

# A CROWNING SUCCESS

*Ms. Oregon recounts her family's harrowing escape from Vietnam and her path to citizenship*

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**I**t sat there smugly, seeming to exist for the sole purpose of taunting the little girl every time she meandered past it. Thuy Huyen (pronounced "Twee Who-win") despised that inane bowl of decorative fruit.

Back then, food was always on her mind — there was never enough of it.

There wasn't enough at the refugee camp in Indonesia, where her little belly swelled up like a basketball from malnutrition, protruding out from her wiry frame. And now that her family had finally been granted

entry into the United States, there still wasn't enough to eat.

There were times when her mother, Lien, would go to the McDonald's near their home in the little fishing town of Port Arthur, Texas, and bring back a single hamburger that she would cut crosswise two or three times, so she could split it among her children.

Huyen remembers one day when she was about 7 years old, she watched as a girl her age tossed an apple core into the gutter. Huyen

thought about that apple core for a while. There was a bite or two left on it. Would she go fetch it from where it lay in the gutter and eat it? It was covered in dirt, but she was so hungry. She admitted to picking it up, but was reluctant to say what she did next.

When her family arrived in Texas, they were flat broke. A charitable woman hosted the refugees in her home. Huyen remembers, now three decades later, the anguish that was caused by this woman's choice of table topper — that awful bowl of plastic fruit.

It seemed fitting that, when Huyen filled out her application for Ms. Oregon earlier this year, she chose world poverty as her platform.

"I figured: If I'm going to pick a platform, I'm going to pick something that I am very familiar with," she said.

The Ms. (not Miss) America pageant is for women 26 and older. They can be



PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ

*Ms. Oregon, Thuy Huyen, will compete in the Ms. America pageant. Her platform is world poverty.*

married, single or divorced and with or without children. There is no swimsuit or talent competition; instead, the emphasis is on contestants' spreading their platform messages in the months leading up to the selection of Ms. America. This will happen at a live-streamed pageant in Brea, Calif., in September.

This was the first time Huyen, 42, had ever entered a pageant. A selection committee crowned her after a thorough vetting process earlier this year, and now she's the reigning Ms. Oregon.

She smiled with poise as she recounted her life's astounding and often horrific tale during an interview over a picnic table in North Portland's Peninsula Park.

Despite the somewhat depressing topics of conversation, Huyen seemed cheerful, even laughing gleefully, at times, as she detailed her family's struggles.

Later she would reveal she could barely hold back tears throughout the interview. She said it was the first time she'd shared

the details of her escape from Vietnam in 35 years.

## Saigon's fall

Huyen was born on Buddha's birthday at the most lavish hospital in Saigon.

It was 1974, one year before communist forces captured the South Vietnamese capital city, marking the end of the Vietnam War.

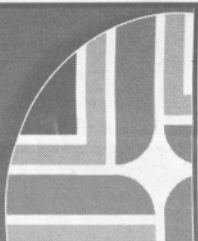
Huyen's grandmother was a wealthy woman who owned a fabric store and retailed jewelry. She used her riches to build several Buddhist temples for the people of Saigon.

Huyen's father, Chanh, was a well-known man of pedigree who dabbled in politics and taught high school English.

Her parents owned two houses in the city. Huyen remembers splitting her time between urban Saigon, where she was

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Planet  
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A periodic series on the personal journeys within Portland's immigrant communities.

At Thuy Huyen's request, Street Roots has not included the full names of her family members due to her fear for their safety. For many people who flee oppressive regimes or conflict zones and later find refuge in the U.S., the fear can stay with them throughout their lifetime. For the Planet Portland series, Street Roots respects these requests for anonymity.