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Editor's Note: Although the following article is not the kind of paper we usually publish, we have decided to do so to remind us that ESL is not just about teaching and learning but also about learners and teachers – people working together to create a better life for all of us.

Her Rightful Place

RAYMOND DEVENNEY

Bell Multicultural High School

I always secretly cringed when I heard teachers say if they could make a difference for just one student in their careers they would be satisfied. Something inside of me always scoffed, and I thought, even as I nodded my head in apparent agreement with my colleague, that the person must have pretty low professional ambitions. But what does it mean to really help someone, to make a difference in someone's life? A good relationship, shared experiences, close interaction, learning about and from each other, helping students think more about themselves and the world, helping to sharpen or expand literary and linguistic skills, getting someone into college, finding someone a job? These were the kinds of things I had counted as reaching or helping a student, making a difference in a student's life. At least they were until I started the process of helping Loan try to find her father.

Loan

Loan was a 20-year-old Amerasian high school sophomore whom I had known for about two years. She had been in one of my classes when she first arrived in the school, and we had a friendly, though not especially close, relationship. We had never really talked about her past or her father, except for a few joking remarks she had made saying that her father looked like me. Not me personally – it was her way of referring to her mixed

Vietnamese and American heritage. I may have asked a few perfunctory questions, but we never discussed the topic at length. Yet one day in October 1991, out of the blue, Loan approached me with a scrap of faded notepaper with a name and address on it and asked me if I would help her try to find her father. She had a letter with the name of her father's mother and a Florida address for her from the early 1970s, a black-and-white picture of her dad with Loan's mother, and not much else. As an adoptive parent, I identified with Loan's hope to locate her father, having often fielded my own young daughter's questions about her biological Korean parents. But, though I never said so to Loan, to be honest, what initially intrigued me most was the practical, intellectual challenge of the task: How would I go about finding this ex-serviceman, especially with so little information to go on? I had no idea, and that's probably why I said I would do it. To me, it was a mystery, a puzzle to be solved, but to Loan I suspected it was much more, a defining moment in her life, regardless of the outcome.

Certainly as a child and teenager she had thought innumerable times about her father and had fantasized about a reunion. She had probably rehearsed in her mind what she would say, how she would act, how she would respond, maybe even what she would wear. These imaginings were even more poignant given the realities and hardships of her life and existence as an Amerasian child in postwar Vietnam, and later in a Vietnamese community in the United States.

But now she was going to try to do something to establish a relationship that had existed only in her dreams. She had worked up the courage to proceed in the search for her family – and for herself, and she had asked me to be a part of that investigation. Who am I, who do I look like, what is my father like, does he remember me, does he think about me, why hasn't he ever contacted me, does he love me – so much of her life kept locked inside of herself for so many years, and I was being asked to get involved in this personal quest.

On reflection, I felt honored. But why me? Wasn't someone other than an ESL teacher more capable of helping in this matter? Probably, but I think no one is as accessible to second language students as their ESL teachers, particularly students with limited English skills and even less knowledge of the working of the bureaucracies of American society. I was chosen not because I have an Asian daughter, not as a function of a close student-teacher relationship, not for skills or knowledge that I might possess, but by default, because Loan probably didn't know anyone else to ask. And that's important to remember. As teachers of immigrants we need to be ready, we need to be prepared on a moment's notice to become our students' advocates. We may be their last or only option for issues of pressing

or personal concern that we never suspect. It's just part of the work we do as ESL teachers, to be ready for our call.

For my part, I wanted to be especially sure that Loan was willing to accept bad news about her father, or even outright hostility and rejection, if we were able to find him. But more likely, I cautioned, I didn't think we'd find him at all. She also needed to recognize that he might not want to be found. Loan said she had considered all of this and was still willing to look for her father. It was something she needed, and wanted, to do. And on that basis, our search, and my own development as a teacher, began.

