

After the War: Benson “Bennie” Nguyen

One Immigrant’s Story



The fall of Saigon in April 1975 marked the close of the war, but also the beginning of one of the largest and longest refugee crises in history.

Over the next two decades—from 1975 to 1995—more than three million people fled Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Countless thousands died at sea, victims of pirates or overcrowded, makeshift boats.

The State of Iowa has welcomed thousands of refugees from Southeast Asia.

I was born in 1974, after the war. I lived in Hue City, in the center of Vietnam. The central area was where the Tet was fought. When they collided, they took all the land underlying there. They call the line between them—you cannot go to my side, I cannot go to your side. And when the war collided, my city was all dead. In the end, they dug a big hole, and they put all the bodies down there because there were too many. Now sometimes when you dig underneath the house there are bodies down there. My city had a tough time. Also there are tornados, always flooding, every year it floods. There was always big death in my city in the central area there.

My father was in the war. As I grew up my father was gone because he had been put in jail. It was only my mom with five children, five boys. We grew up working when we were young. We started working when we were five or six years old. We moved to a small mountain, a new farm, when I was eight or nine.

I didn’t know where my father was until after I grew up and asked my mom. and she said that after the war is over, he was put in jail, but I don’t know what it was for. He got out in 1984. We were offered another place in the mountains to develop the land. My dad and me went there and lived in a small tent. We went into the mountains to cut real big trees to sell for a living, and we were farming. We planted all kinds of food and all kinds of trees. My dad and me taught ourselves how to plow and sow the seed and sell the food at the market. We also went to the rivers to catch all the fish, catch bugs, catch everything. We did everything.

We had animals in Vietnam, cows and buffalos and pigs, chickens, ducks. I had to go dig the soil to get worms for the ducks. We had nothing to feed them. We had banana trees to feed the hog. I took about twenty, thirty cows and goats to the mountain to feed the rest. I watched them all day and then brought them home. We put them in the barn and then cut leaves so they can poop in there. We got the manure to raise the farm again. That way the peppers and the trees grew up fast. Smell very bad!

In 1989, my dad had friends who escaped the camps and came to the U.S. They said everyone who had been in jail for more than five years, the U.S. would take because we cannot live in Vietnam. My dad was scared to do it. He said, “Maybe they trick you. and then they put you in jail again!” My dad didn’t fill out the paperwork or apply to go because he was scared. Then the friend sent a letter and

said, "Yes, we are here already!" They were the first group to go. My dad was scared, so he waited to go until Group 9 in 1991.*

One of my brothers stayed over in Vietnam. He had a girlfriend and wanted to get married. My dad said he had to choose to go with the family or stay with his girlfriend. So he stayed and got married.

The U.S. government bought the tickets for us to come here. I think at that time it was \$250 for the ticket, or something. We had seven people so it was all about two or three thousand. Then my dad started a job early. After four months he came here, he found a job. And that paid like two or three hundred a month. We paid it back.

We came to Des Moines in November. When the plane was almost down, I saw that all the trees were dry. In our country the trees have leaves all the time. My mama cried. Our sponsor rented an apartment for us, cheaper because the budget was like \$400 a month. It was a basement with two rooms for seven people. My sister was born in 1986, so we are five boys and two girls. We had support from the government for six months, and then we had to find our own way, to find a job and rent a house and everything on our own.

We came to Iowa because our sponsor was here. I could move anywhere I liked but we didn't know where to move. So we stayed.

We were poor, and we had to pay a lot to learn English. So when I came here I didn't know one word. Even when they ask "How are you?" I don't know what to say.

I was maybe nineteen when we came over. I applied to go to the high school. They tested me to put in high school and said to go even though I don't know any English. After that I worked part time at two jobs and went to school. At twenty-one years old you have to get out of high school, so then I went for my GED to get through the last three years of high school. I took all the credits I could and made it in three years.

I worked everywhere. My first job was at McDonald's. Then I also was a waiter at the Target store downtown at the Embassy at 801 Grand. I worked at anything, Taco John, *anything*. Cleaning at a hospital and delivering food, anything.

When I was in high school the counsellor called and said, "You didn't tell what you picked for a major." He gave me a list. I asked him about a single word. "This is something engineers study. Auto mechanics." I said, "What does auto mechanic mean?" "Fixing cars." I said, "Yeah, I am interested in that." He said, "You can go learn yourself," but I didn't want to waste time learning on the job, so I went to DMACC. I studied day and night.

