Hai Hoang’s Long Journey to Commencement Day

“What are those deep ridges in your thumbnails?” asked Kevin Selden of his dental lab partner Hai Hoang.

“I received those during the time I was in a communist labor camp” Hai replied.

“Oh, sure,” Kevin laughed. “We’ve all gone through that on our way to dental school.”

But those ridges were no laughing matter. They serve as a reminder, if any is needed, of just how far Hai has come.

When Hai Hoang received his dental degree from The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio on May 24, his thoughts were not only on the future, but on a past that did, indeed, take him from the communist labor camps of Vietnam to the graduating class of the #1 Dental School in America.

The path that led Hai from a political prison camp in Saigon, through Cambodia, to freedom in Thailand and eventually to San Antonio is a remarkable story not only of the indomitable human spirit, but of opportunities found in America that most of us, in this time of relative peace and prosperity, simply take for granted.

In 1968 Bobby Kennedy was assassinated, Apollo 8 orbited the moon, Helen Keller died at age 87 and the Viet Cong launched the Tet Offensive against the South Vietnamese and the United States forces. The Tet Offensive was a pivotal point in the war in Vietnam; it was also a pivotal point in the life of 5-year old Hai Hoang. Hai’s father, an official with the South Vietnamese government, died just as the Tet offensive began, and for the next 18 years, life for Hai, his mother and his six brothers and sisters, revolved around efforts to get the children out of Vietnam, by means legal or illegal, before the borders were closed forever.

With great sadness, Hai’s mother put the younger children up for adoption with the certain knowledge that life with any family in any other country would give those children something that was missing in Vietnam: hope. Hai alone, as the oldest child, stayed with his mother.

For the next twelve years Hai looked for the opportunity to make an escape of his own. When that opportunity to leave the country finally did come, 17-year old Hai, with the blessing of his mother, was ready. The escape plan called for Hai to evade detection through a series of
transfers to three different boats. Concealed beneath fishing tarpaulins, Hai and three other freedom-seekers spent several hours huddled in the bottom of the first of the three boats that would take them up the Saigon River and out of the country.

Or so they thought.

The first transfer from the small rowboat to a larger one went smoothly enough. The number of refugees on this second boat now numbered 20 and included Hai’s aunt and three of his cousins. All 20 were stacked like cord wood, covered with canvas and fishing equipment, with no room to move, no opportunity to stretch, no place for bodily functions other than to try to roll away as far as possible from the body next to yours. But something even worse than these sub-human conditions concerned Hai. The brutality with which the Communists had killed millions of their own people was well known. The fear of detection gave Hai and his fellow refugees every incentive to stay nearly motionless for those three days in deplorable conditions. But, Hai thought, he could endure this for a few days, sustained by the knowledge that waiting for them at the other end of the Saigon River was an even larger boat, which would take them completely out of the country, and to a future that would offer the only thing they asked for: freedom.

Perhaps the police patrolled the river a little too closely during those three days. Perhaps the boat crew lost their nerve. Perhaps they were bribed. But Hai’s boat, with the 20 people huddled under the fishing equipment and tarpaulins, never made contact with the large boat, and as Hai’s fishing boat stayed anchored in the Mekong Delta, the larger vessel, as well as Hai’s hopes for freedom, simply sailed away.

For almost a day, the refugees didn’t even know they had missed their contact point, nor did they know their own two boat crewmen had simply jumped overboard, perhaps fearing for their own lives. But as the final day wore on they could tell, even under the camouflage, that the sun was beginning to set. The escape attempt had failed.

As 20 frightened, cramped people jumped overboard into the chest-deep mud of the Saigon River, Hai realized he had one last chance to escape by himself; he could slip away from the rest of the group and, striking out alone, might have a chance to connect with another outgoing vessel. This might work, he thought; this could be another way out. But just as he started to make his way up the river alone, Hai heard his aunt called out to him, asking him to
help her with her three small children. If he thought at all about what he was giving up to in order to help his relatives, he didn’t linger on it for long. As he turned back to lift his young cousins out of the water, a local villager, now aware of the failed escape attempt, informed on them to the local Communist authorities. Hai was arrested as a political criminal.

