Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE1956

Ho, Mai

Occupation Mayor

Summary

Mai Ho arrived in Australia in December 1982 with two small daughters and sixteen dollars. By 1997 she was Mayor of Maribyrnong. Twelve months later her daughter, Tan Le, was voted Young Australian of the Year.

Details

Raised in Saigon's District 5 at the outbreak of the Vietnam War, Mai's childhood was characterised by constant threats to safety in the midst of tremendous political unrest. Mai was strongly influenced by her anti-communist father, who published a controversial bilingual political magazine for American and Vietnamese soldiers. He encouraged her to understand and help others, and urged her to consider the possibility of escape from Vietnam.

Aged sixteen, Mai married a wealthy pharmacist eighteen years her senior. By 1981 she was preparing to escape Vietnam by boat. In early morning darkness, she left with her daughters Tan and Min, her mother, sister and brother, and 161 fellow passengers. Her husband was to join her a fortnight later. An indescribably awful journey ended with rescue by an English vessel and transport to a Malaysian camp. Here Mai worked as a translator before gaining passage with her family to Australia.

Housed in the Midway Hostel, Maribyrnong, Mai began work picking fruit to support her family. Her husband, she learned, did not intend to join her after all. The family moved to Footscray, where sheer persistence obtained for Mai a position in Quality Control for the Holden factory. She was the first female inspector at Fishermen's Bend, Port Melbourne, where she earned more than the Vietnamese men working on the factory line. While raising two children and working full time, Mai took on and completed a Bachelor of Arts (human resource management) and tertiary qualifications in computer operations and health science (beauty therapy). In 1987 she opened her own computer business and prospered. By 1990 she felt secure enough to open her own beauty salon.

Meanwhile, conscious of the struggles of those in her position, Mai set up a Vietnamese community support service. With her own savings she co-financed a venue, electricity and a telephone. At the age of twelve, her eldest daughter Tan was manning the telephone and helping people to fill out government forms. By 1992, Mai decided to stand for the local election. With strong support, she was defeated due to hundreds of uncounted informal votes. The following year she joined the Labor Party, and this time was victorious. She returned to her country of birth in 1995 with the Australian Consultative Delegation to Vietnam, the first delegation to investigate human rights there. By 1997 Mai Ho was Mayor of Maribyrnong.

The same twelve-year-old Tan who was answering the telephone would become president of the Australian Vietnamese Services Resource Centre (as it is now known) by the age of eighteen. In this role she implemented counselling, training and employment programs, and refuge services for Vietnamese women. Despite some racist ridicule at school, Tan had maintained outstanding academic results and graduated to university at the age of sixteen. Awarded a KPMG Accounting Scholarship in 1997, she went on to complete a combined Bachelor of Commerce/Laws at Monash University in 1998 and was admitted as a barrister and solicitor two years later.

In 1998, Tan's contribution to community service was recognised nationally and internationally when she was awarded Young Australian of the Year.

In 2000 she co-founded a wireless technology company, SASme. The company has grown to become a leading wireless technology provider in Australia, with branches in Asia and Europe. Still young, Tan's has already been a distinguished career with appointments on the Australian Citizenship Council and the National Committee for Human Rights Education in Australia; as Ambassador for the Status of Women and Ambassador for Aboriginal Reconciliation; and as Patron of the Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development Program. Her strong public profile and breadth of experience mean she is frequently called upon for public speaking engagements.

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Author Details
Barbara Lemon

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