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## Surviving Adversity: A Life Left Behind



Thuy Wong, left, with her older sister, Mai Hoang, during a stop in Irvine, Calif.

Thuy Wong is living proof that, with love and support from people who care about and believe in you, it is possible to overcome even the worst kinds of adversity. In the early 1970s, Wong was a little girl living in Vietnam. The youngest of 10 children, Wong endured extreme poverty and tragedy.

Shortly after the communists took over the area, Wong's father, who owned a lumber company, went into the forest to get trees. During the trip, he broke a bone, which should have mended easily with simple surgery.

But because all of the region's physicians had been rounded up and taken off to concentration camps, Wong's father never received proper medical care, and he died from complications.

Wong's mother, who was left suddenly alone to raise her large family, did her best to take care of the many children. But times were tough, Wong recalls. Money was in short supply, and food was even scarcer.

While a family of that size could easily consume two pounds of meat in a single day, Wong said her family was given that amount as a monthly allotment.

"A lot of the meat that we got was bad, with a lot of fat. We only ate one or maybe two meals a day during those times, and my mom would make the meat really salty so we wouldn't want to eat a lot of it, and she would count out how many pieces of meat we would have."

The family raised chickens and tended a garden to try to make ends meet, but most days there just wasn't enough food to go around. Wong recalls meals made up of two cups of water and a bowl of watery rice.

"About 28 days out of every month, I was hungry," she said.

In the mid 1980s, the family finally received some good news. Wong's oldest sister, who had moved to the U.S. in the early 1970s to attend college, had started the paperwork process to move her family to the States. It took an entire decade to get the papers in order, but in 1986, when Wong was 15, she, her mom and five of her siblings journeyed to Mesa.

The contrast in cultures was both fascinating and overwhelming.

"When we were on the plane coming to America, I saw people for the first time who looked different than we did. When you are living under the communists, and probably because I was so young, I was brainwashed. I thought we were the only race in the world."

Wong recalls seeing Caucasians and Hispanics for the first time, and she still laughs at the memory of how puzzled she felt when she saw an African American wearing white stockings.

"I saw people I never had seen before. It really opened my eyes," she said.

After struggling with hunger for so many years, Wong said her first trip to the supermarket left her literally breathless with excitement.

"Seeing a grocery market for the first time was incredible. I had never seen anything like it before," Wong said.

"I felt like I was living in a dream."

Soon after arriving in Mesa, four of the six siblings found work. Wong and another sibling began classes at Marcos de Niza high school. Her mom stayed home, cooking and cleaning and taking care of her children.

Unbeknownst to the kids, their mother began to suffer from health problems, including internal bleeding and other symptoms.

"The Asian community here was so small, and everyone was so busy just surviving, that my mom never said anything to anybody about what she was going through," Wong said.

Less than a year later, Wong's mom died.

"Before my mom passed away, she told me that she had wanted to move here for our future, and that she wanted us to get into higher education and to be better people and have a future," Wong said.

Losing her mom was extremely traumatic for Wong. The two had always been close, and Wong's heart ached for her. Her mom's last words inspired Wong, but she was not sure that she had the confidence to succeed.

While Wong was struggling with her feelings of depression and loss, Patty LaVallee, who taught English as a Second Language at Marcos, noticed the sad young girl in her class.

“It was such a blessing to meet the woman I call my American mom,” Wong said.

After learning about Wong’s situation, LaVallee invited her to live with the teacher’s family.

“I didn’t speak any English, but they took me in regardless,” Wong said.

“We used non-verbal communication, and they never had any doubts about me and my ability to survive. It was so nice that she had trust in me.”

Wong ended up living with LaVallee, her husband Roland “Spud” and their family for three years. Slowly but surely, Wong felt her confidence begin to grow. After she graduated from high school, Mai, one of Wong’s older sisters, and LaVallee convinced Wong to go to college.

Wong enrolled in Mesa Community College in 1990, and transferred to Arizona State University two years later. She graduated with a bachelor’s degree in education. In 2000, she went back to school and got her masters degree in business administration.

Wong now lives in Tempe with Hiram, her husband of eight years. For the past four years, she has worked at MCC, where she is the manager of college outreach and recruitment.

“I’m doing well here. My husband is a great motivator to me, and he always believes in me and tells me that I can do things, and that I have to learn to believe in myself.”

In 2000, Wong traveled back to Vietnam to see her siblings who had stayed behind. While she enjoyed visiting her family, the trip brought back a lot of difficult emotions, she said. Seeing her family’s old house again made her marvel at how a dozen people could fit into those 800-square- foot confines.

“I felt traumatized, and it just felt so weird to go back. It was really an emotional roller coaster, and overall I did not enjoy the trip,” Wong said.

Wong returned to Tempe with a renewed appreciation for her new life and its many advantages. More than ever, she appreciates having a nice home and a good job, and the knowledge that whenever hunger strikes, there is always plenty of food in her pantry.

Wong is also grateful for her kind and supportive husband, and her two families—one Vietnamese, one American. About once a month and during the holidays Wong gets together with the LaVallees, and she visits with her siblings who also live in Arizona. She and Mai are especially close.

“Mai is literally my mom now; she is there as a guide and is always watching over me.”

Through her work, Wong said she often meets students who are struggling financially, emotionally or with family issues. She feels honored to try to help and inspire them, the same way that her late mother, as well as Mai, Hiram and the LaVallees, have done with her.

“I always tell the students that whatever they are experiencing may be hard now, but it will also help to shape and mold them into better people. It just depends on how they want to take it.”

And then, Wong shares this bit of heartfelt advice:

“There are always going to be rainy days in life, but you have to look up and look forward and the sunny days will come again. No one stays in the dark forever.”



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