

## Promoting Diversity in the Courts: Martin Huynh

John Caher:

Welcome to Amici, news and insight from the New York Courts. I'm John Caher.

We all have a story, and the purpose of Diversity Dialogues is to dig those stories out and explore the different backgrounds and experiences of people who work in the unified court system.

Today we're going to visit with a man who is well known to very many of us in the court system, at least on the surface. I've probably known him for close to a decade, but until just a few days ago, I had no idea that he was a Vietnamese refugee brought out of the country at the age of four by a single parent mom, or that their journey halfway around the world began on a boat and included a period of waiting in the Philippine Islands where they slept on hammocks. In fact, I didn't even know how to pronounce his name.

I'm referring to Martin Huynh, pronounced H-W-I-N, as if it were Hwin, and he is a technical manager in the Division of Court Modernization. There's a common phrase in the Unified Court System when judges and nonjudicial staff have a technical problem. It's, "Call Martin." I'm pleased to introduce you to that ever helpful presence on the phone or Teams call.

Martin, even though we've been colleagues for nearly half of your 23 years in the courts, I'm really looking forward to hearing your story for the first time. Let's start at the beginning if we could.

So you were born in Vietnam in 1978, and when you were about three, your whole life is uprooted. Tell me ,if you would, why your mother wanted to get herself and you out of Vietnam?

Martin Huynh:

Yeah, so we are from Saigon, which is the southern part of Vietnam, and right after the war when the communists took over, just like all other people that aspire to come to the United States, we wanted a better life, opportunities, freedom, democracy, and justice. Right after the war, life was very, very difficult, especially during the reconstruction. There wasn't a lot of job opportunities. At least my family and my grandmother, we were used to having democracy and democratic government and freedom. So with the communists taking over South Vietnam, it's kind of difficult to go back and have those freedoms taken away. So it was really important for her to, especially after having me, to provide that opportunity and that life that the United States can provide.

So we made a difficult decision. I mean, my mom, did after the war. She sold her possessions, gathered as much savings and income as she can, and decided to try to escape.

John Caher: What has your mother or other relatives told you about that time in Vietnam? What was it like for them?

Martin Huynh: It was definitely difficult. The war itself didn't affect them as much because we were in the city. A lot of the battles and the conflicts were more up north, so we weren't affected that much in Saigon. But as it was drawing to a close, with the economic hardships and just getting the basic necessities like food got a little bit more difficult. She was a bank teller. Eventually she found a job working for the US government. So when they left, when the US left, she was out of a job. So we were just pretty much living on savings and family support. It was getting difficult at that time. That's one of the reasons why she decided to leave.

John Caher: You end up in the Philippines?

Martin Huynh: Yes. At that time, I was born in 78, so she decided to leave when I was three years old. So that would be around 1981. She actually tried to escape three times. This all under the cover of night. First time she was caught and they basically said, you're lucky that you have a small child with you or else we are just going to put you in jail. So they let her go. The second time she said that a soldier was kind enough just to tell her like, "Oh, don't go down this road," or something like that. Go around here or whatnot. And then the third time was I guess the lucky charm.

So all in the cover of night, we went to the beach, got on a fishing boat and I think she said there was about 30 other passengers, escapees just kind of all hunched, bunched in together.

And they sailed off on a fishing boat at night. We were on that boat for a day and a night until a German boat came and rescued us. So this German boat, I think the name of it was Cap Anamur, and if you Google it, you'll see some stories and articles and pictures about it. But basically it was this crazy German guy, and I say "crazy" as a positive thing because everybody thought that it was just a crazy idea. But basically he gathered a bunch of his friends and they decided to form an organization to get donations and to charter a boat to sail the sea, picking up refugees on boats. And this was a time during where there was no internet and GoFundMe and social media going viral or anything. It was just basically boots on the ground getting donations to charter this boat.

So we got picked up by this boat. They brought us to Palawan, Philippines. And so the German boat asked my mom, it's like, oh, if you wanted to go to Germany, we can go right away with this boat. We will take you, but if you wanted to go anywhere else, you have to stay here. And she wanted to go at that time to the US because she didn't really know Germany, she's more familiar with the USs. So they dropped us off at Palawan, Philippines. And it's a refugee camp. Again, it's on Google if you want to look it up. There's pictures and articles. But it was a Vietnamese refugee camp and we stayed there for I think about a year.

