

2015-07 Member in Focus:

Tru Tran - on a bike from age 5

I was born in Saigon (now known as Ho Chi Minh City) during the Vietnam War. Saigon was the capital of South VN back then and had a population of about 2 million. Most people get around the city by bike so I was exposed to biking at a very young age. I can still remember sitting on the back of my mom's bike while she rode to the market to buy food for the day at the age of 5. If you had to go somewhere and did not want to ride yourself, you can call for a cyclo (a three-wheel bicycle taxi). The



guys who made a living pedaling these cyclos would put most our club members to shame. Imagine having to pedal a 60-70 pounds tricycle plus one or two passengers and their packages (200+ pounds) on a fixed gear all day. The end of the Vietnam War came in 1975 after the United States pull out of Vietnam and the communists from North Vietnam took over the entire country. My dad who fought for the South was immediately captured and thrown into what the communists euphemistically called "Re-Education" camps. These camps are better known in the West as "Gulag" where political prisoners and dissidents are sent to disappear. I never saw my dad again after he was sent there and he died in that forced-labor camp a few years later. My mom passed away shortly after that. My dad's older sister and her husband who had a daughter of their own adopted me and my older sister. In 1979, my adopted parents decided to escape from Vietnam because they saw no future for me and my sisters as long as the communist was still in charge of the country.

After several failed attempts, they finally made contact with a smuggling group that owned a large cargo ship. After paying these smugglers a large amount of money in gold bullions, a date and location was revealed to us and hundreds of other escapees to meet at their cargo ship anchored far offshore in international waters. We were to hide aboard smaller fishing vessels that would secretly meet the larger ship at night to transfer their human cargos. Unfortunately for everyone in our group, on the day of our planned departure, a class-3 typhoon was blowing through South East Asia and although we were not directly in its path, the resulting wind and rain from this storm had

created extremely dangerous conditions for small crafts. We had no choice but to attempt to leave the dock on the small fishing boat and head toward the cargo ship. The cargo ship captain was leaving that night with or without our group. With 20-25 foot waves crashing in the ocean, we honestly did not expect to make it to the cargo ship in the tiny vessel. By some miraculous and skillful piloting, the fisherman managed to get us to the large cargo ship located offshore without sinking our tiny boat. We thought our troubles were over once we were on board the smuggler's cargo ship. Little did we know that the smugglers' greed had caused them to overbook the number of escapees and instead of 800 they ended up with slightly fewer than 4,000 "passengers". After 13 days of intolerable conditions aboard this ship and with food and water running out, the captain of the ship hatched a plan to get rid of some of the passengers. When his ship came close to a small deserted island in the Philippines, he secretly sent his crews to this island and had them light small fires to make it look like the island was inhabited. He then announced that night that we had reached one of the destination countries that would accept refugees and anyone on board who wish to disembark can do so that night. With conditions on the ship worsening by the hours, my parents decided to take up the captain's offer and our family and 800 other passengers were whisked to shore by their small boats. As dawn rose and we were able to see clearly, we realized that the captain had lied and we were actually stranded on a deserted island that was about 3 miles in diameter with only a small beach on one side of the island where we were dumped. By this time, the smugglers' cargo ship had been chased away by the Philippine's Navy which had detected their ship on the radar. Unfortunately for us, the Philippine's Navy did not detect the 800 people that were left on the deserted island and we watched helplessly as the two Navy destroyers disappeared into the distant horizon. Ultimately, we were rescued by fishermen (after three days on the island) who noticed our group when we created smoke signals and they radioed our position to the Philippine government. We were taken to a refugee camp where we applied for immigration to the United States and since my dad had fought with the American forces against the Communists of North Vietnam during the war, we were granted asylum.

I was twelve when I arrived in the United States and thankfully my life has been less eventful since then. During Junior High School, I saved up enough money from a paper route to buy a blue 10-speed Huffy bike. I really wanted a Cannondale road bike but that was way beyond my means at the time. I rode this Huffy all over Philadelphia during High School and some of my favorite rides include the Schuylkill River trail and Kelly Drive Loop. I also used this bike as transportation to and from my restaurant job where I worked to save money for college. I remember that I was able to get to work from my home faster than someone could drive there by cutting through Pennypack Park. After I graduated from Penn State with an Engineering degree, my career and family got in the way of cycling and before I knew it, 22 years had passed without a single ride on a bicycle. During the summer of 2011, I had my mid-life crisis. As an IT professional (Data Warehouse Architect), my job is high stress and sedentary. My weight by now had climbed to a whopping 198

pounds. My blood pressure and cholesterol was through the roof. I resolved then that I would not allow my weight to reach 200 and would try to improve my health by riding again. I bought a hybrid bike from Bicycle Rack and start riding loops around my neighborhood until I could get up to around 10 miles. I started to hit the open roads after that. Before I knew it, I was riding up to 40 miles and had lost 40 pounds a year later. A chance encounter at Woody's Café in Allentown with Erich Woisetschlaeger during one of my solo rides resulted in my joining the Princeton Free Wheelers. The rest as they say is history.