

————— CONNECT —————  
CONVERSATION | CREATIVITY | COMMUNITY

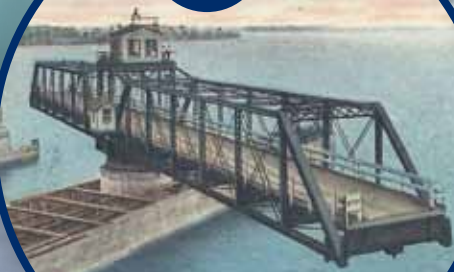
Fall/Winter 2019  
*Complimentary*

# havre de grace

*...the meeting place*

## Maryland

18



32



24



14



10



30



5



*Map & Calendar of Events Inside*

## Dr. Chris

### Learn to Live & Live to Learn

As a young health care professional, society probably sees me as an inexperienced young man who has yet to live the harsh realities of life. It is hard for them to see that beneath the persistent smile and calm facade, there is an individual who has felt the weight of death looming over his head when he was only six years old.

My childlike innocence had disappeared sometime during the night my father and I tried to escape Vietnam on a small boat with many other Vietnamese refugees. We reached the United States months later empty-handed and began to build a new life in this country by working multiple jobs for many years.

Even through my tears when I look back on my life, I feel so privileged to have lived through such raw experiences because I have learned to take nothing for granted. Moreover, these experiences have instilled in me lessons of perseverance, strength, and courage. I strongly believe that these lessons will see me through future hardships and disappointments as they have brought me this far without letting language barriers or cultural differences discourage me.

*I met Dr. Chris Nguyen (pronounced 'wynn') one day in passing by his office, Havre de Grace Dental Associates at 363 Green Street. He had been planting beautiful flowers around the building. Later that year, he called me on a snowy day to ask about advertising in the magazine. He happened to be at the office, so I walked up to chat.*

*I had heard about the wonderful program offered by the HdG Dental Associates, Veterans Day from the Heart. Inquiring more about this very personal project of Dr. Chris's, I learned a bit more of the story.*

We started back in 2017, repeated it again in 2018, and our Veterans Day from the Heart in 2019 will be October 26th from 9-3. Our practice offers free care during this special day to all Veterans. We have served more than 40 in a single day!



**Top Photo: Dr. Chris as a young student at Clara Barton ES, Phila. Bottom Photo: Port bow view of a boat filled with Vietnamese refugees, as the guided missile cruiser USS FOX (CG-33) (not visible) comes alongside**

We work with Dr. Aaron Vafakos, an oral surgeon at Broadway Oral Surgery in Bel Air; and Dr. Gerard "Joe" Simoneaux of the group, Endontics, P.A. They are available for specialty work and accept referrals of our veterans. I'm very grateful that they are willing to volunteer their services to help our Veterans Day from the Heart program.

Many others volunteer to help us that day, including hygienists and other dentists. Without their support we would not be able to help the more than 40 Veterans in a day. We expect this year to be even bigger.

*Dr. Chris has plans for expansion if the need is there. He'd love to see every Veteran who needs help in the area, to receive it. If you want to be involved, he's eager to encourage other dentists and support people to join this special day, sharing what he's learned.*

*Posters are distributed throughout the area, through the VFW and the American Legion, and placing ads with WXCX and 98-Rock.*

*Continued on page 36*



[vintagecafehgd.com](http://vintagecafehgd.com)

## Comfort Food

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When the weather cooperates, I try to have bands and a barbecue for those who are waiting for their turn for dental care. (*We couldn't last year because it rained.*)



### **What motivated you to create Veterans Day from the Heart program?**

I came to this country when I was six years old as a refugee from war-torn Vietnam. My father and I escaped - lives on the line - leaving my mother and baby sister behind. Many young American soldiers - complete strangers to Vietnam - left their homes, parents, spouses and children, sacrificing their lives to preserve some semblance of hope for us. This is one way I believe I can pay that forward. I feel blessed to have the life I have now because of what they so freely gave, which often meant ALL they had to give. It makes me feel good to help others.

My father and uncles were military Veterans in S. Vietnam and fought with the American soldiers. In the US, there are more than 23 million Veterans and less than 15% of them qualify for dental benefits. We have our annual event to help those Veterans who cannot afford dental care.

*Visit this link for more details.*

[havredegracemagazine.com/dr-chris](http://havredegracemagazine.com/dr-chris)

*That was the beginning of our conversation. Then I had to inquire as to how he ended up working and living in Havre de Grace. Here's the astounding story...*

### **Behind the Story.**

In 1985 we lived in South Vietnam. We received news that after 1987, claiming yourself as a refugee would no longer guarantee entry to the U.S. Our family decided to move from our village to the seashore so that we could begin our plan of escape. Very carefully

we started paying attention to the boat captains, trying to determine who might help us. My father planned our trip while my mother and sister were to stay behind. My parents did not want to risk the entire family. The day came. My father and I woke at 3am for the scheduled boat. But we missed our boat and ended up returning home that morning. We later learned that all of the refugees on that boat died at sea due to a bad storm.