John Caher: Wow, interesting that you had to “escape” from your own country.

Martin Huynh: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I think that's the way she thought about it and felt, because really before she had me, we had all these freedoms and democracy and justice and things like that. When the communists came in, she saw what was going on in Russia and China and everything like that. She didn't want to be under that form of government.

John Caher: You were awfully young. What memories do you have of the Philippines?

Martin Huynh: Not much. What I can kind of vaguely remember is wooden huts on stilts and dirt roads. I remember there was hammocks and sleeping mats on the floor, but otherwise I don't remember that much about it. It was really mainly a refugee camp, so it was just a lot of other families, Vietnamese families, and there were some children and we did I think the best we could to recreate the places, the country and the homes, that we left for a year or so while we were there.

John Caher: I don't know how far the Philippines would be from where you left Vietnam, but any way you look at it, you've got another 9- 10,000 miles to go to get where you want to get to. How did you make that journey?

Martin Huynh: So we were there for a year and there were of course volunteer organizations there, and one of them was actually the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. And actually they started after World War II to relocate Holocaust refugees and they continued that mission all the way, I guess, until I think even now they're active. But at that time, they were helping the Vietnamese people, the refugees, relocate.

So after a year, they sponsored us to the US and they asked my mom, “Where do you want to go in the US?” And my mom said, “Well, Hawaii is nice.” And they're like, oh, Hawaii, it's more like a tourist area, high cost of living. Is there any other places that you go that might be more reasonable? And there's like, well, New York. She always heard about

New York. So we got on a 24-hour plane ride and we ended up in JFK and into New York City.

John Caher: So what happens when you arrive? Where do you go? Where do you live? How do you communicate? How do you support yourselves?

Martin Huynh: So that organization, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, helped us settle down to find living space, like an apartment. They helped us with applying for social programs and getting us in contact with more local organizations to kind of help us settle and find jobs and education. So it was really them, and also the local Catholic Church there. My family's Catholic, so that was one of the first things that my mom did, just go to the Catholic Church and ask for there's any assistance that they can give us. So it was really just a combination of just a lot of people, organizations, people that we met through that organization and through the church that really kind of helped us our initial first year there, basically providing an apartment, providing furniture, clothing. And then eventually my mom, they found her a part-time job to work at to make some money and then also to enroll in school. So yeah, it was very integral part, everybody involved there.

John Caher: What was your immigrant status at the beginning?

Martin Huynh: We had green cards. So when we came to the US, they issued us green cards and I think you need a green card. And I think after five years you become eligible to go through the naturalization process, to become a naturalized citizen. And that's the route that we took. After five years, my mom, she studied English and the US history and civics courses to take the exams. She took the exam and passed. And then that trickled down to myself. She was a citizen, she became a naturalized citizen, and I became a naturalized citizen because of her.

John Caher: I see. So you became a citizen because she was a citizen?

Martin Huynh: Yes.

John Caher: Okay. So as a kid in grammar school, you're an immigrant. Do you feel like an outsider in any way?

Martin Huynh: Yes and no. No, because I grew up in Sunset, and this is for New York City in general too, is it was always a very diverse community. And when I lived in Sunset, there was a good Asian population, Italian, Irish, Spanish. So I really, as a kid, looking back, I don't think I've ever felt like as an outsider, but at that time because of some of my own insecurities of

being different than everyone else, even though there were other Asians around in that neighborhood, there weren't a lot of Vietnamese people. Most of the Vietnamese population and people migrated to Southern California and Houston. In New York, we were just really spread out. But for the most part, no, I didn't feel too much as an outsider.

John Caher: I'm glad to hear that. Who were your major role models as a kid?

Martin Huynh: Well, my mom, of course. I mean, just to share what she did to get here.