He was sent to a prison in a small town about 100 kilometers south of Saigon. Hai was placed into a room with 15 other prisoners, not just political refugees, but murderers and rapists as well, and the 16 of them were forced into an 8-foot square room with no windows, no furniture and one open toilet in the corner. There was rank even in those circumstances: the newcomer had to sleep next to the toilet.

In order for his interrogators to learn the names of the accomplices in the failed escape attempt, Hai was beaten and tortured; he was wakened at all hours in the hopes that in a sleep-deprived state he would reveal information the Communist authorities wanted. But Hai survived, and a small bowl of rice that was slipped to him through an opening once a day kept him alive. After six months in prison, Hai was sent to a ‘political reeducation camp’ for another year, where he worked at heavy labor every day from 5:00 a.m. until dark, all for the crime of trying to leave a Communist country.

“What kept me going during this time,” Hai remembers “were thoughts of my mother, my brothers and sisters, and the belief that there had to be a better future for me, if I could just endure this and make it out of the labor camp.”

After a year Hai did make it out of the labor camp, but the brighter future he envisioned was still many years, and many ordeals, away. To avoid being drafted into the Communist army, which was then invading Cambodia in scenes that would become familiar to Westerners through “The Killing Fields,” Hai spent three years evading the officials and surviving by his wits on the streets of Saigon. Moving from shelter to shelter, he sold medications from his mother’s pharmacy to buyers on the black market and he learned English from a small paperback he carried with him at all times.

As Hai became an object of increasing arrest warrants from the Communist army, he knew he could not survive much longer in Saigon. There was no future, Hai knew, if he did not attempt another escape … and make this one succeed.
By foot, by bus and by boat, he escaped to Cambodia ... to Phnom Penh. Cambodia was by then under the control of the Communist Vietnamese forces, and while conditions were no freer in Cambodia, at least he was not as recognized and hunted by the military. Before Hai could begin the next leg of his escape, to Thailand and to freedom, he needed time to make the necessary contacts, and that meant convincing the Cambodian officials that his presence there was for legitimate reasons.

He built a small house and, relying on lessons he learned at his mother’s pharmacy and some training he had in acupuncture and Eastern medicine, Hai started a business as the closest thing the villagers had to a health professional. And for the first time in a very long time, something positive happened in Hai’s life. He met, fell in love with and married Dany, a beautiful young woman from a nearby Cambodian village. Now Hai had even more reason to escape to freedom. Life was still dangerous; escape attempts were still risky; but now he had Dany as both a helper and an inspiration.

After making discreet local inquiries, Hai made contact with the person who agreed to help them escape from Cambodia into Thailand. Hai’s mother-in-law served as their cover on escape day, providing the appearance of a normal day’s activity in the front of Hai’s house while he and Dany slipped out the back, again to a small boat that would take them close to the Thai border. The most frightening moment of this escape attempt occurred on an island just outside of Thailand, where he, Dany, and a fellow refugee had been dropped to avoid detection until the following nightfall.

Just as Hai had found cover under the brush he remembers hearing the dreaded sound of a motorboat. “I saw a boatload of Vietnamese police come onto the island, and I knew they would find me, especially when I saw them start cutting down the brush that was my only cover. The police came so close that one of their feet was less than an inch from my hand, hidden beneath the brush. At that point, instead of making that next cut that would have revealed my hiding place, they chose to return to the boat.”

The last leg of Hai’s escape to freedom began that night, when the boat returned to the island and took them on to the mainland. “Keep going in that direction,” the crewman told Hai. “You’re only about three kilometers from Thailand now.”
Before the night was over, after years of waiting, a failed escape attempt, survival in conditions of unbelievable squalor, a prison sentence, torture, a labor camp, and years in hiding, Hai saw the sky shine of Thailand and he knew he and Dany were free.

Hai was 24 years old.

After crossing the border, Hai spent two weeks in a refugee camp sponsored by the United Nations, and shortly thereafter was transferred to a larger camp with 10,000 other Vietnamese refugees. Although he didn’t realize it at the time, it was during his stay at the refugee camp that Hai’s future career in dentistry would be launched. Aware of the refugees’ desperate need for services of all kind, Hai volunteered to work at the camp hospital, but was told the most desperate need was for a dental assistant.

