

'Girl in the picture' brings peace message to Winnipeg



South

Vietnamese forces follow terrified children, including 9-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phuc, center, as they run down Route 1 near Trang Bang, Vietnam, after an aerial napalm attack on suspected North Vietnamese troop positions on June 8, 1972. A Vietnamese Airforce bomber accidentally dropped its flaming napalm on South Vietnamese troops and civilians. (Associated Press/Nick Ut)

Kim Phuc recalls her 14 month recovery in a Vietnamese hospital. (Teghan Beaudette/CBC)

You may not know her name, or even anything about her, but chances are you've seen a photo of her in her most vulnerable moment.

Kim Phuc is known worldwide as "the girl in the picture" after being photographed as a child running naked in a small Vietnamese village after a napalm strike burned the clothes off of her body.

The photo, taken by Nick Ut, is considered one of the most recognizable photos in the world. Phuc's desperate face and burnt skin became the image of war, and years later, a catalyst for peace.

Now, Phuc is an advocate for child victims of war and a symbol for peace. On Thursday, she stopped in Winnipeg to speak as part of the city's Peace Days.

The moments before the photo was taken

Phuc was nine years old when the iconic photo was taken in 1972, in the midst of the Vietnam War. Days before, her family relocated from their home to a temple, believing it would be safer there, but, Phuc said, "in war time, nowhere is safe."

'I wished the photo wasn't taken the moment I saw it'- *Kim Phuc, the 'girl in the picture'*

On the third day in the temple, south Vietnamese soldiers arrived to tell her family they needed to run.

"I saw the airplane get very fast, very close and very loud. Then I heard bo-bo bo-bo," she recalled. "I saw the four bombs."

Immediately, Phuc saw flames all around her.

“I saw the fire over my left arm,” she said. “I was terrified.”

Phuc’s clothes were burned off her body, and she ran alongside her brothers and grandmother, who was holding her infant cousin in her arms.

Phuc ran while her skin came off like sheets of paper. Finally, she stopped.

‘I thought, “Oh my god. I will be ugly.”’ - *Kim Phuc, the ‘girl in the picture’*

“I stopped and cried out, “Too hot. Too hot,”” she said. A nearby soldier offered her water and poured some of his canteen over her burns. She passed out after that.

While she was running, Associated Press photographer Nick Ut had snapped her photo, capturing the image that would not only frame the way people saw war, but also have a lasting impression on how Phuc saw herself.

When she woke, she found out two of her cousins, age 3 and nine months, were killed in the bombing.

She would spend the next 14 months in a Vietnamese hospital and undergo 17 operations, including painful skin grafts, before she would go home.

Coming to terms with her body



“I thought, ‘Oh my god. I will be ugly,’” said Phuc. As a nine-year-old Vietnamese girl, Phuc’s first thought was about how others would see her for the rest of her life.

Phan Thi Kim Phuc, 9, bearing the scars of a mistaken napalm strike two months earlier, pushes another patient at the Barsky Center for Plastic and Reconstructive surgery in Saigon on Aug. 8, 1972. (Associated Press/Michel Laurent)

Phuc wouldn’t see Ut’s photograph until she was out of hospital, more than a year after it was taken. Her father pulled out the photo he had clipped from the newspaper and showed it to her.

“I was so embarrassed,” she said. “I was a girl, right?”

Phuc was angry and upset she was naked, while her brothers ran with clothes. “I wished the picture wasn’t taken the moment I saw it,” she said. It wasn’t until years later, she was glad it existed.

For years she struggled with her burns and low self-esteem.

“I hated myself. I hated people who made war. I hated people who were normal,” she said. “I envied them. I wish I would be normal.”

Things as simple as wearing short-sleeved shirts were things Phuc thought she would never be able to do.

‘Now, I love my scars. It reminds me where I come from’ - *Kim Phuc, the ‘girl in the picture’*

The self-esteem issues came to a head in her late teens, when she was studying to be a doctor. A group of her friends were discussing what men they would be willing to date, when one of the girls suggested a man in their class.

Phuc hadn't shown the women her scars, and one of her friends candidly said she would never date the man because he had a small scar on his hand from a fire as a child.

"I heard that. I left and I cried and cried, and I said, 'Who will love me?'" said Phuc. "I couldn't sleep for honestly three days."

Focusing on forgiveness



Debilitating self-esteem issues and anger were eventually replaced with forgiveness and a strong desire to spur change.

"I had a choice. I had to learn to forgive," said Phuc. "I can learn from the past."

Getting over the emotional damage was much harder than her physical recovery. She joined a church, and credits her faith with helping her change her attitude.

'I can use that picture for peace. For good'- *Kim Phuc, the 'girl in the picture'*
Now, she says, "I pray for them -- all the people who caused my suffering."

Phuc has spoken on peace and war worldwide and even recalls bringing Oprah to tears during an interview. She said the most important message she gives people is to have hope for a different future.

"I always encourage young people; open your mind and see the good," she said. "Now, I love my scars. It reminds me where I come from."

Promoting compassion and peace has become Phuc's life mission, and the photo she initially wished hadn't been taken, has allowed her to do that, she said.

"I can use that picture for peace -- for good."

Helping child victims of war

Now, Phuc is a permanent Canadian citizen and runs The Kim Foundation International, a group dedicated to helping child victims of war. Phuc said the foundation focuses on getting the children medical care and schooling. She has visited and worked with thousands of children, some badly burned like herself.

"I don't have to say a lot," she said. "They saw my picture. They know what happened to me."

Phuc had originally wanted to be a doctor, aspiring to be like the people who helped her when she was injured.

She began attending school in Vietnam when, after her first year of classes in 1982, she was plucked from university by the Vietnamese government. Phuc was frequently visited by journalists from all over the world, and the government at the time saw an opportunity to use Phuc to further its agenda.

"I felt so bad. I couldn't do anything. I had no choice," she said.



Kim Phuc sits down with CBC ahead of her Peace Days appearance in Winnipeg on Friday. (Teghan Beaudette/CBC)

She was never able to return to medical school, but after seeking asylum in Canada, she started her foundation.

Though Phuc said she wanted to offer medical care to help people who suffered like her, now she can help them in other ways and “help people understand the pain.”

Phuc is now married and has two teenage sons -- age 16 and 19.

“I have two boys, so I don’t want any more child to suffer like me,” she said. Shortly after the birth of one of her sons, another photojournalist took a photo of Phuc holding the infant in her arms, baring her scars.

That photo is one of her favourites.

“I love that picture so much,” she said. “I hold up my future. It’s a beautiful photo. That is the picture of hope and healing.”

And of the scars she once hated, she says, “I love my scars. It reminds me where I come from. When your heart is healed, it doesn’t matter for outside.”

Phuc said she plans to continue speaking across the world to spread her hope for peace and help children recover from ordeals similar to her own.

“I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Now, I am in the right place, at the right time.”

Kim Phuc is speaking Friday night at 7 p.m. at the St. Boniface Cathedral as part of Winnipeg’s Peace Days.