

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: Kim-Anh Nguyen

LSS 1122 (26:16)

FIRST AIR DATE: 7/24/2018

I always to leave the door open and have choices. So, that's why I got my MD, but also my PhD. And so, my first job was half research, half working as medical director of the Blood Bank. And after a year or two, my boss had a heart-to-heart talk with me, and she said: Kim-Anh, your eyes light up when you work in the Blood Bank; maybe that's where you need to ... spend your life, is to follow your heart. And that was the hardest decision that I ever made, to close my research lab and follow my heart. And I've never looked back. And here I am, running the Blood Bank of Hawai'i.

Ever since she was a teenager, Kim-Anh Nguyen wanted to make medical research her career. Her parents told her they didn't want her to become a kooky, nerdy scientist, but she became a scientist anyway. And then, her heart took her down a different path. Kim-Anh Nguyen, next, on Long Story Short.

One-on-one engaging conversations with some of Hawai'i's most intriguing people: Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.

Aloha mai kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Dr. Kim-Anh Nguyen moved to Hawai'i in 2013 to accept the position of chief executive officer of the Blood Bank of Hawai'i. It was the job, not the culture, that attracted her to Hawai'i, because she'd become accustomed to fitting in where she was. When she was seven, her family was airlifted from Vietnam as the war ended. Their new home turned out to be New Jersey. And the name of her English language teacher? PBS children's programming.

I was actually born in what's now Ho Cho Minh City. Back then, it was Saigon, South Vietnam. And I lived in a suburb until seven years old, 'til 1975. And it was a normal childhood. We had an outhouse. We did not have indoor plumbing. And we had a real honest-to-goodness icebox. I would go down the street and pick up a block of ice, and put it our icebox, and that was our refrigerator.

Voila; icebox.

That's right.

You mentioned it was a calm suburb. So, no signs of war raging around you? I mean, that was the time.

So, that was the beauty. Until the day I left Vietnam, Leslie, I never saw a gun. And my father had been in the military and had been drafted, my cousins were in the military. But for me, it was just life as normal, and I never saw any violence. Not 'til the end.

How fortunate. And in the end, you mentioned you left at seven. That was under duress.

So, we were one of the families that were airlifted out in a helicopter. We were so fortunate. My mother was a secretary for an American company, and after they evacuated their American staff, a few of them were able to sponsor local staff. And so, my parents heard one day: Take a small suitcase, take your immediate family, show up at the airport with a little bit of money, and that's it. And then, next day, we knew, we left everybody, we left everything, and we all stood out on the tarmac. And a big helicopter came down, we piled in, and that's how we left Vietnam.

Was it one of those scenes that we have seen in the old footage, where people were trying to get in and get up into the chopper?

Fortunately, Leslie, we weren't that last cohort out. But people were clamoring. And so, that was the first time I ever saw a gun, and it was a man who pulled out a gun to keep the peace and quiet. And it was scary. We all huddled on the tarmac, and then the big, loud helicopter came. And it was a cargo helicopter, and we all piled into the cargo bay. And off it went.

So, you couldn't tell family members outside your immediate family that you were leaving forever?

No.

That must have been really hard.

I remember my last thought before getting on the helicopter, not about my family, not about Vietnam, but that I was sad that I would never see my grandparents again.

So, they left without knowing. They weren't told: We have to steal out in the middle of this.

They knew.

They knew.

And they knew also that most likely that this was it. And it was.

And they knew they couldn't go?

They couldn't go.

But they were glad to see you have a chance to go.

They wanted the best for us, but they knew that they couldn't go. And so, that was the bittersweet part, Leslie.

Did they survive?

So, they did. And they lived a long life, but I will say it was a very, very hard ten years after the fall of Saigon. Very hard times.

Mm; that must have been hard. Meanwhile, you're in a new country, learning a language, and have your own challenges.

That's right. So, to continue the story, that helicopter touched base in the middle of the Pacific on an aircraft carrier, which landed in Guam. So, we actually lived in Guam for a little bit, and then we eventually ended up on the mainland, made our way in tent cities, aircraft hangars. And we were the first cohort in the refugee camp at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. And that was a beautiful time for us. We actually lived in the barracks with hundreds of other refugee families.

