

# Distant Echoes Across Time A Journey Home and Back Again

Left to right:  
Oldest Cousin Tường  
Nguyễn, brother Lâm  
Phan, Baby Kim Phượng  
Phan, cousin Lan Nguyễn,  
Mr. Jim Smith, and guests.



Today, there are over two-hundred thousand people of Vietnamese heritage living in Silicon Valley, many of whom were very young children at the time of the Việt Nam War. As refugees escaping the ravages of the conflict, they endured uncertainty and considerable hardship before finally arriving in America in search of a better life. They now proudly comprise a sizable portion of the area's multi-cultural mix that makes the Valley one of the most richly diverse areas in the world.

On April 26th 1975, as Việt Cộng forces massed just outside South Việt Nam's capital city of Sài Gòn, two and a half-year old Phượng Kim Phan, along with her ten-year old brother Lâm and their three cousins Tường, Hoa, and Lan, hastily boarded a crowded jet, bound for a refugee camp in Guam. The children had secured exit visas through an American who



Kim and Cousin Lan  
visiting with each other  
in their Florida  
Hometown, 2005.

worked with the U.S. military and who had befriended their family. He was known to them only as Mr. Jim Smith. Four days later, on April 30, South Việt Nam officially surrendered and North Vietnamese troops surged into the capital city, finally bringing an end to a war that had lasted over twenty years and cost more than 3.5 million lives. Although the war was over, the staggering cost would never be accurately calculated, especially in terms of the human suffering and loss, particularly for the South Vietnamese people who saw their country—and many of their families—torn apart.

Once Phùng and Lâm had arrived in Guam, they, along with other South Vietnamese, were processed into a refugee camp where they patiently waited to continue their journey to the U.S. Amid the uncertainty and confusion, their eighteen-year-old cousin Tường did his best to navigate the tortuous snarl of paperwork, while

Lâm took care of his little sister, protecting her and seeking out food and milk when she would get hungry.

After months of anticipation and disappointment, they finally made their way to the United States and California. At first they thought they would be reunited in California with the “Mr. Smith” who had helped them escape. But Smith’s wife, who was then in her 60’s, felt that, as much as she wanted to, she simply could not take on the responsibility of caring for, even temporarily, five young refugee children. From California, Phùng, Lâm, and their cousins were transported to Eglin Air Force Base on the panhandle coast of Florida and with the assistance of Catholic Social Services, were placed with foster parents. Luckily, Phùng and Lâm managed to stay together, which did not often happen with refugee siblings. The plan was to care for them only until their mother, Nuôi Thị Phan, who had stayed

behind in Việt Nam, could join them in the U.S. Sadly, she never arrived.

After enduring the first years of the harsh transition to a communist-led unified Việt Nam, Nuôi finally escaped the country, then spent nearly three years in a refugee camp in Malaysia. Eventually she worked her way through the bureaucratic tangle of red tape and secured her sponsorship to the States. But the day before she was due to board the plane to join her children, she died suddenly of a heart attack. Once the news reached Jack and Neelteje McNulty, Phùng and Lâm’s second set of foster parents, the former Navy pilot and his wife decided to adopt the young boy and his little sister and raise them along with the two children they already had of their own.

As a member of the McNulty family, Phùng’s name was Americanized to Kim and she grew up a typical American girl, only vaguely aware of her brief early life

## identity distant echoes across time

in war-torn Việt Nam. Her “native” language became English and at age thirteen she was sworn in as a U.S. citizen. In high school, she steeped herself in hard work and achievement; her humble beginnings seemingly light years away. She was not only an excellent student, graduating from the prestigious International Baccalaureate program, she was also captain of the cheerleading squad, and was elected homecoming queen. “Việt Nam to me then,” Kim recalls, “was something that was vague and distant; it was like it was another planet. I didn’t speak the language and I wasn’t at all interested in the country. I was Kim McNulty, an American girl from Pensacola, Florida who just wanted to fit in with everyone else. And I wasn’t alone. My brother Lâm, who had seen people shot and killed in the streets outside our house in Sài Gòn, didn’t talk about Việt Nam at all; he was mostly just trying to forget.”

