

The Asian Reporter

Volume 29 Number 6
 March 18, 2019
 ISSN: 1094-9453

The Asian Reporter is published on the first and third Monday each month.

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MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



Meet Coi Vu!

Since December, Coi Vu has been living her dream. As the newly appointed director of the Asian Family Center (AFC), a program of the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO), Coi considers it an honor to lead and design programs for the families AFC serves. But this job, she says, is the culmination of two decades of social-service work that was inspired by her personal experiences as a refugee.

In 1979, Coi was still in her mother's womb when her family and many village members fled Vietnam on a boat that eventually shipwrecked off the coast of Malaysia. Her father drowned trying to rescue her mom and siblings when he was caught in a whirlpool. The rest of her family were rescued by Malaysians who took them to a refugee camp. After she was born, a village uncle named her LaiCoi — Lai for *Mai Lai* (Malaysia in Vietnamese) and Coi for *mo coi*, which means orphan. (Orphan is a cultural term used when one parent dies.)

Her family arrived in Portland in 1980. Growing up as a 1.5-generation Vietnamese American, Coi learned early on to navigate her dual identities. In her 20s, she worked full-time while raising two young nieces on her own and studying for a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology and later a Master of Arts degree in education. She then focused her career on social-justice work as a community organizer at organizations such as Impact NW and Open School.

Like many artists and writers in Portland, I met Coi during her five-year stint overseeing public programming at 19 branches of the Multnomah County Library where she offered a venue for performances and talks. Through that position, she was involved as a programming advisor on a mega-documentary about the Vietnam War by Ken Burns, a collaboration she described as memorable for her because people are still healing from the trauma of the war and it's still "very real for our communities."

Currently she's also a human-rights commissioner for the City of Portland, an appointment in which she looks into human-rights needs and violations and works to bring social-change policies. When she was hired as the director of AFC, she saw

it as a great opportunity to "lift up voices" and advocate for other immigrants and refugees, saying, "Every day I go home and think about the huge responsibility and privilege it is to be in this role."

As AFC director, she's tackling policies for early childhood equity to help ready children in preschool and kindergarten for elementary school. Through IRCO, she works on direct services such as housing stability, health navigation, legal services, energy assistance, and youth and parenting programs that support families.

IRCO and AFC are also increasing immigration legal services because there's a "fear in our communities" about current restrictions in applying for green cards and citizenship.

"Our Southeast Asian and African communities are also facing deportation at high rates," says Coi. Through AFC she's helping immigrants and refugees know their rights while advocating for policy and social change.

Established in 1976 by Asian refugees, IRCO originally assisted refugees in finding jobs, services, and a pathway to become citizens. As the organization grew, it became inclusive of all immigrant and refugee communities. AFC was founded by IRCO in 1994 and celebrates its 25th anniversary on May 2 at a gala event held at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, located at 1441 N.E. Second Avenue in Portland.

Coi believes there's still work to do to uplift immigrant and refugee communities and she's committed to the effort. Always positive, she says she keeps her spirits up by focusing on the "humanity of people" even when she disagrees with them.

"When we lose focus on humanity, we get discouraged because we no longer feel the bond and link with each other," she explained. "What grounds me is the understanding and belief we're all connected."

Coi was diagnosed with thyroid cancer six years ago. As a cancer survivor, she's well aware of the impermanence of life, the importance of every moment, and how "every relationship is precious and should be valued." To me, the signature in her e-mail speaks to her personal mission and spirit:

I was born onto my mother's earth. I rise above the sea of my father's death.

I am who I am of this sea and of this earth, of this time and of the time of my birth.



Coi Vu is the newly appointed director of the Asian Family Center in Portland.

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Wondering what events are going on this week? Check out *The AR's* event calendars, on pages 10 & 12!