

Vilay's Story

Vilaysouk Chanthavong lives with her husband in Camas, Washington. She grew up in Vientiane, Laos with her mother, father, two brothers, and one sister. She is the third oldest child. Her nickname is Vilay. Her father was a teacher and her mother a nurse in Laos. This is her story of how her family escaped to the United States.

Section 1

We left our country in 1979. I was about 10 years old. We left because the Communists took over and there were going to be new laws and rules. They were trying to take away most of our freedom and my dad was afraid he would be arrested and taken away to a re-education camp. My parents were thinking not about themselves, but for the future of their children—because if my father was arrested, he couldn't support the family. So we left.

We were not allowed to tell anyone we were leaving. We didn't even tell my grandfather. My dad said he was going to take us to Thailand to visit, to see what Thailand was all about. I said, "Why can't I tell my friends?" because I was going to be skipping school and I had a big exam. He said, "You'll come back and you can tell them."

We left very early in the morning. I think it was one or two in the morning. Someone picked us up in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, where I grew up. We paid them cash or jewelry that my mom took with her. We went to Thailand by boat. There were four other families, and four, five or six kids in the boat. We stayed in the boat until the person in charge searched for a safe place to drop us off.

Section 2

We stayed in this house or cabin in Thailand for a couple of days before someone took us to the refugee camp. We didn't have any food and we didn't know anybody. A couple days later, someone brought us to the legitimate camp.

We stayed in Thailand for a year waiting for someone here in the United States to sponsor us—a family that would take care of us and guide us through new customs in a new culture. What we did in the camp during that time was just be on a waiting list to be interviewed by someone that's in charge of the camp. We stayed and waited.

Food was provided by, I guess, the United Nations. We survived on what kinds of foods were provided at the time. They gave us food by family size, and we had six of us. My mom lost a lot of cash and jewelry. She sold all her stuff to feed us and help us survive. Sometimes we had a pack of noodles to feed the entire fam-

ily. My dad helped by teaching kids reading and writing. He taught for free, but the kids' parents would bring food to my mom and say, "Here's for your family."

My older brother and sister were in charge of getting water. The water was turned on each day at a certain time. Let's say this day they're going to turn on the water at four. You put your bucket in line, and if your bucket was too far away in line when they shut the water off at 4:30, that's all the water you were going to have. Every day you had to go get water. Every single day. We have a family of six and we needed water to cook, to bathe, and wash and clean.

It was very tough staying in the camp not knowing why we left and why we were there. It was a torture for me. I felt like I was being arrested, and I didn't do anything wrong. I cried a lot of the time. I would say, "Why are we here? At home we can get anything we want. Why are we here?" and that kind of stuff. I would play in the camp all day and come in and there was no food on the table and I would get really upset. I would say, "Where's the food? What are we doing here? Why are we so poor? Let's go back to grandfather. He's over there by himself. Why are we here?"

We were happy that, within a year, we got our name on the list to be interviewed because our uncle, who had been living in Oregon since 1975, found us a sponsor. They gave us a list—this is what my dad told us—and you picked which country you wanted to go to. I believe there was Argentina, Israel, the United States, France, Germany and Russia. The United States was always my dad's first choice. He didn't put down any second or third choice. He just put United States, United States, United States. The land of opportunity and freedom, that's where he wanted to see his kids grow up and be our home.

Section 3

We came to the U.S. maybe in 1980 or 1981, in the wintertime. When we left Thailand we were stopped in a camp in the Philippines for two or four months. Then we left and stopped in San Francisco. That was a memorable moment for me. I thought I was in heaven because they had us to go pick out new clothing. They asked us to pick a coat because it was going to be cold in Oregon. Not knowing what Oregon was, all I knew was that I would see my uncle and his family and return to my homeland afterwards. I picked out a red coat with fur around the hood and I thought, "Oh my gosh, I'm a movie star." It was heaven for me. I remember when we went to bed I threw out my pillow and used my coat to set my head on. I was afraid that it was a dream and might be gone in the morning.

We left San Francisco the next morning and came here to Oregon. The reason we came here is an American family sponsored us, a Christian family, Methodist.

We got off the plane in Oregon and my uncle was there and the sponsor was there. It was very cold. I went outside and grabbed a little piece of snow and put it in my mouth and hoped it would be like this all year round. It was so beautiful, so white. How can such things fall from the sky? My uncle said, “Only in America, Vilay.”

What I didn't realize was that I didn't speak the same language as the American people. I discovered this the day I started school. They didn't know what I was talking about. The first day I was put into ESL classes and gym. I didn't know how to communicate with the person in the cafeteria. I was so lost, hungry and frustrated. I wanted to scream and cry. But who would understand me? There were tear drops falling inside of me. I was too afraid to let people know how lost and frustrated I was. I was very unfamiliar with the food. It didn't have that familiar smell. I thought everybody would eat rice and speak Laotian. At that moment I discovered I was “different.”

I was absent from school for a short time, and found out my uncle and my sponsor had an arrangement with the school principal. The arrangement was to have my older brother sit in with me for a couple hours in the ESL room each day. From that moment on I felt secure knowing I had my brother with me, someone I could communicate with, someone that spoke my language.

The first days in school I was just learning “A as in apple, B as in banana”. It was overwhelming. I love learning, but it hit me really hard that here I am, 11 years old and I'm learning the letter “a”. I felt like a newborn, like my mom's just given birth to me once more and now I'm learning the alphabet.

It took me about a year and a half to feel comfortable. I made adjustments by playing with American friends. I was very lucky to have a friend who helped me. I'm very grateful to her. I played with her all summer. I started signing up for classes with her the following year. Some people might progress faster, but it took me a year and a half to kind of focus myself and adjust to a new culture. I was still convinced that we were here for a short time and would soon return to Laos. I got my American citizenship in November of my junior year in high school. After learning about us and my country's history, I was convinced there could be no future for me back in my country.

I've thought about going back to visit Laos, hopefully some day soon. I am very grateful my mom and dad made the decision to come to the United States for our future. We're here and I try to do my best and make some kind of effect or change for our community. My dad says, “This is a land of freedom and opportunities.”