But then, during her junior year at Loyola University in New Orleans, an indirect and unexpected voice from her homeland stirred longings in Kim that she hadn’t been aware even existed. While visiting New York City, Kim saw a Broadway production of *Miss Sài Gòn*, the popular musical about South Vietnam’s fall and its aftermath. In one of those strange examples of art imitating life, the college student found herself thoroughly engrossed in the tale of a young Vietnamese mother who sends her child to America, aware that she will likely never see him again. To Kim it was no coincidence that the mother’s name in *Miss Sài Gòn* was also Kim. As the rest of the play unfolded, she found herself going ever deeper into the story, especially at the beginning of Act II, where the song “Bụi Đời” (translated as those children who are the “dust of life, born in hell, conceived in strife”) was accompanied by video images of the thousands of young refugees like herself who had languished in camps

following the war. The production, which Kim would eventually see fourteen times, brought her to tears.

Soon after that performance, Kim set off on her own journey to reconnect with her largely unknown past. She began by first seeking out her cousins who had fled with her and Lâm and who still lived in Pensacola. Tragically, her stalwart guide through the refugee camps and eventually to the States, cousin Tường, had been killed in a car accident, but the other two, Hoa and Lan, were more than happy to get together. During the visit, the girls brought out mementos from Sài Gòn, including the toddler clothing that Kim had worn the day that they all had escaped.

They also produced a map of the neighborhood in Sóc Trăng, the city at the very southern tip of the country in the Mekong Delta where Kim’s mother’s family lived, plus a hand-written list of the names and birthdays of her mother Nuôi’s relatives, even though no one knew if any of them

were still alive. There were photographs, too, some of them of Nuôi. It was then that Kim realized she needed to return to Việt Nam, seek out her buried heritage, and discover the country that had once been her home.

In June of 1994, nearly twenty years since she'd fled Sài Gòn with her brother and cousins, Kim returned to her native soil, the formerly divided nation that was now unified as the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam. She spent most of the month touring a large part of the country, including a visit to Sài Gòn, renamed Hồ Chí Minh City. She remembered almost nothing about the time she had spent there as a toddler, but what she saw of Hồ Chí Minh City seemed strangely westernized. Busy and energetic, the place was thick with traffic and incongruously teeming with advertising, consumer goods, and other assorted emblems of capitalism.

Close to the end of her visit, on June 27, 1994, with her list of names and an

address of a house where her cousins had once lived in hand, Kim ventured to the Mekong Delta and the town of Sóc Trăng, not quite sure of what she would find, but compelled to make the trip, nevertheless.