That was beautiful?

Yes, because it was a permanent dwelling. For the first time, it wasn't an aircraft hangar, or a tent. And so, each family was separated in the barracks by a blanket that was hung from the ceiling. And we made friendships there that survive to this day.

Wow.

Yeah.

Eventually, you were relocated?

That's right. So, after about three months, we were sponsored by my mother's company, and we ended up in a town called Fair Lawn, New Jersey. And I remember we landed at the Holiday Inn on a Friday, and on Monday, my mother reported for work. And it was just before the American Bicentennial. Pretty amazing.

Pretty amazing.

Looking back.

And could you speak English at all?

I spoke no English; zero. My father spoke no English, and my mother had a rudimentary knowledge of English. That's it.

And how were you received by the folks of New Jersey?

You know, looking back, Leslie—and this is one of my life lessons. The American people welcomed us with open arms.

No prejudice?

Oh, you know, we had the prejudice and, you know, the little taunts from kids. But the most important thing is, we had a lot of help. And so, what I've learned from that is, success is part individual effort, but a lot of it is systems.

Well, your mother's company deserves a big—I mean, kudos to them.

That's right.

Took you out of the country, and then gave your mom an immediate job.

They were so good to us. They helped us find a house. And you know what they got out of it, Leslie, was they got two employees that worked there their whole lives. And advanced within the company.

Who's the other employee?

My father.

Oh, he joined as well.

That's right. He ended up working in building maintenance, which was what we called facilities at the time. And he worked there for over twenty years. My mom retired there. She started as a secretary, went back to school, and ended up in the accounting department.

How did you learn English?

I learned English through PBS, believe it or not.

Did you?

I learned English watching Sesame Street, The Electric Company, and Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood.

Oh, that's wonderful.

True story; true story.

And that got you what you needed? You got enough English from that to build on?

TV can be amazing. I was a latchkey kid. And so, I watched hours, and hours, and hours of good old fashioned TV.

Wow. You had good taste. You went for PBS.

I did.

And how was it in school? I mean, it's hard enough to progress, you know, in learning if you're language-challenged in the beginning.

So, I was very fortunate in that I was seven, which is around the age for critical language. So yes, I didn't know any English, and so, I started taking remedial classes. But my teachers were very good to me, and uh, I learned very quickly. Like again, TV and Sesame Street helped a lot.

So, did you become a Jersey girl?

I did. I grew up in Bergen County, New Jersey, so Fair Lawn. So, when I'm stressed out, sometimes I say: Come with me to Fair Lawn, hot dawg.

My mother has a part-Vietnamese, part-Jersey accent. So, I cringe. Her voicemails: Hi, it's your mom, cawl me.

That's so funny. And actually, she's originally from North Vietnam.

That's right.

So, the accent is probably even more different.

Funkier. That's right; that's right. So, when I speak Vietnamese, I actually speak with a northern accent, a pronounced northern accent. But I grew up in the south.

How long did you stay in New Jersey? That was where you spent your entire childhood?

I did. We spent our entire childhood there. My mom still lives in the house that I grew up in. My sister lives in New Jersey. And I'm the one that's gone far, far away.

You know, whenever you've had something sad happen, and you find yourself in a better place at that time, you've still left your home.

That's right.

You still left a place that you meant to stay. I mean, how do you feel about the loss of that county for you, your nation?

It's there. It definitely is there. I've learned so much from it, but there are tradeoffs. So, for instance, very fortunately, the town in New Jersey where I grew up, there were no darkies, as I call it. We were one of the few minority families. So, the good news is, I don't speak with a Vietnamese accent, very assimilated. The tradeoff is, you know, my Vietnamese is not that good. And even today, I have very loving, but remote relationships with my family. And so, it really is bittersweet. There is some loss, but so much more gain.

Did anybody begrudge you jumping at liberty?

You know, I'm gonna be honest, Leslie. There's a bit of survivor's guilt among some of us that left for better lives. Among families, there is sometimes hard feelings. For the most part, I think that's water under the bridge, and most families have reunited, and obviously, we love each other. But yes, there were some hard feelings. There were some hard feelings, jealousies, misunderstandings.

