

Babes in arms

October 24, 2004



Thirty years on, Tyler Robertson, Dominic Golding, Jen Szetho and Faith Denelzen still wonder about the place they left behind.

Photo: *Craig Sillitoe*

For the children of the Vietnam War, it was a mercy flight meant to heal the wounds, but for those living with the legacy of Operation Babylift nothing is quite that simple. **Peter Wilmoth** reports.

The day Jan Robertson arrived to "meet" the child she was to adopt, a row of tiny babies - orphans or abandoned - lay in wire cots with no mattress but a little piece of cloth. Underneath the cots was the babies' excreta, which would be sporadically hosed away by the nuns.

The baby in the last of a row of cots next to the door was nine months old, malnourished and suffering scabies, living on rice water because the orphanage had no money to buy milk, if any could be found anyway. The little boy had been abandoned. He had no papers, no name and, on the face of it, not much of a future. The only point of difference this baby had from the others was his proximity to the door. And that's how Jan Robertson from Melbourne made her choice.

"My mum walked in the room and said, 'I'll have that one'," says the boy, now Tyler Robinson, 29. "The nun said 'Don't you want to choose?' She said, 'That's not what I'm here for; I'm just here to help'. I was just lucky I was the closest to the door."

Jan Robertson had made the trip after the South Vietnamese, Australian and US governments agreed to fast-track the process. Tyler and another baby, adopted by Robertson and her husband Colin and later named Kim, were placed in foster care before being flown out of Saigon in a military aircraft. They were reunited with their new family six weeks later.

Today, approaching the 30th anniversary next April of the mass exodus of orphans called Operation Babylift, Tyler is cheerful and confident, passionate about dance parties, swimming, tennis and his small direct marketing business, which sells confectionery. He shares a house in Hawthorn with a friend.

He grew up in a family of six, three of them adopted Vietnamese and three by natural birth. "My parents felt they had a civic duty mainly because of the images from the Vietnam War," he says. "The graphic nature of some of those photos just compelled them to do something."

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As a baby resettled in Melbourne, Tyler for a while kept his distended belly, a consequence of malnutrition. His mother remembers he would "constantly have his mouth open" and, when he ate, "he didn't know when to stop", a common characteristic of children who have suffered early deprivation.

Tyler also had initial difficulties accepting affection. "I had this lack of attachment," he says. "When I came over here I found it difficult to adjust to a family. I didn't like being held, I didn't like being touched because for the first nine months of my life I hadn't had that."

But Tyler was soon a healthy and happy child. He grew up in Wandin, near Lilydale, feeling very Australian, playing football and tennis and picking mushrooms and blackberries around what was then countryside. "I counted myself to be an Australian from a really early age. I had a different heritage, but it didn't make a difference to me."

At 14, he started going through a wild time. He doesn't trace this to his adoption. "In high school, I hit a stage where I went off the tracks a little bit, ran amok. My parents sent me to boarding school (Assumption College in Kilmore) to fix that problem. It took me a long time to appreciate just what I've got. Growing up and being a little bit different and trying to find your own sense of being . . . it wasn't until my late teens that I started to figure all that out."

He remembers the first time he was singled out for how he looked. "My first taste of racism was two black kids picking on me when I was 10 or 11. One of these kids was really dark . . . and he called me black. I'm thinking 'Hang on!'. I was bemused by it because it was the first time I'd experienced this negative just for being who I was. I couldn't figure it out. We got into a fight, and that was it."

"My attitude was, 'If I can survive what I have so far, this is nothing'. That was how I mentally managed to get through that period of my life, I guess. And you have to throw a few punches here and there, too. And cop a few."

His sisters would stick up for him in the playground if there was trouble. "I had the luxury of having my two sisters and they were both wonderful people. If I was about to be in trouble with another kid, a quick word from them would defuse the situation pretty quickly."

Tyler sometimes pondered his adoption, but for him it had been a moment of good fortune that he chose not to analyse too much.

"Occasionally it would come into my head, but I had such a good thing with the parents I ended up with. It took me a few years to recognise that. I knew I was very fortunate to be where I ended up and the family I ended up with. They've been brilliant."

Tyler's parents did not discourage their three adopted children from contemplating seeking the identity of their birth parents. "They said if you ever wanted to go down that road, go for it. But none of us ever took it up. We were all happy."

