

GUEST ESSAY

It's Been 50 Years. I Am Not 'Napalm Girl' Anymore.

June 6, 2022

By Kim Phuc Phan Thi

Ms. Phan Thi is the founder of the Kim Foundation International, which provides aid to child victims of war.

I grew up in the small village of Trang Bang in South Vietnam. My mother said I laughed a lot as a young girl. We led a simple life with an abundance of food, since my family had a farm and my mom ran the best restaurant in town. I remember loving school and playing with my cousins and the other children in our village, jumping rope, running and chasing one another joyfully.

All of that changed on June 8, 1972. I have only flashes of memories of that horrific day. I was playing with my cousins in the temple courtyard. The next moment, there was a plane swooping down close and a deafening noise. Then explosions and smoke and excruciating pain. I was 9 years old.

Napalm sticks to you, no matter how fast you run, causing horrific burns and pain that last a lifetime. I don't remember running and screaming, "Nóng quá, nóng quá!" ("Too hot, too hot!") But film footage and others' memories show that I did.

You've probably seen the photograph of me taken that day, running away from the explosions with the others — a naked child with outstretched arms, screaming in pain. Taken by the South Vietnamese photographer Nick Ut, who was working for The Associated Press, it ran on the front pages of newspapers all over the world and won a Pulitzer Prize. In time, it became one of the most famous images from the Vietnam War.

Nick changed my life forever with that remarkable photograph. But he also saved my life. After he took the photo, he put his camera down, wrapped me in a blanket and whisked me off to get medical attention. I am forever thankful.

Yet I also remember hating him at times. I grew up detesting that photo. I thought to myself, "I am a little girl. I am naked. Why did he take that picture? Why didn't my parents protect me? Why did he print that photo? Why was I the only kid naked while my brothers and cousins in the photo had their clothes on?" I felt ugly and ashamed.

Growing up, I sometimes wished to disappear not only because of my injuries — the burns scarred a third of my body and caused intense, chronic pain — but also because of the shame and embarrassment of my disfigurement. I tried to hide my scars under my clothes. I had horrific anxiety and depression. Children in school recoiled from me. I was a figure of pity to neighbors and, to some extent, my parents. As I got older, I feared that no one would ever love me.

Meanwhile, the photograph became even more famous, making it more difficult to navigate my private and emotional life. Beginning in the 1980s, I sat through endless interviews with the press and meetings with royalty, prime ministers and other leaders, all of whom expected to find some meaning in that image and my experience. The child running down the street became a symbol of the horrors of war. The real person looked on from the shadows, fearful that I would somehow be exposed as a damaged person.



Ms. Phan Thi now travels around the world providing medical and psychological assistance to children victimized by war. May Truong for The New York Times

Photographs, by definition, capture a moment in time. But the surviving people in these photographs, especially the children, must somehow go on. We are not symbols. We are human. We must find work, people to love, communities to embrace, places to learn and to be nurtured.

It was only in adulthood, after defecting to Canada, that I began to find peace and realize my mission in life, with the help of my faith, husband and friends. I helped establish a foundation and began traveling to war-torn countries to provide medical and psychological assistance to children victimized by war, offering, I hope, a sense of possibilities.

I know what it is like to have your village bombed, your home devastated, to see family members die and bodies of innocent civilians lying in the street. These are the horrors of war from Vietnam memorialized in countless photographs and newsreels. Sadly, they are also the images of wars everywhere, of precious human lives being damaged and destroyed today in Ukraine.

They are, in a different way, also the horrific images coming from school shootings. We may not see the bodies, as we do with foreign wars, but these attacks are the domestic equivalent of war. The thought of sharing the images of the carnage, especially of children, may seem unbearable — but we should confront them. It is easier to hide from the realities of war if we don't see the consequences.

I cannot speak for the families in Uvalde, Texas, but I think that showing the world what the aftermath of a gun rampage truly looks like can deliver the awful reality. We must face this violence head-on, and the first step is to look at it.

I have carried the results of war on my body. You don't grow out of the scars, physically or mentally. I am grateful now for the power of that photograph of me as a 9-year-old, as I am of the journey I have taken as a person. My horror — which I barely remember — became universal. I'm proud that, in time, I have become a symbol of peace. It took me a long time to embrace that as a person. I can say, 50 years later, that I'm glad Nick captured that moment, even with all the difficulties that image created for me.

That picture will always serve as a reminder of the unspeakable evil of which humanity is capable. Still, I believe that peace, love, hope and forgiveness will always be more powerful than any kind of weapon.

Kim Phuc Phan Thi lives in Canada and works with the Kim Foundation International, which provides aid to child victims of war around the world.

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Twitter (@NYTopinion) and Instagram.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section SR, Page 7 of the New York edition with the headline: I Am Not 'Napalm Girl' Anymore