

Rim of the New World Weight of a Family's Hopes Parents' Dream Leaves Little Room for Being Average American Teen

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ATLANTA -- Orchid delicate and tottering around on cork platforms, Amy Nguyen carries a green backpack that could flatten a pack mule. It's loaded with textbooks, backup reading glasses, a calculator, binders; all the gear needed for a well-planned ascent. Amy's parents expect her to become a doctor.



Amy Nguyen's Vietnamese family has had her life planned for as long as Amy can remember: college, medical school, physician's residency and then marriage. (Photo: Sarah L. Voison/The Washington Post)

Her mom works in a Vietnamese nail shop, giving \$18 pedicures and dumping dirty footbath water while customers leaf through Cooking Light magazine. Her dad fixes car windshields for a living. All hopes are riding on their 17-year-old daughter.

"People will call you Doctor, not Miss," her father tells her, in Vietnamese.

Amy feels the weight of 10,000 fleeing boats. To add even more pressure, she attends a high school in the new immigrant South where Asians have reset the standards for academic excellence. So she jots down quiz dates in her daytimer and tries to unlock the clues to W.H. Auden. She holds a 3.5 grade point average. Her pencils are sharpened, and her bag of Cheddar Ruffles is taped over to preserve freshness. But the fact remains that in her senior year at Duluth High, she is only in trigonometry and not in calculus.

When Amy imagines America, it's not wearing the white coat of a doctor.

It's an existence where being average would be okay.

There are moments when Amy pulls off the role of American teenager: flying across the sunbaked suburbs of Atlanta, P. Diddy blasting on her MP3 player and a bottle of Victoria's Secret body splash rolling around her Honda.

Then her cell phone rings. "Hien!" her dad says, in his high-pitched warble, using the name he gave her in the shack of a maternity clinic in the Vietnamese village of Tan Phu. Her full name is Bich-Hien, which means something like "innocent jewel."

The innocent jewel lives in a place called Gwinnett County. For decades, the white-flight suburb fenced itself off from the urbanism of Atlanta 15 miles to the southwest, banning mass transit from crossing its borders. Then in the 1990s, 95,000 immigrants arrived, and the white wonderland of Gwinnett County became the rim of the new world.



Amy (right) does homework with a friend as they commute to Georgia State. Amy often wishes she could tell her parents, "Guess what, mom and dad? Maybe I'm not smart enough to be a doctor. (Photo credit: Sarah L. Voison/The Washington Post)

Latinos are 11 percent of the half-million people living here, but it's the 7 percent Asian population that is most audacious: in entrepreneurship, in school performance and in the leap toward the middle class. What was once white suburbia is now a Bladerunneresque topography of strip malls with the bling-bling of Asian cash registers: Shanghai Beef 7 Ways and Indian DVD stores, Vietnamese nail shops and Korean dry cleaners waging their \$1.50 shirt wars.

Against this backdrop, Amy Nguyen's parents believe that anything is possible. Their daughter knows better. And yet she keeps pushing. Midway through her senior year, she pulls into her driveway from school. "I don't want to be an embarrassment to my family," she says.

"You don't understand. White people are two parents and two kids. Asians are like the whole extended family. Something happens, everybody knows."

The Nguyens left Vietnam in 1991 with nothing more than a set of twined-together suitcases. With the help of a Catholic aid organization, they landed in California's Orange County. Amy's mom got a job doing nails, and her dad delivered take-out food on a bike. The Nguyens adopted cheery American names. Huan became Tony, Sau became Lisa and Bich-Hien became Amy. The Nguyens crammed in with relatives, but they were destined to always be renters in California's expensive real estate market. In 1998, Tony Nguyen heard the economy was booming in the Deep South and he went on an exploratory trip, calling home with the amazing news that he bought a split-level house with creamy carpet for \$135,000 in Norcross, Ga.

By working six days a week and splitting the mortgage with relatives who live downstairs, the blue-collar Nguyens can almost touch the middle class.

What remains is the final quest: Amy Nguyen, M.D.

