be fine to move on. Hopefully, next time, you won't make the same mistake again. Oprah Winfrey (2014) explains that "we all have stand-down moments that require us to stand up, in the center of ourselves, and know who we are. When your marriage falls apart, when a job that defined you is gone, when the people you'd counted on turn their backs on you, there's no question that changing the way you think about your situation is the key to improving it. I know for sure that all of our hurdles have meaning. And being open to learn from those challenges is the difference between succeeding and getting stuck" (p.44).

I met Professor Jones in the Leadership and Organizational Behavior course in my junior year. He is a supportive and attentive person. When I came to his office and asked questions, he often took extra time to explain the concepts slowly and clearly. Even though he was busy with many students, he usually spent his time to ensure that we understood the class material well. He asked about my background and tried to get to know me on a personal level. He also suggested to check out other additional resources on campus such as the Writing Center, and the Tutoring Center, etc. He responded to his students' needs promptly because he cared about our successes.

I met professor Bonifield in my Marketing Management class. She is a perceptive, sensitive and empathic person. In class, when she explained the material, she always tried to make sure that we all understood the concepts. She frequently mentioned that if we needed extra help outside class, we needed to follow up with her immediately. She wanted us to get the most out of our class. Even though she was busy with her classes and students, she was very approachable to provide support when we felt struggled. When I came to her office to ask questions, she often took some time to explain the concept thoroughly and made sure that I understood it well. For example, there were times I had several unanswered questions and other students were waiting, she would schedule a second appointment with me. She didn't rush or explain hastily. She also encouraged me to think about applying for an internship related to my major. Her advice was useful because I hadn't thought about applying for a summer internship before.

I came to the Career Center and met Mrs. Barritt. She is a thoughtful and attentive person. She explained the steps of applying for internships and other helpful strategies for interviews. She encouraged me to check out the UVM job board and other local jobsites a few times a week. I listened and started to search for a summer internship. I checked out the job board frequently and applied to different local companies in the areas. After a few weeks, I had sent my resume and applications to over 50 different places. I still hadn't heard a word back from anyone. It was hard to apply for jobs and internships. I thought the job market is so competitive, especially for an Asian American student. I received

rejections from many places. First I felt frustrated because I tried my best and put all my efforts, but the result was nothing. I told my mom and she positively encouraged me to keep trying. I also thought if I stopped applying, I wouldn't get anything. I continued to search and apply for internships persistently. In May, I finally got a marketing internship at a local radio station. I was late in terms of applying for an internship in my junior year. I should have started thinking about internship earlier in my freshman and sophomore year.

In my senior year, I worried about applying for jobs. I thought about applying to graduate schools at some points but I knew that I would not apply to graduate schools right away. At the same time, I also tried to do well in my current classes. It was all about how to maintain a balance between my personal and professional lives. I followed the same useful steps and strategies for my studying. When I had questions in classes, I followed up with my professors and classmates regularly. When I had an exam, I started to review my notes and studied two weeks before the exam. I made my notes and studied together with a couple friends. When I worked on my papers, I came to the Writing Center for suggestions and improvements. I also checked out other resources at the ALANA Center and Student Support Services. I couldn't emphasize enough how these steps tremendously helped improve my schoolwork. However, I didn't understand why I did better in some classes than others. There are a lot to learn. Besides that, I searched and applied for jobs at different local places. I sent many and many applications and I didn't hear anything back. I had to wait and wait. I still kept trying consistently. One thing I know for sure is that I try my best, and that's all I can do. Along with these activities, I also reserved some time for chorus rehearsals at a local church. Doing the practices and other favorite activities give me a sense of refreshment and rejuvenation.

