

Thuy Cooper's American Odyssey



Thuy Cooper with a couple of her friends

“For me, my family’s immigration to the United States is foremost a love story,” says Thuy Cooper, Special Projects Lead in ARM. From a backdrop of war, and through twists and turns, Cooper finds the connections to her family and her country of birth a source of strength that brings richness to her experiences. “My parents met in Vietnam. My dad was in the U.S. Marines, but was a civilian working for a US company in Vietnam when he met my mom. They met in 1970 when he hired her as his housekeeper. After a couple months, my father, through a translator, told my mother he liked her. It didn’t matter that my mom had a son, my dad continued to pursue her, and eventually he adopted my brother Phil. Despite the language barrier, love struck and I was born, followed by my sister and baby brother one after the other, each entering the world one year apart, respectively. They wasted no time,” Cooper laughed.

“My dad’s contract ended before my younger brother was born, so dad had to return to the States,” said Cooper. “As soon as he got back, he wasted no time and began processing the paperwork to send for us. From 1973 to 1975, my mom was a single mom of four young black Amerasian children during a time of war. My grandpar- ents were very supportive, so we moved in with them at the family house in Saigon, where my uncle still lives today with his family.”

In 1975, the paperwork to bring the Cooper family to the US finally came through. Although, it almost didn’t happen. “In 2006 when I returned to Vietnam, I learned my mother had thrown away the confirmation letter. My mom said her home was in Vietnam, and

she didn’t want to leave her family to live in a different country. But my grandmother saw the letter marked with a U.S. seal and fished it out of the trash. If it wasn’t for my grandmother, we probably would still be in Vietnam, and I wouldn’t be here today.

“I don’t recall much of my time in Vietnam as a child, but I remem- ber being in the airport on the way to the US and smelling baby formula. Every time I smell baby formula, I remember the airport and being assisted through the process by a soldier who saw my mom and her four children and wanted to help. We don’t know who he was, but I’m thankful he helped us,” said Cooper.

“When we arrived in San Francisco, my dad met us to take us home to Southern California. Of course, we were all so young that none of us had no clue who he was. We landed in San Francisco on April 29, 1975, one day before the Fall of Saigon. If we had waited a week or even a day or two, or if my father hadn’t completed the paperwork in time, we may not have been able to leave Vietnam,” said Cooper thinking back on that momentous day 45 years later. While most of her life in Vietnam is lost in the fog of childhood, April 29, 1975, marks a moment that defines part of her identity. “I consider myself an immigrant. I came over in a different way from other Vietnamese immigrants because my father was a U.S. citizen, but I still consider myself an immigrant. My whole family does as well. However, we were raised to have the all-American experience. My dad, mom and aunt wanted us to be all-American kids, which meant playing softball, taking gymnastics and joining little league baseball.

For the first six months to a year in the country, none of us spoke English, and my father didn't speak Vietnamese. We would be in a room all talking among ourselves, and then my dad would walk in and we would be quiet because we felt bad that he did not speak Vietnamese." But soon enough, the kids started learning from that famous instructor: American TV. "We would watch Sesame Street, Romper Room and Captain Kangaroo, and by the time I started kindergarten, I spoke English."



It is from that first year in the U.S. that Cooper finds some of her favorite memories. "Our first year in the U.S., we had no clue what Easter or Christmas were (we had never had those holidays), but my dad made sure we experienced them. He woke us up early on Christmas morning in '75, and we were like 'why are you waking us up so early?' We still didn't speak a lot of English, but we saw toys, toys my dad had made mostly by hand. I remember he made a train set for my brother. And Easter '76, our dad again woke us up early to go out and find eggs in the yard. He made personalized baskets for each of us. He was so excited to expose us to all those things he had been exposed to as a child. He made all of those holidays and family gatherings special for us. My parents couldn't afford a lot of material stuff, but my dad gave us a lifetime of priceless memories."

[Search for Flyer Stories](#)



[Contact the Flyer Team](#)



The Cooper kids beaming during their second Easter knowing what to expect.

She also admits that she's probably a bit of a nerd because of her dad. "From a young age, I loved school. I would play teacher, creating lesson plans, watching educational TV shows and reading the encyclopedia. I would go through the telephone book and make lists of different colleges and universities that I wanted to attend. My parents really

my mom and I to visit Vietnam together. That's where I'm from. I love living in America and would never trade the experience, but it's good to know the people of Vietnam, the Vietnamese culture and the roots from where I come.

"To me, our immigration story is a love story between my parents. My dad is my mom's only true love, and she was his. This whole story is a testament to my parents, who did what they had to do to build a family and a life for their family. My dad will forever be my hero and role model. I'm thankful that he took the necessary steps to bring his family to the United States. As for my mom, I admire her courage and the trust and love she placed in my dad to travel across the world with four young children in tow while not speaking a lick

stressed education because that was one way out of poverty and a way to explore the world. Yes, I did all the nerdy things like joining the chess club in the 4th grade. My dad loved that I picked up chess and had me teach my siblings to play. We would have family chess tournaments, and my dad made a championship belt for the winner. I am still the chess champion of the house," says Cooper proudly.

Though her father has since passed away, Cooper still hears stories from her mother and aunt, who now live together. She cherishes the memories she has of him. This desire to remain a close knit family is a part of her immigration story.

The Coopers still have strong ties to their relatives in Vietnam. She has visited them a couple of times, and some of her family in Vietnam have since emigrated to the States. She plans on going back to Vietnam with her mom again soon. "My dream is for my siblings,

of English. Their journey took them through a myriad of obstacles, but they persevered through love and persistence to overcome these obstacles to get us here.

They gave me and my siblings the American dream. The American dream is not that people can come over here, get rich, and live a lavish lifestyle. The American dream is to have and to seize those opportunities to succeed and do better. Yes, it's a land where the history hasn't always been easy or friendly, but I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. That's the beauty of being an immigrant and what immigrants bring to this country. We bring color and culture, which can only enhance the richness of this country's history. And without immigrants like myself, you wouldn't have Vietnamese food."