

A Valedictorian Speech: Uncertainties make life exciting

By Chau Huynh '07

Parents, today I am one of the last obstacles to stand in the way of your child graduating. Oh sweet power, but of course with great power comes great responsibility. It is a humbling experience to be able to stand up here and share my memories of the past years.

Two weeks ago, I ran across a book by **Robert Fulghum** titled *All I Ever Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. The book contains important lessons that we learned, such as clean up your own mess, don't hit people, flush, learn some and think some and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some. But the one lesson that truly got me through school was this one: it's okay to be uncertain about what lies ahead. My message is not about self-doubt, but rather about having confidence and trusting that everything will be all right.

While in the first grade, I learned that my uncle had sponsored my family to move to Hawai'i from Vietnam. After frequent visits to the office of the U.S. Ambassador, my family was finally granted permission to come to the United States. So at 11-years-old, I boarded an airplane for the first time in my life and watched as my friends, relatives, and everything familiar got smaller and smaller until I was above the clouds. Several transfers later, my family and I landed, and I was still feeling above the clouds, unreal and uncertain. On my first day of fifth grade in Hawai'i, the teacher asked me how old I was and I replied, "Yes." I went shopping at Longs, and when I stepped on the foot of a middle-aged lady, I said "thank you" and ran away.

Looking back, I am glad that I was ignorant of how hard my parents had to work and how scary or embarrassing it was to not understand what was going on all the time. The uncertainty had allowed me to test my limits. I trusted that everything would work out, and indeed it has.

Neither of my parents had the opportunity to finish high school, and education has never been an emphasis in my family. I applied to 'Iolani as a result of a fifth grade teacher's encouragement, not even knowing what 'Iolani was. Once again, I found myself face to face with uncertainty. Rumors about how competitive the students were and how late I would have to stay up at night filled me with fears, while promises of new experiences filled me with excitement. During my first year, I joined the Science Bowl team, not because I liked science, but because I thought one of the team members was really cute. Little did I know that Science Bowl would become such a big part of my life. I learned to take risks, to make random guesses despite what my choices might cost the team. While I caused my team to lose many times, my fellow science geeks still love me, or so I hope. In hindsight, I did not expect that all the little risks would add up to a free trip to Washington, D.C.

These past few years have been so fun because I did not know what was in store for me. The people at 'Iolani never ceased to surprise me with their intellect, their athletic ability, their artistic talents, their good looks, but, most importantly, their kind hearts. I know I will never forget that Mr. (**Charles**) **Proctor** saved the science section from the *New York Times* for me every week. Now I'm leaving 'Iolani and still have no clue who I am or what will become of me, and I realize there is nothing wrong with that. Uncertainties have made my life exciting.

Since my parents have not understood what I have said today, please allow me a moment to thank them. *Cam on ba ma da hi sinh rat nhieu cho con. Hi vong ba ma vinh hanh ve con ngay hom nay.*

Fellow graduates, I hesitate a bit as I think about the next few years. 'Iolani has opened so many doors for us, and the infinite choices can look daunting. Hopefully through it all, we will discover that perhaps our limits are not zero, but undefined. I am sure that we will confront many, many uncertainties. Be excited. The dots will somehow connect.



Chau Huynh '07 speaks from the podium during the 2007 commencement ceremony.

Valedictorian Chau Huynh '07 delivered this speech at the June 2 commencement ceremony for the Class of 2007. Other student speakers were valedictorian Jonah Yuen '07 and senior class president Gerilyn Manago '07.

A YOUNG WOMAN'S JOURNEY FROM HO CHI MINH TO HARVARD

By Cathy Lee Chong

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. But sometimes a thousand words can represent the struggles, journeys and triumphs of an entire family and their native land.

When **Chau Huynh '07** stepped on to the stage and took her rightful place behind the podium at the commencement ceremony for the Class of 2007, the moment signified a pinnacle in her young life. Not only did she speak on behalf of her fellow valedictorians and classmates, but her speech told the story of humility, courage, perseverance, a quest for knowledge, and the value of family and lifelong friendships.

When she finished delivering her commencement address, many audience members were moved to tears. Applause roared from every space on the lawn. Though they were not physically there, Chau's family and friends in Vietnam were present in spirit. And the sacrifices and risks made by her mother, father and uncle had clearly been worthwhile.

"The graduation speech is an opportunity for students to share their versions of the 'Iolani experience and how they got to that point in life," says 'Iolani Director of College Counseling **Todd Fleming**. "I felt Chau's speech provided such a great insight into her as a person. Everyone knows her as this phenomenal student, but the speech revealed her sense of humor and real self."

