

The Nail Salon That Raised Me

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In 1972, my father had his first hamburger. It was wrapped in plastic and served to him aboard a Pan Am flight from the Philippines to Guam. Just six months earlier, at nine years old, he and his sister had fled the escalating violence of the Vietnam War, leaving behind their parents, twelve siblings, and the only home he had ever known, bound for a refugee camp in the Philippines. After a brief stay in Guam, my father was flown to Fort Chaffee in Arkansas and then to San Francisco, where a sponsor family took him in. In 1975, he enrolled at Olympia Elementary as a fourth grader without knowing any English, facing both the challenges of a new country and the isolation of language barriers.

Around the same time, my mother and her family remained in South Vietnam, enduring the atrocities of war while working for American troops in Saigon. Unaware that they too would soon be forced to leave, my grandfather served as a police officer, while my grandmother worked in a supply warehouse. After the fall of Saigon, those connected to the Americans were barred from jobs and education, struggling to survive as they were pushed to the margins of society. It took thirteen years for the new Vietnamese government to approve my mother's family's emigration. During that long wait, they endured severe hardship, resorting to eating wild animals and burning leaves for warmth. When they were finally accepted into a refugee camp in the Philippines, only six of the eight family members could go, leaving two of the eldest children behind. My mother made it to the Bataan refugee camp, where she prepared for life in the United States. A sponsor family in California could only take four of them, leaving my mother and aunt at the camp for two months, waiting to reunite with their family.

In 1990, my mother entered the United States, joining her family as they began to rebuild their lives. Eventually, all eight members were reunited in Gardena, California, where they crowded into a rented garage. To support her family, my mother worked in a sweatshop, earning just seventeen dollars a week. They turned to local churches for help, which provided food, transportation, and a supportive community during those difficult times.

After fifteen years in the United States, my father had established a solid foundation and felt a strong desire to give back. He began helping newly arrived refugees from Vietnam as they started their own journeys, volunteering through Maria Regina Catholic Church. It was there that my parents first met.



My story did not begin when I was born. By the time my parents were my age, they had endured experiences that most people, including myself,

will never have to face. I owe my life to their resilience and perseverance and often reflect on the chain of events that led me to where I am today. I entered the world in 2003 in the small town of Statesville, North Carolina. By then, my mother had left her job as a line worker at a cup noodle factory, and my father had stepped down from his role as a general manager at Taco Bell. They realized that living in California wasn't ideal for their dream of raising a family, so they followed my aunt to North Carolina, where they were set to begin new jobs at a nail salon. Like many other Vietnamese immigrants, my parents found that the nail industry offered an opportunity for financial stability. After moving from one strip mall to another, my parents finally established their own nail salon, Hana Studio, named after my mother's American name, where they still work to this day.



As a toddler, my parents set up a cozy room in the salon for me. It had lime-green walls, blankets on the floor and a boxy TV perched on a folding

chair, keeping me entertained while they worked long hours. I spent a lot of time alone, lost in daydreams, watching the Discovery Channel, or taking naps. Before I could attend school, this was where most of my time was spent. I was always allowed to leave the room, but the sound of the nail drill, the strong smell of acetone, and the ongoing chatter of the grown-ups outside were enough to keep me in.

My parents put so much work into making the salon just how they wanted it. A waiting area with three chairs and a stack of magazines greeted each customer at the door. Racks of nail polish bottles hung on the walls. The bottles clacked every time someone picked out their color. Plants and photos of our family were sporadically placed around the salon. A makeshift kitchen was nestled in the back. It had a mini-fridge and prehistoric microwave, one with a dial and no buttons. Rows of pedicure chairs and workstations filled the rest of the space.

My parents were experts at saving money. Whether it was eating at the same cheap Chinese buffet every day, or reusing grocery bags so they'd never had to buy trash bags, my parents made the most out of every cent. They brought me to the salon every day as they went to work to avoid paying for a babysitter or daycare. The walls of the room were the border of the world in which I ruled and I was content with that.

