

Geointeresting Podcast Transcript

Episode 21: Christine Staley, Part 2

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Due to the surge in Vietnamese refugees, the U.S. Refugee Act of 1980 was created to provide a permanent and systematic procedure for the admission of refugees of special humanitarian concern to the United States.

This is part two of Christine Staley's story of her escape from Vietnam and relocation to the United States. Christine and her family are among the estimated 800,000 Vietnamese boat people who came to America. Despite the language barrier, being in a foreign country and having to start over, Christine worked hard to pursue her passion and fulfill a career in civil service to the United States.

Welcome to Geointeresting.

Christine: Very shortly, when we got off the ship, we hit a sandbar, and we couldn't go anywhere. We saw the island. We were told that's the island we were supposed to go to. We hit the sandbar and got stuck. All of a sudden, I hear gun shots, loud gun shots, and they wouldn't stop. I was terrified. Everybody was terrified. What's going on? We hear screaming, louder and louder, and more screaming. First of all, I could hear a couple [of] voices, and then it was more and more people. We got stuck. We were pretty sure it's definitely pirates now. It has to be pirates here. My mom was on the upper deck. My mom ran to the hole that we climb up and down. She said, "Stay down there. Cover your face. Get the oar, and cover your face. It's pirates." We covered our faces, and we stayed low down there and then all of a sudden, hear, "You! Come up here! All of you! Come up, come up!" I look in the little hole and saw this big guy holding a gun up like they are shooting up in the air. I was about to faint. I said, "Oh my god, we made it this far, and now this." His name was Tony. He's a marine for the Philippines. He was the sweetest guy. He was so kind, so sweet, so gentle when we met him. But at that day, I was so scared of Tony, and he wouldn't stop shooting in the air, so we all get off the boat. They lined us up on the shore, and we see nobody, but we're surrounded by Filipino men. Found out it was 24 marines and 24 navy men that guard the island. And that's the marines and navy that we met. There was a captain there that welcomed us to the Island and said, "There used to be an official refugee camp here, but because the number of the refugees got so big, we've now moved it to Palawan which is a much bigger island. So now this island here is just the marine and the navy." That's the beginning of my time in the refugee camp. We were there for four months, and then they transported us to Palawan, which is the official refugee camp now. After one month on Terra Island, our family was moved to Palawan. Life in Palawan in the refugee camp is another story and another challenge. It was ran by the U.N., and [at] the camp we had the Red Cross volunteering, helping the refugees. We had one church and one Buddhist temple. You pretty much just sit there and wait. You don't know the future. You know that you made the escape. You know that you survived. What's in front of us, we don't know. I remember



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crying almost every day because I just lost everything. I lost my home country; lost my hometown. My dad was still back with the communists, and he and my mom and my five other siblings — we don't know our future. We know that we [escaped communists], but what's in front of us, we don't know. When you sit there and wait for seven and a half months and you don't know your future, it's a long wait.

NGA: It's hard to keep hope alive?

Christine: Right. You hear the people get turned down, of course. Our number one would be America because I think when we escape, we don't think of any other place to settle but America. Growing up, I see the American veterans, the American soldier in my hometown, and I think Vietnam always associated ourselves with America because of the Vietnam War. I didn't think anything, except, "We are definitely going to America." That's it. My uncle who escaped one year before settled in Virginia. The reason he settled in Virginia was because he used to work for the U.S. military back in my hometown. He was the one who drove the trucks to provide all the supplies for the military base. When he escaped, his American boss was in Virginia, so that's why he sponsored my uncle over. The relationship is why we ended up in Virginia; because my uncle was here. In the Philippines it was hard. They gave us food — rice. Back in Terra, the small island, we had rice, and we had salt. That's all we ate every day. Not the fine salt like we have; it was like rock salt. That's what we had for our meal every day. I remember going out to the field. My mom would take us to go around the island. The island is wild, so we would pick up some vegetables that we know we can eat, so at least you had some vegetables. We just cook it with salt; that's what we ate. Now we moved to the Palawan; the big island is more structured. So we have either fish or meat based on a number of your headcount of your family. In the morning you go out there and stay in line, and you can pick up food and cook for the rest of the day for the family. I shared some pictures about the house in the refugee camp. We focused the time there; we focused on learning English and what we can do for the community. My sister volunteered to be a teacher's assistant to teach the kids English. The instructor teacher was Filipino, but the teacher was obviously fluent in English. My sister helped her and [assisted] her. We had very limited English. We focused on learning English the last year when we knew we were going to escape, so we learned English a little bit more. I volunteered to work for the Red Cross to pay back, to help with the community, to give us a chance to improve our English and to keep us busy. Otherwise, you go crazy sitting there. That's my time in the Philippines.