For his own part, Tyler has never been tempted to pursue details of his birth parents. "Even now, with the onset of DNA testing, the ability is there to go back and search. But it doesn't really interest me. To me it just opens up a whole side of life that I maybe don't want. It could potentially mean me sending money on a consistent basis to a family I don't even know that gave me up 30 years ago, regardless of the circumstances. Although I'm sure, to make that decision to give up your children, things would have been pretty dire."

"In retrospect, we've ended up in a really good place. If I'd stayed in Vietnam my life would have been completely different. It was a question of survival, whether or not I would have survived that next year or two. It's a lottery. We could have ended up with anybody or we could have not been adopted at all. Whatever opportunities present themselves, you've got to take them regardless."

Tyler says that while, the problems faced by those adopted from another country receive attention, the role of the adoptive parents is sometimes overlooked. "With all the problems we've had, we've got to remember our parents have had similar issues to deal with. They want the best for us. They want us to assimilate into Australian society and get along and have our friends and have our life."

"But most of us forget that to unconditionally love somebody else's kid forever is a big commitment. There's times when we feel unloved or they haven't done us justice and there's been plenty of those, it's really easy to lose sight of how difficult it's been for them to do what they have."

At the age of four months, Dominic Golding was picked up by an Australian doctor at an orphanage on the outskirts of Saigon and taken to an adoption processing centre run by World Vision. Dominic was very ill, suffering malnutrition, mild cerebral palsy and respiratory failure. "That's why I was evacuated," he says now. "The doctor was advised to take only children that might not survive if they stayed."

Dominic was flown in the Hercules to Melbourne, where he was met by his adoptive parents. They "held me for a couple of minutes" before he was taken to Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital.

Dominic's parents were teachers who had fostered several children. Like Tyler's parents, they had been prompted by the images on television. "They couldn't sit back and see all the trauma the kids were going through," he says.

Dominic had a classic rural upbringing on a four-hectare farm at Mount Gambier in South Australia. "I had a ball growing up in the country, playing cricket, doing country stuff, hanging out with the larrikins of my street. I loved being Australian."

When he asked about his adoption, his parents were unable to give many details. "My parents said I was brought out of a burning building and mortars had been going off at the time, so my parents could be dead. The possibilities about who they are and what might have happened to them are endless."

This confusion fuelled an adolescent wild streak that Dominic was going through anyway. He believes having been adopted from a country at war led to his near obsession with the Vietnam conflict, which worried his parents. "I was very close to my parents until I became a teenager. Then I started really getting into the Vietnam War. I became quite obsessed by it, actually. I wanted all the information about the conflict I could get my hands on . . . That didn't really turn my parents on very much. They didn't like the idea that I was dressing up in camo (camouflage), watching every Vietnam War film that ever came out. I'd pretend to be VietCong or ARVN, the South Vietnamese army at the time. They thought I'd become a bit psycho."

"I'd hang out with a couple of farm boys and we used to go out and do a bit of shooting of rabbits, all that sort of boys' stuff. They were disturbed by the idea that I glorified violence . . . I'd try and imitate booby traps they built in Vietnam. The war films was the only information I could get about the country."

Dominic was educated in a special class at the local primary school because, he says, "it was the only way the school system could cope with someone who's Vietnamese, with a disability and who's got an attitude problem".

He had a happy childhood, but a sense of dislocation "definitely fed my war fantasies". "As a young kid, you tend to think, 'It's all my fault or my problem, the world hates me'."

He says his parents were "picked on" because they'd adopted a kid from Vietnam and he was teased because he was Asian. "I got called the normal names. I was an aggressive little shit, actually. I became even more socially isolated. I took a bit of pride in my social isolation. I didn't want to be associated with Anglo-Saxons at the time. I associated Anglo-Saxons with American imperialism."

He says he harboured deep resentment about his adoption. "Towards my parents as well as towards the system. It's a big 'What if?' thing. What if I didn't leave the country? I'd speak Vietnamese and I'd be fluent, I'd be able to eat as much pho as I want. It's the idealised romanticism of maybe tending rice in the paddy. I've mellowed in that view."

