

STORIES OF CHANGE

My story



The Vanguard Series

The Vanguard Series: Paving innovative ways to combat trafficking and unsafe migration

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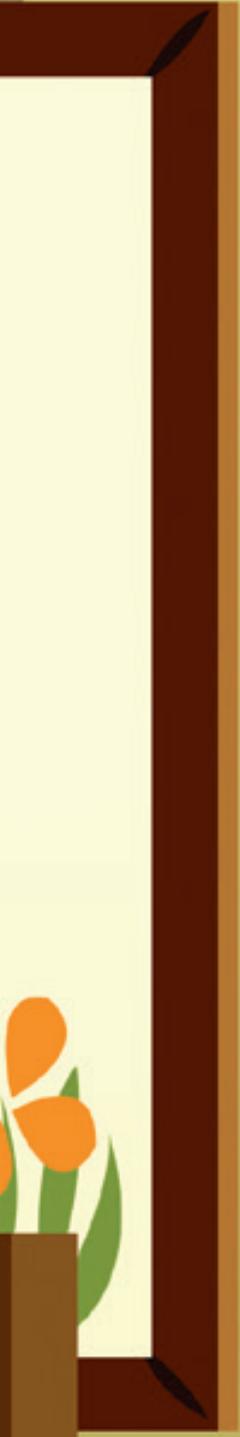
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My name is Mai. I live in Vietnam. A year ago, I would never have told this story to anyone. I was too ashamed, too worried what people might think. But I don't feel like that anymore. Now I want to tell my story.





One of my earliest memories is of my mother saying sorry to me. I never understood why she – not my father – was always saying sorry. After all, it was my father who would come home in a drunken rage and beat my mother. As a result, she was often not well enough to go out and work. And this is why she would apologize to me. She was sorry because she couldn't earn money for my education.





Early one morning, after a very bad night between my parents, my father lay snoring in his chair while my mother struggled to sit up in her bed. As usual, I saw the tears welling up as she watched me preparing her breakfast.

‘I’m so sorry, Mai – ’, she started to say.

But I stopped her: ‘No, Mother,’ I whispered, so as not to wake my father: ‘You have no reason to be sorry. I don’t want you to be sorry anymore. Please don’t worry – everything is going to be fine.’

To be honest, I wasn’t exactly sure how I was going to make everything fine. But I knew that if I could earn some money that would be a good start.







Later that day, I visited my friend, Diep, who was also interested in making some money. We discussed some ideas and came up with a plan. With the little money we had between us, we bought fruit from a farmer and set up a market stall near the Dong Ha Bridge. Every time a bus stopped, we held up our baskets and sold fruit to the passengers. It was hard work and, with competition from other sellers, we did not make much money. But we were determined to keep trying.



An illustration of a hand with a yellow skin tone, wearing a blue sleeve, pointing upwards with the index finger. The hand is positioned on the left side of the page.

As the days passed, we became friendly with a Chinese boy named Shen. He told us stories about working in China. He laughed at the amount of money we made selling our fruit and said we could make much more if we worked in China. Then one day, he told us that his uncle who owned a club in China was looking for waitresses. He said the salaries were really good and that the waitresses also received excellent tips.

'You could easily earn 10 times what you are making selling fruit,' said Shen.





That night, Diep and I chatted about it and decided we should give it a try. I didn't tell my mother because I knew she would worry. The next day, Shen helped us cross the border into China and escorted us to the club. I don't think the owner really was his uncle because Shen left the same day and we never saw him again.

We started off as waitresses but it soon became obvious that the men at the club wanted more than just drinks from us. When we realised we were expected to sleep with these men, we tried to leave. The owner beat us and locked us in separate rooms for days.

Then the men started visiting our rooms, and our lives became a living nightmare. We both tried to escape many times after that, but the punishment we received was so severe that we eventually gave up. This was to be our life for two long years.









One day, a Vietnamese man visited the club and our fortunes changed. He was shocked when we told him our story and agreed to help us escape. We told him there was a side door to the building that was always locked. If he could get that open and wait outside for us, we knew we stood a chance. It was a very scary time for Diep and me as we crept down the stairs to the side door. We prayed no one would see us. We prayed the door would be unlocked.

It was! We rushed out and saw the man waving to us from a taxi. We leapt inside and drove off. We couldn't believe it – we were free!

We were so happy and relieved to get back to our hometown in Vietnam, yet this was not an easy time for us. We knew how people treated victims of trafficking – looking down on them and considering them useless to society. So we didn't dare tell anyone, not even our families, about what had happened. Carrying this awful secret made it difficult for us to feel normal. All I wanted to do was talk to someone about what had happened, but I didn't think anyone would understand.





Months later, we heard that World Vision often helped victims of trafficking, so we decided to visit them. It took a lot of courage, but we were so glad we did. What an amazing feeling it was to be able to tell people our story and not feel like we were being judged.

The people at World Vision encouraged us to participate in a life-skills training course, which has been a great help to Diep and me. We no longer feel weighed down by that terrible secret, and our confidence has increased.







World Vision recently invited us to a survivor's camp that was attended by other victims of trafficking who had been through similar experiences. At the camp we were encouraged to share our stories. At first, it was a little scary, and both Diep and I stayed quiet for a long time. By the second day, we had heard many stories that were similar to ours, and we slowly began to tell our stories as well. I cannot explain how much better we felt after talking to people who understood what we had been through. Diep and I both agree that telling our stories helped us heal more than anything else.





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