



Refugee advocate with criminal past changes life, helps others

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Nghiep Ke Lam remembers when he learned that “violence is okay.” He was around 8 or 9 years old and was living in San Francisco, California. He still often thinks of the moment when six bullies surrounded him and told him, “You have two choices.” The first choice was to fight with one of them; the second choice was to be beaten up.

Lam pointed out one kid and said, “I’m going to fight with him.” They fought until the kid cried, “No more, no more.” The bullies approached him. Lam thought that they were going to rough him up. Instead, they praised him: “Good job, good job!” He was confused at first. Yet he remembers that day as the point at which violence began to seem normal to him. As a teenager, he joined a gang, killed someone at the age of 17, and was imprisoned for 23 years.

Lam, now 41, currently works as a reentry coordinator at the Asian Prisoner Support Committee, a nonprofit organization based in Oakland, helping other former prisoners adjust to their new lives after they are released. The number of Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders who were arrested or charged with criminal offenses increased 53 percent between [2007](https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2007) (<https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2007>) and [2016](https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2016/crime-in-the-u.s.-2016/topic-pages/tables/table-21) (<https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2016/crime-in-the-u.s.-2016/topic-pages/tables/table-21>), according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. During the same period, the population of Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States increased 33 percent, according to the Census Bureau. “This job for me is not actually a job. It’s part of my life,” Lam said. “It’s part of my way of making right, the wrong that I’ve committed in my life.”

Yet even as he helps other former prisoners restore stability to their lives, Lam’s own life remains unsettled. Lam became a legal permanent resident after he came to the United States as a refugee from Vietnam in 1980. However, he’s now a “stranded deportee,” because he lost his resident status after committing a felony. Yet for legal reasons, he can’t be sent back to Vietnam, a country he doesn’t know. “I’m just stranded,” he said. “I’m stuck in the middle right now.”

Lam was born in Vietnam in 1976. He fled with his family by boat in 1978. They were rescued by fishermen, who first robbed them of everything they had. The family spent two years in a detention center in Hong Kong before arriving in Sunnyvale, California, as refugees.

Many Vietnamese refugees who live in the United States suffer from trauma associated with war, escape, and resettlement. A [study](https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/BF02599987.pdf) (<https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/BF02599987.pdf>) of Vietnamese refugees who

visited primary care clinics in the early 1980s found that more than 60 percent reported difficulty concentrating and sadness. “For the refugee community, their situation is very unique in that they came to the United States already very traumatized. Their parents had to witness a lot of wars and mass genocide,” said Katrina Dizon Mariategue, the immigration policy manager at the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center. “Oftentimes, the trauma is passed down to the children as well.”

Lam said his mother had witnessed her parents being murdered by the Communist Party in Vietnam, and lost everything that she had while fleeing the country. His parents separated when he was about five years old and he grew up with his mom.

Lam grew up in a poor part of Potrero Hill in San Francisco. He was the only Asian kid in his predominantly African-American neighborhood. He couldn't speak English. His clothing and haircut were different. “Growing up there, that was my first time that I dealt with a lot of racism,” he said. “They mocked me, laughed at me, threw rotten eggs at me, pushed me, and also attacked me with their dogs.”

About 25 percent of children of refugees in the U.S. live in families whose income is below the [federal poverty level](https://www.healthcare.gov/glossary/federal-poverty-level-FPL/) (<https://www.healthcare.gov/glossary/federal-poverty-level-FPL/>), according to a recent [report](https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/young-children-refugees-united-states-integration-successes-and-challenges) (<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/young-children-refugees-united-states-integration-successes-and-challenges>) by the Migration Policy Institute. Many also face a language barrier: 31 percent live in “linguistically isolated households,” where no one older than 14 speaks English well. At the same time, many Asian-Americans must confront the “model minority” myth, which focuses on their educational and financial success. “In the process, I think people don't necessarily talk about all the challenges and all the hardships that they have to encounter as individuals, as families, and as a community,” said Eddy Zheng, the codirector of the Asian Prisoner Support Committee. “Through the false understanding from the mainstream, they think that those are the people represents all of Asian Americans, not necessarily understanding the trauma of war, that impact to many of the refugee population.”