And there were some Vietnamese who left and resettled in America who didn't have as much success as you did. They struggled here.

Again, this is where ... I want to reiterate how much welfare, religious groups, programs, support systems really matter. They really do. And so, not everybody had that support network, that safety network. Some of it was individual effort, but a lot of it was luck and the assistance and the altruism of others.

By the time Kim-Anh Nguyen finished high school, she had decided that she'd become a scientist. She credits those who helped her along the way to achieve her dream, but at the heart of it was her own passionate curiosity and determination.

You went to Ivy League universities. BA, MD, PhD, very impressive; Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania. Wow; okay. How did all that happen? I imagine you were really quick in science, math.

You know, again, I think it's a combination of my own gumption, if you will. If I were to describe myself, Leslie, I would say that my intelligence is average.

I doubt it.

Average. I don't have a lot of talent, I'm not a great artist or an athlete. I think I have curiosity and gumption, so that's number one. Number two, though, and I think just as important, I had so much help and support. I had the best teachers who believed in me, and said: Kid, you know, you can do it if you want to. I had scholarship programs that were made available. So, it truly was a combination of individual effort, but systems to help support that individual.

Once you into one of those systems—and Harvard is good example, I mean it's a tough place to be. It's very competitive, and you know, there's a lot of undercurrents there. How did you handle that?

Well, you'll laugh. But freshman year, I lived with three or four other women. And four out of the five of us got a letter that said: You are in danger of failing at least one class. Can you imagine? So, yes, it was a tough place, and it was a real wakeup call. But we all woke up, and we realized that it's not just hard work, but also learning the system, and learning ourselves. And all four of us that got that letter turned it around and have since done very well.

Did you know what you wanted to do when you started college?

I did know that I wanted to become a scientist, and just learn how the human body worked.

'Cause you said you're curious.

That's right.

And it was about how the human body worked.

Absolutely. And so, I always wanted to be a scientist. But sadly, my parents were quite dismayed, because they did not want me, a girl, to become a quirky, kooky scientist, as they called it. And so, they were hoping against hope that I would change my mind. Never did, though.

You wanted to be a researcher to begin with, didn't you?

I did. I did, and I had some wonderful mentors. And I actually did get my PhD and started my career as a researcher.

Then, what happened?

Well, you know, I think I followed my heart. My first job was half research, half working as medical director of the Blood Bank. And you know, I spent more of my time doing the Blood Bank medical director job than my research job.

Where was this?

This was at the Blood Bank in San Francisco. And after a year or two, my boss had a heart-to-heart talk with me, and she said: Kim-Anh, your eyes light up when you work in the Blood Bank; maybe that's where you need to ... spend your life, is to follow your heart. And that was the hardest decision that I ever made, to close my research lab and follow my heart. And I've never looked back. And here I am, running the Blood Bank of Hawaii.

I don't know anyone who grows up saying: I'd like to run a blood bank. But I can see how fulfilling it is to do so.

You know, one of the best decisions I ever made in my career, Leslie, was to come work at the Blood Bank of Hawai'i.

Did you answer an ad for that?

I was actually fortunate to be recruited to work here. I had never been to Hawaii before interviewing for this job.

And that was five years ago?

Five years. Here I am, five years later, I'm raising my family here. And I see firsthand how this community supports its blood program. And I am thrilled to work here. It's a fantastic opportunity.

What did you experience as you moved here for the first time, took a job here? You never lived in a state where there were—I mean, you said there weren't many Asians where you grew up.

I think people who live in Hawai'i sometimes may not know how lucky we are here. Because as I look around, there are people who look like me. Not just around, but

policewomen and men look like me, the mail delivery person looks like me. That's not true everywhere. And so, I think Hawaii is a special place. It really, really is. We grow and live together, and we understand diversity.

Had you missed that, or did you not have it so you didn't miss it?

I felt it keenly, Leslie, coming from Vietnam to New Jersey.

And that was double, because you were—

That's right.

--an immigrant.

That's right. And you know, I took it in stride, 'cause what choice do you have. But coming to Hawaii, and seeing how we all for the most part are able to live together, what we have here is special.