"Quite a few years ago, I asked my mum and dad, 'Hypothetically speaking, what if my birth parents walked in through the door and said 'We want little Dom back?' They were a bit stunned. 'Where did this come from?' or 'Is this what they teach you at school?' It was 'Fine, if that's what you want to do, be reunited with your parents, that's fine.'"

Dominic moved to Melbourne four years ago and started working in the Vietnamese community, doing theatre and multi-media projects with young Vietnamese Australians as part of the Australian Vietnamese Youth Media based at the Footscray Arts Centre. "That's when I started wanting to know more about my cultural heritage."

Last year, he was commissioned by the Melbourne Workers Theatre to write a play based on his experiences called Another Shrimp 4 The Barbie, which he hopes will be performed next year as part of the 30th anniversary of Vietnamese migration to Australia.

He now lives in Yarraville. His cerebral palsy and hearing impairment have been a challenge, but have not hindered him, he says. He is passionate about writing, he visits art galleries and sees "lots of Asian cinema, especially ones where limbs get chopped off".

He went back to Vietnam in 1999 and visited two orphanages. He was disturbed by the poor level of health care for people with disabilities. "I'm very happy and thankful for being in Australia with all the technology of hearing aids and physiotherapy."

FAITH Denelzen was 15 months old when she was taken from an orphanage in Saigon, placed in a cardboard box and put alongside scores of other Vietnamese children on an RAN Hercules aircraft bound for a new life with her adoptive parents, Dianne, a nurse, and John, a teacher.

Faith lived her early life in Sunbury before moving to Melbourne. "I've been moved around a lot and didn't feel settled," she says. She was an only child, which she says was lonely, and she felt sad she didn't have any Vietnamese friends. "I had no one to relate to, to talk to. I was looking for Asians to hang out with. At some schools I was the only Asian person." She was often the butt of racist comments at school.

Her adoptive parents split when she was a child, which Faith coped with badly. A few years later her mother remarried a man with whom Faith got on well. But as a teenager she struggled with the combination of loneliness, racism and a lack of identity.

For Faith, now 30, the circumstances of her adoption have not been easy to reconcile. "I feel rejected," she says. Her pain centres on "the wonder of what might have been". She has tried without success to find her birth parents through the Department of Human Services.

Faith wanted to be a vet but school was a struggle. Since leaving she has worked with her father in a garden maintenance business. She concedes she has dwelt on the sadness of her past. "People say you were lucky to be adopted, but they don't know what we've gone through," she says. "I've been told 'You shouldn't look into the past, you should look to the future'."

She hopes she might one day feel less hurt by the impact of her adoption. She would like to put it behind her, but not until she can afford a trip back to Vietnam to "get a sense of where I came from". She is living with her parents in Croydon and would one day like to move out and start a family of her own.

Jennifer Szetho knew only sketchy details about where she came from. She knew she had been placed in a cardboard box and loaded onto a Hercules military transport when she was 10 days old. The paperwork said she'd been abandoned. She learned more details 26 years later when she found an article in The Age from 1975 that her mother had kept. It was about the airlift in which her Vietnamese name was mentioned as well as the name of the pilot who had flown her that day. All she knew was her Vietnamese name and what orphanage she had been in. One day soon after she rang the pilot.

"I said, 'You don't know me but I was one of the babies on the airlift'. There was a silence. And then he told me he knew Bob Hills, who was the

chief steward on that flight." Several months later, she rang Hills, who told Jen he had the logbook from that flight. She asked him to write all the details he remembered from that day. "It was just putting these pieces together," she says.

Hills told Jen that, at the plane's first stop in Bangkok, he saw cardboard boxes being carried across the tarmac and thought they contained food. When he got closer, he saw they contained babies.

In Melbourne, Jen was adopted by a Chinese couple. "They really wanted a baby so they adopted me, then 11 months later my brother was born. That was a big surprise."

Jen had a comfortable upbringing in Wheeler's Hill. She went to school at Wesley College at Syndal. But the unknowns about her life nagged at her and she found it hard to live comfortably with the knowledge of her adoption. "I felt very resentful about the fact they adopted me because I didn't know where I fitted in. I didn't know where I belonged or who I looked like. I just didn't like who I was."

There were times when Jen felt angry towards her parents. "Sometimes I wanted to stand out and say, 'I've got these feelings that need to be heard. I need special attention because I am different'. But, at the same time, I also wanted to feel part of the family."

