

This is who we are and how we live!
Stories and faces of the Vietnamese LGBT community

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community

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Preface

These are monumental times for LGBT people. We are seeing changes now that would have been unimaginable only a few years ago, not only in Vietnam but in many other countries, including the United States. Some of our most meaningful work here involves supporting local efforts, such as this book, to improve the lives of LGBT people. Not only is this work personally important, but it is also a priority for the United States. As President Obama stated earlier this year, in his declaration of LGBT Pride Month, “...our commitment to combatting discrimination against the LGBT community does not stop at our borders: Advancing the fair treatment of all people has long been a cornerstone of American diplomacy, and we have made defending and promoting the human rights of LGBT individuals a priority in our engagement across the globe.”

We celebrate the brave individuals and couples who share their stories in these pages. Despite the improvements of the past several years in Vietnam, including the decriminalization of marriage between people of the same gender and granting of certain rights for transgender people, it is all too often an act of bravery to live openly. Many LGBT people are reluctant to come out, fearing that they will lose family and friends if they are open about who they are. Discrimination in the workplace against LGBT people is still far too common. Equality under the law for LGBT people remains an aspiration.

That is why this book is so important. Through it, some readers might feel affirmed, or less alone, while others might be moved to see that LGBT people are their children,

brothers, sisters, neighbors, coworkers, and friends, worthy of the same dignity and respect as anyone else.

And we are proud to share a bit of our story. This photograph marks a very special moment for our family – when U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg visited our home in Hanoi last year and presided over the renewal of our marriage vows. Shortly before her arrival, Justice Ginsburg and her colleagues determined that marriages such as ours would be recognized throughout the United States. At a press conference in our home, Justice



Ginsburg walked through the history of marriage equality that led up to the Supreme Court's historic decision. By the time the Court decided the final case, there were already small steps in the direction of marriage equality and a good number of states recognized it. So the Supreme Court was taking not a large step but one further step in the direction that was begun at least ten years earlier. Social change, the Justice argued, began at the local level and that's what made it broadly acceptable.

We know how important family is in Vietnamese culture. Family is celebrated during Tet, in legends, in songs and poetry. When Justice Ginsburg renewed our vows, we hoped to show that family was possible, too, for LGBT people. Our two children participated in the ceremony. We declared our love for each other and for our family. And we did so hoping to show that families are possible for all, even here in Vietnam, though we know that each society must find its own way. We hope you will be as inspired as we are by the very human stories shared in this book.

Ted Osius and Clayton Bond

Introduction

Vietnam has come a long way the last several years. Still many Vietnamese LGBT persons lead invisible lives. Their stories are seldom told and those who dare to come out of the closet are often alone and have a low self-esteem. At the same time it's hard for those who want to come out without any examples of how good and normal life can be as a Vietnamese lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Our goal is to give the LGBT community a face and a voice.

ICS the non-profit LGBT organization of Ho Chi Minh City, and I, would like to raise self-esteem of the Vietnamese lesbians, gays, transgenders, bisexuals, and queers. The coming out process will get easier by providing positive examples and tell the stories of a variety of Vietnamese LGBT persons. At the same time we want to celebrate diversity and show how different lifestyles are not only possible but also fulfilling. This way we hope to reach out to all those in doubt and in need of certainty. Especially young people need positive role models. Coming out and being who you are is vital to healthy and happy living. Though coming out can be hard, most LGBT persons end up stronger and more self-assured.

We want to reach this overall objective by giving the community this book filled with interviews and photographs, packed with their own stories. It contains personal histories of 33 lesbians, gays, bisexuals, queers and transgenders in different age-groups coming from all parts of Vietnam. Some are famous, but the majority are ordinary LGBT community members. Topics in the book include coming out stories, first love, the relationship with their family, education and work, successes, hopes and dreams for the future. Apart from that, part of the book provides information on the socio-legal rights of LGBT persons in Vietnam and Asia and the socio-political context they are living in. Moreover an extensive list of organizations with information about their work and whereabouts is provided.

In Asia the family is vital to surviving. The LGBT community is our second family and needs to be more open so it can reach out to those in need of guidance. This book will give the Vietnamese LGBT community a positive input and stimulate emancipation. It will also give a face of the LGBT community in Vietnam to the rest of the world. There are some openly gays, lesbians and transgenders, but not nearly enough. This book tries to fill at least part of that gap.

