

My Sacred Path

Her parents' journey as Vietnamese boat refugees and the life they built served as the catalyst for an SLP's profession.

BY PHUONG LIEN PALAFOX

I cried an ocean in the weeks leading up to Oct. 15, 2018—the day I presented the keynote address at the Alabama Early Intervention and Preschool Conference. Exactly 40 years before, in 1978, my parents had arrived in Hong Kong after spending 11 days in the South China Sea as Vietnamese refugees. I was born within the walls of Tsan Yuk Hospital the day after they arrived on land.

On this day, I share my meaningful family tales and their impact on my profession in my address. Fittingly, I then talk about the value of literacy-based interventions in the following session. Oh, the power of stories.

To say it's a full-circle moment would not be accurate. Circles repeat the same path. The privilege I had in sharing my family's narrative is the direct result of sacrifices—sacrifices built on welcomed sacrifices. Today is more of a mountain moment.

Má and Bá started stacking the rocks and boulders for my siblings and me. On this day, I climbed the mound carrying their stories, their hardships and, ultimately, their dreams. Along the way, I acknowledged their efforts, and I fulfilled part of my sacred path—a path written in their quiet whispers before they embarked on that wooden fishing boat in 1978. For a moment, I stood at the top of our mountain and acknowledged the predestined beauty of it all.

Growing up, Má would fill the walls of our home with our awards—perfect attendance, science fair runner-up, math minute assessments. She was proud. I miss



Exactly 40 years after Phuong Palafox was born in Hong Kong in 1978—on the day after her parents' 11-day boat journey from Vietnam—she presented the keynote address at an Alabama early intervention conference.

her, and I find solace in the fact that she witnessed me becoming a speech-language pathologist the last year of her life. She practiced, on repeat, how to say “SPeeCH languaGe paTHologiST.” She helped me set up my first classroom. She heard the woeful tales of my inaugural year. In the evenings, she would help me make materials for my students. It was a really good year, and she died that December ([on.asha.org/ldr-slp-grief](https://www.asha.org/ldr-slp-grief)).

She did not, however, get to see how her stories are now shared across this country—a place that used to be a hopeful destination for her child. She did not see the tears of people who have thanked me for acknowledging our narratives as immigrants. I ache knowing that the person proudest of my efforts did not have the opportunity to witness all of it. This is my truth, and I hold space for it.

Oh, how she would have clipped every presentation advertisement, blog post and article to line the walls of her home. So, for me, each time I get to stand in front of my

peers to speak our stories, I feel her tugging at me. Then, I imagine her hanging my earned moments on stage on her motherly wall of pride.

Tears happen when a heart is too full to hold it all in, and my heart overflows today. As I embark on this 40th year of life tomorrow, I am grateful. I am grateful, and I am listening. I hear the world telling me to deeply feel and loyally follow my sacred path as an SLP supporting our diverse communities. I will continue to do so because my family, through water and land and love, earned this for me. 🌈

Phuong Lien Palafox, MS, CCC-SLP, is a bilingual clinician at Bilingualistics in Austin, Texas, specializing in literacy-based interventions, students from diverse backgrounds (including poverty) and service-delivery models for school-based services. She is an affiliate of ASHA Special Interest Groups 14, Cultural and Linguistic Diversity; and 16, School-Based Issues. phuong.palafox@bilingualistics.com

This column presents contributors' views and experiences in their own voices.