

The American Dream: Que Hang Pham [Qway Hahng Fam]

Intro Music (Sean Fischer, "We Are Millennials")

Opening:

LK.: Hello and welcome to the Harrisonburg 360 Podcast. I'm your host Lizzy Kubica.

LK.: The Harrisonburg 360 Podcast is an attempt to capture and record narratives of immigrants living in the Harrisonburg community. Using past and present voices of Harrisonburg immigrants, students in our JMU English class have collaborated to create a space focused on the importance of listening to each other's voices. Every person deserves a chance to share their story, and we, as a class, are privileged to share these stories with you in hopes of expanding perceptions of what it means to be an immigrant in Harrisonburg.

Transitional Music (Lance Conrad, "Affection")

Transition/Episode Intro

LK.: Each week, Harrisonburg 360 is produced by a different team of students. This week's episode, The American Dream, was produced by Jasmine Frank, Lizzy Kubica, DJ Monsale, and Sean Walsh. In this week's episode, we'll talk about how realistic or unrealistic the American Dream is for immigrants by hearing different immigrant experiences with education, language learning, and discrimination.

Transitional Music (Lance Conrad, "Affection")

Newer Oral History

LK: Que Hang Pham and her family left their home in Vietnam for political reasons during the end of the Vietnam war in 1975. The communist agenda was too threatening for her family to stay. With the possibility of torture or death for her father, who was a prominent educator in Vietnam, and the knowledge that their home as well as many of their friends' and family's homes would be taken away, they knew they had to escape. Knowing what was around the corner for his family if they were to stay, Que Hang's father rounded his family up and looked ahead to their next chapter: starting a new life in America.

LK: With one of her uncles, her father, mother, two brothers, and three sisters, Que Hang and her family hastily boarded a ship amidst the chaos of other escapees trying to do the same thing.

LK: As Que Hang and her family searched for transportation out of Vietnam, Communist forces bombed the airport, destroying a vital mode of transportation.

QH: But for us, the only other way to go would be by sea. So you can't go by air, land, you go by sea. So my parents round us up, and got us down to the harbor, where we saw a lot of confusion, a lot of chaos, people running massively anything that can move, people were jumping on it, including kids, just hanging out on the harbor, you know, teenage kids, you know, and then seeing people, you know, just running around, and they just decided to jump on a ship or something and load it up, because there was no tickets at that time to board any ship that was leaving Vietnam. So you had a lot of situations where family members were very, it was very chaotic. So they were separated from their families at that time. So that journey was not a very pleasant journey, because we didn't think to pack food or water. So we just thought to get the heck out of there as all we could think about except my mom six months prior to all this, she did, prepared us, to say, "In case we ever leave our country, we're gonna have a bag and you guys can fill in what you can in one bag, that's all you can take with you." So that journey was a very stressful, arduous journey, trying to just leave the country before the communists come and capture us before they round up the men and get them to the retrain camp and start kicking you out of your home.

QH: Yeah, we were on the water, but surely not your typical cruise. So we just make do and on the third day, and this ship was getting just overloaded with people, you know, no food, no water, we're out in the sun. And so people were getting dehydrated. So the captain had SOS a lot, the he was just sending out SOS. You know, we've got a ship [of] 4000 people; the boat is not doing too well. It's looking like it might sink. And luckily, a Danish cargo ship intercepted our SOS and took him three hours to find the coordinates to get to us and they rescued us.

LK: After being rescued by a Danish cargo ship, they were brought to Hong Kong where they received food, water, and medical attention.

QH: So then we stayed in Hong Kong, in a camp in Hong Kong for three months. And luckily they had food and water for us, three times a day which was a blessing even though it was the same kind of food, and we kind of got sick of it after a while but we were grateful to have food.

LK: After 3 months in Hong Kong, international agencies came to interview the Vietnamese refugees to determine their eligibility for refuge in countries all over the world. A strict vetting system was used to determine an individual's ability to contribute to the country in which they were seeking refuge. Through the Red Cross, Que Hang and her family were able to track down other family in California.

LK: In our interview with Que Hang, she was able to tell us about her experience coming over to America and learning English. She told us that because she came over as a child, it was a lot easier to learn the language and culture. She says "children are very resilient and it allowed us to pick up the language quicker". In addition to this, when they still lived in Vietnam, her mother would take her 12 year old brother to the University of Saigon for English classes. This was a huge advantage to them and allowed her brother to be a translator for the family. She also

mentions that a family at the local Methodist Church sponsored her family and ministered to them even though they didn't speak the language. She was very fortunate for these opportunities to learn at such a young age because it allowed her the opportunity to do well in her schooling here in America.

