

Why I Love My American Homeland



I grew up in Saigon during the height of the Vietnam War. My father, a South Vietnamese government official and a man of great honor and wisdom, was imprisoned by the communists in a “re-education” camp following the Fall of Saigon. My mom, the mother of eleven children, of whom I am only the seventh, had to find a way to feed, clothe and educate our family without our father’s presence. She did so by selling vegetables in the market, an up-at-dawn, home-by-dusk, backbreaking labor for a tiny woman such as herself. During my teen-age years, I often helped her by pedaling her merchandise in a large cart on the back of my bicycle the two miles between our home and the marketplace and back again. Doing so, I learned the value of hard work and of commitment to my parents and siblings. Watching her, I learned the value of duty and self-sacrifice on behalf of one’s children.

When I was nineteen, our family had an opportunity to facilitate the escape of one child from the now Communist-controlled country. By this time, my father had been released, physically broken but spiritually and mentally intact, from the concentration camp in which he had been imprisoned for many years. After what I assume was much deliberation on the part of my parents, I was selected as the son who would make this very perilous but potentially life-changing journey. This decision was how I became one of the massive wave of Vietnamese refugees who fled Vietnam by night on rickety boats, dubbed by the press in the early 1980’s as the “boat people.” *According to the report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, of the 1.5 million refugees who escaped Vietnam by boat, one third of us died at sea by killing, storms, illness and food shortages. Given this grim statistic, I naturally felt very lucky to be alive at all when we were rescued at sea by a U.S. oil drilling rig. Our boat was towed to a refugee camp on Pulau Bidong, Malaysia where I resided for three months in quite difficult circumstances as I awaited an opportunity to relocate to another country. Finally, I was given a chance to immigrate to the United States of America, where I have proudly made my home for the better part of forty years.

Upon my arrival to the United States, I was first settled in Chelsea, Massachusetts where I learned first-hand the kindness and generosity of the American people. I arrived here speaking not a word of English and without a penny in my pocket, but was helped by the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The members of the IRC made sure that people in situations such as mine had the basic tools and support to recover and regain control of their lives. Eventually, I was contacted by a former high school friend who had escaped Vietnam and immigrated to the U.S. earlier who urged me to relocate to Falls Church, Virginia, where a large community of Vietnamese people had already resettled. With the advice and encouragement of older friends, I resumed my higher education in the United States, securing student loans, working part-time at school and 7-11 and living frugally amongst other Vietnamese students in my situation for many years. In 1985, I graduated from George Washington University with a degree in electrical engineering whereupon I began a successful career as an electrical engineer in the engineering industry for a span of 28 years.

In 1989, at the age of 29, I began looking for a change of scenery and for the chance at a greater level of integration into my new homeland, so I moved from my close community of friends in Virginia to Maryland where I knew hardly anyone. My dreams of better integration were realized almost immediately as I ended up subletting an apartment from an American friend-of-a-friend in what would turn out to be the home of my future mother-in-law, Bonnie. As fate would have it, my future wife, Ashley, happened to be home from graduate school on a leave of absence and was living in the very house where I sublet an apartment! We married in December of 1993 and were blessed to have our only child eleven years later in 2004.

In 2014, we began thinking of opening a business in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, where my father-in-law and his brother both reside year-round in a family property owned since 1968. Ashley and her younger brother, Billy, have been spending the summers in Rehoboth Beach since childhood and, when we had our daughter, we began spending summers at the family home as well. We thought Rehoboth Beach would be a great location for a restaurant since the year-round and retirement communities have grown so much in recent years, and residents and tourists alike might enjoy having access to authentic Vietnamese cuisine in addition to the other types of cuisine available at the beach. Noting the growth in demand for vegan, vegetarian and gluten-free food as well as for dishes that are extremely fresh and less heavily dependent on animal protein (hence heart-healthier and lower calorie than most American cuisine), we thought a great Vietnamese restaurant would respond to a genuine need in the community. So far, this seems to have been the case.

We opened Minh's Bistro (so named out of affection for my youngest brother) on July 1, 2017 and have been happily serving up Pho and other tasty dishes well into what used to be known in Rehoboth Beach as the "off-season." We are grateful to the community that, so far, our business has continued to be more "on" than "off," and we are busily working on offering new

drinks and menu items that will keep Minh's Bistro a fresh and exciting dining experience for local customers.

In closing, it seems most fitting to end where I began: with my gratitude to my adopted country, where that sense of gratitude originated, and how it connects with my role as a small business owner in this community. From my earliest days, it has never been lost on me how much our American soldiers sacrificed in their attempt to keep South Vietnam from being overtaken by the current Communist regime. Although this war was very contentious among Americans themselves, from my perspective as one of those who stood to gain or lose the most from the outcome, I have never had any question as to the role the American soldiers actually played or the gratitude they deserved from us. To me and my family, they have always been, and will forever remain, heroic. In opening a Vietnamese business, I wanted to take an opportunity to thank them for their sacrifice and service on behalf of myself, my family and my countrymen. In addition, my sense of gratitude extends to other members of the military community who sacrifice so much to preserve the freedoms that we enjoy in this country. This is the reason we have a sign at our bar honoring veterans of the Vietnam War, in particular, and a discount for all members of the military and their spouses on the first Wednesday of each month. I am truly honored to welcome you to our restaurant, and to be able to offer even a small token of the gratitude I believe you are owed.

-- Tinh P. Pham