The plan had been explicit for as long as Amy can remember: college, medical school, physician's residency and then marriage. Her parents sprinkle her with cautionary tales, reminding her of her cousin who fell in love during medical school and was two years late becoming a doctor.

By her parents' timetable, Amy should start dating around the age of 26. "Dude, that so sucks," says her best friend, Nadia, a Bangladeshi. Amy downloads sappy ballads about two hearts becoming one and uses them on her voice mail greeting. For now she can only imagine. She is impossibly petite, a size 0 in girlie-girl capri pants that match her purse. She has glossy black hair and teacup skin. Her femininity delights the magnolia brigade of secretaries in the front office at school.

While America is the place that allows Tony Nguyen to launch his family's aspirations, it's also full of dream-killing distractions. Amy's job is to study.

"Isn't she just the *cutest* thing?" the principal's secretary beams one day, as Amy walks by.

In reality, Amy hopes that she's born a boy in the next life. As a girl in this life, she is hardly allowed to do anything. When she asks her father for permission to meet friends at Barnes & Noble or Regal 24 cinemas at night, the answer is always the same.

"*Khong cho*," says Tony Nguyen. No way.

While America is the place that allows Tony Nguyen to launch his family's aspirations, it's also full of dream-killing distractions. Amy's job is to study. But by the end of her senior year -- a year of Saturday nights at home with her parents and Chinese action movies -- the truth begins to glow inside her. *Guess what, Mom and Dad?* she wants to shout. *Maybe I'm not smart enough to be a doctor.*

On a warm May evening, Amy drives alone to First Baptist Church in Duluth, a white-columned brick behemoth that's hosting Duluth High's annual academic awards program. As much as Tony and Lisa Nguyen stress education, they rarely attend school functions. They are always working. Besides, they think Americans celebrate the most modest of accomplishments. Good grades are expected.

Amy arrives at the church, finding a seat in the back next to a friend. She listens as the math and science winners are announced. Asian. Asian. Asian. The succession of Buddhist and Hindu students march up to the altar to claim their honors under a giant wooden cross. Finally near the end of the program, Amy hears her name. Only 11 years earlier, she was eating boiled eggs in a refugee camp in Thailand. Duluth High is full of hard-luck immigrant stories: Mexicans, Vietnamese, Sudanese, they all had their journeys, across the sea or on the floorboards of a car at midnight.

Why, Amy wonders, is so much expected of Asians once they get here?

At the podium, she receives a gold sash for making the honor roll all four years of high school. Not scholarship money to Georgia Tech or recognition for her work in the biology lab, but a gold sash.

Outside, in the church parking lot, she finds her Honda, and tosses the sash on the seat.

Near Amy's school there is an Applebee's restaurant, decorated with local pennants and sports memorabilia to give the feel of an authentic neighborhood tavern. But nostalgia collides with reality. Hanging over one booth is a photo of the 1996-97 Duluth High Wildcat band. Nearly every chin-strapped face is white. Duluth High is now 19 percent Asian.

When Amy started Duluth as a ninth-grader, she had just arrived from Southern California, where half the country's Vietnamese population lived. Georgia was a culture shock. "It was just blah," Amy remembers. At Duluth, the few Vietnamese students there seemed like "FOBs," or fresh-off-the-boats. Amy eventually gravitated toward a middle-class Indian crowd.

"Why do you hang around so many Indians?" asks her ninth-grade brother, Alen, a droll little Viet hipster with a buzz cut.

"Shut up, Alen," Amy says. "Don't be racist."

In 2001, Asians averaged the highest SAT scores at Duluth, 1158 compared with 1091 for whites. Amy's friends are partly responsible. With their blue-black hair, the Indians shimmer, physically and intellectually. Most are in advanced placement and gifted classes. They bemoan Southern life, like the branch of the county public library that has a large selection of Christian books but a lone book on their religion, entitled "Hindu Myths."

Two weeks before graduation, most seniors are starting to coast, but Amy sits in economics class, poised and attentive. The teacher is asking for suggestions on how to gather birth rate information in Third World countries.

