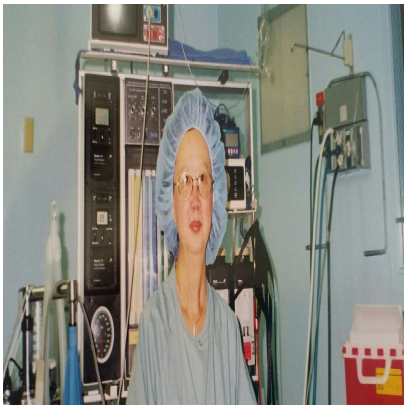


Family separations the price Burma native paid to escape war, reach the U.S. and finish her medical degree

Description

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The hardest decisions Eng Ng ever had to make â?? though they meant family separations â?? turned out to be the right ones for herself and her family, she said.

Four years after she was born, in 1948, Burma shed British rule to become a newly democratic socialist country. Her father and a partner started their own import/export business and operated a small department store. Her mother opened a hair salon with the partnerâ??s wife. Those were happy times.



Eng Ng. (Photos courtesy of Eng Ng.)

But the country became perpetually beset by battles for control among various ethnic groups and communist insurgencies, some supported by China. In 1962, the military took control in a coup, but the factionalism and fighting continued.

â??I remember the racial riots between the Chinese and Burmese with such horrible vividness that even now large crowds scare me,â?• Ng said. Her dadâ??s store was confiscated. He couldnâ??t make a living, so he went to Hong Kong where he had some business connections. â??My momâ??s hair salon was destroyed. She said we had to leave the country.â?•

â??She said we had to leaveâ??

It was 1967 and Ng had just graduated from Rangoon University Medical School, married a fellow graduate and was pregnant with their first child. Her husbandâ??s father and brothers had re-settled in San Francisco six years earlier with help from the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Leaving her family in Burma was her first difficult decision.

She and Thien had both completed their one-year internships at Rangoon General Hospital and hoped to get jobs in the U.S. They went to the American Embassy and took the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates exam. Both passed.

The next year, Ng and her mother-in-law left for the United States, leaving Thien behind until his papers were ready. Since the coupleâ??s hospital internships in Burma were not accepted in the U.S., they had to start over. A Seventh-day Adventist hospital in Tacoma Park, Md., offered them internships.

Ng was pregnant when she left Burma, and gave birth in San Francisco. â??I came here with $75. I didnâ??t have insurance,â??â?? she said. â??My in-laws paid for the hospital.â?•

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Next came Ngâ??s second hardest decision: How to get through what could be grueling medical internships and residencies with a baby to care for? So she left her son Matthew, now four months old, in San Francisco with her mother-in-law.

â??I didnâ??t want to leave him, but I felt I had to go on to get my training to become a doctor and take care of myself and my baby,â?• Ng said.

A difficult internship

Thien made it to the U.S. just in time for the start of their internships, hers in obstetrics. Ng was delivering babies in the middle of the night and working in the clinic during the day. â??I cried a lot and told Thien that I couldnâ??t believe this is how they work here,â?• she said. â??I wanted to go back to Burma.â?• He told her to stick it out and covered for her sometimes.

She was also taken aback when she heard a newly hired U.S. graduate student tell the medical director he needed a saner schedule. â??I would never talk against my superior,â?• Ng said. â??In Burma, as women, especially, we had to act as if the teacher was always right. We didnâ??t argue; that was disrespectful.â?•

And being in a new country for only a few months, Ng was afraid of retaliation. â??I needed a good referral for my residency.â?•

Ng rotated to intern in adult medicine, hoping to work in that field. Thien wanted to be a surgeon, but his friend advised him against it: As a foreigner, it would be hard to get patients, he told him. In 1969, they both obtained residencies in anesthesia â?? â??I had more experience in anesthesia in Burma,â?• Ng said â?? at George Washington University Hospital in Washington, D.C.

By now, it had been 10 months since sheâ??d last seen her son.

â??Although work was distracting, I missed Matthew so very much,â?• Ng said. He was 14 months old when her in-laws brought him for a visit during Easter vacation. Ng and Thien took their son for a drive.

At last, a reunion

â??When we stopped, with him on my lap, he looked at both our faces â?? strangers to him â?? and cried non-stop.â?• Ng said. â??I had to take him back to live with us.â?•

Ng hatched a plan to bring them all together.