Devastation came when my parents told me they needed my room to create more space in the salon. I felt betrayed and threw a tantrum in the middle of the salon until my dad agreed to buy me ice cream. After this, I was forced to stay outside the confines of the room. I reluctantly began to interact with a world that wasn't my own. I was too shy to talk to anyone other than my parents, so I kept to myself and explored every square inch of the salon. I started to learn the particularities that allowed the salon to

operate smoothly. I quickly became a master at doing my own nails, cleaning up after clients, and reading the schedule to know exactly who was coming next. My favorite things to do were arranging the polish colors in rainbow order and making sure all of the hair products on the front shelf were facing the same way. I was thrilled when my mother finally let me start practicing fake nails. Later on, some of my mother's clients were kind enough to let me practice on their nails, even if it meant some nail polish ended up on their fingers.

More than just a nail salon, Hana Studio was a lively hub where people from all parts of our small, rural town came together. I would often sit cross-legged on an empty pedicure chair, quietly listening to the conversations that filled the salon. There was a deep, symbiotic relationship between the salon and the community. The clients not only brought small-town gossip but also provided unwavering support whenever my family needed it. The salon wasn't just a place to get your nails done—it was a gathering space where people found community. Many of our household items were hand-me-downs from clients, and our outgrown clothing was passed on to them in return. My parents would alternate with other families, taking turns driving us kids to school and sports practices. These early connections at the salon brought the community into my family's story, shaping the opportunities I would later find and the role I would play in my own community.

After starting elementary school, I continued to spend the after-school hours at the salon. During that time, I would work with my parents until closing time. I couldn't relate to my classmates who participated in programs or enjoyed time at home after school. I was thrust into a world of nail artistry, meticulous cleanliness, and constant gossip among the ladies at the salon. I

immersed myself in conversation with everyone that came in. As hesitant as I was to leave my room at first, I felt like I had discovered a new frontier to investigate and promptly made myself at home.

Eventually, I was old enough to stay home alone and stopped going to the salon every day. My priorities shifted and the salon became nothing more than a place that my parents traveled to and from every day. The memories of my room and the salon as a whole drifted from my mind.



In high school, I returned to the salon to start working with my parents. The room that once felt like my whole universe suddenly felt very small. There were scuff marks on the walls that used to feel new from the constant movement of rolling chairs. The pencil marks on the door frame that tracked my height were painted over. Pieces of the carpet had started coming up from the heavy foot traffic. Everything felt familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Some things shifted locations and others firmly held their place as they did for the past two decades. I felt at home there, just as much as

I felt comfortable in my actual home. I realized that I never forgot about the salon. As I grew more confident in my nail painting skills, the salon's clients embraced my efforts, turning those moments into lessons in hard work, gratitude, and the warmth of a supportive community.

Thanks to a referral from one of my mother's clients, I landed a pharmacy technician job at Walgreens, connecting me with familiar faces from the salon and deepening my sense of belonging in the community that had supported us. Balancing Walgreens with other commitments taught me to manage multiple responsibilities—training for sports in the mornings, working at the pharmacy in the afternoons, and painting nails on weekends. When the pandemic closed my parents' salon, I stepped up, working full-time at Walgreens. It was exhausting, but I was grateful for the chance to keep our community going—whether by assisting with vaccines or offering kind words. Through it all, I learned to appreciate the strength that comes from leaning on a community and giving back in return.

During this time, I was simultaneously applying to college as a first-generation student. Navigating applications, financial aid, and essays was challenging, but I leaned on my community. A retired English teacher and a local newspaper editor (longtime salon clients) reviewed my essays, guided me through the financial aid process, and encouraged me when I doubted myself. With their support, I applied to several schools and ultimately received the news that I was accepted to Yale University.

After I moved away for college, I had a hard time accepting that the salon would go on without me. Each time I come back, something is different about the salon and I have to ask my parents, "When did you do that?" There's a new sign that reads "Welcome to paradise," which is what my dad says to greet every customer. A TV antenna that captures local

channels (for free!) was hung right outside the back door. A communal phone charger has been added at the front counter.

I'm still reminded of the salon even though my physical distance from it spans almost 700 miles. My mother periodically texts me with requests to update the Hana Studio Facebook page. My parents don't know how to use Venmo, so my account is used for customers who don't carry cash. My phone pings with Amazon notifications when my parents order supplies. Every day, I still ask my parents how the salon is doing and how business is going. "Same as always," they say, and we move on.