"Put beepers on everyone," a student calls out.

"Yeah, like Outback Steakhouse!" says another.

Between classes, the seating chart for graduation is posted in the hall, and Amy scans for her name. Her friend Nadia, wearing a tie-dyed T-shirt that says "SLACKER," races up. "Where are we sitting?" Amy sees her name: second row, honors section. Only a handful of the 449 names on the chart are Latino. "Maybe they got tired," Amy says. "Maybe their English isn't good. Maybe they are not pushing themselves." Amy can't imagine such a scenario for herself. Her dad barely speaks English and has a 10th-grade education, but he made inquiries to relatives in California about the finer points of SAT scores.

In traditional Chinese culture, where Vietnam has its roots, mandarin scholars held the highest status in society. In America, the well-educated also sometimes get the keys to a Lexus.

Amy's parents hardly acknowledged the biggest accomplishment of her senior year. In a social kingdom dominated by whites, Amy made the homecoming court. Her friends recognized the feat as a grand slam for Asians. Her parents? They'd never heard of homecoming.

Amy persuaded her father to escort her. Neither had ever been to a high school football game. Standing on the field under the lights that Friday night with the homecoming court, Amy wore a pink gown. When her name was called, she took her father's arm. It was all too weird for Tony Nguyen. "I am to be your boyfriend?" he asked, nervously.

Homecoming passed, and the focus shifted back to academics, specifically, the SATs. "Do your best," Amy's parents encouraged. Tony would say this with his hands still dirty from fixing windshields. Amy barely cracked 900. Her parents were sad. Though not sad enough to surrender the doctor dream.

Her grandparents arrive from Vietnam for a visit. They wear pajamas all day and nap on the living room couches, getting zonked on Vietnamese kiddie videos that Amy's 18-month-old sister watches. They are dazed by the blankness of the Woodbine Station subdivision, where garage doors inhale and exhale minivans.

Moving from California, Amy's family bypassed the immigrant apartment ghettos off Buford Highway and proudly settled here in the land of identical everything. To pay for it all -- the house, the minivan, the consumer appetites of their three children -- Lisa Nguyen works six days a week in a nail shop. She wears a white lab coat as if she's a highly trained Swedish aesthetician instead of someone who scrubs feet and breathes chemicals 10 hours a day. When she gets home, her lipstick is gone and her shoulders are sagging. She earns \$400 a week. Her nail shop is located in a former Smoothie King.

The number of nail shops in Georgia has tripled in the last 12 years, with most of the state's 6,000 nail techs now Vietnamese. The discount concept has democratized a once-luxury service for consumers, but it chews up people like Lisa Nguyen. At 37, her eyes aren't as keen as they used to be. Lately, she's earning less money because customers prefer the younger nail techs. The Vietnamese women in her shop use names like Kim or Ann or Debbie, but they know only a few key phrases in English.

"What you like, honey?"

"You pick color." The Nguyens want to open their own nail shop, but the Atlanta market is saturated. So they start making overnight scouting trips to South Carolina and North

Carolina, with their Americanized scout Amy riding shotgun. "We have to find where there are more Caucasians, rich ones," Amy says.

Sundays are spent together: Catholic Mass, lunch out and then grocery shopping at the Asian markets on Buford Highway. "Everything is family!" Tony Nguyen says proudly. He insists that Vietnamese be spoken at home and Saturday nights are reserved for a traditional dinner cooked by him.

Sociologists used to think that becoming an instant American -- dropping cultural and ethnic identity -- guaranteed the best pattern of adaptation for an immigrant. Now many believe the opposite is true: Immigrants who keep these ties strengthen the psychological well-being of their children.

But Amy sees America as more than just a staging ground for accomplishment. From the first moment, she had loved everything about this place, especially the unabashed emotions expressed by its inhabitants. People here didn't care if they were caught laughing or crying or kissing. In her culture, life is lived in avoidance of shame.

