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TIME TRAVELER: AN ORLEANIAN RETURNS TO VIETNAM TO GET IN TOUCH WITH HER PAST

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This past May, two weeks after graduating from Loyola University, Kim McNulty went to Hanoi.

"When our plane broke through the cloud cover over Vietnam, I felt so strangely relieved," she says. "I was flying over my country, and even though I didn't remember it at all, I felt at home."

Growing up, Kim says, she never thought much about Vietnam, where she was born Phan Kim Phuong in Saigon. In April 1975, four days before that city fell to the communists, she, her brother Lam and three cousins fled along with thousands of their countrymen.

Unable to get exit visas, their parents stayed behind, hoping to escape and join their children later. Kim was only 2 years old. The oldest of the five, her cousin Tuong, was 17.

The five children made it to the United States after months in camps in Guam, the Philippines and Hawaii. By early 1976, they were transferred to Eglin Air Force Base, and Catholic Social Services helped them find foster families in Pensacola.

Kim and her brother were placed with Jack and Neeltje McNulty - he is a former Navy pilot, she an early childhood specialist - who had served as foster parents for a number of children and also had two young children of their own.

In 1981, when the McNultys learned that Kim and Lam's natural mother had died in a refugee camp in Malaysia, they adopted the two children.

Kim became a U.S. citizen five years later, with her entire eighth grade class there to cheer her on. She remembers being embarrassed by the attention.

"Growing up, I didn't want to be different from the other kids," she says. "I didn't remember Vietnam, didn't know the language and, frankly, didn't want to learn about it. I just wanted to fit in."

More than fit in, in fact. At Pensacola High, Kim, an honor student, became a cheerleader and the homecoming queen.

Vietnam meant nothing to Kim, and Lam - eight years her senior - never talked about his memories of their homeland or their journey to the States.

It wasn't until her junior year at Loyola that Kim began to feel a hole in her identity. During a trip to New York City that autumn, she went to a performance of "Miss Saigon," the Broadway musical about the fall of Saigon and its aftermath.

The story line eerily mirrored her own life: A young Vietnamese mother sends her child to a new life in America, knowing she will never see him again. The mother's name is Kim.

The play's second act begins with a song about the thousands of Vietnamese children in refugee camps in the 1970s. As the music plays, a screen behind the characters shows videos of children in such camps. Kim was in tears.

"I felt like I was watching myself up on that screen," she said later.

That Christmas, Kim contacted her cousins in Pensacola. Tuong had died in an auto accident several years earlier, but her cousins Hoa and Lan were eager for her to visit. They brought out memorabilia from Vietnam, the baby clothes Kim had worn when they fled Saigon, a list of her ancestors' names and birth dates. For the first time, Kim saw a picture of her biological mother.

A few months later, after watching a TV news story about a woman who had returned to Vietnam and been reunited with family who had stayed behind, Kim knew that she had to find her roots.

She says she believed that all her relatives were dead. "But I felt it was important for me to find out where I came from. I wanted to know, both for myself and so that I could someday tell my children."

After she arrived in Vietnam, Kim spent the month of June traveling the length of the country via bus, train, boat and car. In Hanoi she visited ancient temples, toured the mausoleum where Ho Chi Minh's body still lies in state, and saw Hoa Lo prison, the infamous "Hanoi Hilton" where many American POW's spent the war.

On a day in the former demilitarized zone, she saw remnants of destruction left over from the war: live ammunition that still kills and maims unwary farmers, and trenched-out former U.S. combat bases where nothing will grow.

"Going through the DMZ was hard; it really hit me, everything that had happened there," she says. She also saw the old Imperial City in Hue, which was destroyed during the Tet Offensive. It's been partially rebuilt, but barren acres of land still remain where the emperor's palaces used to stand. "It made me really angry."

In late June, she reached Saigon, her birthplace. She found a bustling, chaotic, still-Westernized city. The streets were crowded with cars and motorcycles, and signs of capitalism were everywhere: billboards for Ray-Ban and Coca Cola, golf resorts going up in the suburbs, a five-star floating hotel on the Saigon River.

Kim saw the former American Embassy, fallen into partial disrepair, with chickens strutting around the courtyard. She walked through Cong Vien Van Hoa Park, in the center of the city, and wondered if she had played there as a baby. She tried unsuccessfully to find the hospital where her mother once had been a nurse.

On her last weekend in the country, Kim hired a car and driver to take her to Soc Trang, the town in the Mekong Delta where her mother's family had lived. On the six-hour drive, she passed through lush rice paddies and canals, and saw simple fishing villages where life seemed barely to have changed in centuries.

When she reached Soc Trang, Kim gave the driver an old address where her cousins Hoa and Lan had lived as children. After about 20 minutes of searching the narrow, winding back streets, they found it.

"The man of the house recognized my uncle's name, got dressed and took us down the street," she says. When they reached a small, corrugated metal house, the village man spoke to a woman standing in the door. She listened, looked at Kim, and said "Phuong," the Vietnamese name Kim had gone by as a child. She led Kim into the house, and in a back room awakened an old man sleeping on a couch.

Kim recognized the man's face from an old picture her cousins Hoa and Lan had given her. "It was my uncle - the same, after 20 years," Kim said. "He was still alive."

Pandemonium ensued, with both Kim and the old man in tears, people talking excitedly and the house filling with neighbors as word spread that one of Mr. Sam's long-lost relatives had returned from America.

"I immediately took out the few pictures I had of my mother, as though I needed to prove who I was to Uncle Sam," Kim said. "He holds up his hand, goes to a cabinet, and pulls out a stack of pictures of me and my brother and my mother.

"It was a treasure. I had never seen a baby picture of myself; I had never seen a picture of my grandparents."

Kim stayed one night with her newfound family, communicating through sign language and a phrase book. She met cousins and second cousins, and learned that she has more who have emigrated to California and Houston.

She also learned her real birthday. When Kim and the other children arrived in America they had no birth certificates. To satisfy immigration paperwork, her oldest cousin, Tuong, had hurriedly invented birth dates for them all. For most of her life, Kim had celebrated her birthday on Oct. 20. Her uncle showed her a family Bible inscribed with her real date of birth, June 28.

Although it is still unknown what happened to Kim's father, her uncle put to rest questions about what had happened to her mother. A friend at the same refugee camp as her mother in Malaysia had written to Uncle Sam in 1981 that she had died of a heart attack the day before she had been due to leave for the United States.

In his niece's face, Uncle Sam saw his sister again. "He and the rest of the family kept saying, 'same-same,' pointing to me and to pictures of my mother," Kim said. ". . . To them, I'd come back in the form of my mother."

The next day, Kim returned to Saigon. Her uncle went with her and introduced her to still more relatives. Two days later, she left Vietnam - on her birthday - her real one.

When she returned to the States, Kim told the McNultys of her discoveries and then asked them for something. "When my biological mother died in '81, they sent her ashes and personal effects to Pensacola," Kim says. "I remember seeing some jewelry and papers, but I was young and really didn't understand. After I came home from Vietnam, I asked to see her things again."

She now wears a gold ring and cross that belonged to her mother.

Kim has spoken briefly with her brother Lam about her rediscovery of their family. He was supportive, she says, but didn't ask to see his baby pictures or pictures of their mother. She plans to show them to him "when he's ready to talk about it."

As for Kim, she says she will always treasure the memories of Vietnam, especially that afternoon in Soc Trang.

"There were neighborhood children peeping in through the windows, people crying … it was just like the special I'd seen on TV. It happened like I dreamed it would but never believed it could. It was a miracle, basically - a homecoming that I never thought I would have."