

“Con là trượng của Mẹ” (“I am my mother’s daughter”)

By Gianna Le, a young community health advocate who is applying to medical school

Sometimes, I imagine what kind of person my mother would have been had Saigon not fallen. But I dare not change the course of her history. I am not sure if I would know how to love, to forgive, to believe, and to be strong had my mother not experienced the trials and tragedies that taught her the values I learned to mirror.

Although I was born in America, I don’t consider myself removed from the legacy of war, displacement, poverty, and determination that constituted my family’s history. When my mother felt brave enough to relive the years after the Vietnam War, she’d tell me stories of becoming a refugee in her own land, escaping with her seven younger siblings boat by boat across turbulent seas, spending long months in refugee camps, and somehow surviving long enough to reach the “Land of the Free.”

I consider her survival a miracle, a washing of the canvas, a sort of rebirth. For those who left Vietnam, the war and immigration experience did liberate (to an extent) our nation’s then-newest immigrant enclaves from traditionally held gender roles. The experience wrung out previous patriarchal notions and offered new opportunities to Vietnamese-American women. But with those opportunities came both deep pain and hardship.

Culturally removed from the feminist movements that swept America in the previous decades, my mother defined her womanhood on her own terms—a delicate balance of strength and compassion. Unlike my grandmother, who held the traditional role of solely caring for her nine children, my mother juggled her role in the household while working every day of her life to secure a livelihood for her family. She did not miss any opportunity to get her family ahead.

Her first job in America, like many other Vietnamese immigrant women, was at a nail salon. She endured many years working in that environment—even through the pregnancy of my younger sister—until the chemical fumes proved to be too harmful to bear. I’ve even heard some of my aunts regretfully whisper that my sister was born mentally and physically disabled because of my mother’s persistence in working there.

My mother eventually obtained a real estate license and years later, through her tenacity, resourcefulness, and strength, she lifted us into the middle class. And because my mother embraced opportunities that set her apart from the roles expected of the women from the generation before her, I, too, am offered the opportunities that will set me apart from the generation before me.

My generation lives in a society and an era where gender roles are becoming less rigidly defined. As my generation steps up to the plate, I hope we commit ourselves in the ideals that remind us to love, to forgive, to believe, and to be strong. Like my mother, I will stay determined amid hardships, humble amid success, and grateful for every opportunity to shape my own destiny. I cannot deny these words my mother still whispers, “Con là trứng của Mẹ” (“I am my mother’s daughter”).

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