Because Hai had some familiarity with the use of needles from his exposure to acupuncture, and because he was willing to help in the area of greatest need, he was immediately told to start giving injections and extracting teeth. He arrived at the camp hospital every morning to find long lines of refugees waiting for an extraction to alleviate the most painful of conditions. Lacking any dental equipment, he would line five patients in a row and give novocaine to them all. By the time the fifth patient had been numbed, he would go back and start extracting the abscessed teeth from the first patient. He repeated this all day, every day, for the eight-and-a-half months he was in refugee camp, waiting for his immigration papers to be approved. During the evenings, he worked on his English and served as a tutor to other Vietnamese who wanted to learn English in the hopes that they, too, would one day come to America.

“Learning I had been approved for legal immigrant status into the United States was a feeling that is hard to describe, and was one of the happiest days of my life,” Hai recalls.

The next stop of Hai’s journey was in the Philippines, where he spent four-and-a-half months at a camp sponsored by the United States, learning more of the language and learning about cultural differences he would find in his new homeland.

Because American officials had provided health care professionals to the residents of the camp, Hai was able to turn over his duties to an American dentist, but still volunteered as a translator in the dental clinic.
Finally, Hai and Dany were able to board the plane that would take them, after a brief stop in San Francisco, to Austin, Texas where his sister and brother were waiting for him, not just as his sponsors, but as a reunited family. They had not seen each other in 12 years.

"The emotions ran so high at the Austin airport that day that it is hard to describe," Hai remembers. "There was so much hugging, and so many tears, that many of the fellow passengers and even people waiting in the airport got involved in our teary reunion as well."

Hai’s life of hiding, his fear of being arrested again as a political prisoner, were now behind him. His new life in America would still hold some challenges, but after all he overcame just to get here, Hai knew he would seize any opportunities for a better life, no matter what the costs.

Hai did what so many other new immigrants do: he found entry level work and began making plans for an education. "I had to accept welfare, but only for one month," Hai said. "I was determined to pay my own way." Because he still lacked fluency in English, he took a job as a busboy in a Chinese restaurant, and later worked at a Sonic fast food restaurant. "One of my greatest surprises, and one of the most painful, was when I was accused of being stupid, simply because I didn’t talk a lot. But I was so grateful just to be in America and to have a chance for a better life.

"That winter was the first winter I had ever known. We didn’t have cold weather in Vietnam and because I didn’t have money for a warm coat, much less a car, I wasn’t prepared for how cold it was walking to work. But my goal was to enroll in college as soon as my required year of residency had passed, and I knew I could make it."

Hai enrolled at Austin Community College, taking an overload of 18 hours that included math, biology, chemistry, and, of course, English. He made straight A’s.

Eventually, Hai enrolled at UT Austin and was graduated in the spring of 1993 with a BA in Biology. A few months before graduation, Hai had taken the dental school exam, and although he had been granted interviews at many schools, when he was accepted at The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, he canceled the rest of the interviews. Hai knew where he wanted to go to dental school.

When Hai graduated on May 24, there many proud, grateful family members in the audience: his mother, Chi Truong, from Pflugerville; a brother, Lee Brandt, from Singapore; a
sister, Tisha Goodman, from Boston; a brother, Chad Goodman, from Houston; a sister, Lisa
Johnson, from Cleveland; and a sister, Susan Johnson, from Atlanta. Hai’s graduation was the
first time the family had been together since their days as children in Vietnam.

Hai proudly became an American citizen this year, and continues to be grateful to live in
America. “The only problem here is that people in America don’t realize how fortunate they
are,” Hai reflects. “I came here the hard way, and I won’t ever forget. What I have now is what
so many want: I am an American.”

Hai plans to open his dental practice in an area where he can work with other immigrants
from Vietnam and Cambodia. He and Dany have a son, Brandon, now four, and are expecting
another baby this summer.

All graduation stories are happy ones; all are about new beginnings. But the story of Hai
Hoang’s journey to commencement day is one of the most inspiring of any graduate who walked
across a stage this spring.

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