

# Hannah's Story

## A New Life on Vancouver Island

As told to Chrystal Phan



Hannah at age eight with her father and younger brother at a refugee camp in Pulau Bidong, Malaysia. They waited there after being at sea for many days. Credit: Courtesy of Truong family.

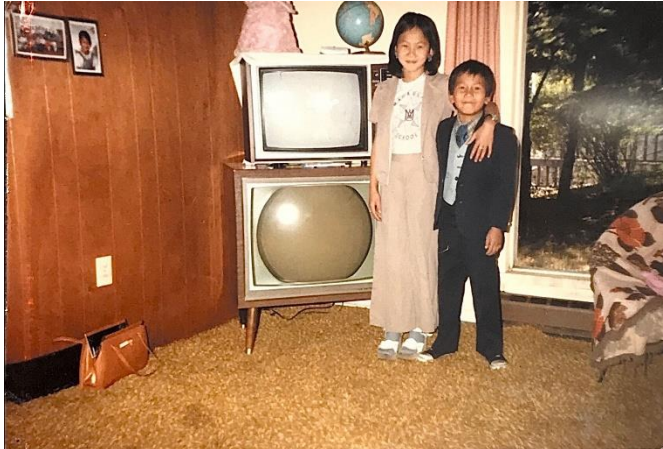
Late one night I was woken by my aunt. She told my little brother and me to get up, that we were leaving. We lived near the river, so we had only been walking for a short while when we reached a small boat. It seemed to be waiting for us. We stepped inside, and there she left us. With dozens of strangers under the cover of the tall river grasses, the pilot sailed us towards the open sea. We transferred onto a larger boat when we reached the safety of the open sea, away from the police boats that patrolled the coastline. It was this large boat that was meant to take us to freedom.

We waited alone in the damp darkness of the boat's lower deck. But we quickly heard our father's voice calling us from above. Relieved, we joined him on deck and stuck to his side for the next three days until our boat was spotted by an American ship. We felt safe now as it guided us to a Malaysian refugee camp. At the camp we saw thousands of other Vietnamese refugees, just like us. They too, waited for weeks, months, hoping to secure a future in a new country. For my brother, my dad and me, it was Canada.

It was in 1980, and I was only eight years old at the time. When my dad told me we were going on a long trip from our home of Saigon, Vietnam, I had no idea that going meant saying goodbye to my mother forever.

At the refugee camp, my dad successfully applied to the Canadian government for resettlement. Canada was one of the few countries willing to accept entire families. We wanted to be with my aunts and uncles.

When we first arrived in Canada, so many new things happened at once. We settled in Victoria, BC. It was my first time at school and my first time meeting Canadians. They seemed so big to me. Our dad began working quickly after we arrived. It was up to me to take care of my brother and take us both to school. He refused to walk so I piggybacked him to preschool and back each day. Although I was already eight years old, I spoke no English, so I was placed in a kindergarten/Grade 1 split class. Each day I went back and forth from this class and English as a Second Language (ESL) class at Macaulay Elementary.



Hannah and her brother, Tony, adjust to life in Canada.  
Credit: Courtesy of Truong family.

Our Canadian sponsors gave me the English name Hannah so that I might fit in a bit more. Maybe they chose this name because it was close to my Vietnamese name, *Ha*.

But I didn't fit in at all. Everything about me was different, foreign. I was an easy target for bullies. I played with rocks and picked at grass every day at recess, hiding from my bullies who tried to rip the earrings out of my ears or knock my lunch onto the floor. They made fun of the way my food looked and smelled. I made my lunches with dinner leftovers from the night before, usually rice with vegetables or chicken.

One day at school my biggest bully said she wanted to fight me. All the kids were egging us on,

so we went into the field. I kicked her so hard that I was suspended from school. The principal said I was in trouble because the other girl was injured and I didn't have a mark on me. I didn't think it was fair. I struggled with the few English words I knew to defend myself. "Me hurt, inside" was all I managed to say while pointing to my chest.

After school I always picked up Tony and hurried home to make dinner before my dad came back from work. Without anyone to show me, I learned quickly how to take care of household chores. I don't remember having many toys, but I did like watching television. I loved cartoons like *Casper the Friendly Ghost* and *Tom and Jerry*.

My first years in Victoria were difficult. But I also have good memories, liked going to McDonald's on the weekend with my dad. He ordered Happy Meals for us. I loved playing with the flying saucer toys that came with them. My dad drove us there in his old Ford Pinto. The back of the car had a large window where we could lie down as he drove. Looking through the car roof, my brother and I stared up at the moving sky, wondering what my mother and three other siblings were doing back in Vietnam.

## Epilogue

That was a long time ago now. Hannah Truong (Trần Thị Thu Hà) remained in Victoria. In 2022, the year this story was written, Hannah celebrated her 50th birthday surrounded by her husband and two children. As an educational assistant she has dedicated her career to helping children with diverse needs in kindergarten and Grade 1. In 1993 she returned to Vietnam in search of her family. There she reunited with her siblings but sadly learned that her mother passed away in 1988.