

ASU crowd hears story of resilience from famed 'napalm girl'

Immortalized in one of the most iconic photos from the Vietnam War, Kim Phuc kicked off this year's Wrigley Lecture Series

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
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Before she became a symbol of warfare, Kim Phuc was just a little girl from a Vietnamese village — until fire fell from the sky. On that day, more than 50 years ago, Kim Phuc became an unwilling figure of the Vietnam War.

In 1972, the 9-year-old was photographed running through the streets of her village after being severely burned by a military napalm attack, the terrified expression on her face an indelible reminder of war's atrocities.

“For most of the world, my story begins not with a birth certificate or a childhood memory, but with a bomb — and a photograph,” Phuc said to a crowded auditorium at the Rob and Melani Walton Center for Planetary Health on Thursday, Oct. 30, on Arizona State University’s Tempe campus. “I almost died many times. And yet, I didn’t die. That’s why I’m here with you today. Somehow, I survived.

“I survived because of one unwavering choice: the determination to live.”

Her talk, “From Scars to Strength: the Unforgettable Journey of Kim Phuc” — a powerful story of survival and resilience — was this year’s [Wrigley Lecture Series](#) kickoff.

“The Wrigley Lecture Series brings leading thinkers and problem-solvers to ASU to speak about the world’s most pressing challenges and to help us imagine a future in which all life can thrive on a healthy planet,” said [Peter Schlosser](#), vice president and vice provost of global futures and director of the [Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory](#). “Kim’s story reflects the work we pursue here every day — the belief that healing our planet begins with healing ourselves and our relationships with one another, so the choices we make today expand what’s possible for generations to come.”

Before the world knew her name, Phuc said her childhood in the village of Trang Bang was gentle, simple and filled with laughter. She rode her bicycle to school, played tag with friends and spent hours helping her mother, who ran the most popular noodle restaurant in town. Their home was

surrounded by fruit trees and the hum of animals in the yard.

“For nine years,” she told a spellbound audience, “I felt completely protected.”

The security of Phuc’s childhood shattered on June 8, 1972.

That morning, fighting between North and South Vietnamese forces erupted around Trang Bang. Phuc and her family fled their home and sought shelter in a nearby temple.

“For the first time in my young life, I knew absolute, paralyzing fear,” she recalled.

Moments later, South Vietnamese planes roared overhead. In the confusion, pilots mistook the temple for an enemy base and dropped napalm. The explosions tore through the air and engulfed everything in sight.

Phuc’s clothes were burned away instantly. Her skin began to melt. Screaming, she ran down Trang Bang’s Route 1, her arms outstretched, crying for help.

That moment was captured in a photograph, published around the world and became one of the most searing images of the Vietnam War.

But while the image became a symbol, few knew the life that continued beyond it.

When her parents found her three days later, Phuc was lying in a morgue. The doctors had done what they could and assumed she would die from her burns, which covered more than half her body. But one doctor, a family friend, intervened and arranged her transfer to a burn clinic in Saigon¹.

Phuc spent 14 months in the hospital and endured 17 surgeries, the last one in Germany.

“The pain was unbelievable,” she said. “And yet, I didn’t die.”

For years, her recovery defined her existence. Phuc had to relearn everything. That included how to walk, move and live in a body forever changed. Her skin was tight, raw and scarred. When she returned home, her family became her caregivers.

“My siblings and cousins would massage and stretch me every day, forcing the blood to flow so my body could heal,” she said. It was painful, sometimes unbearable. Her mother, who had already lost her home and livelihood, was relentless.

“She would tell me, ‘Kim, please don’t cry, because it makes me cry. If you don’t want to be disabled, you must do the exercises.’”

Phuc called it tough love.

“Love is not always easy and gentle,” she said. “Love is action.”

Her family’s care became her first lesson in survival and compassion. It taught her that strength was not just physical endurance but rooted in the people who refused to give up on her.

By her teenage years, Phuc's body had mostly healed, but her mind was still at war. She avoided mirrors, and long sleeves became her armor.

"When I looked at my arms — one smooth and beautiful, the other scarred and tight — I wondered, 'How can I ever get married? How can I be a mother?'"

She turned her attention to education. Inspired by the doctors who had saved her, Phuc dreamed of becoming a physician herself. She threw herself into her studies and, in 1982, was accepted into medical school in Saigon. It was the fulfillment of everything she had fought for.

That hope, however, was short-lived. The Vietnamese government, realizing that the girl in the world-famous photograph was still alive, decided to use her as a symbol of state propaganda. Just as the war had torn apart her childhood, politics now threatened to shape her future.

"They pulled me from classes for endless interviews with the foreign press," she said. "Once again, I became a victim — not of a bomb but of politics."

