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Crusade uncovers birth family

Tuesday, 29 April 2003

FOR the second time, I was returning to Vietnam where I was born 28 years ago.

I was travelling with my Australian parents, Basil and Robyn Turner, who adopted me when I was five months old, and I was on a personal crusade to find my birth mother.

It was unfinished business - just two years ago a trip to Vietnam resulted in a dead end - but I had to go and at the very least I was looking forward to a holiday with my parents.

A family friend, Doan, had offered to act as a translator for us while we were in Ho Chi Minh City.

Armed with a letter my mother had left with me when she gave me up for adoption we started our search.

The letter, my only link to the past, contained my birth mother's name, date of birth and ID number (like a licence number) as well as my Vietnamese name and date of birth.

In it she explained she could no longer care for me because she was too poor, and my father had been killed in the war.

Doan suggested we start at a police station in Ho Chi Minh City.

My parents stayed in the car while I went with Doan.

The first two men we spoke to showed very little interest in our search. They glanced at the letter then returned to their work.

Almost as an afterthought one of the men pointed us in the direction of another officer.



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A young girl took us into another office, where another two men sat and listened to Doan tell them that we were looking for my birth mother. Of course, they conversed in Vietnamese and so I briefly tuned out as I had been down this road before.

But after a few moments one of them sat down in front of his computer, which held files and information on every person in the Go Vap district of Ho Chi Minh City.

I started to pay attention again, as this was much further than we'd gotten last time.

He typed in my mother's name and date of birth and then, as I held my breath, hit enter.

There were a number of people in the district with my mother's name, Huynh thi Nga, but not the same date of birth. More disappointment. I thought that was the end of it. But then he went into the next room to make a call.

Doan told me the officer was calling a friend of his who worked at a national archives centre with a database of each of the 12 million Vietnamese living in Ho Chi Minh City. Maybe he could help.

After a few minutes, I again started to lose hope. I couldn't understand what was being said, as Doan continued talking to the second policeman while the phone call was being made. Not being able to speak Vietnamese was extremely isolating.

Just as my mind started to really wander, Doan suddenly grabbed my arm and said, "They've found someone."

She could overhear the first policeman's conversation, and he was writing down the address of a woman who had my mother's name and same date of birth - the only match on the computer.

The policeman then obtained the woman's phone number and dialled it.

The person who answered the phone said the woman was nearby, please call back in five minutes. This all unfolded in the space of a few minutes. It suddenly hit me with terrific force that we could be on the verge of finding my birth mother.

I bit my lip to try and stop the tears in front of the policeman.

It didn't work.

When he called the number again, the woman on the other end identified herself, and the policeman told her there was someone at the station called Huynh thi Cam Tu looking for her

mother, Nga. The woman said she had kept the birth certificate from her daughter's birth, 28 years ago.

The document serial number she read out to the policeman was exactly the same as the one on the photocopied birth certificate I had, which my parents had received when they adopted me.

It was a match.

The woman said she would be at the police station in 30 minutes.

I immediately left the room and went to collect my parents from the car outside. That's when I lost control and started really crying.

It was actually happening.

We had tracked down the woman who gave birth to me.

By the time I reached the car, I was a mess. I opened the door with tears streaming down my face. When my parents saw me they assumed the worst. They thought I'd found out my mother was dead.

Instead, I smiled and sobbed; "They found her. She'll be here in half an hour".

Those next 30 minutes waiting with my parents in the police station were the most frightening and exciting moments in my life.

I felt like I was going to throw up. My stomach was in knots.

I couldn't stop fidgeting. Fear, hope, anxiety, exhilaration, caution, jubilation; they all collided at once. The situation now was completely out of my control.

My entire life had come down to this moment. All the questions I'd had about my heritage and myself were about to be answered.

Who was my father? What nationality was he? Was he married to my mother? How did he die? Do I have any brothers or sisters? Had she tried to look for me?

Suddenly, she appeared.

A slim, gorgeous, well-dressed woman walked through the door and our eyes met. We both

knew.

We walked towards each other and both burst into tears as we embraced. It was her. It was my mother. I couldn't let go.

Here she was - my flesh and blood.

As we pulled back to look at each other, she started talking to me - in Vietnamese.

She couldn't speak English and I couldn't speak Vietnamese so I called Doan over.

When I introduced my mother to my Australian parents it was a truly incredible moment.

The woman who had carried me in her womb and cared for me for my first five months of life was now face to face with the two people who had nurtured and loved me since then.

They had cared for me and shaped my Australian identity from a baby to an adult.

We left the station headed for my mother's house and when we arrived a tiny, frail old woman slowly walked towards us.

She was my 88-year-old grandmother and, although she said little, there were tears in her eyes.

We sat down and my mother spilled the details of her heart-wrenching life during the war.

She met my father when she was 20 and he was 50. He was a Vietnamese man, a Major in the Republic of Vietnam army (the South Vietnamese force). He was also married to another woman.

My mother and father had an affair for a year, and then I was born in a military hospital in 1974.

My father's wife found out about me when I was 10 days old, and demanded my mother hand me over to her. Soldiers were sent to my mother's home where she lived with my grandmother, to apply pressure. They threatened to pour acid over them if they did not give me up. My mother and grandmother showed true dragon-like spirit and refused.

They truly believed that if they handed me over, my father's wife would kill me. I was humiliating evidence of her husband's affair.

In addition to that horrifying threat, my mother was very sick when she gave birth to me and had no breast milk.

I had developed severe dysentery and my mother was very poor. It was a hopeless situation.

She had heard that World Vision was a kindhearted organisation with good medical facilities so mother made the heartbreaking, courageous and entirely selfless decision to give me up for adoption. She said if I didn't get help from a doctor, I would die.

My mother and grandmother took me to the World Vision babies' home and handed me over.

What none of us ever knew, until now, was that my mother never intended to give me up forever.

She thought I could just stay there until the soldiers went away, until I got better and she got some more money.

But it did not go according to plan. During the tail end of the war, the United States donated some money to World Vision to help them run the organisation.

The Viet Cong subsequently assumed World Vision was an ally of the US and threatened to bomb the babies' home.

The babies were quickly divided into two groups: those who would probably survive in Vietnam and those who would not.

I was among 32 in the latter group. Sixteen of us would be flown to the United States for adoption and 16 to Australia.

The entire babies' home was then evacuated. The plane carrying the babies destined for the US left Ho Chi Minh City and blew up shortly after take off.

There were no survivors.

I arrived safely in Australia, into the arms of my wonderful new family - complete with three older sisters. My Vietnamese mother knew none of this. Four months after she had left me at the babies' home, she returned with my grandmother to collect me.

When she arrived, the place was deserted. I had disappeared without a trace. My mother told me she fainted on the footpath that day.

My natural father never knew what happened to me.

He survived the war but was put into a brutal re-education camp where he died in 1979 of an illness he contracted while imprisoned.

My two half brothers, however, are alive and well! I met them at my mother's home that evening.

My mother had told them they had a sister, but she died.

They never expected me to walk into their lives!

Together with my Australian sisters, I have quite a family - not to mention the two aunts, three nephews and countless cousins.

In the blink of an eye, I have inherited a huge extended family and everyone has welcomed me in true Vietnamese style.

The search for my identity is over. I feel complete. I have wondered for years about my background, and have not always been entirely comfortable being the odd one out whilst growing up in Australia. Now, I am incredibly proud of my country and my ancestors. I am completely at peace with myself and my dual identity. It has been a miraculous homecoming.

My next challenge: learn the language. My mother and I have a lot of catching up to do.

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