

Dreamers Fulfilled



Catherine Lazarcik is one of the four local "I Have A Dream" students who have graduated from college this year. (DAVE OLSON/The Columbian)

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BY TOM VOGT, Columbian staff writer

Ken Nguyen's path to a college diploma includes a piece of art that runs the length of his hallway.

That 15-foot-long scroll isn't just a major piece of Nguyen's senior thesis: It's his life.

It shows a dragon that flows into stormy ocean waves, which merge into his mother's hair. It's a vision that might come out of a dream, and that's Nguyen's life, too.

He's a "Dreamer." Nguyen and three former classmates are the first Vancouver students to graduate from college through the "I Have a Dream Program."

They were among 60 fourth-graders tapped when a group of local sponsors brought the national program to Vancouver in 1995. If you graduate from high school, we will make sure you can attend college, the sponsors assured the Washington Elementary fourth-graders and their parents. It's an assurance that has been made to three other groups of Vancouver students, in 1997, 1999 and 2001.

"I didn't have a clue what the program was about," Nguyen (pronounced "win") said.



Ken Nguyen shows his unrolled senior thesis project after having graduated from Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland. The artwork, a scroll measuring 15 feet long by 11 inches wide, depicts his family history from Vietnam to the U.S. (DAVE OLSON/The Columbian)

And now the Vancouver program has its first college graduates:

- Catherine Lazarcik earned a bachelor's degree at Oregon Health & Science University's School of Nursing.

- Daniel Limonchenko earned a bachelor's degree in theological studies at Valley Forge Christian College in Phoenixville, Pa.

- Han Tran earned bachelor's degrees in law and criminal justice and in women's studies at the University of Washington.

- Nguyen earned a bachelor's degree in communication design at Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland.

All four members of the first graduating class came here from other countries.

"That definitely says something," Lazarcik said. "This is the land of dreams."

She was born in Botswana, in southern Africa, while Limonchenko's family came here from Ukraine the month before the Dreamer class was tapped. The families of Tran and Nguyen endured significant hardships before leaving Vietnam and settling in the Rosemere neighborhood.

They're part of a long-running "Only in America" story; but that story can be told from more than one perspective, said Mary Granger, who organized the Vancouver program.

"Only in America can these students get money from someone who doesn't know them, someone who will encourage them to be the best they can be," Granger said.

And that encouragement might be more important than the tuition money.

"They motivate you to pursue your dream," Nguyen said. "The program is like a second family."

His family plays a prominent role in the project that earned Nguyen his college diploma.

He calls his family story "Here and There," the title of his senior thesis project at Pacific Northwest College of Art.

The 2003 graduate of Vancouver School of Arts and Academics created a scroll that includes key chapters in the lives of his parents. The student showed his father, Thi Van Nguyen, as a second lieutenant in the South Vietnamese army; he was sent to a "re-education" camp after the war.

The ocean waves that merge into a woman's hair reflect his mother's attempted escape in 1981. Thu Huong Thi Do and other people from her village used gold to buy passage on a

fishing boat. It was intercepted by a Communist patrol boat, and she wound up in a detention camp.

Ken Nguyen was 10 years old when his family finally was able to move to Vancouver, thanks to the sponsorship of a humanitarian organization.

That same organization helped Han Tran's family move here. Her father also had been an officer in the South Vietnamese army. The Tran family came here when Han was 9.

Lazarcik's family came here from Africa, although her father's journey started much earlier, in what was then known as Czechoslovakia.

"He was trying to escape Communism. He went to South Africa, and then to Botswana" where her parents met, she said. It took 10 years for her parents to get through the immigration process; they moved to Hawaii when she was 9, and then arrived in Vancouver a year later.

She arrived just in time to be part of Vancouver's first "Dreamer" project.

The program expanded in 1997, tapping 68 fourth-graders at Hough Elementary. In 1999, the program tapped 69 Harney Elementary fourth-graders.

In 2001, the sponsors went with an even younger group, with 91 second-graders at King Elementary; those students graduated from the eighth grade last month.

Lazarcik was part of the Dreamer celebration for those students, offering some encouragement as they head for high school.

"I want to be a mentor for Dreamers who are still on their journey," said Lazarcik, who graduated from Prairie High School in 2003.

The students from the Washington and Hough classes have a combined 85 percent high-school graduation rate, Granger said. National and state averages for low-income students is below 50 percent, she said.

Ken Nguyen knows he'd be facing even tougher odds if his family had remained in Vietnam.

"If we were living there, I wouldn't think about going to school," the recent college grad said. "Living here is a dream come true."

Ken isn't the only one in his family who uses that word. His father shares the sentiment.

"The American dream," Thi Van Nguyen said. "That's why we're here."

Update

Previously: The local "I Have a Dream" college-assistance program started in May 1995 with 60 fourth-graders at Washington Elementary.

What's new: Four of those students became the first Vancouver "Dreamers" to earn four-year college degrees this spring.

What's next: Three more local "Dreamer" classes are still in school, including another group of collegians.