

America does wonders for boy from Vietnam

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Article written by Jerry Bledsoe

LAURINBURG — Sometimes when he is out there, going for the long pass in his wheelchair, it's almost as if he's running.

That was the dream that brought Nhi Phan to this country. Running.

"My mom and dad always had this idea that the United States doctors could do anything with a polio victim," he says. "So they were thinking the doctors here could make me walk. I thought when I come over here I could just run and play soccer like my brother did."

Nhi was struck with polio as an infant in Saigon, leaving his legs withered and useless. He grew up utterly dependent on his family, who saw no need to educate him other than to read and write.

"My brothers used to carry me, or I just crawled around," he remembers. "Mostly, I never went out of the house, did not meet any friends, didn't go to school. In Vietnam, people didn't treat me as anything at all. I was just really the lowest person in Vietnam. I felt I was an embarrassment for my family because I was not normal, so all day long I just hid somewhere so nobody will ever see me. I was very scared of people. If somebody came to our house, I crawled real fast upstairs and hid in a corner."

In 1979, four years after the fall of Saigon to the communists, Nhi turned 16 and his parents decided the time had come to secret him out of the country in the hope he could get to the United States and be made to walk.

An older brother had fled the country a year earlier to avoid being drafted into the army, and the family still didn't know his fate. But despite the risk, they thought Nhi should have a chance. They knew he couldn't make it on his own, so his younger brother, Hy, then 14, would go with him.

Nhi's parents sold household furnishings and family treasures to get money to pay smugglers to take the brothers to Thailand. Nhi rode on his brother's back to a small coastal Village, and the two hid under nets with 89 other people on a 30-foot fishing boat to escape.

Five times they were confronted by pirates who searched, robbed and threatened them. Once Nhi was knocked overboard but was rescued by a pirate. For two days they went without food and water and endured extreme heat before finally reaching Thailand and a crowded, dirty refugee camp.

Most refugees in the camp were adults or families who found sponsors and left after a couple of months. Finding somebody to take in two teenage boys, one of whom couldn't walk, was difficult. Months passed before a young couple, both lawyers in Washington, came to the camp on a monthlong church mission to teach English and met Nhi and Hy. The couple flew home and began making arrangements to take in both brothers.

After eight months, Nhi and Hy flew off to Washington, where the couple, Steve and Deborah Standiford, met them with a borrowed wheelchair.

"It was so funny to sit in a

wheelchair the first time," Nhi says. "I was so happy I could move around by myself. I didn't know what to do with my freedom."

Although his brother knew some English, Nhi could speak none and Deborah Standiford took time off from work to teach them the language.

Other matters soon were attended to. The brothers had discovered that their older brother was in Lynchburg, Va., and the Standifords arranged a

tearful reunion. Nhi also was taken to Children's Hospital in Washington, where he was fitted with braces, but his spine was found to be too curved to support him. An operation in 1981 solved that problem, enabling him to walk at last with crutches, but it was a slow process that required great effort and Nhi was impatient with it, preferring the speed and maneuverability of his chair.

After more than a year of tangling

with English, Nhi was adept enough to be admitted to Washington & Lee High School in Arlington, Va., but he was still fearful, shy and withdrawn. He thought everybody was looking at him, talking about him, laughing at him. That began to change when he met another student, Liz Kronwall, who volunteered to tutor him in English.

"She saw me really shy and quiet. She came and talked and encouraged me. I thought, 'Why is this girl doing this? Can't she realize I cannot do anything?' But she said, 'You're smart. You can do this and that.' She really encouraged me, just kept encouraging and encouraging me. We became really good friends. I found it feels so good when you can talk to someone and when you have friends.

"I found out American people are so open, so welcome, so interested and accepting who I am. I changed so much. I found I was becoming more looking forward to life. That is so opposite from my brother. In Vietnam, he was captain of soccer team, all the girls liked him, but here he becomes shy and quiet. The two of us just like switch." After his graduation from high school in 1984, Nhi came to Laurinburg to visit St. Andrews College. He'd heard that the college attracted large numbers of wheelchair patients because it was built to accommodate them. He loved the campus. The large lake in its center reminded him of the river near which he'd lived in Saigon.

He's now a sophomore studying computer science, a member of the wheelchair football and track teams, a campus photographer and—other students say—one of the brightest, friendliest and most outgoing people on campus. And he's paying for it himself on a work-study program and with savings from a summer factory job in Hickory, where his older brother now lives.

"I'm making my own way," he says proudly. "I feel very happy that I can do that. Every day I more and more break out of dependence. Sometimes it's hard, but I seem to do very well with independence."

Not only is he making his own way, but he and his brothers regularly send money to their family in Vietnam. Their dream is that the rest of their family will be able to join in this country someday.

Meanwhile, Nhi and Hy, now a student at the University of Virginia, have a second "Mom and Dad," as they call the Standifords. The four of them have written a book about their experiences as a new family. Nhi thinks it could come out later this year, although it is yet untitled.

Nhi admits to only one major disappointment since his arrival in this country—that the doctors couldn't make it possible for him to run.

"I thought if I can't walk in America, there's no place left to go. I'll never be able to do anything. Now that idea, it's almost gone. Now I feel like I can do anything. There are just so many opportunities here for me. I feel I am so very lucky to be in this country. This is a very neat country. I hope maybe sometime I can do something to repay this country."



NHI PHAN: From Vietnam to St. Andrews

Anyone on campus who knows Nhi Phan can tell you that he is very rarely found without a smile on his face. Nhi's camera is never far from his side, and no one can ever be sure where he'll turn up next to capture a candid shot.

However, there is more to Nhi than meets the eye. Nhi, along with his brother, Hy, and his two American parents have written a book entitled, *SUDDEN FAMILY*, which will be printed by World Publishers. The book is tentatively scheduled to appear in late July of this year and will

be hardback. The story of Nhi and Hy's escape from Vietnam leads the reader straight to St. Andrews where Nhi has found a tremendous amount of happiness.

On Monday, April 14th, WTVD-Channel 11 aired an interview that reporter Greg Barnes had with Nhi on the campus of St. Andrews. Nhi is very excited about all of the terrific things that are happening in his life but he is most excited about receiving his American citizenship which he will apply for this summer.