

Freedom from Fear: Bon Van Nguyen

Photographer : Dominic Fijac

Before the fall of South Vietnam to the Communist forces in 1975, I held the position of Secretary General (Assistant Minister) of the Department of Education, Culture and Youth in the government of the Republic of Vietnam, with responsibility for general administration. I started my career as a teacher, became a principal in high schools, moved to teaching in the School of Pedagogy, Saigon University, was appointed Director and Chief of Cabinet of Department of Education and later District Chief, Chief of Cabinet of the Mayor of Saigon.

I obtained a Bachelor of Arts/Laws, Postgraduate Diploma of Teaching, Master's degree in Public Law, and I was a PhD candidate at Saigon University in the field of government administration at the time.

After South Vietnam fell on 30 April 1975, all high-ranking government officials were rounded up and confined in concentration camps in North Vietnam. I cannot describe how bad it was. I will never forget the horrific conditions. We were separated from our families; our homes and possessions were taken away from us; and we were left with nothing.

When I was released after six years in a series of concentration camps, I made plans to leave my home country. Unfortunately, our attempt to escape by boat failed and my family was jailed. Eventually we sent our oldest son to Australia with my sister.

In 1990, he was able to sponsor my wife, a former teacher, our two other children and me to Australia and we settled in Campbelltown. Our daughter has a BA and now lives in USA. One son is a doctor of medicine, the other is a chemist. Both live in Sydney.

From the moment I arrived I have tried to contribute my knowledge and experience to my new society. I continued my education, starting by reading leaflets and books about Australian society including the Australian constitution, to gain insight into the nation's society and government. I think it's important for new migrants to understand the culture of their new country.

I completed a Postgraduate Certificate in TESOL, and a Master of Education. I did interpreting, ethnic welfare and language aide courses through TAFE, and a tertiary preparatory course at UWS before beginning my PhD which I completed at the age of 64 in 2002. My thesis examines ways to improve the effectiveness of Vietnamese language learning in NSW public schools. I teach Vietnamese to BA students at UWS and taught English at TAFE. I am still testing my PhD thesis while teaching Vietnamese to primary children in Sydney schools. I am a teacher. My life's work has been in learning and teaching.