The constant attention, the photo ops, the orchestrated media sessions, made her feel trapped again. But once again, Phuc found a way to endure.

"I begged the prime minister to let me study somewhere quiet," she said. Eventually, her request was granted, and in 1986 she was sent to Cuba.

Cuba was meant to be an escape, but it came with its own challenges, according to Phuc.

"New country, new problems — they spoke Spanish!" she said, laughing. Once again, Phuc had to start over. She learned a new language, adapted to a new culture and tried to rebuild her life. But health complications from her burns forced her to abandon her medical studies.

The loss was devastating.

"My dream was crushed," she said. "But I had to accept it. Sometimes new dreams have to pile up, and that's okay."

So, Phuc began to study Spanish and English, and discovered that education itself was her lifeline.

"What matters is having a growth mindset and a love of learning," Phuc said. "A degree is just a foundation; your lifetime of learning is the true masterpiece."

In Cuba, she also met the man who would become her husband, a fellow Vietnamese student named Bui Huy Toan. They married in 1992, hoping their honeymoon would be the beginning of a new chapter. Yet even on their honeymoon, the couple was followed by government minders.

"Even then, we were not free," she said.

Their chance at freedom came by surprise. On their flight back to Havana, the plane stopped to refuel in Newfoundland, Canada. Kim turned to her husband and whispered, "We cannot go back. You must trust me."

That moment changed their lives. They defected, stepping off the plane with nothing but their passports and her purse.

“That was true love,” Kim said, smiling at the memory. “He says I kidnapped him, but we defected.”

Canada became their refuge and their home. For the first time in decades, Kim could live without surveillance or fear. She began to rebuild her life once more, this time in peace.

But even as she settled into her new life, the image from 1972 continued to follow her. It appeared in textbooks, documentaries and exhibitions. The photo later became a symbol of war and suffering. For years, she wrestled with the burden of being “the napalm girl.”

Eventually, she decided that if the photograph would always follow her, it would do so with purpose. She began to speak publicly about her experiences, transforming her pain into advocacy.

Phuc founded the Kim Foundation International, a nonprofit dedicated to helping child victims of war and poverty. The foundation has built schools, hospitals, libraries and homes in Vietnam, Uganda, Ghana and other countries. It has also supported refugees fleeing conflicts in Ukraine and elsewhere.

“We cannot change the past,” she said, “but with love, we can heal the future.”

Forgiveness would become the most transformative lesson of her life. For years, she carried anger toward those who had dropped the bomb that scarred her. The hatred, she said, was its own kind of prison.

“Forgiveness is not a feeling; it’s a process,” she said. “When you forgive, you are not letting the other person off the hook — you are taking yourself off their hook.”

That belief was tested in 1996, when she was invited to speak at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. There she met Reverend John Plummer, a former Air Force officer involved in coordinating the airstrike that had burned her village.

“When we met face to face, we both cried,” Phuc recalled. “I told him from my heart: ‘I forgive you.’”

In that moment, a decades-long burden lifted. The two became friends (and remain so), united by a shared desire to turn pain into peace.

Today, Phuc is a Canadian citizen and a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for the Culture of Peace. She travels the world speaking about reconciliation, resilience and the human capacity for compassion.

At Arizona State University, Phuc stood before dozens of students, many too young to remember the Vietnam War. However, she shared the lessons of a lifetime. Her story, once defined by fire, had evolved into one of purpose and hope.

“My challenge to you is to cultivate strength of heart and spirit,” Phuc said. “Be a beacon of perseverance, not just for yourself but for those around you.”

She offered the students three challenges to carry forward: be future focused in their decision making; seek to connect across boundaries; and choose to actively bring hope into the world.

“Hope is not passive; it’s a decision,” Phuc said. “Radical hope is grounded in courage, compassion and resilience.”

When the applause filled the auditorium, Kim stood quietly for a moment, hands clasped before her. Behind her, a projection of the iconic 1972 photograph appeared. The very image that had once captured her running and screaming.

She turned toward it and smiled.

“Now,” she said, “when you look at that image, don’t see a child running in fear and pain. See her as she is today — a survivor, a wife, a mother and a grandmother — someone who turned her pain into purpose and moved from scars to strength.”

She concluded: “In a world full of hate, anger and chaos, let us choose peace.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

¹ Saigon officially changed its name to Ho Chi Minh City on July 2, 1976, after the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the reunification of Vietnam.

Main image



Kim Phuc, who was immortalized as the “napalm girl” as a child, in a photo taken during the Vietnam War, shared the life lessons she learned from her lifelong journey of healing during the kickoff talk for ASU's Wrigley Lecture Series on Thursday, Oct. 30, at the Walton Center for Planetary Health on the Tempe campus. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News