Beginning the Search

The first thing I did was to attempt to contact Loan's grandmother, Mrs. Helen Davis, in Florida; but that address, as Loan already knew, was no longer current, and there were no other listings for Helen or H. Davis in that phone area. Because Davis was a common surname, I attempted to concentrate on finding Loan's father, Gary McGowin, through the phone book, hoping for luck with that more unfamiliar last name; however, this produced nothing either. Next, I got in touch with a friend of mine who had served as lawyer in the military for almost 10 years. Most of what I did eventually manage to find out came as a result of advice and suggestions he made.

He started with an overview of military personnel records and set the parameters of the search. There were two possibilities: Either the person was still on active duty and could be found through the Enlisted Records and Evaluation Center (EREC) in Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana; or the person had left the military, in which case his or her service records would have gone to the National Personnel Record Center (NPRC) in Saint Louis, Missouri. My lawyer friend's next piece of information was the key to the whole search process. I could probably get the information from the former source by phone, but the latter, and more likely source, was regarded as protected under Privacy Act regulations. However, and this was the crucial thing my friend told me, while I, or even Loan, had no right to obtain her father's military records, a member of Congress is free from such Privacy Act regulations. He or she can access any public record. The critical step would be to get Loan's congressman to make the request for Loan.

A call to Fort Benjamin Harrison confirmed that Loan's father was no longer on active duty, and a call to Saint Louis produced pretty much what my friend had predicted. The military representative did let us know that in fact there were several records under the name McGowin, Gary but that I had no right to them. Encouraged nonetheless, we planned the next step, a formal congressional request for information.

Loan's Mother and the Congresswoman

Another thing my lawyer friend advised me to do was to talk with my student's mother to try to gather as much information as possible about the serviceman. Loan's mother was the best resource for getting the information needed to identify and locate Gary McGowin. He urged me to use a great deal of tact and deliberation in dealing with Loan's mother because this could be a very sensitive area that my student's mother had kept private on purpose. The mother could have been raped; she could have been a prostitute; she could have been unsure, mistaken, even lying, about who the father really was: It could be an epoch of her life that she wanted to remain distant and closed. What she wanted and what her daughter wanted could be in direct conflict.

Fortunately, Loan's mom, De, had had a positive and close relationship with Gary. Most of the information she had possessed about him she lost in the chaotic times in Vietnam after 1975. What she did have was the crucial piece of information we needed for the congressional request, a very old military identification number for Loan's father – one that actually was issued prior to the uniform use of social security numbers as identification in the army. Additionally, she had an army post office address from his time in Vietnam, which identified Gary McGowin's military unit. She could also make a fairly approximate guess about his age, though she did not know his exact date of birth.

Loan's mother was open and encouraging to me, and she became a bastion of emotional support for Loan throughout this whole process. Still, at this point our search would have ended without the invaluable assistance of Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton and her dedicated administrative aide, Antonio Montes. They promised to help in any way they could, Tony even directing us on what we should do and how we should do it. He advised us on what to include in our formal letter and provided us with the necessary forms to complete so that the congresswoman could assist on Loan's behalf. By Christmas, the congresswoman's request for access to Gary McGowin's service file was on its way to Saint Louis.

A Time of Anticipation, A Time for Sadness

Tony Montes told us that it would probably be 8 to 10 weeks before we'd get any information from the military. We had hoped to come across a more current address in Gary McGowin's discharge records, or perhaps a phone number or street listing for Helen Davis. On my lawyer friend's advice, we also contacted the Veteran Administration's regional office to see if they had ever processed a benefits claim for Loan's father. If they had, we

would have asked the congresswoman to get that file, too. Unfortunately, Gary never made a claim for benefits.

Over the next two months, we would periodically call to find out if the congresswoman had heard anything yet. Loan and I talked about what we would do with any information we got as well as about how Loan felt about the whole experience. She said she was just glad to be doing the search at last and that she was prepared to deal with whatever happened. Most of the time, however, Loan just waited anxiously.