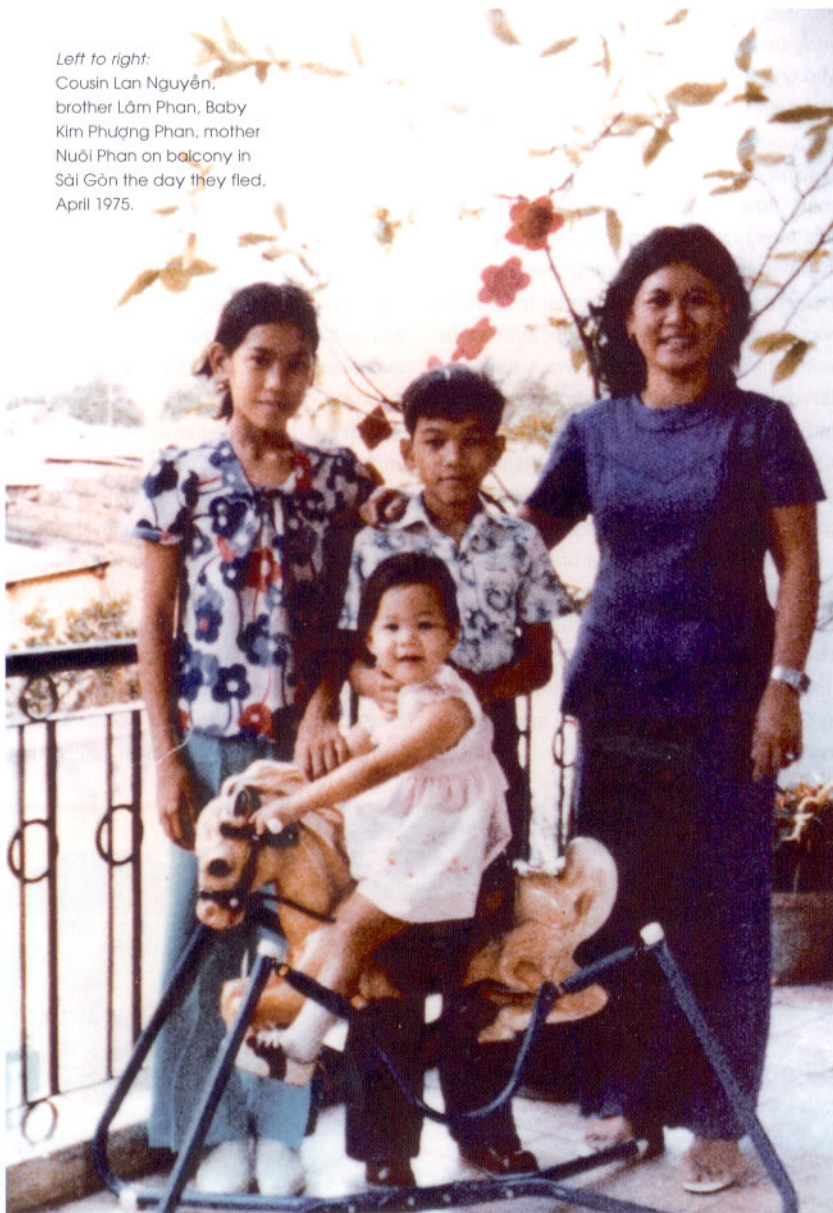
She'd only planned on spending a very short time there, to take some photos and to try to locate the places where her relatives had lived. She didn't realistically expect to find any of them still there; she was almost certain that most or all of them had either died or moved away. Kim and her driver managed to locate the house and the man who now lived there recognized Kim's uncle's name from the list and led her to another house where a woman stood in the doorway of the small corrugated metal structure. After a brief exchange of words with the man, the woman looked over at Kim and simply said, "Phượng..." After excitedly leading Kim into the house, she awakened a thin old man who was sleeping in the back. His face had twenty more years on it than the one in the pho-

tograph that Kim's cousins had given her, but it was unmistakably that of her mother's brother, Uncle Sâm.

The encounter, for Kim, was thrilling, but at the same time strange and nearly overwhelming. "Here I was, thousands of miles from home, in the town where my mother grew up. Other than seeing photographs of these people, I really didn't know them and I wasn't sure how to react. They were ecstatic and I was happy, too. But I was also, frankly, in a state of shock and disbelief."

During the subsequent commotion, her uncle went to a small cabinet and brought out a family journal that contained a log of everyone's birthdays, including those of Kim and Lâm. Kim quickly scanned the dates, then came upon her own. Because she had had no birth certificate while undergoing processing at the refugee camps, her cousin Tường had randomly chosen dates of birth for both her and Lâm. The subsequent trail of paper that

*Left to right:*  
Cousin Lan Nguyễn,  
brother Lâm Phan, Baby  
Kim Phượng Phan, mother  
Nuôi Phan on balcony in  
Sài Gòn the day they fled,  
April 1975.