She had me when she was a little older. I think she was in her early forties when we came over here. And just a small Vietnamese woman, single mother coming with a small child through the boat ride and the Philippines and coming all the way out here and doing what she did to provide me with this opportunity that I had. Definitely the toughest woman I've ever known. And just through hard work and grit. So definitely, yeah, so definitely my mom.

And then while growing up I had some good family friends that got me into fitness and another relative that he was a very smart gentleman and I think one thing that stuck out for me was that he gave me a hand-me-down Vic 20, which was like a Commodore 64, before Commodore 64.

So at that time, everybody, at least all my friends, had Nintendo and they had Commodore 64 and I couldn't afford that. So he gave me a Vic 20, which is the previous generation. So that Vic 20 actually played cassette tape. So what you had to do just to play a simple game like Frogger is you had to put in the cassette tape and find where the counter starts for that game, press play on it and wait for that counter to stop at a certain point. And then that's how they load the game. So I think that's what got me into technology down the road, having to do that and be exposed to that.

John Caher: What did your mother do for a living?

Martin Huynh: Well, when she got here, mostly she cleaned offices, and did whatever that needed to be done, just to provide and raise me the best she can. So she cleaned offices, she was a cashier, she babysat, she worked at a library, basically everything under the sun to raise me up. And I think I get a lot of the work ethic is from her seeing her doing all that.

I started working at an early age to help her out. I got my first job when I was 12 years old, part-time at the church, just answering the phones after school and on weekends or answering the door. And that time I think I made \$3 an hour, cash. And I remember like, oh, I worked a

weekend and I saved up enough money to buy some Levi's jeans for that weekend. I think I've been working ever since.

John Caher: Where'd you go to school?

Martin Huynh: In Brooklyn, I went to a Catholic school, grammar school and high school also. And then after that I went to Long Island University down in Brooklyn. They had a Brooklyn campus and I was there for about a year or two years and I wanted to get into... I was always interested in science, so I wanted to do something science related or maybe the health field. So I was juggling between something like physical therapy or physician assistant or pharmacy.

So after the first year I realized that Long Island University is a very expensive private institution. Even though I worked during the semester on campus as to try to reduce the cost, I realized that I wasn't able to keep this up at least without having a very big loan when I graduated. And that's something I didn't want to have, a big loan. So I decided to transfer over to Baruch College in the city, and this is where the computer technology came in. I was always interested in computers, so I majored in computer science at Baruch and I graduated. Then after that I received my master's down at Pace University, down also in the Manhattan campus.

John Caher: What's your master's in?

Martin Huynh: Computer Technology. Also, computer science.

John Caher: So how'd you come to work for the Court System?

Martin Huynh: I was working part-time. This was during I think my senior year in college and I was working part-time at a small family law firm and they dealt with taxes, real estate taxes and just helping out in the office doing whatever they need to do, office things and sometimes computer, since they were a small family law firm, whatever they needed to do on the computer, help them out with that. So one of the things was I went down to 60 Center Street down in Manhattan here, and I was filing a notice of claim and an RJI for them, and I noticed a court posting for jobs on the wall and for a technical position in HR and I applied to it and then shortly after I got an interview and that's where I started my career, in HR as a technical position.

I spent a few years in HR and then I transferred over to the Department of Technology under Sheng Guo. Since then, I mostly deal with video

streaming, court audio recording. In the Family Court and Civil Court, there's no court reporters. We have on an audio court recording system that records the hearings that went over to evidence presentation. So now we developed our own group division here, court modernization. So that's my current group and that's still under Sheng. So we do same thing, court evidence presentation, audio systems for the courtrooms and also live-streaming, which we worked in the past with.

John Caher: Do you think the court system has a diverse workforce?

Martin Huynh: Yes, definitely. I see it every day when I come to work within OCA here ,nd when I go into the field and the courthouses. I definitely see examples of that. But I think also where we definitely shine is the way the courts really believe and promote it, not just saying it but really living it and promoting it. And I see that through some of the great programs that have come up recently. Really very, very fascinating and interesting to see.

John Caher: Well, that's the purpose of the Diversity Dialogue, so we can all learn more about people we think we know including you. Is diversity important and why?

