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Saigon to the San Francisco Bay

By Cathy Dausman



Phuong Tran (far right) with her daughters and son-in-law in Ha Noi, in front of Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum. Photo courtesy the Tran family

backyard trees. "We were starving," she said. They sold their refrigerator, and eventually even the rice rations gave out.

After five years, they had nothing left to sell. "My dad was forced to retire in 1976," said Tran. "My mom retired in 1980, the year we applied for an exit permit to the U.S. We lived on gifts and money my sister sent home (from the United States)," she said, but much of that never reached her family.

Tran found work a second time as an accountant at an import/export company, but the salary was meager and the company laid her off eight months later when she applied for her exit visa. Ten years later the Trans were still stuck in what was now called Ho Chi Minh City when the government announced it would accept exit visa applications. The day Tran and her mother joined the line at 5 a. m. she saw 1,000 others ahead of them.

Tran's mother was determined to succeed; by walking the building's perimeter she spotted a hole in the fence. Tran and her mother slipped through and went inside. A cleaning lady allowed the pair to stay after they bribed her with cigarettes. Tran, her husband, their two daughters, her mother, and a brother and sister finally left Vietnam in January 1990 - 15 years after the communist government took over.

They stayed three weeks in Thailand, living on \$49. When the Trans arrived in San Francisco, the family had one single dollar left.

In June 1990, another brother immigrated to the United States. A third brother arrived in 1991. In all, Tran's sister, who arrived in the U.S. in 1969, sponsored 11 family members.

Tran learned English and attended Laney College, and then Mills College on a scholarship. She became a U.S. citizen in 1995.

Since then the Moraga resident has visited Vietnam three times. She first flew back to Vietnam in 2000 for her brother's wedding; in 2008 she returned to sell her family home. Last year Tran, her two daughters and son-in-law visited Vietnam.

"This was the first time my two daughters and I had a chance to visit Vietnam together. They had a chance to visit their dad's family after 33 years, met with their relatives, many of them for

Moraga resident Phuong Tran's life has flowered in two countries. Tran (whose name means flower) and her family once led what she called an "easy life" in Saigon. With a banker for a father and a nurse for a mother, the family of three sisters and five brothers could afford a cook. Tran was a student at University of Saigon School of Law until 1975, when her life altered course.

North Vietnamese forces attacked Saigon at dawn April 30, 1975. Tanks stormed the presidential palace and the war came to an end, with North and South Vietnam becoming the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Tran dropped out of school to work full-time. Two of her brothers were beaten. The new government told its people that the U.S. was their enemy. When food and medications grew scarce, Tran learned firsthand "how hard is life for people who are poor."

Her family subsisted on nine kilos of rice a month and whatever fruit they could glean from

the first time, and enjoyed their courtesy. We had a great time visiting our homeland," she said, adding that her daughters "appreciated a chance to grow up and live comfortably here (in the United States)."

Her only wish is that "we still had South Vietnam as a country, like North and South Korea."

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