

Speaker 1: As part of the University of Michigan's bicentennial celebration the U of M Library brought StoryCorps to campus to capture personal stories of the people who make up the University's rich history.

Most people who know Hai Huynh know him as an active volunteer in the Ann Arbor community, as well as an IT professional who has worked at U of M for 27 years. Few, including his 16-year-old son Brandon, know of the incredible journey that he took to get to Ann Arbor. In 1979, at the age of about 12, Huynh fled his home in Vietnam with his siblings and parents. They were part of the mass exodus of Vietnamese refugees who were known as boat people. For our latest installment of StoryCorps, Hai sat down with his son to share his story in detail.

Hai Huynh: We were put on a boat. I remember the boat was called TG, Tien Giang. Tien Giang, it's a province in South Vietnam, that's where we came from. TG009, that was the second to the last boat that the government allow people to leave officially. We almost go to the last boat but we didn't, luckily. If we were, that boat was sunk, and all the people on that boat dead. You know, because the people from our town told us that that boat gone, the family all gone.

So I end up, we were on Pacific Ocean for about a total of five days. On the boat there was about 300 people, Vietnamese refugees from the south. We went, for five day we in Malaysia, for a couple of days, and the Navy tow us to Indonesia. We end up in this town, a tiny little town called Litung. It was Muslim. We lived with Muslim. We didn't know what's going on. We would live under their houses, the house was built above the ground, under the ocean. We lived under there for maybe a month or two, and then United Nation send us to this island. It's called Kuku Island.

There's a lot of story about that island, video documentary about that. We were there from probably March or April of 1979 till the end of 79, and then they brought us to another island, which is called Galang refugee camp. It took us almost a whole day on a big boat to go to that island. I was there for about five months before we came to America. But on our way there we were in Singapore for about three weeks, and in Camptown, California, for about two weeks. We got to Ann Arbor, Michigan, on probably like July seven 1980. That's when we got to America.

Brandon Huynh: What did you bring with you to America?

Hai Huynh: Well, each of us had this little package, like a little carrying case. Just mostly our clothes, nothing much, because we didn't have anything after we left Vietnam. But one thing that the parent told me that they all have seven US dollar left. How did we came to America? Because the church, it's called First Baptist Church of Ann Arbor, they brought us over here. They provide the Christian love and the support with everything that we needed to start.

That same year, the people at church, the lady who sponsor us, her name is Ruth W Harris. She's a professor at the University of Michigan. She brought us over here. She took care of us, with the help of the church members. They provide us everything we need at that time. Until today I still remember that. It just incredible. When we left Vietnam, and we were homeless, we were homeless and we were refugee. When we live on that island, Litung, this village, and people help us. They was Muslim. We came to America, the Christian, they help us. I'm indebted to those people. You've got to learn to love people and give it back, give it back.

Brandon Huynh: When you first came to America, what was your first thoughts about it?

Hai Huynh: Wow. Well, the day that the people of the church brought us to the house, this was at 1312 Colgate Circle, right by Miller, and I still remember the house exactly, the basement, everything. The food already is there in refrigerator, everything was just incredible, like, "Wow. Man, I open the refrigerator there's food." So all the brother, which is eight, our favorite food was bread. There was like five loaf of bread in the refrigerator and eggs and bacon, sausage. It was amazing.

We keep eating all the time, and fruit, apples. Inside our garage there was five bicycle. We took and drove it around. It was amazing. We were all shocked. I remember the first snow, it was 1980. That's four or five months after we came. The first day of snow was November, and man it's amazing. I went out, just regular clothes and just touched snow and played with the snow. There was a kid next door, his name was Eugene. He's showing me all this snow, and he's, "Wow." This was amazing.

Brandon Huynh: When you came to America and you went to the schools there, did you fit in?

Hai Huynh: Fit in? I don't know. I think my personality is friendly, positive. Although I face racism when I came to America, I mean I got kids trying to beat me up when I was here, at Mack school, down the street from here. But you know, I overcame that. I wasn't afraid of them. The thing is that, learn to forgive. If you want to be one of the richest people in the world, you learn to forgive. Forgive your enemy.

Brandon Huynh: It sounds like you went through a lot trying to get to America, on your way to America, and you had a hard life here to start out with, but it seems like you've made something good out of it.

Hai Huynh: Again, son, forgive people who did wrong to you and go forward. Rich is not about money. I could be so rich a long time ago. I owned a company, it's in computer. I sold it to the people and they're millionaires right now. I owned that company. I own invention. But somehow it didn't work out. But my work, where I work, they encourage us to do volunteer work. We do work for Habitat Humanity. We went to Detroit to help rebuilt Detroit. I've been doing that for over 10 years.

You know, where we live, before you were born, my neighbor and I we help plan the flowers. We put our money to plant the tree, annual, perennials. We do everything for over 10 years, and I'm still doing it now. I did volunteer at University of Michigan Mott's Hospital. I'm on master gardening program, where I did over 40, some 50 hours of volunteer work to help better our community through gardening. You know, beautify the city. I hope that my story help you to understand that I want to you to learn that when you have a good time, and all that, just remember that I sacrifice a lot for you.

No matter how hard life is, you can overcome it, because a lot of people out there have lives worse than you are and they overcome it, such as me. You just have to work harder and smarter. You want to establish a good foundation of education at the beginning, so that you can get a good job in the future. Education is number one. That's my goal for you, is to get a good education and be creative, make a better world for all of us.

Speaker 1:

That was Hai Huynh, sharing the story of how he came to Ann Arbor from Vietnam, with his son Brandon. These interviews were recorded by StoryCorps, [www.storycorps.org](http://www.storycorps.org). For more from this series, visit [arts.umich.edu/storycorps](http://arts.umich.edu/storycorps).