NGA: How did you find out you were going to leave?

Christine: Right. We filed an application with the American — what are they called — the American group that came over and interviewed the refugees. We filed an application with them. Also, over here in Virginia, my uncle filed an application that he wanted to sponsor us over. At that point in time, I didn't know why, when the American interviewed people, they were going to select you to go to America. They always called into an interview at like midnight, one or two o'clock in the morning. Why did they call for the interview at that time? I realized that it was

because of the time difference! We were like, “Wait, we’re sleeping,” but, “Nope, you have to come for an interview.” They interview the entire family to make sure you are one family because people would put in kids, especially with the half-Vietnamese, half-American children. Some people would just buy them or put them in the family and claim they have five kids, so my entire family can go with the kids, for example. So they interviewed very thoroughly; they interviewed you. Not just once; twice, three times. They ask different questions to make sure you are all in the family. They turned us down the first time; I can’t remember the reason they turned us down the first time. Then my uncle reapplied, and they came and interviewed us again, and that proved us. So that’s the first step. It was my mom and all of us were so happy that we were approved to come to America. The next step; we didn’t know when we got the signal to go, but now, at least we passed the first step. It was months; just every day we were waiting for the announcement from the speaker, “This family such and such, come to the office because now you have the ticket to go.” We were just waiting for that moment. Eventually, that moment came, and we all got on the plane, and we left Palawan. We went to Manila. We spent two days in another refugee camp in Manila. Manila is just a transition camp. And then we got on a plane and came to America. So we closed that chapter in the refugee camp, and we came to America. First of all, we came to Honolulu. Then we spent a night in San Francisco. Then we came here to Virginia, our final destination. It was February 28, 1981. My family and I came here as political refugees in this country.

KD: How long had that entire journey taken?

CS: I escaped Vietnam in July of 1980. I came here February 28, 1981. That time in between I was in the refugee camp or on the boat in the water.

KD: What was that adjustment like? When you got here, obviously, you were happy to have finally made it, but then [you were] adjusting to life in the states.

CS: It was very scary. We didn’t speak much English. I remember coming here with two pairs of pants and two shirts for all of us, for my family. We didn’t have anything. How are we going to make it? It’s just like, we were so happy. We were so fortunate we made the escape. The part of our refugee life in the refugee camp was over, but now we’re here. What’s going to happen to us? How are we going to make it happen? Shortly after I came here; I came in February, and the USCC, I can’t remember the full name, but that’s the organization that helped the refugees, and they coordinated summer work for the students; for the youth. I worked for the social services for the first few months when I first came here as a summer student job just to help other refugees and translation with my limited English. I don’t know how they trusted me enough to have that job. I was just so happy to meet other Vietnamese people. I felt so lost and was so scared. My uncle was there, but he had his own life. It was pretty much my mom and the six of us now. The program back then was to put the refugees on welfare and put them for 18 months, just to help us out. And after 18 months, you were on your own. I am forever grateful for that 18 months. I remember I received \$214 a month for welfare and \$32 on food stamps for me because I was older and 18, so I was independent. I got a separate amount. My mom and my

five other siblings received a different amount because they were one family. We did whatever we could to survive. I remember the social worker would take us around to different churches to pick up clothes from different churches to wear. This is what we did for three years. We didn't have any money, and my mom did everything she could to support us because we are a [inaudible] just enough to pay for the rent. My mom had two jobs. She worked for a restaurant in Georgetown. She had to take two or three different busses to get there and work all day long for a Vietnamese restaurant, took two or three busses to come home and looked after us. Then [she] took two different busses to her second job. There was another Vietnamese family who settled before 1975, so they were established. They had an old aunt. They asked my mom to spend the night every night to babysit the aunt; to talk to her and keep her company at night. In the morning when mom would come home and check on us, to go off again; to go work in the restaurant. I remember we didn't have enough money to buy food, so my mom, she would, when she worked in the restaurant, she would bring home — you know how you go to restaurants, and you eat the chicken? They removed the meat from the bones, so the bones is what my mom would bring home, and that's what we ate for years. My mom was an excellent cook. She had so many different ways of cooking the chicken bone. I enjoyed it. I have no problem with that. One of my sisters is traumatized. Up to this day, she won't touch chicken bones. She says she's just traumatized. My mom did; I'm just very, very proud of her. As a woman from Vietnam, she relied heavily on my dad, and she made it happen for us. The person who didn't speak a word of English; she knew how to say yes and no, but she didn't understand the question to say yes or no. She just knew two words, yes and no. All she said was education, education, education. She said, "It doesn't matter what happens to me or your dad; you are here now. All you have to do is study." And that's what we did. We had nothing to eat, we had nothing to wear but what we did well was study. We studied hard. That's something I'm very grateful; the guidance from my parents. I thank my mom and my dad. Study hard, and that's how you move up, and that's how you survive. Either you're in Vietnam; it doesn't matter where you're at; you have no choice. You have to study.