Then, one day in late March, Loan sought me out in the teachers' room, and it was evident that she had been crying. With her she had a terse, formal governmental letter. The correspondence was from the National Personnel Records Center, stating only they regretted to inform her that Gary Mack McGowin died in Key West, Florida on October 29, 1978. She was crushed. Though we had always known that this was a possibility, her father's death was not what she was expecting or preparing for. She was trying to come to grips with issues of acceptance or rejection. Her father's death was the worst imaginable, and the least considered, scenario for Loan. I hugged her and told her how sorry I was. She thanked me and said at least she knew the truth and that she was glad she had tried to find her dad.

Loan's Father

While Loan knew the truth, she didn't know what had happened to her father. A couple of days later I asked her if she wanted to continue looking for information about her dad and perhaps even try to find other members of her family. She said she would, so our search shifted gears. When a person dies, I told her, there is often a notice, called an obituary, in the local newspaper. At the end of this obituary, names of surviving relatives of the deceased person are usually given.

From directory information, we learned the name of the local newspaper, the *Key West Citizen*, and we asked them to look for Gary McGowin's obituary. John Guerra, a reporter, dug back through the records and let us know that no obituary for Loan's father ever appeared in the paper. For more assistance in the search, he suggested we contact Tom Hambright, a local historian at the county library. Mr. Hambright said he would investigate for us, and in the middle of May he sent a letter saying that, while there had been no obituary for Gary McGowin, a very short article about his death did appear in the *Key West Citizen* on October 31, 1978: "No Foul Play Ruled in Man's Drowning."

Loan sat down and I read and explained the article to her. According to the newspaper, Gary had been a mate on a shrimp boat. Apparently after

drinking heavily with the other crew members, Loan's father, wearing only a bathing suit, jumped off the vessel into the water and simply never surfaced, an accidental drowning. His body was recovered the next day by the Coast Guard. A small bag inside his suit contained some cash, a checkbook and a savings book, some personal papers, and a small amount of marijuana.

The difference between her reaction to this new information and the depression she felt after receiving the governmental letter was striking. This was cathartic. To me, it seemed as if she was trying to put together the reality of her father's existence with the few bits and pieces of information she had of him from her mother, her family lore: Her mother had mentioned to her that he liked to drink beer and had said he was a little "wild," but not in a mean way.

Loan chuckled at the reference to marijuana, but in a way reminiscent of how young people can never quite imagine that older people they know were ever young once, too. Then, when suddenly confronted with the evidence of this incomprehensible youth, they are forced to change forever the way they have come to see that older person, no longer a museum piece or family icon or fading photo, but a sensuous, dynamic, or impetuous young man or woman, much more like the young person is now than the youth had ever considered possible. And that's the point. That person is like me, that person could be me – and for Loan that was a special moment, a brief connection to a person and past and family she had never known, but which encompassed her now as we read and made small talk about a 13-year-old six-paragraph article in the *Key West Citizen*.

Also mentioned in the article, and cited by Tom Hambright as a potential lead, was the sheriff office's investigation of the incident, which was handled by Detective Lieutenant Richard Conrady. We called and requested any information they had on the case. A short time later Richard Roth, sheriff of Monroe County, Florida, sent us a copy of the file on the case.

What stood out in the transcript of questioning for Loan was the way the others talked about her dad to the police: he was a good crew member and a good guy. He did his job and didn't cause problems. They were sorry they couldn't have done anything to help. They didn't know why he suddenly decided to jump overboard; he wasn't trying to kill himself – it was a terrible accident. The sheriff's office also forwarded a copy of the medical examiner's report and suggested I get in touch with them to find out where Mr. McGowin's body was sent.