Diana van Oort

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Definitions & some comments on the Vietnamese context

Definitions change over time, the ones used here are the most mainstream right now. But it is very important to respect people's desired self-identifications. One should never assume another person's identity based on that person's appearance. It is always best to ask people how they identify, including what pronouns they prefer, and to respect their wishes. I let people pick their own 'box' they wanted to be in.

LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQA, TBLG: These acronyms refer to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, and Asexual or Ally. Although all of the different identities within "LGBT" are often lumped together there are specific needs and concerns related to each individual identity. In Europe the "I" for Intersex is regularly added.

Gender

The definitions of gender and gender identity vary. There is a distinction between biological sex and gender as a role. In the 1970s feminist theory embraced the concept of a distinction between biological sex and the social construct of gender. In popularized and scientifically debased usage: **sex** is what you are biologically; **gender** is what you become socially; **gender identity** is your own sense or conviction of maleness or femaleness, or one's sense of oneself as a man, woman, or gender non-conforming, and **gender role** is the cultural stereotype of what is masculine and feminine, or social conformity with expectations for either of the two main sexes. In Vietnam there seems more attention to gender roles than in the Netherlands, especially among older people. Being a lesbian to me meant that I didn't have to be bothered with gender roles. There weren't any. You just did whatever you wanted to do. Within relationships you just had to figure out who did what. Nothing was pre-programmed. I always greatly appreciated the freedom this gave me, especially when hearing straight friends complaining about who 'had to' do this or that and the discussions about it. Of course I had these discussions as well, but without the: you are a man or a woman, so you have to do this or that.

Definitions

- **Heterosexual:** A person who is only attracted to members of the opposite sex. Also called "straight."
- **Homosexual:** A clinical term for people who are attracted to members of the same sex.

- **Pede:** a French derogatory word people in Vietnam use for gay people. It's the equivalent of faggot.
- **Gay:** A person who is attracted primarily to members of the same sex. Although it can be used for any sex (e.g. gay man, gay woman, gay person), "lesbian" is sometimes the preferred term for women who are attracted to women.
- **Lesbian:** A woman who is primarily attracted to other women.
- **Bisexual:** A person who is attracted to both people of their own gender and another gender. Also called "bi".
- **Transgender:** This term has many definitions. It is frequently used as an umbrella term to refer to all people who do not identify with their assigned gender at birth or the binary gender system. This includes transsexuals, cross-dressers, drag kings, drag queens, two-spirit people, and others. Some transgender people feel they exist not within one of the two standard gender categories, but rather somewhere between, beyond, or outside of those two genders. Being transgender is independent of sexual orientation, transgender people may identify as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual, etc., or may consider conventional sexual orientation labels inadequate or inapplicable.

I came across many transgenders in Vietnam. Or as Foxie explained to me: "In Vietnam there's a thin line between gay and transgender."

There's also a big difference regarding opportunities between female to male, and male to female transgenders. Foxie: "In Vietnam what I observe is that female to male transgenders have a harder time to be accepted by the public and the family. When a girl has short hair, it's not a problem for their family. They can be like that, without saying they are transgender. Thanks to that they can graduate and get a good job in the future. But when male to female transgender express themselves for example by having longer hair, they are very easily recognized as different by their families, and they have to face discrimination very early in their lives. So many of them haven't had a chance to study and to graduate, so their future is usually not bright."

Of the people I interviewed and who called themselves transgender, all but one wanted to change their bodies, so in the Netherlands we would refer to them as transsexual.

- **Transsexual:** A person whose gender identity is different from their biological sex, who may undergo medical treatments to change their biological sex, often times to align it with their gender identity, or they may live their lives as another sex.
- **Queer:** An umbrella term sometimes used by LGBTQA people to refer to the entire LGBT community. Or an alternative that some people use to "queer" the idea of the labels and categories such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc. It is important to note that the word queer is an in-group term, and a word that can be considered offensive to some people, depending on their generation,

geographic location, and relationship with the word.