unraveled afterward stated that she had been born on October 20, 1972, which, by default, then became her birthday. Gazing at the journal, she discovered that she was about to turn twenty-two, not on October 20th, but on the very next day, June 28th, in the country of her birth. Her Uncle Sâm then retrieved a couple of other items he had in the house and gave them to Kim. They were fairly common articles, but in Kim's eyes they were like the most precious gems. As she held her brother's eyeglasses and a photo of Nuôi and Lâm, Kim couldn't help but think how unexpect-

edly wonderful her side trip to Sóc Trăng had turned out. Here she was, Kim McNulty, so far from her familiar surroundings and loved-ones in America, yet, strangely enough, she was also Phượng Kim Phan. And she was home. Upon her return to the States, Kim asked the McNultys for the small collection of her mother's personal effects that had been sent to the couple following Nuôi's death in 1981 and which they were safe-keeping until Kim felt ready to receive them. Kim placed the articles, along with Lâm's glasses and the photo Sâm had given her, in a glass case that

is now proudly displayed in the Delevett home in San Jose, Calif.

Since that initial visit, Kim has led a full and busy life. She married Peter Delevett in 1997 and eventually moved to San Jose where she is now a marketing manager for Southwest Airlines. In spite of her hectic life, she hasn't forgotten about her other family in Southeast Asia. In fact, Kim has returned to Việt Nam three times since that first 1994 trip, most recently in March 2005. Accompanying her this time were her husband Peter and his parents, her cousin Tony (Uncle Sâm's son), and, much to Kim's surprise, her brother Lâm, who flew from his home in Birmingham, Alabama, where he is now an architect. "I was really surprised," says Kim. "He never said much about what he experienced there and I wasn't sure if he'd ever want to go back. But he was the first one of us to make his plane reservation."

As was the case with all of Kim's prior visits to Việt Nam, her fourth was part anxious anticipation, part euphoria, and part emotional roller coaster. With the increased knowledge that came with digging deeper into her past there were revelations that were enlightening, but also heartbreaking. The journey for Lâm, in particular, was far more than a long plane ride to a distant land; it was a deep and daring plunge into a roiling river of memory, filled with ghosts and demons that he wasn't all that sure he wanted to revisit. To Kim, however, Lâm's willingness to confront that part of his past was nothing less than heroic.

There are two old snapshots that Kim has, over the years, periodically gazed at with sadness and longing. One is of her as a very young child on a toy spring rocking horse and the other is an informal family portrait taken around the same time on the porch of her former home in Sài Gòn. Whenever she looked at these images, she would wonder if she would ever, one day, be able to find the balcony of that house where the pictures were taken. But in those same thoughts there was the one that disturbingly whispered to her that maybe the house no longer even existed. After all, it had been so many years and any number of things could have happened to it. Still,

she often thought of the place and its distinctive wrought iron railing. The setting even became part of her dreams.

During her March 2005 visit, with their cousin Tony leading the way, Kim and Lâm made their way to the section of Sài Gòn where Tony believed the house to be, even though he wasn't sure either if the house would still be there. As they approached the neighborhood, they came upon a movie theater that Lâm remembered as a boy and that was still in operation. They made their way through a nearby alley and then saw the house. On the second story, as though materializing out of a distant memory, there was the narrow balcony with the patterned iron railing, a row of circles running two thirds of the way up and across the equally spaced vertical bars. It hadn't changed in thirty years. "Once again, I was in shock," Kim recalls. "Everything was so surreal and I couldn't believe what was happening. Before I saw it, I was beginning to think that it didn't exist anymore."

But the house was there and so was the balcony. This time Phượng Kim Phan was truly home.

The current residents of the house listened to her story, then let her and her husband and Lâm in to wander around upstairs. Kim and her brother went out onto the balcony and stood there, in the same corner where the family photo had been taken thirty years before. "It's hard to describe how meaningful it was for me that this house was still there," Kim said. "That these were the same tiles that I had run around on and where my mother had held me. It was like my mother had guided me there and was watching over me. I definitely could feel her there. I didn't want to leave."