She wrote to her mother in Burma, asking that her grandmother move to the U.S. to take care of Matthew.â?• Gwat Eng Tan, 70 at the time, would first live and get to know the boy at Ngâ??s in-laws in San Francisco. Once Matthew was comfortable with Tan, they would move in with his own parents.

Family was always a big part of Ngâ??s life.

Now 78, she grew up the eldest of seven in a comfortable family setting. Both parents worked. Her maternal grandmother, with helpers to cook and clean, oversaw the care of the children and the house. â??We had a lot of freedom under British rule,â?• Her childhood was happy.

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Eng with her mother, Annie.

Her fatherâ??s family had emigrated from Malaysia to Burma (now Myanmar). Her mother, Annie, was born in Burma. Both were Chinese. Annie was three months old when her father died, leaving Gwat Eng Tan to support them working as a tailor, a seamstress and doing embroidery.

â??My grandmother, who was illiterate, even made Chinese shoes.â?• Ng said. â??She sewed beads on top of shoes for weddings.â?•



Ngâ??s grandmother Gwat Eng Tan.

Her parents met as teenagers when they were playing in a band with a group of friends. â??My father played the clarinet and my mother played the sax as well as sang.â?• The band played for weddings. The two were in their late teens when they married and Ng was born.

Her mother spoke five languages: Burmese, English and three Chinese dialects â?? Fujianese, her grandmotherâ??s dialect; Cantonese and Mandarin, the national language in the Chinese school in which she taught.

Ngâ??s father, having gone to an English school who had a respectable command of English, had a good position with the British Petroleum Company. He worked and lived in Rangoon, but made his family home outside the capital. The country was getting swept up in World War II.

Swept up in WWII

â??Because of the war, my father moved us to a safer location in a small village outside Rangoon where I was born in 1942,â?• Ng said. â??He would come home from time to time.â?•

Ng spoke Burmese growing up and became fluent in English at the all-girls English-Anglican church school she attended through 12th grade. â??My mother and grandmother taught me some Cantonese growing up, but because I wasnâ??t fluent, they would talk in Cantonese when they didnâ??t want me to know what they were saying.â?•

Ngâ??s new family â?? herself, her grandmother, husband and son â?? came together in Pennsylvania after the couple finished their residencies, in 1971. Both had found fellowships in intensive care at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, eventually becoming attending physicians and teaching assistants in anesthesia. A second child, Michael, was born in 1973.

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Annie Tan.

By this time, Gwat Eng Tan was getting too old to care for both boys. She wanted to move to San Francisco, where her daughter Annie â?? Ngâ??s mother â?? had since settled and was working in a public health clinic.

This prompted another big decision â?? this one by her husband. Her mother had told them San Franciscoâ??s Mt. Zion Hospital needed anesthesiologists. So, while attending the yearly convention of anesthesiologists in San Francisco, Thien applied and got a job.

The Ng family moved to San Francisco in 1976. â??We lived with my mom for three months until we found a house and school for the kids.â?• They bought a house in Pacific Heights they still live in.

Ng worked in the federal Public Health Service Hospital in the Presidio for three years until 1981, when budget cuts forced its closure. So, Ng went into private practice. She worked on contract for the next 20 years for The Podiatry Hospital, now the Pacific Coast Hospital on Scott Street.


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Ng worked for a federal hospital in the Presidio until it was closed, then for 20 years as a contract anesthesiologist The Podiatry Hospital, now the Pacific Coast Hospital on Scott Street.

She was still working there at the age of 59 when she contracted thyroid cancer and retired early. â??In the â??70s, the machines we used didnâ??t have exhaust systems. You could smell ether,â?• Ng said. Ng isnâ??t sure there was a connection to her cancer, but said she was lucky to have a good surgeon at Mt. Zion.

Although she loved her job, sheâ??s not sure she would like it as much these days. Protocols have changed, she said. When she worked, anesthesiologists talked to their patients the night before their operations.

â??I would know my patient better for the procedure; the charts donâ??t tell you everything and the surgeons donâ??t know about certain drugs,â?• Ng said. â??Today itâ??s rushed. They see the patient only in the morning and the person who talks with you might not be your anesthesiologist.â?•

She doesnâ??t have patients to tend to anymore. So she puts all those energies into helping seniors at the Calvary Presbyterian Church. As a volunteer, she calls regularly to see what they need.

And who tends to her? Her two sons and their families, who live in the Bay Area. They bring food and visit regularly. No more separations.

Contact: janrobbins@sfseniorbeat.com

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1. All Posts

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