

DANIEL MAI
LEFT
VIETNAM
IN A 32-FOOT BOAT
LOOKING
FOR A
BETTER LIFE.

HE FOUND IT
THROUGH ROTARY.

OUR HOUSE WAS on a busy street, and every night we heard gunshots. One time they started in broad daylight while I was taking my younger siblings to the park to play basketball. The gunfire was maybe 40 feet away. I told my siblings to get down. Luckily we were close to our house and were able to run back.

My father moved us from Vietnam when I was a child to provide us with more than what we'd had under the communist regime. We ended up in a ghetto in Oakland, Calif., USA. I went to Fremont High School, one of the worst schools in a neighborhood plagued by violence, poverty, and high dropout rates. The spring of my junior year, a group of Rotarians visited my class. That was 21 years ago. They told us about the Rotary Club of Oakland's Enterprise Institute, a three-day camp that allows students to develop and test their business skills. Spending time in the Santa

as told to Katya Cengel

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Cruz Mountains, creating a business plan with my peers, didn't appeal to me so much as escaping from the projects for a few days. In my world, the only businesses I saw were funeral homes, liquor stores, and drug dealers.

My dad had envisioned a future for his six children that was different from the reality we lived in. As the oldest child, I knew I was expected to go to college, but I lacked ambition. I was just trying to survive. Every now and then I would see bodies lying on the street in pools of blood. Sometimes the cops would knock on our door in the middle of the night: "There was a shooting in front of your house. Did you see anything?" What did they expect us to say? We always told them no.

The Enterprise Institute exposed me to a new reality. I met teenagers who talked about Plato and Shakespeare, not drive-by shootings and AK-47s. Their catchwords were *allowance* and *Alan Greenspan* instead of *duck* and *911*. It was at camp that I heard the word *entrepreneur* for the first time. Surrounded by high school students from schools that were far superior to my own, I learned just how little I knew. As we considered case studies and came up with our own business plans, I also saw a future that didn't involve assault rifles and prison cells. These kids talked about going to college and starting their own companies, and I realized I wanted the same things. Coming from the streets, I knew I was at a disadvantage and would have to work even harder to achieve the same goals. That was one of the most important lessons I took away from the Enterprise Institute – not a business outline, but a sense of ambition and self-motivation.

Back at Fremont High School, I stopped cutting classes. I knew that if I hung out with the local teenagers, I would

end up dead, injured, or in jail, so I didn't have a lot of neighborhood friends my age. I started studying and brought my grade-point average up from around a 2.5 to a 3.67.

My parents hadn't gone to college. In Vietnam my father was a fisherman. It was an unpredictable and dangerous life, and he wanted something better for his children. I didn't know we were leaving Vietnam until I saw my father bow to my grandmother three times. In our Buddhist tradition, you bow to people like that only when they are dead, so I knew he didn't plan on seeing her again. After he said goodbye, we loaded 32 family members into a 32-foot boat. The craft was

only 7 feet wide, and I was barely seven years old.

On the sixth day of our journey, a massive storm struck. The men bailed water from the boat while the women and children huddled against the rain, wind, and waves. My father and uncles were fishermen, but their wives and children could not swim. I felt every wave that hit the boat. I knew that if the next wave were big enough and hit us hard enough, we would be done. On the eighth day, our food ran out. My uncles and aunts wanted to return to Vietnam, but my father refused. He believed that our fate in the open sea would be better than what we would face under the communists if we returned and surrendered. I remember him closing his eyes, raising his hands, and asking God to help us. Eventually the storm subsided, and after almost two weeks on the water, we landed in Hong Kong. We spent a year in a refugee camp in the Philippines before making our way to America.

I still remember the Chevy Nova my uncle met us in when we arrived in the United States. There had been no cars in our village in Vietnam, and the Nova was one of

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my first glimpses of modern technology. Years later, after I'd made it through college, I started my own computer consulting business and named it Novateck PC after that Chevy Nova.

In Oakland my father delivered newspapers, and my mother painted nails. We didn't have much money, so I applied for every college scholarship I could. I filled out 20 applications and received 19 rejections because I was not a U.S. citizen. Only one scholarship program accepted me: the Rotary Club of Oakland's. The Rotarians met with me and my family and listened to what I had been through and where I wanted to go. I know they had many applicants, and when they awarded me the \$5,000 scholarship, it proved they believed in me. The scholarship, along with financial aid, allowed me to go to college.

At the University of California, Davis, I used the scholarship money to pay for rent and books. The first three years I was in school, the scholarship meant that I didn't have to work and could concentrate solely on studying. Whenever I would talk to my Oakland club counselor, Terry Turner, he would always ask how I was doing, and I would tell him truthfully that I was struggling. Fremont High School had not prepared me for UC Davis. Terry offered me advice, and I listened to it. I started at Davis at the same time as three other Fremont High School graduates. By my second semester, I was the only one left. The Enterprise Institute had jump-started my future. The Rotary scholarship kept it in motion.

After graduating from college with an English degree, I spent a few years working at Enterprise Rent-A-Car.

When the dot-com boom hit, I wanted to get involved in the action and went back to school to earn my second degree, a Bachelor of Science in information technology. I spent several years working for a series of small companies before seeking further training and finally striking out on my own with Novateck PC in 2004. Novateck essentially serves as our clients' IT department; we set up their servers, make sure they can access the Internet, and protect their networks from hackers. As soon as I opened my business, I joined the Oakland club. Its members became some of my first clients. Novateck has grown since then and now has three employees. My family has also

grown; I now have a wife and two young daughters.

Last year I took my wife and oldest daughter to Vietnam. The little fishing village I left as a child 30 years ago is now a bustling metropolis. The district where I once lived no longer exists, and my former neighborhood has been replaced by a fancy beach with cabanas. My childhood home in Oakland has also morphed into something else; the basketball court where I used to play has been torn down and replaced with apartment complexes. The Rotary Club of Oakland's Enterprise Institute is one of the things that remain unchanged. Now in its 30th year, the institute continues to take dozens of high school juniors to the mountains and teach them how to make their own future in the business world. I have helped with the institute for the last seven years and am now cochair of the committee that runs the whole thing. I know that the camp experience will help other teenagers change their way of thinking and give them hope for a better future. That's what it did for me. ■