Growing up with Chinese parents meant Jen's adoption was sometimes highlighted. "My parents used to introduce me to work people and others they didn't know all that well by saying 'This is Jennifer, and she's adopted'. That really hurt my feelings. It was like saying, 'Hey, if you don't like any of her qualities, they're not associated with us'. That's the message that I got as a child."

Jen grew up riding her bike, swimming and having friends over to play on the family squash court. Her parents would drive her to school early some days so she could attend band practice with her trombone.

At school she was conscientious, "a people-pleaser", she says. But there were problems. "In year nine, I was bullied by lots of people and called Mongolian. I ran into the music room and hid there. On my school report they said I relate better with teachers than I do with students, but they didn't really know that I was feeling crap about it."

Jen's parents separated when she was in her early 20s, which reinforced her sense of instability. She hated change and dealing with the break-up was hard. "When your parents split when you're an adopted child, it's worse," she says. "You think, 'I felt rejected by the first parents' and now there was this instability. Where do you go when your parents split up? Where's the family home? As an adoptee, I didn't know where I belonged anyway, and then you didn't know who to be loyal to, your mum or your dad. Being adopted magnified that dilemma. It's not rational, it's an emotional response."

She went to Monash University for an arts and teaching degree. At uni, she developed an intense interest in her heritage, learning she had been "just abandoned or left at the orphanage". "I was always told that my parents were dead, so I never really thought about it and I tried to accept that they were dead but I still felt different. Then, when I was in my first year of uni, my sociology teacher, who was really into the Vietnam War, gave us an opportunity to do a project. I wanted to do 'Who am I? My place in society'. She said 'Have you ever tried to search?'"

She began collating information about Vietnamese adoptees and the airlift, but hasn't traced her birth parents. She isn't sure whether finding them will give her satisfaction. If she does, she won't be able to speak with them without a translator.

She says she has become a more resilient person from her experiences. Her nickname used to be Jenny Puddles because she couldn't deal with her emotions and would cry at the drop of a hat. Now, she says, she hardly cries at all.

She works as a prep teacher. "They're so innocent and give so much of themselves," she says of the children. "When they say, 'I want my mummy', and it's like 'Yeah, well I do too'. But they don't understand the extent of my pain. They say, 'Have you got a mummy?' And I go, 'Yeah, everyone's got a mum'."

She is finding teaching satisfying. "I'm able to shape who they are, and teach them how to be kind to themselves and to be confident people and to teach them that they can do whatever they want to do and that they should believe in themselves."

Last year, Jen got married, which "makes you a bit more secure". Her husband has been supportive in her quest to discover her past. She still feels sadness at departures.

"When you say goodbye to people, you do feel a big sense of loss, like, 'Oh, don't go, don't leave'. Today, I still feel that. Even right now."

OPERATION BABYLIFT

In April 1975, South Vietnam was under fierce attack from North Vietnamese troops and Saigon, later renamed Ho Chi Minh City, was besieged. Planes full of refugees flew out of the country. In the final days of the mass withdrawal, around 1300 Americans and 5500 Vietnamese fled Saigon by helicopter.

Early that month, US President Gerald Ford announced a plan to send military aircraft and cargo planes to fly out of Saigon several thousand children held in orphanages. It was called Operation Babylift.

The babies, some as young as 10 days old, were loaded into military aircraft in cardboard boxes, sometimes three to a box. Many were ill. Some died on the tarmac.

One of the first flights ended tragically, a C-5A Galaxy, carrying more than 300 children, crashing soon after take-off. When the aircraft was about 65 kilometres out of Saigon, an explosion blew off its rear doors. The pilot turned the plane back towards Saigon and it crashed just two kilometres from the city.

More than half the children and adults aboard died.

About 3000 children were flown to the US and just under 1000 to Canada, Europe and Australia.

The first aircraft from Saigon to Australia, carrying 197 children, arrived on April 5. The second, arriving on April 16, brought 77 children.

Most of the children settled in Adelaide.

Jennifer is talking with various agencies in Australia and overseas to develop a database - which may include a DNA database - to help inter-country adoptees to make contact with birth relatives. She is seeking funding for the project. Further details at www.adoptedvietnamese.org or PO Box 123, Oakleigh 3166.

Thanks to the ABC's *Rewind* program for help in preparing this article.

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