Some time later, they finally did leave the house and drove to a nearby elementary school that was next to what Lâm, as a boy, had called the "stinky river." At first Kim felt a slight shudder at his comment. She knew that when he had talked about

the river being "stinky," Lâm was referring to the dead bodies, victims of the war that were decomposing in it. But in those moments that her brother stood there, quietly looking at the old school and reliving what must have been painful memories, she realized just how courageous it was of him to venture into that dark territory again.

"I was so proud," Kim says, "that he was able to make the trip back with me. I so much admired his bravery. I told him, 'You are my hero'."

As the trip continued down to the south of the country, to Sóc Trăng and Kim's mother's family, more and more of the blank spaces began to fill in. Some were joyful little details of Kim's past that her uncle Sâm and the rest of her relatives gently teased her about. Others were not as comforting.

As the narrative spun out in the lively punctuated rhythms of Vietnamese, Kim learned the real reason her mother had

not managed to escape Việt Nam with her brother and cousins on that fateful April day in 1975. Ever since Kim could remember, she had thought that her mother had not, for whatever reason, been able to secure the proper papers to flee the country or that she simply hadn't had enough money for all of them to get out. She thought that her mother had sacrificed her freedom and safety so that her children could gain theirs. She also believed that her mother had sent her and her brother off with hugs and kisses and tears and a promise that they all would, one day, be together again.

The unhappy truth was that Kim's

mother did, in fact, have the necessary exit visa as well as a ticket for the same plane as her children. What she didn't have was enough time. Days before the scheduled flight out of the capital city, Nuôi learned that her brother Sâm was ill in Sóc Trăng and headed south from Sài Gòn to tend to him and to also say good-bye. By the time she left Sóc Trăng, the entire country was in chaos and the only narrow road to Sài Gòn was hopelessly choked with traffic. As the plane with her babies climbed into the sky, she was still far from Sài Gòn, desperately trying to make her way back to the city. When she finally did arrive, it was too late; the communists had taken

over and all flights out of the country had stopped.

"It was heart-breaking," Kim says, "to know that my mother had never had the chance to say good-bye to my brother and me. She never had that opportunity to give us those final hugs and kisses."

Before Kim and Lâm returned to their lives in America, Kim surprised her brother with a special gift. It was meant to commemorate the deeper bond the journey had forged between them as well as to celebrate Lâm's courage for taking care of his baby sister in the refugee camps and for having come with her on this trip. As was the case with Kim, Lâm had been arbitrarily assigned a birth date by cousin Tường while undergoing refugee processing. From that time forward, he had always celebrated his birthday on October 1. Through family records that she found while visiting her mother's family in Sóc Trăng, Kim discovered Lâm's correct date of birth. She bought him a card that said "Happy Birthday" in Vietnamese and in it she inscribed a brief message of love along with his true birthday, September 7, 1964, a day that he could now call his very own. In its own quiet and powerful way, the celebration was a bright new beginning for them both.

*Kim and Peter Delevett are already planning their next trip to Việt Nam, their fifth. In addition to further strengthening the ties with Kim's Vietnamese relatives, they also hope to uncover more detail about Jim Smith and how and why he helped Kim and Lâm and her cousins escape the communist takeover in 1975. Her dream is to somehow locate—either through her Vietnamese family or through someone reading this article who knew Jim Smith—surviving members of his family. She very much wants to personally express her heartfelt thanks for everything that Smith did for her and Lâm. The upcoming journey will add yet another chapter to Kim's continuing odyssey of discovery, bringing her ever closer to the family—and the country—she was forced to leave behind. □*



Kim and Lâm Phan reunited with family and friends in Sóc Trăng, 2005, Việt Nam.



Lâm (Phan) McNulty, cousin Tony Phan, Kim Delevett with relatives in HCM city, 2005.