Lam's mom worked at a nail salon. She used to come home at 2 a.m., and would leave two hours later. Lam and his little brother would be left with an elderly babysitter. When he was 8 years old, Lam remembers seeing his baby brother was crying alone in the living room while the babysitter was watching TV. He decided to take care of his brother by himself, and stopped going to school. “I became a parent of my little brother,” he said. “I raised him for almost a whole year by myself.”

Lam went back to school after his mom found out that he had been cutting class. But he was soon transferred to another school because he caused trouble. “I fought with other kids because of the language barrier,” he said. “I get frustrated, they get frustrated, we fight.” Kids bullied him with taunts like “go back to your country” or “that's not American.” He started bullying other kids because he didn't want to be bullied anymore.

There were some good moments, though. Lam won a city track and field championship in 7th grade. He became an honor student and was accepted to a high school with a good reputation. But his mom didn't allow him to go there because it was too far across town.

Many refugee kids do not get a high school education. Nearly one third of refugees who arrived in the United States in the 1980s did not get a high school diploma, according to the [Migration Policy Institute](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0ahUKEwi888jP8ajXAhVB9mMKHeN6BaEQFgg) (<https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0ahUKEwi888jP8ajXAhVB9mMKHeN6BaEQFgg>)

FINALWEB.pdf&usg=AOvVaw1HhN z9yNCc6). Lam began to feel like no one cared about him. “This is like, ‘You don’t care about me? Why should I care about my future?’” he said. He started to think about suicide.

The “‘school to prison pipeline’ really starts in the home,” said Zitsue Lee, the Asian Prisoner Support Committee’s ambassador to Oakland’s Chinatown. “Parents, they work all the time, just to provide for their children,” continued Lee, whose family fled Vietnam a year before he was born. “In doing so, parents tend to neglect children because they are constantly working, trying to provide.” Lee said his father was always busy working, and his mother barely spoke English. He grew up feeling like he never fit in. He was imprisoned for 23 years after committing a gang-related felony at the age of 16.

Lam first encountered gangs when his family moved to Richmond when he was 15. The kids in his neighborhood protected themselves by joining gangs. Lam started spending time with an Asian-American gang, but wasn’t really an official member. Yet rival gangs started to see at him as an enemy. “I didn’t know by hanging out with them that I’m part of the gang,” he said. “This was a thing called ‘guilty by association.’”

After getting picked on and harassed, Lam joined the gang at age 16 and started to fight back. He wanted to be strong. He wanted to be tough. He slowly stopped going to school. “In the gang’s lifestyle, it is either you beat them up first, or they get you later,” Lam recalled. “So it’s better for you to get them first than for them to get you first.” He started carrying weapons like a chain, a belt and a baseball bat.

Lam said didn’t feel attached to the gang, but it made him feel safe. Also, the gang members had similar backgrounds: They were refugees and their families had the same problems as his. He felt that he was not alone. “Without the resources and knowledge to address the trauma, these [refugee] children become more vulnerable to be influenced by outside factors” like gangs, according to Mariategue. “They often try to look for camaraderie in other individuals that look like them, which is oftentimes some of the reason why they end up being attached to gangs that they see in their neighborhoods.”

One day, when he was 17, Lam got a call from a friend who said there was a rival Latino gang in Richmond. Lam went there, taking a knife for protection. The gangs argued with each other until the police broke up the brawl. On his way back home, Lam saw two kids who belonged to the rival gang. He chased them and stabbed one of them. He was arrested and taken to juvenile hall. After he turned 18 in 1994, he was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to 27 years to life in an adult prison.

Lam spent time in several state prisons, including Calipatria, Solano, and San Quentin. When Lam was in San Quentin in 2003, some older lifers asked him whether he not only wanted to go home, but *stay* at home. At first, he didn’t know what they meant. All of the prisoners Lam met wanted to go home. But many of those who were released would soon be back behind bars after committing another crime.

The lifers suggested that Lam sign up for a program they ran called the “healing circle.” There, he saw inmates sharing their problems with each other. While he listened to other people’s stories, he realized that their lives had been like his. “We understood the struggle for each other, we were

always there for each other,” he said.