NGA: So what led you to a career in civil service, and how did you get here to NGA?

Christine: Let me go back a little bit on my education in America when I first got here. I got here in February, and they sent me to school in April. They said, "We have an option," because now I was 19, "We have an option to send you to learn ESL, English as a second language, with an adult like your mom, or we can send you to high school because you still can go to high school until your 20. We want to send you to Falls Church High School." This is the social worker talking. "We're going to send you to Falls Church High School so you can learn English with kids your age instead of hanging out with the older folks." So I went to Falls Church High School in April. June came, two months, and nothing happened in there because I was just getting used to finding my locker. I get lost every single time. I don't know how to operate it. I don't know how to walk around school; it looked so big to me. I had no idea what people were saying around me. June came, and they said, "For next year, you have to be out of high school because then you're 20 years old." I'm very competitive in that sense. I said, "Then send me to school here. I

want to get something out of it, and I want to make the most of it.” I went to summer school, and my social worker said, “Do you think you can start English? Just go in there and have fun and slowly. We aren’t expecting anything from you.” But I know better, from my parents and myself. That summer, I signed up for English 11. I finished English 11. I don’t know how I made it. I made everything with a C. It doesn’t matter; I just need a C to pass. September, when the official school year started, I entered English 12. I took history, government — you need math; you need all of that. You have required credits in order to get a high-school diploma. I’m studying ESL at the same time with my very limited English. I remember sitting in the back of my class listening to the teacher, and this is in government, and thinking, ‘my God, I have no idea what she’s saying. She sounds like she’s singing up there. It sounds so beautiful, but I have no idea what she’s saying.’ Every day, when I come home from school, I spend my entire afternoon, evening, just looking up words in the dictionary word by word. When you try to put the word by word together, it doesn’t make much sense in a whole sentence, but that’s how I studied. I got English 11 out of the way, and I’m now doing English 12, so what about English 9 and 10? My ESL teacher said, “I’m going to send you to JEB Stuart High School for you to take that test. If you pass the test, they’ll give you the credit. I don’t expect you to pass it the first time, but just go to see what it’s like. You’ll come back, so we can train you, so you can go back and pass the test.” She sent me up on the bus, and when I passed English 9, I came back, and she said, “I am so proud of you! I am going to send you again for English 10.” Three months later, she sent me, and I passed English 10. Long story short, I graduated from Falls Church High School in 1982, in one year. I don’t know about now, but at that time [at] Falls Church High School, nobody did that. I am so proud of my accomplishment, and it’s because of the support and guidance from my mom and all the support and guidance from the teachers; that they helped us.

NGA: What a testament to your work ethic, too. That’s amazing.

Christine: Thank you, thank you. I wouldn’t know to do anything differently; that’s how my parents raised us. Going back to your question, what made me choose to work for the federal government? When I got my Bachelor degree in accounting, I worked for a CPA firm, but in my mind — back then, my brother already worked for Ft. Belvoir. Very proud to say that my mom who didn’t speak English, who couldn’t speak English; not that she didn’t, she couldn’t speak English. She raises us, and my brother has a Ph.D. in [inaudible] Engineering [and] works at Ft. Belvoir; degree from Virginia Tech.

NGA: Go Hokies.

Christine: He always talked about the mission and how he proudly worked for Ft. Belvoir and supported the Army, and in my mind, I thought, oh my God, that would be so cool; and as a refugee coming here. Deep down inside me, I know that’s the way to go. I owe so much to this country that I wanted to do something to pay them back. I remember I took a pay cut to go into the federal government because that’s what I wanted to do. I don’t want to work for a firm or work for a private company; that’s all about profit. It’s not in my heart. I knew that I wanted to go