Martin Huynh: Yes, 100%. I think if you're in a homogenous environment and then it's all you see you don't get exposed to different cultures and different people, when you see new things or different things, you might see them as strange and weird or if becomes more like a "them," "those people" kind of thing. Where if you're in a diverse environment, it's more like an "us" thing instead of "they" or "them."

One example I came across and stuck out. I was taking the train is I saw this young girl on the train and she got out a bowl of rice and she was eating seaweed and she was an Asian. And I was like, wow, that's awesome. I would never see that growing up. If a kid was doing, most of the time they would say what's that weird smell? Or what's that weird thing? And now I see that on the train and I see when I go to one of my favorite Vietnamese restaurants and there's a line for it and it's crowded.

John Caher: My guess is that in the crowd of people you see in the Vietnamese restaurant, as many of them look like me as look like you.

Martin Huynh: Yes.

John Caher: There's our melting pot!

So you were very young when you left Vietnam. Do you feel roots there?

Martin Huynh: Yes, I do. And that's I think because I was a first generation immigrant, even though I didn't grow up there and I left at a very, very young age. I feel like New York, the US, is definitely where I belong and it's my home. My mom really tried to preserve the traditions and the culture and the language and the food when I was growing up, even though we didn't have a large community here, I still feel like there is a connection to Vietnam. I think it will always have a place in my heart for it. But the US and New York is definitely where my home is.

John Caher: What unique traditions or viewpoints did your mother share with you or instill in you?

Martin Huynh: Just hard work, study. I think more like the traditional, how would you say, the "tiger mom?"

After I started working for the courts and I started taking some annual leave time off, and she would say to me, "Hey, don't take so much time off and they're going to say something or they're going to fire you or something like that for taking too much time off." And I'm like, mom, no, they give you this time. They want you to take this time. You practically have to take this time. So in her mind it was always like, just do hard work, do your best, be a good person. And even to this day she always says, "Don't take too much time off. They're going to say something."

John Caher: I've done dozens of these Diversity Dialogue interviews, including several with immigrants and consistently immigrants from everywhere had a similar story, a similar work ethic, a similar appreciation.

Martin Huynh: And I always took it as, oh, it's just mom nagging and telling me to do this and telling me to do that. And then I recently came across a post that I read. The title is "Advice My Vietnamese Parents Gave Me." It was like word-for-word what my mom at that time nags me about. And it kind of dawned upon me, this is not just my mom, this is like every Vietnamese parents.

I guess this is a generational thing that they passed down from one generation to generation. And what I thought was just my mom is just really just some sayings, words of wisdom maybe that every Vietnamese parents tell their kids. I actually have some of them here. Here's one: "Lam bieng thi sau nay kho," which means "if you're lazy now, life will be hard later." The other one is "lam gi cung phai co long," meaning "whatever you do, do it with heart." Another one is "i dau cung phai le

phep.” That means always be respectful wherever you go. And “hiu cuc truoc, suong sau,” meaning “suffer now, enjoy later.” These are word-for-word exactly what she tells me growing up. I thought that was a little interesting and-

John Caher: I think it's very interesting. I've done several of these Diversity Dialogue interviews and a whole lot of them with immigrants and virtually all of them had a similar story, lessons they learned from their parents, lessons that were brought down from their ancestors, and I like to think some of those reached the greater society and made us all stronger.

Martin Huynh: Yeah, I completely agree. Yeah.

John Caher: Now, I'm afraid most Americans, myself included, know little more about Vietnam other than that we fought a very long and very unpopular war there. What else would you like other Americans to know about Vietnam?

Martin Huynh: It's a very inexpensive place to go. I went back there back in 2005 for the first time with a college friend of mine. We went there for two weeks and it was just a beautiful country. The culture, the people, the landscape, it's all diverse and I think it's modernized a lot, but I think it still has that charm. It should be definitely on your go-to list if you want to experience beautiful landscape and great food and the people.

John Caher: I do, and I just added it to my list. Thank you so much for your insight and your openness and for all you do, for all of us in the Court System. You're always there, always helpful and I know we all appreciate it.

Martin Huynh: Thank you, John. I really appreciate it.