

Hoa and Thai Nguyen

Hoa and Thai are married and have lived in Kensington for almost 20 years. They came to Australia as refugees from Vietnam in 1979. After a treacherous journey here and a few years of working hard and adjusting to a life in Australia Thai and Hoa created a tailoring and clothing manufacturing business. Thai and Hoa are members of a few of our social groups - the Wednesday lunch seniors and our Vietnamese and Indochinese Elders group. They have also been part of the Kensingtons (local choir). Hoa often drops off packages of her amazing biscotti and biscuits to the house for staff. She has been making facemasks this year for the community and distributing them via the House too.

Hoa tells us about coming to Australia with Thai and life over the years.

Coming to Australia

Thai and I came to Australia at the end of 1979 with Tram our 3 year old daughter and Thai's nephew and my brother as refugees. We had to escape Vietnam because of the war. We began the difficult journey of leaving our country by travelling to Thailand on a small boat with 22 people. There were six children, ten women and six men. I was seasick and fainting in the boat and a lady who was the nurse gave me injections. At night after three days at sea there was terrible thunderstorm, and very fortunately we were rescued by a Thailand fishing boat. After we got on board we watched as our small boat broke and disappeared in the storm. It was very scary. We stayed in their boat for two days. The captain of the Thailand boat could speak English so he discussed with Thai and our men the way to get to a village. He arranged our way to shore via a small canoe that fit 4 people at a time, as we were not able to dock the boat. We then had to walk 6 hours to a village. The captain of the boat gave us some food and a map so we could find our way to the village and we started walking at 4am in the morning.



There were 22 of us staying in a small house in the village where we waited for 2 months until further UN workers came to help us. They interviewed us and took us to a camp in Songkla— a province near the border of Thailand and Malaysia. We stayed here for 3 months waiting for our documentation to be approved. Because I was very unwell we travelled to Bangkok and waited for our visa documentation there. Australia was the first to approve visas for us and we wanted to leave as soon as we could as we were scared for our lives. We were lucky to be able to leave that soon – for others it took much longer. Some of our friends were approved to immigrate to America and one to Sweden. In the refugee camp we had been told many people had been attacked, raped, robbed and murdered by pirates. We were so lucky - thank God.

Life in a new home

When we first came to Australia, we lived in Maribyrnong where we lived with other refugees – mostly Vietnamese but some from Poland and Romania. We learnt English and prepared to settle here by learning about Australia. It was all so new. Things like playing sport on the weekend were new concepts. Because of the war in Vietnam our lives had been very different before Australia, we had to adjust and learn to navigate new systems and

norms. We felt pain and suffering leaving our country, we worried for family under the communist system. It always consumed us.

We made friends here with families that became our life long friends and we still catch up with them. Because I was very unwell, I had to spend another 3 months in hospital when we first arrived, so Thai cared for our daughter on his own. At this time, he made friends with an Australian family – Shirley and Colin as they were invited to a Vietnamese group by the Church. They lived in Benalla. They taught us a lot about Australia. They were very kind and treated us like family – they will always be in my heart. We became good friends and we would visit them over the years and they would come down to visit us. Sadly, Shirley passed away two years ago and Colin is now in a nursing home.

After finishing a part time, then full time English language course, Thai got a job in Richmond in a metal factory. After some time we moved to Burnley to be close to his work. The factory is now the Victoria Garden's shopping centre. Thai worked there for about four years. We had two more children – a son Antuong and a daughter Cattram and I stayed home to care for them.

When we were in Vietnam, Thai worked for the oil company Shell as an engineer technician. Thai is very good at fixing things – he has an inquisitive mind and can teach himself lots of new things, for example how to fix the washing machine! He also learnt tailoring and he actually taught me how to sew.

After working at the factory Thai and his brother started a clothing factory business. It was called Anco factory. We had this business for many years until Thai's eyesight started to deteriorate, then we sold the business before most of the textile industry moved overseas. We made clothing for big brands including Target, Lacoste and Jump. While taking care of my three children I would sew garments at home too. Thai always worked very hard - 12–16 hours a day on weekends and at night too. He would leave before our children woke and sometimes came home after they were asleep. We didn't take breaks or holidays, only occasionally at Christmas time.

Moving to Kensington

We moved to Kensington in 2001. Our children grew up and went to university and were living close to the city so we wanted to be closer to them. We have three grandchildren and we help out babysitting. Before the stage 4 Covid 19 restrictions my daughter Cattram went to Sydney for a two-week holiday to see my son in law's family. Because of the situation in Melbourne they stayed up in Sydney as they were able to work from home and the grandparents could help with babysitting. I would talk to them every day but I still missed them!

Life in Covid 19 lockdown

To keep busy I was sewing facemasks for my friends, family, my children's friends and I also dropped some off at the verandah of the Neighbourhood House. I improved the design along the way – some with pleats, some with different materials to improve the breathability. I enjoy gardening and watching movies. Thai and I try and get out regularly for exercise and go for walks around the park, which is just outside where we live. Thai enjoys catching up with some friends on zoom once a week and watching the AFL games when they are on. Geelong is his team. When Thai's eyesight was better he liked singing and until recently we were part of the Kensingers Choir.