QH: There was a lot of hugs, a lot of smiles, a lot of you know, just a lot of encouragement, with a pat on the back to my dad, and a lot of looking up the Vietnamese English dictionary, and you know, to translate what we want to say, but my brother stepped up to translate a lot between the communication between the church people that were our sponsors, and then my family, my mom and dad, and I've, but even to this day, if you talk to my brother, he has a stronger accent than I do. So I think when I came here, when we came here, and I was eight, I don't think I picked up an accent, I think I was able to acclimate, pick up the language and just kind of learn very quickly a new language. So I think the advantage was the language skills, I think and able to adapt, adjust, make new friends and just move on.

LK: Que Hang also went on to talk about the struggles her and her family faced during their acclimation to life in America. They often received help with groceries from the church, but she remarks on the satisfying moment when her family was finally able to get back on their feet and support themselves again.

QH :I remember going back and talking to them as an adult and thanking them for all their hard work and getting my family settle[d]. They [said] that one of the ladies told me Mrs. Sketchley, I still remember her and she had told me that one of the proudest moment I think for your mom and dad was when I came and brought groceries one time. And she looked at me and she said, Mrs. Sketchley, you don't have to bring us groceries anymore. We have jobs. And we can make it and we can stand on but we you know, they thank them. And I remember as a kid, getting newspaper routes, all three of the older kids had newspaper routes, we all deliver newspapers, and we knew what we needed to do after school was go home and deliver newspapers. And every two weeks, I can't remember exactly how much we made. But I remember whatever we made, we gave it to my mom, and there was enough for grocery money for all of us. And then she would say, "here, you can take \$5 back." Like I would make \$50 every two weeks or something and I would give it to her. She goes, "you can have \$5 to spend whatever you want." And we were like, wow, \$5 was a lot! And on Saturday, I remember my dad loading us up in his station wagon, because we're three paper routes. So he would drive us around, we would just, you know, get the newspapers out and get delivered a lot faster than all three of us trying to deliver paper routes in different places.

LK: Que Hang describes the financial struggles she and her family faced as they established their new lives in the United States. To support their family and to reduce their reliance on the church organization that supported them, Que Hang's parents took on several jobs. Eventually, Que Hang's father, knowing that his Vietnamese degrees weren't going to hold up in America, left his job at Bob's Big Boy to pursue a degree that would give him more employment opportunities.

QH: So some of the challenges were, you know, the cultural challenges- the not ever having enough money. That just my parents had to really work hard, we all had to work hard, my brother would be bussing tables after school to make enough money, and He would give my mom the check to help out with the family income. So we all pitch in. And that's how, I guess, immigrants who came here with nothing, you know, we make it to survive without putting ourselves on [a]government food stamp or something. Because we all just worked, we got out and worked.

QH: But yeah, everything that we did was very family oriented so that we can function as a family unit when we came here with nothing. So those with financial challenges, educational challenges and cultural challenges; education was the fact that we didn't know the language.

LK: Even though Que Hang had some challenges initially when starting school, she quickly overcame these challenges and her ability to speak other languages aided her in in the opportunities she came across during her collegiate years. She goes on to talk about how the opportunities she found in America have impacted her life.

JF: so you know, now as an adult, what aspects of American culture would you say have impacted you the most?

QH: Well, the opportunities for sure, certainly, the opportunities for sure, I was always good in foreign languages. So I just learned Spanish, I took it in sixth grade, and I stuck with it. I also took advantage [of] the opportunities in college to go abroad and study so I went to Spain to study one summer to university- University of Salamanca in Espana, and that was fantastic. I took a summer I would work during the school days, even though I had scholarships and stuff, but I would take- I always took like interns, and whenever I was working, while I was in school, save money. And then in the summer, I just traveled. So I remember, first of all, I remember [being] 19, going to Mexico, and I had no Spanish always able to help translate from my church group that was doing a missionary project in Mexico. And so I took opportunities like that. It wasn't through school, but it was an opportunity to travel to meet new people and also use my foreign language skills. And so with English, Vietnamese and Spanish, that opened many doors for me when I did get my degree in Virginia Commonwealth University as Business Information Systems. And my first job out of college was working for department of transportation in DC as a systems analyst. But in college, I took advantage of a lot of their programs. I did Co Op. I looked through the co-op program where they placed students to work for companies. I ended up working for IBM for about two years when I was getting my degree. And then in the summer, I would save money and be traveling. So it was great. It was great, the opportunities was just so wide open, and my parents worked hard for us to have the opportunity so I seized other opportunities I could get. And I went to college, without my parents paying a dime for any of the things I did, I was always working able to pay my way and pay my own braces. So there's a lot of opportunities, I definitely would say the advantage in America [was something] that I took full

advantage of because that's what my parents worked hard to bring us over here for, and I didn't want their efforts to be in vain.

LK: Que Hang ended our interview by stating that she would love to go back to visit and see the house she grew up in and her old neighborhood, and that her culture and where she comes from will always be a huge part of her life and identity.