Mary was my supervisor when I worked at the UVM Student Employment Office. She is a supportive, friendly and humorous person. I was responsible for reviewing job requests and connecting students with staff to support student employment on campus. Mary created an open and supportive environment for her staff members. For example, when I worked on the newsletters, she encouraged me to be creative with my work. I was able to brainstorm my ideas and how I wanted to create the designs, the colors, and the pictures for the newsletters. I felt that I had some autonomy in my work because I was able to contribute my own ideas. She trusted me to take my own responsibilities and complete my own tasks. She also suggested to check out some development workshops such as effective leadership skills, team building, and conflict management, etc. She fostered a friendly and open environment where everyone felt motivated to perform their work. We worked together to connect and support students with job opportunities on campus. I enjoy working with many students from diverse backgrounds such as Asians, Hispanics, and Africans. I remember one day, an Asian freshman came in the office in confusion searching for a job on campus. I asked him several questions and got to know him more. I found out that he is also a first-generation student. I explained and showed him the steps on the UVM job board. I also asked for his email for connection. A few days later, he came back and said that he got a work-study job. Sometimes, he stopped by the office, just to say hi. That's when I thought my job was rewarding. I started to gain interest in the student affairs field.

I researched some graduate programs at UVM. I found some interesting programs such as Sustainable Entrepreneurship (MBA), Higher Education & Student Affairs (HESA), and Educational Leadership. I didn't meet the requirements for the MBA program because I didn't have enough work experience. I tried to contact the program coordinator of the Educational Leadership a few times, but I didn't hear back. I applied to the HESA program, but I didn't get in. I wasn't sure about the Interdisciplinary program, so I emailed Professor Nash and we scheduled a time to meet. During our meeting, Professor Nash explained about the Interdisciplinary program, the flexibility, and how the program allows students to take a variety of courses from multiple disciplines. The program is also a good fit for working professionals who want to pursue a master's degree in education. As a result, I applied and got accepted into the Interdisciplinary program.

Professor Nash is a compassionate, perceptive, and conscientious person with a sense of humor. In class, he always took his time to listen and get to know his students not only academically but also personally. He fostered an open and friendly environment for students to share their own ideas. He often encouraged his students to think more critically and constructively. He motivated us to be creative in our own ideas and work. When I have questions or concerns, I follow up with him and he takes time to listen first before providing his suggestions. Even though he is busy with his work and classes, he always responds to students' needs attentively and promptly. He shows that he brings commitment and passion to his work and students. I learned important qualities from him such as compassion, conscientiousness, trustworthiness, diligentness and friendliness.

I am so grateful for the opportunity to meet and work with my professors, my mentors, my supervisors, and my friends during my journey at UVM. Without their supports and encouragements, I would not become as successful as I am today.

## Chapter 9: From Now On

*Your journey begins with a choice to get up, step out, and live fully*  
(Oprah Winfrey, 2014)

I have shared some pivotal events of my journey way back from the time of my grandparents struggling during the Vietnam War, my parents' divorce, and my childhood living in poverty to my experiences of coming to America, and going to high school and college in Vermont. I have shared some of my successes, failures, joys, and pains throughout my journey. Now, I thought why not share some of my current professional and personal plans?

One of my professional plans is to do well in my classes and try to complete my program in the spring. The Interdisciplinary program allows me to take a variety of courses from multidiscipline such as courses in Higher Education, and courses in Leadership and Policy Studies. I enjoy taking classes in leadership and higher education because I plan to work in higher education. I'm also working on my thesis for my program. I hope my work will provide a better understanding for educators and administrators when working with students from underrepresented groups. Dr. Nash is both my advisor and mentor. He supports and encourages me to become a better person. He cares about the success of his students. I'm grateful for the opportunity to meet and work with him.

My second plan is to apply to some doctoral programs in Educational Leadership. I'm interested in learning more about multiculturalism, diversity and inclusion, and their roles in higher education. My research interests include leadership development for first-generation Asian American students, and their motivations to become educational leaders. My career goal is to become a vice president at a college someday. I have applied to several schools in several states such as Vermont, Florida, and California.

I also participate in the Graduate Student Senate on campus. We have meetings and discuss different issues that affect students from assistantships to healthcare forms. Students talk about concerns they may have in their programs or other issues that arise on campus. We share ideas, suggestions, and how we can work together to address these issues. Doing these activities helps strengthen my confidence, communication, and problem-solving skills when working in a team. We also plan and do outdoor activities such as apple picking, hiking, and going to movies, etc. It is a good way for me to meet and network with students from different majors and fields. I have a chance to make new friends and be able to improve my interpersonal skills.