into the federal government, but I took the job in the CPA while waiting for an opportunity to go into the federal government. My first job was the Department of Commerce, Office of the Inspector General. I went in as a financial statement auditor. From there, I looked out for the mission that I loved, that I can do a better job. An opportunity for a promotion came up, so I moved from the Department of Commerce to Department of Justice. Then another promotion came up, so I moved to Veterans Affairs. I really loved the mission of Veterans Affairs because that's so close to my heart. Now I have the chance to see so many Vietnam vets, and the few chances I got, I thanked them in person. I got to talk to them and tell them how much I appreciate their sacrifice. Seeing them in Vietnam growing up, I didn't understand the sacrifice at all. I didn't know what they had to give up to be in my country. Since I've been here, I know it now. Look at this country. We are so wealthy here, and for them to give all that up to come to Vietnam, they could be killed any day, any second, but they were there. Now I got to really thank them from my heart. I loved the mission there. Same thing with, why am I here at NGA? Same thing; national security. It's another great mission to work for. I think all the federal agencies have good missions, but for me, some missions are closer to my heart than others.

NGA: I also wanted to ask you about being here. How do you keep your Vietnamese heritage and traditions alive? Are there things you still do to remember the old Vietnam or the Vietnam you knew when you were growing up?

Christine: We speak Vietnamese at home. With my parents, we always speak Vietnamese, with the kids and my nieces and nephews. I have one son. My nieces and nephews and son; we speak Vietnamese. Of course, they are more comfortable speaking English among themselves, but they know when they're speaking with grandparents, they have to speak Vietnamese to them. My parents have four daughters and two sons, so the four of us, the four daughters, we split the month into four. Once a month, it's my turn to cook for my parents. People at my office ask me, "How was your weekend?" "Oh, it's my turn to cook." So they know. The four daughters take turns to cook. One of my sisters is vegetarian, so all she cooked is vegetarian food for my parents. My other was great; really, really good cook with Vietnamese food, so she would cook those. Then my other sister would cook different things. I mainly cook [a] mix of Vietnamese and American food. We try to cook something different for them to eat. I would call, "Mom, what would you like this time? Dad, what would you like this time?" That's something to carry; tradition. I don't think about it so much, but when you asked me now, it's a normal thing. Your parents took care of you when you were small, so now you take care of them when they're older, so that's something we do for them. If my mom or dad has doctors' appointments, my sister will send it out to everybody, "Who is available?" We don't divide it — you do it this time, you do it that time — we don't do that. We just send it out. Somebody will be available to take my mom and my dad to the doctors. That's it. I said, "Mom, Dad, you are so lucky you have six of us. I only have one son. I don't know how he's going to take care of me when I'm older." We celebrate the lunar New Year, the Vietnamese New Year. On the Vietnamese New Year, I wear my traditional dress and [inaudible]. We have red envelopes which we put money in it; we call it the lucky money. I would offer money to my parents to wish them health and happiness. To the

older generation, but also to the younger generation for my nieces and nephews. We also offer them lucky money to carry, to teach them culture and the tradition.

NGA: Well, thank you so much. Is there anything you wanted to add? Your story is fascinating. I really enjoyed listening to you

Christine: Thank you. It depends. One thing I feel like I have to say; something about my mom. I took a training here at NGA, and the assignment was real quick on the spot — who do you think of when you hear the word ‘courage?’ And people in the classroom talked about this president, big figures, sports person and this and that. When it was my turn, I talked about my mom because to me, she represented about courage. From a society where woman are nobodies, and for her, without my dad, she took six of us on a boat [and] escaped the country. Not because it’s something she wanted to for herself. She did that for us, so her children can have the freedom, and her children can have opportunity and not be with the communist. She came here, [and] she worked so hard to support us, to raise us, and never forget, whatever you do, you have to study hard. She was always there for us, and I love my mom so much. I remember one snowy day where my mom came home from working, and she was walking, and I could see her from the window, she came in from the bus stop, and she kept falling down because of the snow. I cannot tell you how much I love my mom, and how grateful I am that my parents gave us life but also gave us the freedom. On top of the freedom, I love this country so much. It has been home for a long, long time for me. I loved it when I was 18, and I have 36 years here now. I’m forever grateful for the freedom and the opportunities I have here. It’s the only place on earth that I know that will give people that opportunity who came here with nothing. You can make it happen if you work hard.

NGA: What a powerful message and a powerful story. Thank you so much for sharing that with us. For Christine, being a government civilian at NGA is one way to thank the country who helped her and her family and to give back to the community she has called home for the past 36 years. Geointeresting is produced by NGA’s Office of Corporate Communications. To hear the first part of Christine’s story or other podcasts, subscribe or follow us on iTunes and SoundCloud.

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