We came here with the five people and whenever we had to go somewhere it took two cars, and we didn't have one yet. We had to wait until someone could take us to the doctor, the supermarket, everywhere. My dad had to try five times to pass the test for a driver's license.

I studied English and my high school after work, School was out like three o'clock or three-thirty and I studied a little bit. Then I went to work. After, at home I studied until twelve o'clock and I went to sleep. Some people learn English by watching TV but we didn't have a TV. My sister was four or five years old, so she went through kindergarten. She learned English quick. It was hard for us because we were older. .

I'm very shy and I didn't like to go to big parties or events. Friends from high school invited me to parties or birthdays, but I never went. Then I had a couple of friends and on weekends we would go to the park or fishing.

When I went to DMACC, I tried to learn fast. I learned a lot by watching and doing things myself. I went to school for about three or four months. Then I decided to look for a job. I started to look for a job in the newspaper. I went into Ankeny Battery and Tire Service to look for a job. He hired me. He looked at my papers and he saw I was on the Honor Roll. He said, "I looked in your file, you had a hard head." I worked there for about six months, and then I saw another job that paid higher. So I went to Nissan and I applied. Calvin, the owner and the manager, said, "Okay, I'll let you know." I went home, and I just got home and he called me and said, "Come to see me." I came back and he hired me.

I did everything. When customers came in, they gave me a ticket order. I looked at the ticket

order and then worked on it. The manager said, "Who showed you this?" I said, "I did it myself." He thought some worker helped, but I said no, no one helped me. He started giving me more work, harder stuff. And he said, "Work for me full time. I'll pay you more." I said no, I have to finish school. So I work part time. I was the only Asian guy but not too big. The rest of the guys in the shop were all big. One of the guys went to Vegas so I worked in his bay. Whenever the guy went on vacation I went in his bay. I worked there for seven years. After work I worked at home and on weekends.

I worked another job at Lutheran Hospital where I delivered food to patients too. I said, "Okay, if I work on the cars and the hands are dirty, I can't deliver." So I quit the food. Then after that I went back to Nissan and worked full time. I still worked at home on weekends and after work. I worked for a builder until seven in the evening in a garage. We worked on the engine transmission in the driveway.

After I quit Nissan, a guy who knew me, rented a building for me, cheaper after he saw that I was too crowded and busy. Then he tried to raise it in three years. I couldn't afford to rent a whole corner lot, a building over an acre or something. I said no. I looked around and I saw a building for sale, a small building. They said I could rent, but I said I buy or I leave. So I buy that one. And the family said, we had to collateral the house because the bank won't let you borrow. So we bought that building. A few years later we got a bigger one and we had to collateral the house again, but we built that one. Benson Motors started in 2004. We are busy all the time.

I went back to Vietnam in 2008. I went three or four times, the last one in 2019. There are big changes. I came back the last time I couldn't recognize where the streets go back to my old house. It changed a lot. When I left, there were a lot of bicycles. When I came the first time, there were less bicycles but more motorcycles. Now when I come back there's all motorcycles and cars. Jobs are better because of trade. And the government is

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better to the people. They give you a small farm. I remember when we planted rice, they gave you one acre, or something like that. You make the mud for the rice and sow the seed. People come through when the rice is cut. They weigh how much a day, and the more people on the acre, they tell you that you have to pay this much. We make ten tons; we get one ton and we pay nine tons of it. So we don't have any left. We hired people, bought all the materials, all the seed, and did all the work. People got poorer and poorer. Now it's changed because the government gives the land to you for free, to work on it. They have money now because people come in, tourists and everything.

I was born while the war was still going on. Right now the North writes the laws for the people in the South, to work so they control them. People who had association with the South, the Americans, are all suspected. The North removed all of their people, and the children go to the government for schooling. People cannot criticize the government or make jokes. And you can't wear the flag like you do here.

Now I've gone around the country and I think I would like to have a farm. I would like to have some animals, raise ducks, raise chickens, raise cows and pigs, maybe buffalo, all kinds of animals. And a big garden. Maybe two or three acres.

*The Vietnamese government was urged to make social and political improvements so its citizens would not feel pressured to leave. In the United States, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980, allowing Vietnamese refugees to come directly to America if they had family in the U.S.

