

Missing Piece Project

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“Puppy!” screamed three of the cutest little Vietnamese American boys I have ever seen as I met my neighbors for the first time. Cooper, Caden, and Evan are the sons of Allyson and Kenny who are my neighbors across the street. Since meeting them four years ago, those three boys are still my puppy’s favorite kids to play with. Kenny, a surgeon, and Allyson, a stay at home mother, are UCLA graduates who now share a beautiful home in a wealthy suburban neighborhood in South Orange County. From the outside, they appear to be a perfect happy family. The experiences that Allyson and Kenny encountered to get them where they are today, however, are not so perfect and happy.

After interviewing Allyson and Kenny, I learned that they were refugees from the Vietnam War. Remembering painful memories of the past was hard for them, but I noticed one thing that was consistent between both of their individual interviews: while their past was marked with scarring experiences, they both continuously emphasized how grateful they are to the U.S. for giving them the opportunity to thrive. Viet Thanh Nguyen claimed that “how to remember war is central to the identity of the nation, itself almost always founded on violent conquest of territory and the subjugation of people” (2016). This idea is applicable to Allyson and Kenny because they are individual nations themselves—their mind a battlefield of continuous remembering of haunting past experiences. Therefore, how they remember these experiences is central their own personal identity. These memories are encapsulated in my project that I created for the Missing Piece Project, which juxtaposes how Allyson and Kenny are perceived by the world with their experiences. My project is a decorated box. The outside of the

box is wrapped in shiny, colorful wrapping paper. On top of the wrapping paper are glued quotes from Allyson and Kenny's interviews. These quotes are inspirational and reflect the positive outlook that Allyson and Kenny portray to the world. Here are a few examples: "through hardship, you appreciate life" and "without the war, I wouldn't be able to know true freedom." One perceives Allyson and Kenny as though they have nothing but positive things to say and are full of happiness, because this is how they portray themselves to the world. While the outside of the box reflects how the world perceives them, the inside of the box explains the experiences that Allyson and Kenny went through to produce the mindset of gratefulness and happiness that they have today. The inside has no shiny wrapping paper; instead it is the real material of the box. Inside lie folded pieces of paper that describe different scenes that Allyson and Kenny described about what they remember from escaping Vietnam, the refugee experience, and the second phase of struggles once they made it to the U.S. Rather than reflecting on their experiences through quotes about appreciation (which are on the outside), these inside stories are the real horrors that they had to endure to make it where they are today. For example, one of Allyson's stories is about her at seven years old on a boat leaving Vietnam for Indonesia. She described how they encountered another boat of men that offered to help tow her boat to their destination. The new boat got all of the women and children onboard, and tied the other boat with only the men on it to the back to tow it. Instead of being aid, they were actually Thai pirates and raped all of the girls aged 12-18. This story remains inside the box because it is a horrifying experience that most of the world does not know Allyson witnessed. It remains in her head and is part of who she is, but the words she puts out into the world are only positive on reflecting her gratefulness for her life today, to be away from that mess of the past. One of Kenny's stories from the inside of the

box is about him still in Vietnam as a child before he left. He described how his father was imprisoned for 10 years for being in the military. He had no father, no food, no medicine, and no toys. The hospitals didn't even have beds so all of the patients had to lie on the floor. Again, this story is not what the world sees when they look at Kenny; rather, they see his positive attitude and thankfulness for his life today. This is exactly what the box imitates: the outside is decorated, happy, and colorful, which is what Allyson and Kenny's life looks like today, while the inside is real and raw, reflecting what most of the world does not know when they see Allyson and Kenny—memories of the experiences they endured that produced the outlook that they have today.

In addition to Nguyen's concept of the impact of how war is remembered, Le Espiritu discusses the importance of ghost stories as part of the remembrances. She quotes Avery Gordon's point that "to study social life, one must confront the ghostly aspects of it" and adds that in order to do so, we must "tell ghost stories: to pay attention to what modern history has rendered ghostly and to write into being the seething presence of the things that appear to be not there" (Le Espiritu, 2008). This applies to my interview with Allyson and Kenny because while many may know that Allyson and Kenny are from Vietnam, they do not know the process of how they came over to the U.S. These stories are ghostly to the world because they are hidden to a point of forgetfulness due to never being talked about. Some of these stories are traumatic, embarrassing, or horrific to retell which is part of why they are so hidden. One story that Allyson told me was so personal to her that she said she never tells it to people, thus rendering it ghostly. The story is this: when Allyson had made it to the U.S. as a little girl, she would walk to school in the mornings by herself. One day, a man in a truck came and kidnapped her by picking her up and putting her in his truck. As he was driving away, he was saying and doing things to get a

reaction out of Allyson. She was so stunned and frightened that she produced no reaction at all—no facial expressions, no words, no tears. This apparently was not what her kidnapper wanted, because he drove around to the back of the school and dropped her off, letting her go free. This story is deeply personal to Allyson and I thanked her for opening up to me about it. Because she holds it so deep in her memory, it rarely ever gets told. It is important that ghost stories like this get told because it sheds light into the frightening experiences that refugees continued to endure even after they came to the U.S. Had this story not been told, I would not have known that her hardships continued after her move. I instead may have blindly thought that once she made it to the U.S, all of her problems went away. This exemplifies the necessity of ghost stories being told as part of history: they display the truth that otherwise never would have been known.

Along a similar path of ghost stories, Schlund-Vials discusses how the ‘unspeakable’ should be represented. She contends that “the ever important question of how to represent the ‘unspeakable’ often collides with culturally specific arguments about the form such representation should take” (Schlund-Vials 2012). Essentially, it is important to weigh *how* something so tragic that often goes unspoken of is represented. Especially with something so vast as an entire war, it is almost impossible to encapsulate every aspect into a single representation. While there are films, songs, museums, and more about the Vietnam War’s history, the Missing Piece Project is an excellent way to integrate the extensive variants of perspectives and memories rendered “unspeakable” about the Vietnam War. It allows for individuals to put their own personal experiences into a form of art, contributing to the entire collection of projects. The real strength in this is because rather than having a single narrator to attempt to objectively summarize the entirety of the war and its effects, the Missing Piece Project

allows for as many narrators to participate as desired. Everyone who submits a piece is contributing their portion and perspective to the entirety of the project, making their voices heard. Every narrator's subjective experiences combined contributes to the most accurate portrayal of memory as a whole. This is why I am proud to contribute my project to the Missing Piece Project.

No one should ever have to go through what Allyson and Kenny went through. If no one experienced what they experienced, there would be nothing so "unspeakable" to speak about. However, what happened actually did happen, no matter how unspeakable it may seem. Therefore, it must be spoken about to reveal the truth. My project reveals Allyson and Kenny's truth, and I am proud to add their memories, experiences, and perspectives to the Missing Piece Project to contribute to making the invisible become visible and the unspeakable become spoken about.

Bibliography

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