On the last day of high school, cars honk in the Duluth High parking lot, along with all sorts of other shame-inducing behavior involving bikini tops and shouted obscenities through sunroofs. Amy is supposed to drive straight home. Standing orders. Her parents are at work, dad loosening windshields from their rotten rubber bindings and mom bent over another set of acrylic nails. Amy's friends are driving out to Lake Berkeley in search of a party.

Sometimes, Amy reasons, you just have to go for it.

With the stereo at sonic levels and her friend Nadia in the passenger seat, they are flying out to Lake Berkeley. In the bright May sun, the strip mall scenery of Gwinnett County falls by. "Let me get this straight," Nadia shouts over the music. "I am *not* depressed over losing his sorry butt. I am *over* him." The object of her distress is two cars in front, an Indian classmate bound for New York University.

Nadia can't believe whom she's been paired to walk with at graduation. "I've got a white chick I don't know!"

As they get closer to the lake, the road swoops in and out of shade. Members of the convoy stay linked, as they have since their freshman year. Almost everyone is scattering off to distant colleges. But for one last moment they are bumper to bumper, an improbable Asian caravan buzzing through the Georgia pines.

It turns out they are three days early for the party. They decide to regroup at the Taco Bell in town.

"Nothing is planned," Amy shouts, her hair flying in the wind. "That's what's so cool!" Amy will not be scattering off to a distant college. Her low SAT scores wiped out her chances of attending the University of California -- or the University of Georgia.

She receives an acceptance letter from Georgia State University in downtown Atlanta. The campus is 20 miles from her house. She has never seen it, but she declares her major: biology.

On the morning of her high school graduation, she takes her gold honors sash from its plastic pouch. She is the first in her family to earn a diploma. But as her dad reminds her, there are many steps to go.

She drives alone to the Gwinnett County civic center. She finds her friends, who are draped in enough sashes and pins to look like cadets. When the music starts, they march in pairs into the arena.

Parents lean in with cameras, some with tears streaming, some holding signs that read "We Are So Proud" and others shouting names in joy, but the seniors maintain a quiet majesty, keeping stride, chins up.

The assistant principal is a native Georgian who spent three weeks practicing the pronunciation of the names of graduates. He begins with the honors students.

"Sami Afkhani."

"Natalie Rose Anatu."

"Joseph Bukau Audu."

"Daeyoun Bae."

On and on it goes -- more names, songs and speeches -- until finally the senior class president says, "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we're free at last!" The arena rumbles, and caps slice through the air.

Amy hadn't seen her parents in the audience. Clutching her diploma, she wades into the crowd. Tony Nguyen is standing on top of a chair, looking for his daughter.

"Dad!" Amy says, and Tony climbs down and hugs her. The grandparents, squinty and creased, give her an envelope containing \$50. Lisa Nguyen, who has not had a Saturday off in more than a year, is holding a dozen pink roses.

The Nguyens blaze off to a Vietnamese restaurant on Buford Highway. At a large table, the waiter keeps coming: chrysanthemum tea, hot pots

of catfish soup, okra, rice, dipping sauces and piles of green basil. Delicately, Amy turns over her bowl and says in Vietnamese, "Please eat, grandmother," a sign of respect that allows the meal to begin.

Amy and her mom are together in the kitchen one night. Her mom says she should learn how to cook for when she's married. Amy seizes the moment. "What kind of husband do you see me with?" Amy asks.

"Someone who's good in business," her mom says. "You can't live off happiness."

Amy's father had been so poor in Vietnam that he borrowed his wedding suit. "What about you and dad?" Amy asks. "You didn't have any money."

"Yes," Lisa Nguyen says. "But you are in America." She doesn't know that her daughter has already fallen. He is 18, Vietnamese and Chinese.

Amy spends hours talking to him on her cell phone, which she sleeps with under her pillow. He wants to take her out on a date. She explains that her parents haven't quite adjusted to America. "They want to raise me till I'm old," she tells him.

