

# I A M V I E T N A M E S E

I sit in solemn silence, wondering if I should even bother with this essay. I am not the ideal Vietnamese child; I am nothing special. Since I was born, English has been my primary language. It is the language I think in, the only language I can express my true emotions. I am an American-born Vietnamese child, proud of my heritage, yet forever attempting to grasp it. I merely know this: my morals and values, instilled in me by Vietnamese tradition make me who I am today. That is why I write, not to win, but to express my pride in my Vietnamese roots.

I am Vietnamese. Sometimes, it is hard for me to believe. My grasp of the language is childish at best, and at times, I feel inadequate. It is something that I am ashamed of, yet something I hope to rectify in the future. But I know I am Vietnamese. The ability to overcome hardship, to face fear and succeed is in my blood. As our people have always found light in every bad situation, I was raised to do the same. My ability to speak and write may not be up to par with other Vietnamese children but my heart and spirit will forever be 100% Vietnamese.

My parents are the best. They have never ceased to amaze me. I grew up in Allen Parkway, alongside hundreds of other Vietnamese families. My parents worked long hours at their jobs to try and provide for my sisters and me. My mother is a seamstress, working 60-hour weeks. My father is a fisherman. He is gone for weeks at a time, doing hard physical labor. Whenever I look into his eyes, I begin to cry. I see a man that could have been so much more. He was among the top students in his class. His teachers told him he was destined for greater things. Yet there he stands, in front of my own eyes, a waste of a man. We never had the father and son relationship I have always craved, but my love for him and my mother transcends comprehension.

I wish I could say that I had a great upbringing, but I can't. My parents tried their best, but they were hardly ever around. My sisters and I raised ourselves. Among the three of us, the cooking, cleaning, and household chores were divided. I believe we did pretty well but there were some things we missed because of the lack of parenting. For instance, how could I learn Vietnamese if my mother came home late every night and my father was never around?

Even at a young age, I knew why they were not around. They loved me, and wanted me to be better off than they

were. It was that simple. So, I threw myself into my schoolwork. I tried to be a son worthy of such sacrifices.

It has not always been easy. I began school as an ESL student. At a young age, I didn't know how to speak English. Heck, I was in remedial classes for math as well. Nevertheless, I persevered. In time, I became a better and more capable student. By the time I got into high school, I started to realize my potential. I knew that I could graduate at the top of my class and get into a great college. I also realized that my family was heading into a shaky financial situation. One of my father's fishing boats had been hit by an oil tanker, and the total loss was a huge drain.

So that's where my dilemma started. I decided to not tell my parents about anything I did academically. Any score I received, any report card I ever got, was hidden from them. If they knew how good of a student I was, they wouldn't have allowed me to work. Yeah, I worked. Ever since I was 16, I worked until seven o'clock on school days, and full time during the summer. I tried my best to balance it with extra curricular activities, debate, schoolwork, and volunteering. All it ever did was amount to a lack of SLEEP.

But I've been successful. In the past three years, I've found a job I absolutely love. I have been a state and nationally qualified speaker. I have continued my activities in volunteering. Most importantly, I have helped my family and have succeeded as a student. The greatest moment in my life was when I told my parents. For the past four years, they have assumed I was just an average student. When I got my acceptance into MIT, I rushed downstairs to tell them. The look on my parents' faces will remain with me always. Their bright smiles made all those long nights worth it. For the first time in my life, they told me that they were proud of me. They looked at me and told me that I was worth their sacrifices. I cried. I finally felt as if I was a son worthy of such great parents.

I realize I am not the ideal Vietnamese child. I may not speak as well as I would like or write as well as the others. But of my accomplishments, of the hardships I have overcome, of the values and morals that I hold dear, I stand proud. In my heart, if nowhere else, I am Vietnamese.

*Phạm Tuấn Huy*  
Houston, TX

*The author is the recipient of the Dao-Le Scholarship.*