**Mom and Sister while they were still in Vietnam.**

We planned again for our second trip, got to the boat safely, hid in the bottom for 3 hours until the captain told us it was safe to come up. Within 2 or 3 days we were running out of food and water. There were 40 to 50 of us, really crunched up together. We could hardly move. Stranded on the open sea for another 2 weeks, some of us were so thirsty that we tried to mix sea water with sugar - that didn't work; then we diluted urine with the remaining water.

At one point the engine died. After a week, more tragic events occurred. I remembered one older lady who was sitting next to me became ill and died. A mentally-ill man (dehydrated) grabbed an axe and I heard people screaming, blood was everywhere on the boat. He was later wrestled down.

I was six. Six. Everything was very vivid - the sounds, the people, the sights. Everything happened right in front of me. We prayed for the older lady that died and then threw her body into the ocean. Later that night the wind picked up and it started to rain. Everyone was so grateful as we were so dehydrated. We never tasted water so sweet. We put out our hands to catch the rain ... and it was ... so sweet.

The following day, an ocean liner passed by and provided us food and water and gave us directions. We sailed toward Indonesia and were so excited when we saw land.

Suddenly we were surrounded by pirates demanding what we had. We gave them some gold for passage, some we swallowed so that we might survive when we got to land. We arrived in Indonesia weeks after the start of our voyage. We slept inside a church for several weeks prior to being transported to Singapore, Hong Kong, JFK airport in NYC, and finally Philadelphia.



**the dotted lines show the basic path they took to get from Vietnam to Philadelphia.**



**Reunited: The day Chris's mom and sister arrived.  
His dad's smile says it all.**

We arrived in Philadelphia in 1985 with no money and not a word of English. My father worked multiple jobs and we lived in many apartments to get by. I did not eat much growing up. My mother and sister worked their plan to come to the U.S. later. They have their own story to tell. It was even more terrifying. With their first effort, they didn't make it and were actually caught. They went to prison. They were let out sooner, rather than later, because my sister was so young.

The second time they got to the boat but it didn't make it to Indonesia, instead they ended up in Thailand. Their experiences were even more than I can imagine. It was actually March 20, 1990 before we were all together again. My dad worked many odd jobs to keep us well while still sending money to my mother. As a result, I was by myself most of the time.

### **Share with us about your experience in the US as a young refugee?**

Can't say I was able to have much of a childhood - that was hard. Not having my mom present to raise me and with my dad working multiple jobs meant I had to raise myself. I did with God's grace and mercy. In the beginning I didn't know the English language. But, in general, I met more friends than I could have imagined and most were very helpful. My "English as a Second Language" teacher (I was in 3rd grade) was incredibly helpful. I came here with one pair of pants, one shirt, no socks and just flip flops. My 3rd grade teacher, Ms. Stein saw that I was wearing the same clothes every day. She brought me two bags of clothes that no longer fit her own kids. Oh my God, I was so happy to have a change of clothes, something different to wear. I had noticed that it gets cold in the winter in Philadelphia! I was so appreciative that I carried those bags home carefully so there were no tears. I wanted everything in those bags.

In middle school, I remember telling my father that I would not let him down; I would work hard, attend the best University and make him proud. Through financial aid and many jobs, I graduated from Temple University School of Dentistry and attended University of Connecticut Advance Education in Dentistry.

To this day, I know that I cannot help everyone, but I know that whatever, whoever I can help makes me feel really good. Kind of paying it forward...

*There is so much more to this family's story that we don't have room to print here. I think this closing quote says so much. During this holiday season, stop a moment and consider this:*

What's been amazingly consistent about this country is that with hard work and persistence, it pays off. That's not necessarily how it turns out in other countries where civil liberties are compromised. Opportunities are more available and accessible in the United States. This country is more than its president, its congress or its politics. What makes this country so great is the whole package: its history, its people, the fact that we won't compromise on freedom.

*Dr. Chris is married to Sunghee Cho who came from South Korea for a nursing degree, working in a hospital program that sponsored her. He loves gardening, fishing, and jazz (used to play the alto sax). He originally discovered Havre de Grace while traveling regularly to Virginia and decided to stop one day. He is another example of the many wonderful citizens who find their way to our community.*



**Family photo: (back from left) Sunghee Cho (wife), Thu and Quan Nguyen (mom and dad) and Dr. Chris. In front is his sister, Hai-Yen.**

What a beautiful example of human courage, family strength and love, surviving and thriving, sharing, paying it forward and simple gratitude. His story inspires us. Spread the word – I think Veterans Day from the Heart is going to continue to grow in leaps and bounds.

**Welcome to our neighborhood, Dr. Chris Nguyen!** 