In the pull between the two worlds, Amy often wonders who she really is. But on a few days, there are no doubts. One Saturday morning she stands in front of her bedroom mirror; hair swept up, light powder on the face, diamond earrings, and most important, a silk *ao dai*, a traditional Vietnamese dress. A neighbor has asked Amy to be a bridesmaid in her wedding.

When Amy arrives at the bride's house, the porch is already strung with a banner that says "Vu Quy," which sort of means "today is the day the daughter of this house is to be married." A white stretch limo rolls up. The groom's party tumbles out, and three tuxedoed men carry silver platters up to the house. A red cloth is draped over a roasted pig. The lawn is full of people. It's 9:30 in the morning in a cul-de-sac in Gwinnett County.

The adviser from the groom's family stands on the front porch and asks the adviser of the bride's family for permission to enter the house. The guests crowd into the living room, where the main decorative touches, displayed like van Goghs, are four large framed college diplomas.

In Vietnamese, one of the advisers prays to the ancestors for blessings on the young couple. The groom is a pharmacist, and the bride is an accountant. Each wedding gift is held high overhead. The adviser makes an announcement, and all the guests start reaching for their wallets. "We are very spiritual," a guest whispers in English to a visitor, "but we are very practical."

Red sticky rice and Krispy Kreme doughnuts are served, and soon everyone sets out for Our Lady of Vietnam Catholic Church for the priest-officiated wedding service.

Music from the choir drifts outside. The limo driver is leaning against a railing on the church steps. Mel McHenry specializes in Vietnamese weddings. He also teaches at a nail academy, which is how he got in with the Viet community. A black man from the South, he spends a lot of time thinking about how a group of immigrants can make the leap from refugee boat to a limousine in 25 years. He lights a cigarette.

"See, we're born with it," McHenry says of Americans. "We're used to flipping a switch. The bulb burns out and we're pissed off. Them? *What* switch?"

McHenry dusts a piece of lint from his tuxedo. "There is no such thing as *my* money," he says. "The money goes to the house. They save that money. You watch the men come out of this church. They're in those \$5 Kmart block shoes. They come trompin' out, can't hardly walk."

Later that night, the reception is held at Happy Valley Seafood Restaurant, a Chinese banquet hall with gold dragons on the red velvety walls. All the Vietnamese wedding receptions are held at Happy Valley because the parents like it. Many of their children would rather be in a hotel ballroom in Buckhead. But it's here on Buford Highway they always come. Amy sits near the entrance, signing in the 370 guests, including her parents.

Happy Valley is jubilant bedlam. Waiters crashing into each other with platters of jellyfish soup and chicken feet. Guests taking to the stage to sing Vietnamese karaoke. Old men clinking Heineken bottles, their hands stamped with tattoos from the reeducation camps.

Amy imagines her own wedding. She turns to the other bridesmaid and says, "I'm gonna have my dad walk me down the aisle."

The tranquility is wrecked a few weeks later when Tony Nguyen opens his daughter's cell phone bill. There are hundreds of calls to one particular number. Tony is so furious that he hurls the cell phone into the dining room wall.

"Now that you have a boyfriend," he tells Amy, "you'll probably only go to college two years."

Georgia State University is an urban campus of 27,000 students a few blocks from the state capitol in downtown Atlanta. No ivy, no gargoyles, no rolling green, but Amy has found a quiet place to study in the chemistry department.

Her hair is newly chic, cut to her shoulders. She's taking four courses in her freshman fall semester. The one class she struggles with is biology. Her dad tells her to stay focused and she'll figure out the mysteries of science.

Amy has given up asking for permission to go out on a date. She doesn't want to disappoint her father. "You can say I have no guts, but I can't do it," she says. "Deep down, I'm traditional." College is only four years. She'll do what she's supposed to do. Live at home. Forgo love. Study hard.

She starts working in a Chinese doctor's office, filing records and translating for the Vietnamese patients. She gets a credit card for Banana Republic. Her parents finally find a nail shop to buy in the Atlanta suburb of Sandy Springs. They name it New Top Nails.

As for Amy Nguyen, M.D., adjustments are being made.

She is thinking of becoming a dentist.