In late May, about a week before graduation, Headmaster Dr. **Val Iwashita** invited 20 students from the Class of 2007 to his office for an important meeting. He proudly announced that each of them had been named a valedictorian. From grades nine through twelve, they had achieved the highest academic rank and, as a group, their average GPA was 4.32.

In addition to the senior class president, two of the 20 valedictorians would speak at the commencement ceremony on June 2. This would be the boy and girl with the highest GPAs. **Jonah Yuen '07** and Chau were selected.

"I was like, 'Wow,'" Chau recalls. "I would never have thought I'd be there. Everyone in the room there that day deserved to speak. The difference between me and the other people was like .0001."

But when she sat at the computer to write the biggest speech of her life, she didn't know what to say. Her first drafts were unfocused. Her writer's block was the size of a boulder.

Thankfully, she was working with long-time English teacher **Georgeanne Miyamoto**, who has worked with dozens of valedictorians and class presidents on their speeches over the years. Mrs. M, as she is called by students, had been Chau's ninth grade English teacher and had coached her on the speech and debate team.

"Mrs. M was like, you know, 'Tell your story,'" Chau says. "I was really reluctant at first because it was personal. But you know Mrs. M got it out of me. She said, 'It is a story worth telling.' I just sat down and started writing."



Following the ceremony on June 2, family and friends congratulate the graduates on the school's football field. Left to right, great aunt Ba Xim, Chau Huynh '07, mother Nhon Nguyen and father Tu Huynh.



Gathering in Seto Hall before the senior march to graduation were Ili Wong '07, Kerrie Yee '07, Lisa Gao '07, Angeline Chang '07, Chau Huynh '07 and Ruth Chen '07.



On campus during their senior year were Angeline Chang '07, Kerrie Yee '07, Lisa Gao '07 and Chau Huynh '07.

Towards the end of her speech, Chau thanked her parents in Vietnamese, though she was initially reluctant to do so because few people in the audience would understand. However, Mrs. M had encouraged her to because the most important people in Chau's life would know the meaning.

"Thank you for all you have sacrificed for me," Chau said in her native tongue, "and I hope you are proud of me today."

As well, Chau's accomplishments make the 'Iolani community swell with pride.

Born in Ho Chi Minh City, Chau was a young girl when she learned her family planned to move from Vietnam to Hawai'i. Her father's brother, who had fled Vietnam after the war as one of the boat people, sent pictures from Hawai'i back to his family. Chau remembers how impressed she was by the photos and how clean the streets in Honolulu looked.

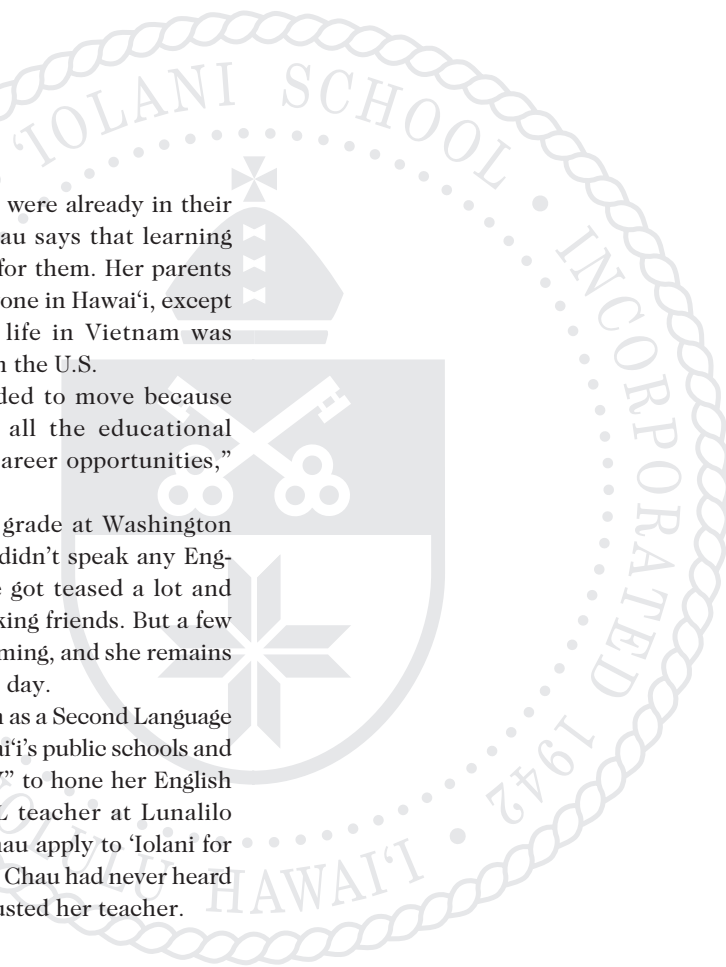
While Chau was only 11 when she immigrated with her mother **Nhon Nguyen**, father **Tu Huynh**, and older brother **Kiet Huynh** to

Hawai'i, her parents were already in their mid-forties, and Chau says that learning English was harder for them. Her parents also didn't know anyone in Hawai'i, except for her uncle, and life in Vietnam was "simpler" than life in the U.S.