Additionally, I volunteer on the Curricular Affairs Committee. This work gives me an exposure to how the faculty work on planning and developing majors, minors and curriculum for students. I gain more understanding of different educational policies they work with and how they make new changes for the university. I have the opportunity to meet and connect with different professors from different schools and colleges. I also

learn many new things from going to their meetings, reading their proposals, and listening to their ideas. It is an eye-opening experience for me because I get to know their important work and how their decisions impact the whole university. I'm grateful for the opportunity to meet and learn from many talented professors. This volunteer experience is valuable because my career goal is to work in higher education. This work gives me a better understanding about the academic planning of faculty and their behind-the-scenes work for the university. I will continue to network and learn from many professors from different fields. I will try to get the most out of this rewarding experience.

My other volunteer experience is the ALANA Mentor Program. I work with first year students from different ethnic groups. I assist with developing academic and personal goals for these students and help to smooth their transition to college. This work gives me the opportunity to interact and build new connections with students from underrepresented groups. Working with these students also allows me to know more about their needs, their challenges as well as their joys in college. I'm interested in learning where these students have come from and how I may connect with them on both educational and personal levels. Through these efforts, I will continue to promote diversity and inclusion on campus. I will also continue to meet and network with students from diverse backgrounds.

In order to maintain a balance with my professional plans, I also have some personal plans. One of my personal plans is to raise funds for a kidney foundation in my community. A few years ago, my mom was struggling from a kidney disease. This experience made me realize how important it is to support kidney treatment and promote a healthy lifestyle. My mom overcame illness by being optimistic and living a healthier lifestyle. Her experiences affected the way I think and act, and encouraged me to stay positive and live healthy. Also, my mom and I will work together to promote donations for the kidney foundation in our community.

My second plan is to practice meditation on a regular basis. Everyday, I'm busy with different responsibilities such as work, classes, and homework. I spend a lot of time focusing on my work and trying to follow up with my schedules. Sometimes, there are only two things in my mind: tasks and deadlines. I also get stressed easily when there are several things coming up at the same time. Even though, I have good organization, prioritization, and planning skills, I still feel anxious about my work occasionally. Now, I try to meditate several times a week. I also learn to be more mindful in my meditation and my work. When I meditate, I close my eyes, take deep breaths and try not to think about other busy things for about 30 minutes. I try to stay and focus on the present moment. I find that meditation is a good way for me to rejuvenate.

My last plan is to try new things and step out of my comfort zone a little more. For example, I used to not eat many vegetables and fruits. I didn't like to try different types of food. Now, I think more about healthy choices and diets when I buy food. I take into consideration and try a variety of food and vegetables. I also like to try different recipes from Thai food, Indian food to Italian food. My other example is trying different outdoor activities. I like running, hiking, biking, and playing tennis. Now, I think about

trying other sports such as soccer, basketball, and volleyball. I would like to do something different and discover my new hobbies. I find that exploring and trying new things open new doors for knowledge and enrich my experiences.

And so it is a story of mine! I hope you will feel empowered to share your story too!



## Chapter 10: Recommendations

In this chapter, I have provided several recommendations for Asian American first-generation students. I hope these students will be able to gain more ideas and insights in terms of navigating through college. Below are some of my suggestions:

- **Explore the Possibilities:** When you search for colleges, make sure to ask your parents, counselors, and friends for suggestions. Pay attention to important factors such as the types of institution, college environment, the programs they offer, the student population, location, size, costs, etc. Don't get too hung up on the tuition because you can apply for financial aid, scholarships, and grants. If your parents worry about the costs, explain to them how many colleges offer financial aid and resources to help students. Don't let the financial part be the only factor that limits all your potential.
- **Plan Early & Start Early:** Start to think about what you want to study and major in college. The sooner, the better. Ask your parents, teachers, and friends for ideas. It's always good to plan and take actions early. For example, in college, when you have an exam, start to review notes and study at least two weeks ahead. The earlier you start, the more time you will have. When you have a project or a paper for class, start to review the assignments early. This will allow you to have more time in case you have questions. The key point is do not wait until the last minute. During your first year in college, start to search and apply for internships. Ask your counselors for different resources, strategies, and tips, etc. If you can't find an internship, ask for other volunteer experiences. This will give you the opportunity to network with other people.
- **Find a Mentor Quickly:** In your freshman year, try to search and find a mentor. Is there any particular professor, counselor or supervisor that you like or look up to? Ask them to be your mentor. If they say no, ask them for suggestions or refer you to other people they may know. The key point is that you should not wait for a perfect mentor to knock on your door. Try to search and ask around as soon as possible.
- **Ask Questions & Follow Up:** Take initiative and step up for your learning. When you don't understand something in class, just ask. If you are shy to ask in class, follow up with your professors by emailing or going to their office's hours. Ask some classmates and study together with them. Ask your counselors and mentors about different resources on campus such as the Tutoring Center, the Writing Center, the Advising Center, etc. Also take initiative to find and join a club on campus. It is a good opportunity to make new friends and network with others from different majors and fields.
- **View Your Mistakes Positively:** We all make mistakes at some points in our lives. Don't get too serious about your mistakes. It's not good to make mistakes;

