

?That little girl isn't running anymore, she's flying?



By Brock Weir

Kim Phuc was just nine years old when a napalm bomb fell on her village in 1972.

The clothes burned off her back by the resulting fire, her image ? naked, screaming and running away from the epicentre of the attack ? was captured by an Associated Press photographer and became an iconic image of war.

But, to many, it also became an image of peace, a symbol that reminds people of the horrors of war in the hopes that it is never repeated.

For Ms. Phuc, however, it is something more: the beginning of a story, one that set her on the path to forgiveness.

She shared her inspiring story of courage and faith with Aurora residents this month at the Salvation Army's Northridge Community Church.

?I was a healthy child and I knew nothing about war,? said Ms. Phuc, addressing an audience of more than 100 people. ?My most serious injury had been hurting my knees when I fell off a bicycle.?

She recalled the people of her village taking refuge in a nearby temple. For the children, it seemed more like an adventure than taking cover under the threat of fire. The temple was a safe, holy place, she said, and it was unimaginable that it could be violated by ?the horrible fire that would drop from the sky.?

'It was only when the soldiers yelled for the children to run that we got really scared,' she recalled. 'The airplanes were so loud, so close. We were running down the road and suddenly there were bombs, explosions of gasoline. My clothes were burned off, my skin was on fire, someone began screaming, 'Too hot! Too hot!' That someone was me.'

Those screams were captured by Associated Press photographer Nick Ut, and so evocative was the resulting image that it won a Pulitzer Prize.

'That day changed my life forever,' said Kim. 'Nick took me to the nearest hospital and I was severely burned, so they moved me to the first children's hospital, where they gave up hope and placed me in the morgue. After three days of screaming, my parents found me in the morgue. Everybody was expecting to bring my body back to the village for burial. Then, a miracle happened: my father met a friend who worked at the hospital and asked for help. They had me transferred to a burn clinic where I spent 14 months and thanks to God and the wonderful doctors and nurses, I survived.'

Over the course of her recovery, Kim Phuc endured seventeen operations, the last of which took place in Germany in 1984. Left with scars on her back and left arm, she says she didn't feel pretty. She envied her girlfriends who could wear short-sleeved shirts, certain that no boy would ever love and marry her.

'I never thought I would have a normal life,' she said, 'but I was so wrong!'

Inspired by her long stay in the hospital, Kim developed dreams of being a doctor. Her doctors were her heroes, inspiring her every day of her recovery. Ten years after the bomb, she was accepted into medical school.

She thought she was on track to achieve her dreams until the Vietnamese government stepped in and decided she would be a potent war symbol for their country. They cut short her study for those purposes and Ms. Phuc says she quickly began to feel like a caged bird.

'I kept asking, 'Why me? Why did I have to suffer so much?' I used to curse those who had hurt me to death and I wanted them to suffer even more than me. For a while, I had a lot of anger, but I knew I could not live like that. I had to change my heart or die from hatred.'

Eventually, she says, she found what she needed in the local library, where she stumbled across a copy of the New Testament.

She became a Christian at the age of 19 and it was then, she says, that she 'knew God had a purpose in her life.'

Eventually, the Vietnamese government allowed her to

travel to Cuba and it was there she met her husband and set her sights on a new dream: finding a way to live her life in freedom in the west. She and her husband married in Cuba and received visas to honeymoon in Moscow. On their way back to Cuba, their flight had a stopover in Gander and, with their luggage still on the plane, the newlywed couple decided to leave everything behind and defect to Canada.

'We had no money, no friends, nothing,' she said. 'We had no knowledge of the Canadian culture, no knowledge of the language ? we had nothing but faith. My physical recovery was a challenge, my life in a new country was a challenge, but by far the biggest challenge was learning how to forgive those who caused my life.'

On the road to forgiveness, the Bible provided direction.

She said she knew that in order to be truly free she had to learn how to forgive.

Naturally, it was far from an easy process, but she knew she could trust in God.

'The more I prayed for my enemies, the softer my heart became,' she said. 'I felt forgiveness completely in my heart. It didn't happen overnight; it took a long time, but when I experienced real forgiveness, my heart felt free and it was Heaven on Earth for me. It sounds easy, but it was the hardest work of my life. But, I did it ? and if I could do it, all of you can do it too.'

The real test of her forgiveness came on a 1996 trip to Washington DC where Ms. Phuc was asked to deliver a few remarks at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. There, she met many of the people involved in the conflict and forged an unlikely bond with one veteran who said he was struck by her message of having no animosity and only forgiveness for the pilot who put in the air strike on her village.

'It was a true reconciliation,' said Ms. Phuc on meeting this veteran. 'The healing I went through made my body strong, but it also made my mind and my faith strong. It gave me the determination to fulfil my life goals.'

Now settled in Ajax, Kim and her husband were eventually joined here by her parents and, as a couple, they raised two sons and now enjoy the company of a daughter-in-law and a grandson.

She feels privileged, she said, to work now as an advocate and a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador, sharing her story along the way.

'Every time I travel, I call my mom and say, 'Mommy, that little girl isn't running anymore, she's flying.' My dream is that one day people will live without fear in real peace with no fighting and no hostility.'

Our world is troubled and full of conflict, but every single day we have opportunities to be better people, better neighbours and better friends. I believe that peace, love and forgiveness will always be more powerful than bombs.?