2011 KENNETH RIVETT MEMORIAL EVENT: PERSONAL STORIES FROM SIX DECADES OF REFUGEE PROTECTION

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I was born in Saigon 1971 and was only six years old when the Vietnamese Communist regime sent five officials to live in our house in Saigon. Their job was to monitor, intimidate and threaten us in order to get my parents to disclose and to hand over their wealth to the communists. During this time, Mum went into deep depression and Dad felt helpless and was unable to do anything.

After 28 days of having the communist officials living under our roof, we were forced out of our house and were left homeless in Saigon, a family of six with four children all under the age 10.

Survival Instinct

Fortunately, my grandparents had a small pineapple farm on the southern coast of Vietnam and offered us a place to stay. They converted their barn into a temporary home for us where we stayed for four years. Having lost our possessions, livelihood and dignity, my parents planned our escape. Part of the escape plan consisted of lots of adult conversations, which I was not privy to. I saw my parents handing over gold plates to strangers, perhaps that was the process of paying for our escape.

The Boat Experience

Sometime in March 1982, when I was 10 years old, I was woken up in the middle of the night, led to the seaside, and got into an old fishing boat that was about 10m long, less than 2m wide and with 45 other people. A few men stayed on top to give the appearance of a normal fishing boat, while the rest of us were packed like sardines in the hull. It was hot and wet sitting in the hull, people vomited from sea sickness and our bodies were soaked in salt water mixed with some of the vomit.

Even though Mum seemed to be the quiet person in the family, to me she's the smartest person of all when it comes to planning to survive – you see she always like to plan ahead. One of the plans I remembered involved her most expensive jewellery given to her by Dad, the diamond earrings. She painted them in pink nail polish to make them look like toy earrings and she asked me to wear them. I promised her not to reveal the truth about my earrings. She wanted me to wear them because she knew that if we were attacked by pirates, they would take jewellery worn by adults and not by kids. I was very proud to wear Mum's earrings and felt that I was a very important person.

Landed

When we arrived and landed at one of the beaches in Malaysia – I saw people running, screaming and jumping off the boat as the strong waves hit the boat. When I got off the boat, we were greeted by the locals who were very nice towards us, and gave us food and overnight accommodation.

The next day we were transported by boat to an island called Pulau Bidong. Pulau Bidong was a refugee camp. I was told that we had to stay there for a while. As I was easing into life on an

island, I started to like living there, it was not a resort but it was great: No schools, no rules, no barbed wire fences and I was free to roam wherever I liked.

Dad enjoyed fishing on the island. On some days he would bring back beautiful coral fish and other days he would bring back giant squid and Mum would cook his catch….yum yum…. Dad enjoyed watching us eat his catch and Mum was able to sell the remaining catch to the other refugees or officials working on the island. She saved enough money to start a small business selling home-made desserts in the evening when people liked to cool down after a hot day in the tropics.

Approximately six months later, we were chosen to meet with an Australian Interviewer– we were told that Aussie interviewers were more strict and do not accept people into their country easily – therefore to be accepted we all had to be on our good behaviour. That meant we had to smile a little and no there had to be fighting or arguing with my siblings when being interviewed.

Good News

A few weeks later, we received news that we would go to Australia. We were transferred to another camp on the Malaysian mainland called 'Sungai Besi'. Sungai Besi looked like a detention centre and life in Sungai Besi was more restricted with barbed wire fencing.

Not long after arriving in Sungai Besi, Dad managed to make friends with some of the local shop owners within the compound, whilst Mum befriended an old local Chinese Malaysian lady. This lady would hide behind the barbed wire fencing outside the centre and negotiated in Chinese with Mum. When an agreement was reached, the old lady throws a bag of meat over the fence whilst Mum tied some money onto a rock and threw over the fence as payment. Everyone was so happy to eat the meat Mum cooked. Until today, I can still remember the smiles we had on our faces – we ate pork that was not available in the camp. It was fun watching Mum doing business with the old lady.

Sydney

In December 1982, we arrived in Sydney and were transported to the Endeavour Hostel in Coogee. Even though we were well looked after at the hostel – deep down I still wanted a permanent place of our own, a place where we could eat rice with smelly prawn paste.

After a few months of living at the hostel, we moved to a rented two bedroom house in Burwood. St Vincent De Paul helped us a lot with basic household items such as blankets, mattresses, second hand plates and I was ecstatic with the goodies that were sent to our new home. We are always grateful to St Vincent De Paul.

From there, I started school in Year 5. It was during the school years that started to experience racism from other non-Asian students calling us 'Chin Chongs' or 'Asian go back to where you came from' or that I would be spat at by hooligans. It was not a nice experience whenever I encountered these people but neither did I allow this to stop me from attending school.

I completed high school in 1990 and got accepted to study at the University of New South Wales, found love on campus (a Malaysian boyfriend, Peter Mak whom I later married), worked part-time at the Commonwealth Bank at the university campus, then began full time employment at Westpac Bank when I completed my studies.

I got married in 1997 and followed my husband to work in Singapore for six years.

In 2003, we moved back to Sydney after we had our second child was born. It was then that I decided that it was time for me to give something back to the community – a community that accepted us to settle into Australia.

Who Am I

Since coming back to Australia and restarted our lives in Sydney for 8 years now, I feel that I have fully integrated into the Australian community, I have regained by Aussie slang, made new friends, work within the community sector in South West and experience life as any Aussie families would. Sometimes I feel so integrated that I do not see myself as a refugee but rather an ex-refugee.

On being a Refugee

My reflection on being a refugee is that our family never intended to be a refugee but due to the circumstances of living under communist regime, it was hard for us to lead a normal life even after being forced out of our home. We were living under constant surveillance of official guards during the day and being woken up during night time for roll-calls. My grandparents even had new neighbours from families of officials who conveniently cleared a plot of land to build their new home next door to us. With this type living conditions we had no choice but to flee our country and became a refugee to find a better place to live.

We are grateful that the Australian government accepted our family to live in Australia. Australia has offered us opportunities to build our lives, our future and a future for generations to come. We are now proud Australians, and as the song goes 'I still call Australia home'.