At the medical examiner's office, Nancy Favell dug through records as I waited on the phone. The body of Gary McGowin was released to Jeffrey Dean of the Dean-Lopez Funeral Home in Key West on October 31,

1978. We hoped to find out from Jeffrey Dean who attended or paid for the service; however, Mr. Dean's records indicated that no service was held in Key West. The body was only held there temporarily; it was picked up by the Hubbard-Copeland Funeral Home of Gainesville, Florida, and unfortunately we learned they no longer kept financial or service files from that time. They did tell us, however, that Mr. McGowin was buried in Evergreen Cemetery, the city cemetery, in Gainesville. Loan, after years of wondering and months of searching, had at last found her father.

Loan's Grandmother

After that, we were looking for living relatives – Loan's extended family, once again – and we had the vital information that would lead us to them. We concentrated on trying to locate McGowins in the Gainesville/Central Florida area, but this proved fruitless. We ended up with six people with the same surname, but none were related to Gary Mack McGowin. Several of these sources suggested we try in the Pensacola area, as they knew of several McGowin families in that area. Again, the people we reached were considerate and kind, but they were not related and didn't know Gary's family.

Suddenly, I realized that I was overlooking something obvious and important, Gary's mother. I called directory information in Gainesville and requested the listings under Helen or H. Davis. There was one, on Southwest 28th Place. And at this point I called Loan. Who would call? Loan suggested I should, that I could explain things better.

I dialed the number I had gotten from directory assistance. After several long rings, an elderly woman answered. I asked to speak with Mrs. Helen B. Davis. The woman said she was Helen Davis. I took a long deep breath, identified myself as a teacher from Washington, and asked if she was the mother of Gary Mack Davis. She said she was but that her son was dead. I told her I knew, I was calling on behalf of her son's daughter, her granddaughter, Miss Loan Le, who was one of my students in DC.

For a moment, Mrs. Davis couldn't speak. When she gathered herself together she said, "You mean Gary's baby, from Vietnam?" Mrs. Davis told me she had written to Loan's mother and had tried to find her for a long time, even worked through the Red Cross but without any luck. I told her briefly about our search and let her know that her granddaughter wanted to call her; Loan was waiting to hear from me about what to do.

Mrs. Davis was too surprised and shocked by the suddenness of events to be ecstatic – that would come later; I told her to stay by the phone and that the call would come through in a matter of minutes. Around 7 p.m. on the evening of June 25th, 1992, shortly after school had finished for the

year, Loan tentatively, in a voice filled with nervous emotion, whispered "Hello" into the receiver and was connected to a part of her life she had only dreamed about up until that moment.

Taking Her Rightful Place

Over the summer, Loan and her grandmother exchanged phone calls, letters, photos, and invitations. In August, Loan's mother scraped together fare money to send her to Florida. The week before school started back Loan traveled to Gainesville to spend five days with her grandmother. It was a tearful and marvelous homecoming. Loan met uncles, aunts, cousins, neighbors and friends of the family. She heard family stories and recollections about her dad, and she informed her relatives about her own saga. She was told, and shown pictures to prove, how much she resembled her father. For Loan's grandmother that was something special, too, because her son now seemed to have reappeared in a way Mrs. Davis could never have expected or hoped for. What's more, Loan learned that her father had loved her very much and had never forgotten her. On the day before she returned home, Loan and her grandmother visited and placed flowers on her father's grave together.

This June Loan Le will take her rightful place among the 114 members of the 1994 graduating class of Bell Multicultural High School. Toward the end of the ceremony, her name will be called, and she will come across the dais in front of the assembled faculty to receive a handshake, a kiss on the cheek, and a diploma from her principal, Mrs. Maria Tukeva. Leading the applause of the families, friends, and well-wishers in the auditorium for all that she is, all she has been through, and all she has accomplished will be her mother, Mrs. De Le, of Washington, DC and her grandmother, Mrs. Helen B. Davis of Gainesville, Florida. And I will be on the stage leading the ovation for all that she will yet become. ■

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the work of all those who helped in this search. I would also like to acknowledge the work of all those who help, especially teachers, in thousands of ways large and small every day to make significant differences in the lives of students.