QH: I would love to go back, I would like to go visit the house I grew up in and the neighborhood I was in and introduce the kids, anybody could travel west and see, where I grew up in and know their their culture, because it's like, when you have a tree that has firm roots, and it gets deep into the soil, when the tree has good roots, it's a very confident tree that just rises, you know, to the sky. Whereas, you know, you got a tree that doesn't have very strong roots, what happens? The wind blows, and they're blown over very easily, you know, with the wind comes because the roots is not deep. So I think, to know cultural background, your heritage, I think it kind of validates a person's heritage is who they are, their being and their developmental skills. And, just different things to know that, oh I came from this country and therefore I like this kind of food and that's why I do what I do.

LK: While Que Hang was very fortunate to have a relatively nice transition to American life and education, unfortunately not all immigrants are as lucky. An interview from 1993 with Harrisonburg resident Willie Chavez shows us how immigrating to the Shenandoah Valley can bring many issues.

Transitional Music (Lance Conrad, "Affection")

Older Oral History

LK: Willie Chavez came to America from Mexico after hearing about the Harrisonburg area from his brother who had already immigrated here. Willie had some issues learning English when he arrived here and mostly picked up english phrases here and there from his coworkers at the poultry plant he worked at. In his interview He tells us about how while he has never personally faced any discrimination because of it, his wife, who as a stay at home mom doesn't have the opportunity to learn from talking to coworkers, has had a very hard time learning to communicate. In addition to this, he tells us that his kids have faced issues before at school with other kids not wanting to sit with them or communicate with them sometimes.

TS: What kind of things have you heard about happening to other people?

MP: The kids bother them [his children] in school. Sometimes they have problems on the bus. Sometimes she'll want to sit alone, or sometimes there will be someone sitting there and they won't let her sit down, but that's it.

TS: Nothing's happened to you? Not at work or...

MP: It's just mainly the kids are having problems mainly with communication. She [Mrs. Chavez] has problems with the communication too, but he's always with her, so it's not as difficult for her.

Connection Section

LK: There is a clear difference between the two interviews about what it is like to grow up in America as an immigrant. Que Hang was fortunate enough to have peers who wanted to communicate, talk with her, help her learn English. Willie Chavez's children unfortunately did not have peers who were as welcoming all the time. An important thing that these conflicting interviews show is that there is no such thing as a "one-size fits all" immigrant or immigrant story. While Que Hang's story covered her initial difficulties with transitioning to American life, she embraced the challenge and thrived. That is not to discount Willie Chavez's experiences or his family's struggles. Another important takeaway on the immigrant experience is that many of them face racial discrimination and even violence during their transitional period, and some may face it for the rest of their lives. Luckily, with Que Hang's experience in the school system, she did not face violence or extreme racism. But others are not so lucky. In one immigrant narrative we read this semester, "The Ungrateful Refugee", Dina Nayeri mentions her appalling experience while attending her new American school. She writes: "At first, the children were welcoming, teaching me English words using toys and pictures, but within days the atmosphere around me had changed. A group of boys met me in the yard each morning and, pretending to play, pummelled me in the stomach. They followed me in the playground and shouted gibberish, laughing at my dumbfounded looks. A few weeks later, two older boys pushed my hand into a door jamb and slammed it shut on my little finger, severing it at the first segment. I was rushed to the hospital, carrying a piece of my finger in a paper napkin. The segment was successfully reattached." Clearly, Dina's experience in the school system is a more extreme experience than the one Que Hang and Willie Chavez's children went through. Hearing each of these stories, it is important to note that although every immigrant's experience is different, one story doesn't take away from or discredit others even if they are divergent. Every immigrant's story is important and valid, and it truly is an honor to be able to hear and share their stories.

Transitional music (Lance Conrad, "Affection")

Conclusion

LK: An important aspect to discuss is that what people often think of as the "American Dream" isn't always the reality, people don't immigrate to America and suddenly all of their problems go away. They are often faced with a whole new set of obstacles, and opportunities aren't often as available to them as one might think. More often than not, they make these sacrifices in order to provide those opportunities for their children and for generations to come. To them, the American Dream isn't about moving to America and suddenly living the perfect life, it is about

sacrificing so much of their own comfort and stability in the hope that their future generations will have the education, opportunities, experiences, and safety that they were often denied.

Closing

LK: Thank you for joining us today on Harrisonburg 360. We're grateful to Kate Morris, Bodeen Amyot, Sarah Roth-Mullet, Kirsten Mlodynia, Leah Smith, and Dr. Allison Fagan for helping make this episode possible. Our host today was Lizzy Kubica. Interview with Que Hang Pham was conducted by Jasmine Frank. Our research and content producer was DJ Monsale, and our audio producer was Sean Walsh. Be sure to check us out on Facebook and Instagram @Harrisonburg360 or find us through the hashtag Harrisonburg360, to stay up to date on what we are doing and our newest episodes. Thank you so much for listening along to Harrisonburg 360. Real People. Real Stories. One Community.

Outro music (Sean Fischer, "We Are Millennials")