What was it about the Blood Bank that got you going?

So, the beautiful thing about working in a blood bank is that I can use the medicine that I learned, that I got trained in, but it's also a community resource, it's a mom and pop small business, and it's also a nonprofit. And so, all of that combined, I think, makes the Blood Bank work fascinating.

And you save lives.

At the end of the day, I come in to work to save lives.

That sounds like a very fulfilling mission.

It is. And what we do is, we connect donors in the community to patients in the community. So, it's a full circle. Hawaii depends on two hundred people every day, rolling up their sleeve. The blood supply is precious, and is perishable and fragile.

What's the most rare type?

So, Hawaii, actually the Blood Bank of Hawai'i has the nation's largest repository, largest repository of a very, very rare type called Jk3. And it's more commonly seen in Polynesians. So, most people don't realize that we are getting asked for this very, very precious rare blood from the mainland all the time. And if something were to happen to Blood Bank of Hawaii, the nation would lose this very, very rare blood type.

And do you ever use it up here? Is it really in short supply here?

All the time. All the time. And so, we're very fortunate to have a small group of donors, and we're always screening the population to look for that next donor.

Are there are cultures here, since we have so many, that have different views about blood gifts?

Absolutely. So, there are certain myths that are more predominant in certain ethnicities or cultures. And one of them is my own culture, Vietnamese and Chinese. Many of my people believe that we're born with a finite amount of blood in our bodies—that's not true, and that if we donate blood or even give a blood sample, that that's one less pint of blood I have. Fortunately, that's not true; our body is constantly renewing that. But it takes real education to overcome that myth.

So, do you have a smaller percentage of Vietnamese and Chinese givers?

So, you know, the beautiful thing about Hawai'i is, our donor population much more mirrors our patient population. But you're right; we have an opportunity to grow our minority donors. We do not pay our blood donors. And most people think it's because we're trying to save money, we're a nonprofit. That's not the reason. It's safety. People who donate out of the goodness of their hearts are a different profile than people who donate for money. And so, we do not pay our blood donors, for the safety of the blood supply. So, the cost of the blood bags, the staffing, all of the testing that we do, we put that cost onto the hospitals, and we charge a processing fee. But we are nonprofit, so just a tiny little margin goes into improving our program.

I look at what you started out to do, and what you're doing now, and it's just incredibly different from what you started out to do, even when you said: I'll be the medical director of the San Francisco blood bank.

Well, when I was a kid, I always pretended that I was, you know, a guest star on the Donny and Marie Show, believe it or not. And I look back at that, and some of the hobbies that I have. I guess in a way, it's prepared me to be out there; out there in the front, and connecting with people. And yes, I'm a nerd, but I love connecting with people.

I don't know how many nerds are really good ballroom dancers, which you are.

Oh ...

How did that happen? You're a ballroom dancer.

You've guessed my secret. That's actually a real passion and joy of mine, is ballroom dancing. I did not go into it, believe or not, with the approval of Mom and Dad. They really did not support my having one man in my arms one minute, and another man another minute.

Were you in high school when you started?

I started in college. And I caught the bug, and it's fun. I love music. It's fun, it's social, awesome exercise, and it's a way to express myself. Because different songs call for a different character, and it's a different part of command that comes out. So, in a way, that is my job now.

I saw you in a—I don't know if it was YouTube.

Oh, my gosh.

It was a video with your husband.

Oh, my gosh.

Dancing at the Blood Bank.

I owed my husband a lot of honey-do's for that one. I think that just goes to show I'll do anything for Blood Bank of Hawai'i.

At the time of our conversation in the spring of 2018, anything included leading a capital campaign to raise money to build a new facility for the Blood Bank of Hawai'i, which was displaced by the Honolulu rail transit route. Mahalo to Vietnam born, New Jersey raised, Hawai'i resident Dr. Kim-Anh Nguyen of Honolulu for sharing your life stories with us. And mahalo to you, for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

For audio and written transcripts of all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit PBSHawaii.org. To download free podcasts of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, go to the Apple iTunes Store or visit PBSHawaii.org.

[END]