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For the Missing Piece Project, I interviewed a second generation Vietnamese American about his aunt's refugee experience. Her story is mostly unknown outside of her family, and she had not previously had anyone ask her about her experience. Like many refugees and immigrants, she had no outlet to share and felt no need to recount her experiences. She did, however, keep these experiences at the forefront of her memory as motivation in a new land. My interview left me amazed, not only by the perseverance of my friend's aunt and mother, but also by their economic success in American despite the numerous obstacles.

His aunt was one of eight children in the family, and the war had been ongoing when she was born. For her, however, the war was not apparent until she was nine years old. She had heard television and radio reports of the conflict, but it had never manifested in front of her until then. In the daytime she would see American soldiers strolling through the city buying food, and she described her nights as "falling asleep to gunfire and mortar shells in the background". Her most prominent memory in school was when an American Chinook helicopter landed in her schoolyard. When most of her schoolmates were fascinated by this massive metal contraption, she understood that its presence symbolized the continuation of the war. She revealed that boys who did not pass the twelfth grade were automatically enrolled in the army. My friend, who was 18

when his aunt told him about her experience, was astonished at this policy, and could not imagine if he were in that position. After the capture of Saigon by the Communist Vietnamese army, she described her life as “torn away from her”, and the living conditions for millions of South Vietnamese were drastically altered. Food, which her family was able to guarantee before, suddenly became scarce. As a teacher, she was only able to afford to buy breakfast each day. Freedom as a citizen was restricted, with officers patrolling streets and enforcing curfews. She had heard rumors of “boat people” organizing escapes from Vietnam, but had simultaneously learned of the strict punishments for citizens who were caught attempting to flee. When she decided she would leave with her sister (my friend’s mother), they had to acquire a large sum of money before being able to board. On the fifth attempt, after suspicion from authorities and risks of imprisonment, they set sail on a 20 foot long boat with 60 other passengers headed to Indonesia. The voyage was “scary and nauseating”, and passengers were left without food after 2 days and water after 3 days. After the second day, the boat’s engine failed and the passengers were “tossed around” on the ocean, hoping to be found by a boat. She felt guilty for convincing her sister to come with her, but she maintained hope after remembering her old life stripped away by war. She was determined to create a better life for her and her sister. Six days after embarking, and coincidentally on her birthday, May 9, an offshore oil rig spotted the boat and was able to transport the passengers to the island of Kuku in Indonesia. She was able to complete the paperwork to be transferred to a refugee camp, and was sent to a camp on Galand Island operated by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). An estimated 250,000 immigrants from Vietnam, Laos, and

Cambodia entered this camp on their way to America. She admits that she spent very little time in the camp compared to most other refugees, since she had a sister in the U.S. that was able to sponsor her and her sister at the camp. After four months on Galang Island, she and her sister settled in San Jose, CA, on October 1986. She took English language courses in preparation for the citizenship test while simultaneously enrolling in college. She earned a degree in business, and worked multiple jobs until securing a career at Boeing, where she is still employed today. Throughout this process, she never forgot the war that displaced her and her family, and kept this motivation to create a better life for herself. Since 1986, she has returned to Vietnam four times, and each time visited a hospital that specialized in disability treatment, including many patients suffering from the effects of Agent Orange. She believes Vietnam “is still in shambles...but, in time, I believe that [Vietnam] will pick itself back up”.

Her story provides a much-needed insight to the extensive and exhausting process of seeking refuge. More importantly, in my opinion, she acknowledges how much luck she had in her journey. Her transition into American life was notably smooth, but her success can unfortunately be retold under the “good refugee” narrative and fuel the “We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose” syndrome, theorized by Yen Le Espiritu. This interpretation ignores the despair that countless refugees faced in the process of escaping, as well as the role of American military in creating this conflict. In the interview, I noticed that his aunt rarely blamed the U.S. or its military, and instead directed much of her criticism towards the Communist Vietnamese forces. I argue that it is equally as important to recognize American intervention as a factor in the formation of

refugees. Otherwise, as Le Espiritu writes, the narrative of the U.S. as a savior is centered in history, and Vietnamese refugees are remembered as grateful victims of foreign violence. These narratives ultimately illustrate America's intervention in Vietnam as a success, forgetting the countless victims and avoidable violence that followed. Further, by shifting public sentiment on the American military's actions towards a positive light, the ongoing effects of the Vietnam War are ignored. The formation of refugees is therefore viewed as solved problem of the past, and the current condition of Vietnam and Vietnamese citizens is regarded as a foreign situation.

Vietnamese American refugee and immigrant voices are crucial in establishing a comprehensive history. Dominant U.S. narratives describe the Vietnam War as a blemish in our past and fail to explain its ongoing legacy. In the rare critical depictions of the war, the humanity of American soldiers is explained in detail, yet the suffering and determination of Vietnamese people are omitted. By telling the stories of refugees, we are able to understand the conditions of refugees, the obstacles they face, and the perspectives of the voiceless.