it's even worse to linger in your mistakes. The key point is that you should view your mistakes as an opportunity for continuous learning and improvement.

I have also provided several recommendations for educators and administrators when working with Asian first-generation students. Below are some of my suggestions:

- **Provide Learning Workshops and Trainings:** Colleges should provide and encourage educators and administrators to regularly attend various workshops and trainings on how to work with students from underrepresented groups effectively and efficiently. This will allow educators and administrators to know more about the needs and challenges of these students. Educators should take these factors into account in terms of planning, teaching, and providing better support for students from underserved populations.
- **Explain about College's Expectations:** Educators and administrators should develop and facilitate workshops to teach first-generation students about utilizing different resources, study skills, strategies for academic success, activities on campus, etc. They should explain some basic important information and policies about campus, courses, resources, etc. Many first-generation students arrive on campus, they have no idea what to expect first. Therefore, students should be required to attend these workshops in their first year in order to gain a holistic view about the "whole college life". That will help them to become more familiar with the college environment and expedite their college transition more smoothly and quickly.
- **Create Opportunities for Connection:** Educators should take time to get to know these students, their backgrounds, their cultures, their strengths and challenges, etc. Faculty should also check with these students periodically about their progress, strengths and weaknesses, and improvements, etc. This will allow faculty to recognize ways in terms of providing better support for individuals' needs. The more educators understand these students, the better they will be able to collaborate with these students. For example, educators can ask these students to share something unique about their cultural backgrounds (i.e. ask them to share poems, songs, artistic pieces, etc. from their cultures or backgrounds). All students have unique perspectives to share and everyone can benefit learning from each other. Educators should foster an open and friendly environment to make students from all backgrounds feel safe and included. That will expedite the learning process and allow all students to be comfortable in terms of engaging and participating in class. Educators should also encourage students to form study groups together inside and outside class. That will create opportunities for students to gain new connections and build close relationships.
- **Have Networking Events with Parents:** Many Asian cultures value the important role of family. Colleges should create opportunities for faculty and administrators to network with parents of these students during their first year in

college. This will allow faculty and parents to communicate and discuss questions, concerns or expectations regarding their students' success. If parents and faculty understand these expectations clearly from the beginning, they will be able to provide better support for their students. Sometimes, parents can play an active role in terms of encouraging their children to do well in college. Also, many parents of these students may have no idea what college professors look like, talk like, or even think like. These activities will give faculty and administrators the opportunity to network and interact with different members in the larger community.

- **Collaboration between Educators and Administrators:** Faculty and administrators should work together to develop strategies in terms of working with students from diverse backgrounds. Administrators bring unique experiences from their administrative side. Faculty bring unique experiences from their research and scholarship side. When they collaborate together, they can create better programming and support services that cater to the needs of students from different backgrounds. They should review and discuss regularly about different ways for diversity and inclusion, what works, what doesn't work, and techniques for improvement, etc. Faculty and administrators have the power to create and foster positive changes and differences on campus.

Overall, Asian first-generation students have their own experiences and challenges in terms of navigating their ways through college. Nevertheless, Asian first-generation students bring their multiple perspectives, unique identities, and cultural backgrounds, which enhance diversity across college campus. Examining these factors closely will help educators and administrators gain better understandings on how to effectively collaborate and work with this underserved population.

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