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News Article

August 1, 2003

PREPARING TOMORROW'S LEADERS TODAY: BUILDING CHARACTER, LEADERSHIP AND SERVICE GOALS

By Jackie Bong-Wright ([Asian Fortune](#))

Vietnamese American Youth Leadership Conference (VAYLC)



A young Vietnamese discussing an issue with her peers at the recent Vietnamese Youth Leadership Conference. Photo courtesy of Hung Nguyen.

The Hon. Tu Pham, at 31, the youngest federal magistrate judge in the country, told the 400 guests at a Vietnamese Youth Leadership gala dinner June 27, "Do not limit yourself in your career choices. Do not limit yourself as to where you live. Always remember the past, but don't limit yourself to it."

Tu Pham, who presides in Tennessee's Western District, used his own family as an example. His sister, breaking the family mold, became a news reporter and anchor in Biloxi, Mississippi, an untraditional career path for a Vietnamese woman. He himself had had to go against his parents' wishes in studying law. Now, he said, his parents felt differently. His sister was a success in television news, and he was a U.S. federal judge prosecuting defendants for crimes like racketeering, bribery, and tax evasion. These were not the professions Vietnamese elders wanted their youth to follow, fearing they were too risky.

The same evening, Kim Oanh Nguyen, an accomplished player of Dan Tranh, the Vietnamese 16-string guitar, received a Lifetime Achievement Award. Ms. Kim Oanh taught traditional music and dance extensively in Vietnam and in the United States. She is well-known for her numerous performances of traditional Vietnamese music at Smithsonian folk festivals and at colleges and universities across America. She has become a leader in preserving the rich cultural heritage of Vietnam.

A cultural fashion show of Vietnamese traditional costumes was presented by the Asian Pacific American Cultural Arts Foundation, to the evident delight of the audience.

The gala dinner was part of a three-day Vietnamese American Youth Leadership Conference (VAYLC) hosted by the National Congress of Vietnamese Americans (NCVA) at George Mason University's Arlington campus June 26-28. The gathering provided a forum for young professionals and students wanting to build professional relationships that would help them acquire the technological know-how, leadership skills and character to lead the Vietnamese American community.

Sherry Ly, a Fox 5 reporter, served as the event's mistress of ceremonies. The principal organizer was Hung Nguyen, the young, dynamic president of NCVA. Supporting the conference were community organizations such as the Asian Pacific American Cultural Arts Foundation, the Da Hieu Youth Alliance, the International Leadership Foundation, the Vietnamese Professionals of America, the Vietnamese Professional Society, and Vision New America.

Dispelling the Myth and Breaking the Glass Ceiling

Over a hundred Vietnamese youths from all over the country and as far away as Australia attended the youth conference. They heard prominent speakers and panelists tell them how to develop issues and communicate effectively to members of Congress. Uyen Dinh, Counsel on the House Armed Services Committee staff, and Duy Hoang, Vice President of the Vietnamese American Public Affairs Committee (VPAC), briefed the group on education (HR 333), human rights (HR 1587), affirmative action, hate crimes, women's health, and other issues. Dinh and many other community leaders accompanied the group to Capitol Hill to discuss their concerns with members of Congress.

On the Hill, the Vietnamese young people were taken seriously, attending a luncheon that included Congressman Tom Davis of Virginia; Robert Primus, Chief of staff of Rep. Mike Capuano (D-MA); Kim Kotlar, Legislative Director for Rep. William "Mac" Thornberry (R-TX); George Phillips, Legislative Assistant to Rep. Christopher Smith (R-NJ); and Darryl Chew, former National Security and Defense Appropriations Assistant to Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen (R-NJ).

The following day, participants attended workshops entitled "Cool Careers: Beyond the 9-5 Jobs." Carlton Nguyen, an agent for State Farms Insurance; 1st Lieutenant Ryan Pham, a U.S. Air Force pilot; federal judge Tu Pham; Captain Due Tran, Counsel for the U.S. Marines Corps; and Minh Vu, Counselor in the Justice Department's Civil Rights division; described some of the careers the youths could select from. They urged the young participants to dare to take risks, and to follow both their heads and their hearts in choosing what professions to pursue.

Joel Szabat, Assistant Deputy Secretary for the U.S. Department of Transportation, talked about the need for increased political involvement of Asian Pacific Americans, particularly in regard to the decennial redistricting process. Je Yon Jung, a civil rights attorney and board member of the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum discussed strategies against the exploitation of Asian women and girls in the American labor force and workplace.

Another session addressed domestic violence. Shamira Abdulla, Community Outreach Director for APIA Domestic Violence Resource Project; Jean Brugeman, Legal Services Coordinator for Boat People S.O.S.; and Christopher Dang, an officer with the U.S. Capitol Police, said the cause of abuse was a desire for control on the part of the batterers. The panelists wanted to promote more awareness among young people who might become victims one day and educate them on prevention and how to enlist the help of community groups, health providers, and legal entities.

There was also a session on "Vietnamese Americans and the Media." Kim Bui, executive producer with CNN, and Phuong Ly, a writer for the Washington Post, spoke on methods of communicating with people, how to present a persuasive speech, and how to use public service announcements and press releases.

Political Involvement

Larry Berman, author of "No Peace, No Honor: Nixon and Kissinger in Vietnam," whetted the appetite of the participants during the lunch period. The keynote speaker and director of the University of California Washington Center pointed out how much the Vietnamese people had suffered from the Nixon disengagement policy and what he described as the sell-out of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger of South Vietnam to the northern Vietnamese Communists. Berman urged the young participants to go back to their roots, do research and read thoroughly to know the past, learn from its mistakes, and be active in involving themselves in the political process.