- **Pansexual:** A person who experiences sexual, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attraction for members of all gender identities/expressions, not just people who fit into the standard gender binary (i.e. men and women).
- **Polysexual:** A person who is attracted to multiple genders. Bisexuality and pansexuality are forms of polysexuality. Polysexuality generally rejects the idea that there are only two genders, rather than a spectrum of genders.
- **Intersex:** A person whose sexual anatomy or chromosomes do not fit with the traditional markers of "female" and "male." For example: people born with both "female" and "male" anatomy (penis, testicles, vagina, uterus); people born with XXY. I didn't come across people who fit this category in Vietnam.

Portraits



Hiếu & Lise

*Lesbian & Bisexual -
Entrepreneurs*

I first met Hiếu and her Australian wife, Lise, at a bazaar where they were selling their unique Asian-inspired hand-printed home ware products. Hiếu works full-time for their business, managing their workers and the production of their products. Lise works only part-time as she works three days a week for the Australian government as well. Hiếu is friendly and welcoming; Lise is a bubbly chatterbox who wears her heart on her sleeve.

Hiếu was born in June 1968 in Saigon and still lives there with Lise and their two dogs. Lise was born in July 1965 in Melbourne, Australia. They have been together since August 2008, and 'married' in 2012 in New Zealand a few months before same-sex marriage was legalized there. So they aren't officially married, but their civil union gives them some rights. Lise was keen to go to Spain where they could legally marry, however they chose New Zealand so they could share their ceremony with some of Lise's friends and family who Hiếu had met, and was close with.

Hiếu's story

Hiếu has seven siblings, 4 sisters and 3 brothers, and she is the second youngest in her family. "My father died nearly two years ago. He was a carpenter and my mother sold fish in the market but she is now retired. My mother is more traditional; my father was more liberal, and wanted his children to be happy."

Hiếu finished grade 12 when she was 18 years old. "I didn't go to university as I started working for a fashion company after I finished high school. While I was very young, they promoted me to be a manager and I really enjoyed the work that I was doing."

Different

She realized she was different when she was ten or eleven years old. "I was just a child and I didn't care. When I was fourteen years old, I thought I was a lesbian, as I would see pretty girls and go ohhh. After that I would worry, because in those days, Vietnam wasn't open about lesbians and gay men. They said lesbians and gay men were sick and so I also worried that I was sick. I didn't want to tell anyone and I thought about going to hospital. When I was eighteen, I had a boyfriend because I didn't want anyone to know that I was a lesbian. But I also had a girlfriend at the same time which was difficult. After three years, I broke up with my boyfriend because, even though we were good friends, I couldn't be in a straight relationship."

First love

Hiếu met her first love when she was 20 years old, and they both worked at the same fashion company. "When we were together, not everyone knew. There were a lot of women in that company: about 700 and just 15 men. Sometimes when another woman I knew liked me and spoke to me, my girlfriend got jealous. She would go home, and cry a lot. Because I drove her to and from work each day, her family worked out we were together, and that she was crying about me. They went to the company director, and wanted him to fire me, demanding that I stop working there because I was very dangerous for all the women. Luckily, because I was a very good worker, my director said no to them. But he told me what happened. I felt very embarrassed, because I had never told people that I was a lesbian, and after that incident many people knew. I just said okay, I will not see her again. But we continued the relationship, and we still went out, but it was much more difficult. Her family found out, and they told her to stop working. They locked her in her house, tied her up in the kitchen, and hit her many times with thick electric wire. Then they told me to come to their house. They wanted me to see what they did to her... That was very difficult...We had been together for two years. I know her family had a lot of money, and they sent her to America. I didn't know where she was. Eventually she would come back to Vietnam for visits, and she would contact me. She would go with a friend, and we would see each other for a very short time - just for half an hour, because her family would follow her. After living in America for five years she married a Vietnamese man. She's still in America, but I don't know where she is."

After her first love, Hiếu had numerous relationships. “I was together with my second love for three years. Then her family found out, and they pushed her to marry a man. Her mother threatened to kill herself if she didn’t marry. This was a regular theme. She got married... While this made me very sad, every time a family told their daughter to break up with me, I would tell my girlfriend to do what her parents asked...”

