

A New Life

The day I stepped foot in this country seemed like a new beginning for my family. The date was June 24, 1994, and we arrived in Chicago, Illinois. I was eight years old with absolutely no knowledge that the English alphabet existed. I did not prepare myself for any of America's culture; especially not for the way some people treated me. I thought that the night before I started school was the scariest day of my life, but my worst nightmare had not even begun yet.

Although I was eight-and-a-half years old, I started school as a second grader. That first year of school in Madison, Wisconsin was a pleasant experience—at least, I thought so. When third grade came, my perspective changed as a dark cloud came over my world. Once I learned a little bit of English to get myself around and to understand what others said, I realized that what came out of everyone's mouth was not as nice as I thought it was. One of the most unforgettable days that changed my perspective forever was in December of 1995.

The sky was clear, stars were glittering in the night sky, but the temperature seemed to be ten below. Sitting next to my bedroom window, I cried and sobbed quietly looking out into space; I did not want to go back to school. I wished I would never have learned that "little bit" of English to understand what others were saying because I couldn't say anything back except "Stop it!" If I didn't know what they were saying, then maybe they would sound nice and respectful. I felt sad and angry at myself all at once because I felt so stupid, so pathetic, and so hopeless.

"Knock! Knock!" My mom was at the door asking if I was asleep yet. I didn't answer her because after a rough day at school, I didn't want to talk about what had happened. Lying there in the dark, I wondered why it took my parents so long to decide to come to the United States. "If only we have come when I was little, I would be a lot smarter." I said to myself. So many thoughts and feelings raced through my mind that I kept thinking and feeling sorry for myself until I fell asleep on my tear-soaked pillow.

The next morning, the sound of my mom's voice woke me up, "Lee, time to get up. It's seven o' clock." As soon as I heard, I quickly got up to look outside. A blanket of snow covered everything. It was still snowing, but the snow didn't look pretty at all. The snow was coming down so fast, it looked like white bullets shooting from the sky. It was definitely not the kind I could build a snowman with.

"My second winter," I thought to myself as fears of another day on the bus slowly came upon me. I slowly walked to my bedroom closet and got dressed.

On my way to the bus stop, I spotted my "so-called" cousins across the street. I prayed and hope that they wouldn't see me.

"Hey, you stupid chicken!" I heard someone called across the street. I just kept walking and pretended not to hear them. "You stupid B! Don't be so deaf just because you are scared of us! You dumb charcoal, why are you so dark?"

When I was about a block away, I looked back and just as I did, a snowball smacked me in the face so hard I lost my balance and fell on the icy sidewalk. I felt dirt in my mouth and started to spit the dirt out. My face felt like someone had just hit me with a baseball bat. I tried not to cry, but my eyes filled up with tears. I looked up and saw Linzi—the oldest of the sisters. She was tall with short black hair and evil brown eyes. Her mouth seemed so small for such big nasty words to have come out. She was in the seventh grade.

“Stop it!” I heard my trembling voice said.

“Stop it,” Linzi echoed back. “Do you want your mommy? Are you gonna cry? Go ahead, you cry baby!”

I tried to get up, but she pushed me back down onto the ground with the heel of her shoe. I tried to get up a second time but she kicked me down again, so I blocked her foot with my backpack and got up quickly. I ran away from her as soon as I got on my feet. As I was running, I heard Linzi still screaming behind me, “Go back to Thailand! Don’t go to school, you’re too stupid to learn!” I just kept running.

I got to the bus stop a few seconds before the bus came. I thought to myself as I sat down next to the window, “When will I ever be smart enough to prove to them I can be just like them? I could do all the things they can if I had been here as long as they have been. I wish that someday...Ouch!” The intense pain on my head interrupted my thoughts. Two black boys behind me grabbed and pulled my hair so hard I had tears in my eyes.

“Stop it! Leave me alone,” I heard my weak voice cried.

“Do you want your mommy? Go back to Thailand you stupid chee-chee chong-chong!”

I didn’t answer and just sat as close to the edge of the seat as possible so they couldn’t pull my long black hair. The older black boy shoved his fist into my back and grabbed my backpack. I held on to it tightly and said, “Why do you hit me?”

The boys screamed in my face, “You can’t even speak, how chu gonna learn? Chee-chee chong-chong! You gook! You stink like dog shit!” They covered their noses and pretend to look disgusted.

I didn’t say anything back and just sat quietly looking out at the snow-covered trees we drove pass. “The trees look so powerless just like me,” I thought to myself, “Dead, cold, and weak from all the snow that have piled on top of them.” When the boys saw that I was ignoring them, the younger black boy spit at my face. I could feel all the slimy saliva all over my left cheek and quickly wiped it off with my purple coat sleeves. The whole way to school, the boys kept punching and hitting me from the back but I didn’t say anything. I just held onto my backpack with my tiny hands and continued to ignore the two boys.

At school, I did not go out for recess because I knew all the bullying and teasing I would get. I sat in the bathroom until I heard the recess bell ring and the students come in; then I would go back to class. On this day—like any other day in the bathroom—I sat and wrote all the English words I knew. Sometimes I would even number the list to see how many new words I have written down from the day before. After a year in the United States, I found that my vocabulary consist of only about 150 words.

When the final bell of the day sounded, I got out of class, grabbed my backpack, and went outside to get on the bus. I looked around to make sure that the black boys weren’t anywhere near where I was going to sit. But, like always, halfway home they eventually found their way behind me to make me cry. Everyday, I would get out of the bus and run straight home. Most of the time I would still have tears in my eyes when I arrived home so my mom would comfort me and tell me, “It’s okay, what they say you know in your heart that it’s not true! You will be a smart person if you put your heart and soul into what you are doing and don’t let what others say get in your way. What they say will only make you stronger...”

When I got to fourth grade, my teacher told my mom how unbelievably fast my vocabulary had grown in just one year. I thought to myself, “At last, my daily routine of sitting in the bathroom to read and write proved itself to be effective in helping me with my learning abilities!” I’ve learned to ignore and forget all the mean things that I’ve received daily from my cousins and some American children. I realized that once they saw that what they say and do no longer bothered me, they eventually stopped. I’ve

convinced myself that someday I would be smarter than all of the mean bullies; so I could prove to them that I could be just like them—maybe even better.

At the time when my mom told me to “not let what others said stop you from being successful,” I did not know what she meant, but now it all makes sense. I studied, read, and wrote everyday and always asked for help when needed. Although teachers said that it would take five to seven years for Hmong students to learn English and be at grade-level with their English-speaking classmates, it took me only three years. I wanted to prove to the world that “a little dumb refugee Hmong girl” could be just as successful as anyone else who was born in the United States and is American. When I took the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concept Exam (WKCE) test in fourth grade, my teachers found that I did not need ESL—English as a Second Language—class anymore, meaning that I was at “grade level” with my fellow classmates. In seventh and eighth grade, I got all A’s and B’s on my report cards and I graduated from Central High School in the top six percent of my class with a 3.9 cumulative grade point average. Whatever I do, I will always remember these words: “What others say only makes you stronger.”

December 21, 2005