At the time that he’d killed someone, Lam didn’t know who his victim was and he didn’t care about the consequences. He spent many years denying his past and blaming other people. Yet as he opened up to share his story with other prisoners, Lam realized why he committed his crime. “It helped me to understand all the way I was thinking, and the way I was growing was wrong,” Lam said. “Not only it was wrong, it was harmful to other people and also to myself.” The realization gave him the power to change himself. He believed that he could be a better person.

The Asian Prisoner Support Committee works primarily with inmates at San Quentin and Solano state prisons and people who have been released from prisons. Lam was connected to the organization while he was in San Quentin. He joined the organization’s Restoring Our Original True Selves (ROOTS) program, an ethnic studies course that builds support networks for people who are about to be released from prison. He was released on parole in April, 2016. He started volunteering at the Asian Prisoner Support Committee and in January, the organization hired him as its reentry coordinator.

Any noncitizen who’s convicted of a felony may be deported from the United States under the Immigration and Nationality Act (<https://www.uscis.gov/ilink/docView/SLB/HTML/SLB/O-O-0-1/O-O-0-0-29/O-O-0-5684.html>). Lam has seen many refugees who committed crimes when they were young and were then deported back to their countries of origin after they finished their prison sentences. More than 138,000 noncitizens who had been previously convicted of a crime were removed by in the 2016 fiscal year, according to Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Lam, who did not become an American citizen as a child, has lost his status as a legal permanent resident because he committed a felony. Likewise, he cannot become a citizen because noncitizens who have committed an aggravated felony do not meet the standard for “good moral character,” one of the requirements for naturalization, according to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (<https://www.uscis.gov/policymanual/HTML/PolicyManual-Volume12-PartF-Chapter4.html>).

In theory, Lam could be returned to Vietnam. Yet he has not been deported because of a 2008 agreement (<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/194771.pdf>) between the United States and Vietnam, which states that Vietnamese citizens who arrived in the U.S. before July 1995 cannot be sent back to Vietnam. At the time the agreement was signed, a spokeswoman for ICE told the *New York Times* that about 8,000 Vietnamese immigrants in the United States were in deportation proceedings or had received orders to be deported. Of those, about 7,000 had criminal convictions, including 4,500 convicted of aggravated felonies. According to a 2015 report (http://www.searac.org/sites/default/files/18877%20A APIs%20Behind%20Bars_web.pdf) by the National Education Association and other organizations, at least 15,000 people in the U.S. who originally came from Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos have received final deportation orders since 1998, despite having refugee status and obtaining green cards.

But Lam said that “right now, the ICE, there’s no distinction.”

“They don’t care if you came before July 1995 or after. They are picking everybody else,” he continued. He said that he is a target, but hopes that the ICE doesn’t pick him up. He calls himself a “stranded deportee.”

These days, Lam works with formerly incarcerated Asian/Pacific Islanders, helping them to start new lives. When they are released from prisons, he meets them and treats them to their first meal on the outside. He guides them as they learn new daily routines such as riding a bus or bicycle. “My job is focused on Asian/Pacific Islanders, but my life is helping every formerly incarcerated person who need help,” Lam said.

Harrison Seuga, the reentry director at the Asian Prisoner Support Committee, said that he and Lam work “24 hours a day, seven days a week,” taking calls anytime from former prisoners who need urgent help. Seuga said that their strategy is “to immerse people coming out of prison into the community” by taking them to volunteer and participate in activities. It’s easy for former prisoners to commit crimes “when they cannot form empathy with other people,” Seuga said. “When you live in isolation, how can you care about another human being?”

Lam said that former prisoners have value to the community, because they can help young people who are facing the same challenges they did. Young kids “need people that lived, that been [through] the same experience to really relate to them,” he said.

“Everyone has done something bad and end up in prison, but not everyone stays in the same person,” Lee said. “People change and they grow, and not enough people see that.”

Lam said that helping formerly incarcerated people is not just his job: “It’s my mission to help people to be successful once they come home.”

One Comment

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January 9, 2018 at 1:07 pm

What an inspiring life-story. Bravo Lam, I admire your work. I can’t imagine the challenges you had to endure. At the end of the day we see many who become amazing contributors to their communities. We would love to hear more about your work and the difference you made in people’s lives. Thank you !!