

2009

CORETTA SCOTT KING

Women For Diversity Award Winner



*Ho-Thanh
Nguyen*

by Mikell Worley

“Don’t look down!” warned Ho-Thanh as she and her five younger brothers and sisters walked across a narrow plank that bridged the gap between the shore and the cargo boat that was their escape from war-torn Vietnam. Their parents had to stay behind to care for Ho-Thanh’s elderly grandparents. It was 1975 and Ho-Thanh was 20 years old, while her siblings ranged in age from four to 18. The young woman knew that if they looked down, they would be more likely to fall. Below them she could see the pounding waves slamming the bodies of those who had fallen against the side of the boat.

Ho-Thanh Nguyen

Ho-Thanh arrived in the United States as a refugee in 1975. She is the president and founder of the Pennsylvania Immigrant and Refugee Women's Network (PAIRWN), an organization created to honor and enhance the lives of women in Pennsylvania. Ho-Thanh has devoted three decades to outreach and advocacy for the immigrant and refugee communities. The journey and experiences she had as a young woman leaving Vietnam and entering a new county continue to shape her life's work.

"We had planned to fly out of the country," says Ho-Thanh, "but the night before we were scheduled to leave Vietnam, the Communists bombed the airport. Escaping on the bay side through Saigon was the only alternative, and we had no idea where we would end up. Sixty people navigated through gunfire and barbed wire and made it onto the overcrowded boat before the plank was pulled in. We huddled together for safety. We were on the boat for a week with only a handful of rice and a cup of water per person each day."

When the cargo boat entered international waters, seamen aboard a U.S. Navy ship gave the refugees food, fuel, and water but wouldn't allow anyone to board the naval vessel. Instead the officers directed the cargo boat to the U.S. Navy Base in Subic Bay, Philippines. From there Ho-Thanh and her family traveled to Guam, where they stayed for a time in Tent City ("horrible"), then to Andrews Air Force Base ("We thought it was heaven and didn't want to leave.").

"We wanted to go to California because it was warm, and there would be employment picking grapes in the vineyards," notes Ho-Thanh. "But the U.S. government told us California was overcrowded. So we were on the first plane of refugees to go to Indiantown Gap. They told us we were going to 'Pennsylvania.' I had never heard of it and the stewardess taught me how to pronounce and spell it on the plane." Ho-Thanh had studied the Seven Wonders of the World and knew that Niagara Falls was in New York. When she learned Pennsylvania was next to New York, she was convinced it would be too cold and didn't want to go there. Thirty-four years later, Ho-Thanh is proud to call Pennsylvania her home and is one of the most dynamic leaders in the community.

After deplaning, Ho-Thanh, her family, and other refugees boarded a yellow bus and traveled back roads to avoid the major highways where people were picketing against their arrival. Once they arrived at Fort Indian Town Gap, they were taken to an auditorium to complete some paper work, then Ho-Thanh and her family were directed to the barracks where she found a room that could be locked for safety. The family of six shared two bunk beds.

Keeping the family together was a priority. "If we had split up we might have had more opportunities," remembers Ho-Thanh. "There were people who offered to help us separately but it took two months to find a family to sponsor all of us."

During this time she met Mr. and Mrs. William Slike, Sr., and their family from the Lebanon Covenant United Methodist Church. The Slikes were involved in Boy Scouts and they agreed to sponsor Ho-Thanh and her siblings. The young Vietnamese family had three requests that the Slikes family honored. Ho-Thanh and her brothers and sisters wanted to stay together; they wanted to continue practicing Catholicism; and they wanted the younger children to attend school.

Soon after the Slikes agreed to sponsor the refugees, Ho-Thanh and her oldest sister found employment. Ho-Thanh began work at Cornwall Manor Nursing Home in Lebanon, then a year later she found a job within walking distance at the Lutheran Home in Lebanon. After Ho-Thanh got married, she and her husband moved to Harrisburg where Ho-Thanh worked for Capital Blue Cross, Catholic Charities, Highmark, and then the YWCA.

After that Ho-Thanh and another bilingual woman were hired through a Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) Grant to work with victims of domestic violence in the Vietnamese and Latino communities. "I had seen victims of violence in Vietnam and throughout my journey," says Ho-Thanh. "Through my work I learned that there are laws here to protect people from abuse. There are many resources and we learned how to help people access help.

"We came with nothing," remarks Ho-Thanh of her own experience. "I understand what it is like for people to make the journey. We need to understand that refugee women are not a burden on society. They contribute and work hard, overcoming many struggles along the way." To that end, Ho-Thanh founded PAIRWN in May 2001. "Our mission is to help, refer, advocate, network and empower these women to their fullest potential. We strive to educate others about our cultures and contributions to American society."

Ho-Thanh speaks enthusiastically about her journey. "It's like a puzzle! Through my journey God helped me find the pieces to fit together to help my siblings, family, and other people have safe, productive, successful lives. I can't do this alone. I've just been a link with many people who are helping others. Ultimately we want them to use the skills they have learned and go back into their communities and take on leadership roles to help others."

Pennsylvania can be proud that Ho-Thanh's journey led her here. Her work has been recognized and acclaimed across the country, and in 2005 Governor Ed Rendell appointed her to serve on the Pennsylvania Commission for Women.

The narrow plank that Ho-Thanh navigated at the beginning of her journey was just the first of many bridges that she has crossed. Since then she has been building bridges of understanding among people, cultures, and communities. ❀