Changes

Things have changed since Hiếu was young. There wasn’t a community or the current ways young lesbians can now connect. “No Facebook, no phone, nothing. If we didn’t talk to friends we just kept it inside. Sometimes I got angry, and would ask why life was like this. Sometimes I wanted to kill myself if I didn’t kill someone else first. I was very stressed out. If someone did something wrong, just a little bit, I would hit them. I could be quite violent. But I know now that it’s very, very dangerous to keep everything inside. I really want for young lesbians and gay men to share their problems with people they can trust, and in the LGBT community; not internalize them. I see many young lesbians that are very aggressive. But I understand that because I was the same - maybe they feel like they can’t show their emotions, they keep them to themselves and then they are tired because of the stress and they get more aggressive. But I think this time is much better for younger lesbians; sometimes they can be open with friends or within the community, but not with their families. Everyone is different, and each family is different. Every lesbian needs to think about whether it is best to speak to their family or not.”

There have been many positive changes especially in the last few years in how Vietnam and the media look at gays and lesbians. Before most of the stories were negative, now they give a more balanced picture. “Very big changes. Before it was very difficult. They would say lesbians do this, and they do that, they don’t do nice things.”

Lise’s story

Lise’s father and sister, who is 20 months younger, both live in Australia. “Interestingly, my sister is in a same sex relationship as well. I like to say mum and dad had a 100% success rate! Hiếu and I got together just a few months after my sister met her life-partner. Mum passed away in July last year (2015). She was so lovely, and she adored both Hiếu and my sister’s partner. Losing such a loving, accepting mother was very difficult.”

Both of Lise’s parents were church going Christians. “Mum had a very strong faith. But she was also fairly open-minded and because she loved my sister and me, as long as we were happy, she was happy. We were very lucky in that respect. I think though for quite some time she probably didn’t speak with her friends and maybe even her family about what was going on in our lives, about our partners. It was quite a transition for them and in such a short amount of time. They certainly weren’t expecting both of

their daughters to choose life-long relationships with women. I think most parents expect a future where their child is heterosexual, will eventually marry and hopefully have children. So it can be a bit of a challenge when that doesn't happen. The other thing is that both my sister and I were previously in long-term hetero relationships. But both mum and dad could see how those relationships weren't positive for us and how happy my sister and I were with our female partner's."

Lise studied a variety of different courses after school. "I studied art at university, majoring in textiles and printing. I studied welfare/community studies for a little while, and also started a course in journalism. I really enjoy writing, and there are projects I would like to work on, but there are too many other things I want to do with our current business."

Different

While Lise has had an essentially straight past, the signs were there. "When I was eleven or twelve years old, we moved from a suburban city to a small country town in regional Queensland. We lived on a big farm which my sister and I loved as children. We could go exploring, we were allowed to ride the motorbike around, and over to the next property to visit friends. It was a very social community, especially within the church we went to. There were lots of dinner parties. I remember at one particular gathering when I was around thirteen or fourteen years old, all the girls were in one bedroom, and there was a girl, perhaps one year younger than my sister... It was a pre-adolescent kind of sexual experience. I'm not sure about my sister, but I vaguely became aware of being interested in girls even though I had lots of boyfriends at that time. I actually thought that was quite normal, and didn't think much of it. My theory is that many of us are born sexually fluid. While some make choices early, many get steered in one direction, because of societal pressures, and then they don't really give any thought to anything else. For me, I think I was always open to the idea of being in a relationship with a woman, but the opportunity never really presented itself until much later in my life. Call me a late bloomer."

Lise doesn't like to put herself in a box. "If I had to define myself it would be bisexual, but in reality I say I'm in a monogamous, committed relationship with the most wonderful person who happens to be a woman. I'm married, and that's it. Sometimes I refer to myself as a lesbian, because I'm in a committed relationship with a woman. But I don't really feel I need to define, to find a word for myself."

Vietnam

Lise came to Vietnam to do volunteer work for a year and a half for a local NGO, a women's employment project. "When I was living in Australia, I was working with a really great organization, I had a lovely house in a wonderfully diverse and interesting community, I had great friends, and my relationship was okay. Everything was really good, but I was 42 and I just needed something to change my life. It was a bit of a risk to leave all that I had, and loved in Australia behind, to go live in Vietnam, but I wanted to have a meaningful experience in a different country. When I arrived in Vietnam in