

August 2003. I spent two weeks with six other Vietnamese students in Thousand Oaks, California. We are exchange students. We had never been to the States, or even abroad, before. We had never been away from our family before. We had never communicated in a second language before. We were a group of scared, inexperienced, timid kids. Each of us stayed with an American host family. Together we visited many places in California. Two weeks was too insignificant a time period in one's life, yet it meant something to me. Actually it meant a lot to me. It probably even changed my life.

I can still remember that evening, in the departure meeting. The party took place in the classroom where we had English lessons everyday. All host families and their students were present. Each student had to make a speech of at least four-minute long about two places that we had visited during our time there. I was the last one. All of my friends did fine, they had all prepared a piece of paper to read from. I had not. But I had to speak anyway. I was walking up to the place where Sandra – our teacher – usually stood teaching. Everybody was looking at me attentively. I avoided looking at anyone. I was too nervous. I walked slowly, trying to keep my heart from jumping out of my chest. I stopped, took a deep breath, and started:

“Hi everyone! First, I'd like to introduce myself. My name is Son, I'm sixteen years old.” – I noticed that my voice sounded unusual – “Second, ...umm, I think I need some water...” I went to the food table and got myself a glass of water. Everybody was laughing. I was relieved to see how my clumsy words had spurred a laugh and turned into a successful joke that everybody enjoyed. Getting another glass of water, I slowly walked back. “I'm good now... So, I'm the last student to speak, and probably will be the least.” They looked at me for a second, and burst into laugh again.

“As you can see, I have no paper...”

“Sandra wanted each of us to have a four-minute speech, hmm, I think it’s been one minute now.”

I was still keeping my face straight while people were laughing, maybe for more than half a minute.

“I’m going to talk about our trip to the Universal City and the Getty Center. In the Universal City, I can remember running around and taking a lot of pictures. We went into every store, looked at everything, but bought nothing... Honestly, I didn’t like that place much, it’s too commercial, and apparently not suited to my finance...”

“Then the Getty Center. I liked this place better, more things to see and less to buy... We saw some beautiful paintings. There was one that everybody looked at and took picture of. It must be famous. I looked at it and found it hard to understand. I thought maybe that’s why it’s famous. I took its picture anyway, hoping I’ll figure it out someday...”

“At Getty Center we found a place from where we could see the whole city of Los Angeles. It was beautiful. But there’s another place much more beautiful for me, right here, in Thousand Oaks. The trees, the hills that go up and down, everything. Above all, here I feel just like home, because I have a family, Judy C. and Sky.” – I looked at my host family – “There’s not enough words to express how grateful I am. Thank you for everything you’ve done for me. Thank you for being my family.”

I received a hug from my host mother and my handicapped host brother. Two weeks before that memorable evening, I would have been scared to death if I had to speak English in front of a crowd of strangers from another country. I was shy and timid. Vietnamese children are not brought up to make great speeches. I didn’t feel comfortable

being with strangers. I enjoyed my own company, safe under my parents' protective home. I was afraid to voice my opinion with other people, even in the classroom. I didn't want to reveal myself. But soon I realized it was time for a change, maybe many changes. If I don't try to make my qualities known, nobody would care to discover them. I felt the urge to see new things, to experience the world, to strive for success despite myself. It was like the feeling of an adventurer longing for a journey, seeking challenges. At that time, I knew that becoming an exchange student will make the journey I dreamt of come true. I have traveled half the earth to get to the U.S., but more importantly, I have come a long way within myself.

So it was the two weeks that have transformed me. After that departure meeting, I was amazed at the different person I have become. My values, my perspectives will remain the same, but how I convey them will be different. I discovered that I actually had some sense of humor. I have showed myself to others, seen my image in others' eyes. They are neither my parents, nor my sister, nor my close friends, but strangers from another country. We speak different languages, come from different cultures. But I told myself the only thing I need to do is open my heart.

My journey has just begun; this is the moment I truly step into life. A whole new world is opening up before me; it may be bitter, may be sweet. My parents have many times warned me of the consequences if I fail to achieve my college dream. I thought: "Failure, I definitely don't want it. But..." – I smiled – "... I don't know yet how it tastes."