"My family decided to move because of me, because of all the educational opportunities and career opportunities," Chau says.

She began sixth grade at Washington Middle School. She didn't speak any English and admits she got teased a lot and had a hard time making friends. But a few students were welcoming, and she remains close to them to this day.

Chau took English as a Second Language classes through Hawai'i's public schools and "watched a lot of TV" to hone her English skills. Later, an ESL teacher at Lunalilo School suggested Chau apply to 'Iolani for her ninth grade year. Chau had never heard of 'Iolani, but she trusted her teacher.



She was accepted to 'Iolani and met the requirements under 'Iolani's Freeman Scholars Program, which is for immigrants from Asia with academic, athletic or artistic promise and who demonstrate full or substantial need for financial aid.

At 'Iolani, Chau flourished. She joined the speech and debate team, math team and Science Bowl team. She made friends more easily than in middle school and was astonished at how much her teachers cared. In her senior year, she was captain of the Science Bowl team which won the state championship and represented Hawai'i at a national tournament in Washington, D.C.

For her scholarship work, she fulfilled duties in the Registrar's Office. She also took a potpourri of Advancement Placement and honors level courses, working closely with Director of Counseling **Tracy Kimura** '87 on scheduling her course work and extracurricular activities.

"Chau always says what she likes about 'Iolani is that people here are really bright,



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—Chau Huynh '07

but are also very modest, and that they inspired her to do her best,” Kimura says. “But I don’t think she realizes that she inspires other people. I don’t think she knows she has that effect on others.”

Back in December 2006, Chau received the news that she was granted early acceptance to Harvard University for the fall of 2008.

When she told her parents, they did not know what Harvard was. And they were uncomfortable with their only daughter moving to the East Coast. They initially asked her to stay in Hawai'i for college instead. But then her mother and father talked to their friends.

“Their friends told them, ‘Wow, that’s a really good college,’ and they were like, ‘Really?’” Chau says. “So then they learned more about it and now I guess they’re really proud, but my dad is still really sad that I’m leaving, and it’s so far away.”

Chau’s parents work in a t-shirt factory, and her brother is a senior at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Relatives on her mother’s side of the family are still in Vietnam.

While Chau has learned a wealth of knowledge from her teachers at 'Iolani, the lessons her parents have imparted to her are equally as valuable and meaningful.

“From my parents I’ve learned that there are a lot of different kinds of intelligence,” Chau shares. “Not just book wise, like doing well on tests. I can study and memorize almost anything. But my dad is like a human calculator. He can

multiply two digit numbers fast. He can do that really well. And my mom is just the greatest cook ever. You know there are a lot of different types of intelligence, and I’ve learned that from them.”

When Chau turned 18-years-old on February 17, she began applying to become a United States citizen. After studying American history, taking a written test and undergoing a lengthy interview, she received her citizenship this past April.

The milestones keep coming.

At spring honors day in May, she received the Sananikone Achievement Award given to the senior who has demonstrated extraordinary efforts in the face of hardship and in overcoming the barriers of an unfamiliar culture and language in achieving scholastic excellence.

This past July, she attended a four-week National Youth Science Camp in West Virginia.

On September 8, she began orientation week at Harvard where she is receiving nearly a full scholarship. She hopes to major in biochemistry and perhaps go to medical school, but she is not ruling out economics as a course of study after being inspired by 'Iolani AP Economics teacher **Richard Rankin** last school year.

The little girl who left Vietnam seven years ago is now a young woman embarking on another adventure in a different part of the world. Again, she is leaving something familiar and jumping into the unknown.

But she’s not worried. As she revealed in her graduation speech, “Uncertainties have made my life exciting.”

What memories of 'Iolani will remain with Chau in the years to come?

“There were a lot of really big events like the prom and senior camp that I’ll never forget,” she reminisces. “But I think I will really just miss sitting on the benches and talking story with my friends. In the back of my mind, I realize I may not see them for a long time. And it’s really nice to just have friends to talk to about anything.” ■