

Address by Khoa Do

Jesuit Refugee Service Winter Solstice Ball Saturday 1st July 2006

“The Quality of Soul”

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I'd like to share with you my story. I was born in Vietnam in the late 70's, but because most of our family had fought alongside the Aussie and American soldiers during the war, we had to flee when I was just 1.

My Mum, Dad and my brother Anh, put to sea in an eight metre wooden fishing boat, with forty other people. Every time a wave came, people would rush to drain water off the boat to keep it from sinking. After one death and two pirate attacks when we were stripped to nothing, we made it to Malaysia and into a refugee camp.

In late 1980, when I was two, we heard the long-awaited wonderful news: we had been accepted as refugees to come to Australia. Mum and Dad's dream of living in a prosperous, free country had come true. Success, we thought, was just around the corner...

When we first arrived, it was winter and we had nothing – one night, a nun came and gave us a bag of clothes and a heater. We were so grateful, except that over half the clothes she gave us were for girls, and there was only my brother and I.

So for nearly two years, Mum dressed us up in girls' clothes rather than throw any of it out. And we wondered why the other kids wouldn't play with us...

Mum and Dad found work sewing in a factory, for \$5 an hour. I remember going to primary school, as the kid with shoes that were sticky-taped together. They were sticky-taped because they were handed down to me from my brother, who in turn had been given the shoes from St. Vinnie's.

After seven years of sewing, Mum and Dad decided to change jobs. Someone had told Dad that duck farming was the boom industry, so they borrowed money from all our friends and relatives and bought a small duck farm near Newcastle.

We ate boiled duck eggs for breakfast, scrambled duck eggs for lunch, fried duck eggs for dinner... and I swear if Mum knew how to make duck dessert, we would have had that too.

One day, my uncle went to the markets and found some cheap grain that we were told would be good for our ducks to eat. So we bought some, gave it to them and they loved it. The next day, he went out and bought 50kg of this stuff. We came home, and fed it to all our ducks.

The next day, we woke up and found several thousand dead ducks lying in our paddock. That was the end of our farm.

Back in Sydney, things became a bit more of a worry.

One day I came home from school to find that Mum and Dad had separated. At the age of 12, my brother and I were left to look after Mum and our little sister.

I had to translate everything because Mum couldn't speak English.

I still remember catching the bus with her to Centrelink to help her apply for unemployment benefits. I still remember helping Mum look for a cheap place to stay when we were forced to move.

We found a small unit in Dulwich Hill, and I remember coming home from school one day to find that the electricity had been cut off. My brother, little sister and I sat in the dark eating instant noodles for dinner, uncooked. The next day, Mum caught the train to the city and sold her jewellery...and the electricity was back on.

Life through those years was tough, but I wanted to tell you about it because there was one thing that got us through – the compassion and generosity of fellow Australians, the tremendous support for battlers, the quality of soul of those individuals who stepped in to help us out.

I remember first experiencing this when playing footy. Growing up, Mum wanted me to be a doctor, lawyer or dentist...anything with security. But all I wanted to be – was a rugby player. My heroes were Laurie Daley, George Gregan and Terry Lamb.

I remember playing for my local club, Yagoona Twin Willows. We were the worst team in the competition. We had players who were skinny, players who were fat, players from different ethnic backgrounds, but we had no players with any talent. Every game, we lost by fifty points.

And each week, our coach asked if we wanted to pull out of the competition. But every week we said “no” – despite knowing that we were going to get killed every time we ran out. And we were always there for each other - whenever someone from the other team yelled racist slurs at me – my mates would all rally around to try and get him.

My brother and I won scholarships to St Aloysius College and one of the highlights of my life was the day I got called up to play halfback for my school's top team, the St. Aloysius College First Fifteen rugby team.

Up until then, I had been playing rugby wearing a second-hand pair of footy boots I had bought at our school's clothing pool, which were a few sizes too big. During every game, these massive clown shoes would fall off my feet.

Well finally, the big day came and as I was preparing to run out looking once more like Goofie – my mate Cameron called out to me. “Why don't you borrow my shoes?” he said. He suddenly took off his own boots and handed them to me. I couldn't believe it. That day, we beat Barker College by 60 points. After the match, he let me keep his boots.

Throughout these years, Mum never went to watch us play footy – she was always too busy working. And of course, dreaming of the day that Anh and I would become successful doctors... I think she still is...

After high school, I realised that I would never make it as a footy player... so I decided to enter the film industry.

And someone had told my brother that he was funny. Unfortunately, he took it seriously... and is now a successful stand-up comedian. Mum is slowly getting used to the fact - that she will have to stay on Medicare forever...

Several years ago, I began a project teaching film-making to “at-risk” young people at a welfare centre in Cabramatta.

Our class consisted of young people in their late teens and early twenties – one was homeless and sleeping in a McDonald's play area, another was on parole for slashing someone's arm, another was a heroin addict since he was thirteen, and another was an Aboriginal young man who was so shy he didn't have the courage to go to Centrelink to ask for a form and needed someone to come with him. Because of their sheer enthusiasm, I promised my class that we would make a feature film together.

We had no money, no crew, no script – and our cast had never acted before. I was suddenly reminded of my days on the footy field – where we had nothing, but just kept going. And those qualities of spirit, of soul, of passion, came through again...

We put a small article in the local paper saying we were making this film and we needed assistance.

The next day, we were inundated with phone calls from the Cabramatta community – a truck driver called to say we could borrow his truck between 9 and 2 – a retired BHP engineer called to say he can help us drive our cast around – a web designer called, a dancer called. Our local pub owner became our executive producer, and gave us \$5000 that day. It was the same spirit that came through again – at a time when we most needed it.

Two years later, our film, THE FINISHED PEOPLE, was nominated for three - AFI Awards, and both Margaret and David gave us 4.5 stars on THE MOVIE SHOW. Our film opened at Dendy Newtown on the same day as George Clooney's film, Intolerable Cruelty. The following Monday, we received a phone call from Dendy Cinemas saying more people had gone to see our film than George Clooney's. Our cast, none of whom had finished high school, went around and told all their friends that they'd just beaten George Clooney at the box office. That year, we were all nominated together for Best Original Screenplay at the AFI Awards, and walked the red carpet next to Geoffrey Rush and Cate Blanchett.

This year, our next film together, Footy Legends, will be released in August on 120 screens across the country at Hoyts and Greater Union. It stars many of the original students from our welfare class, next to Claudia Karvan, Peter Phelps, Matthew Johns, and my brother Anh.

Overall, I only wish my Yagoona footy team had been half as successful.

Looking back, I realise how lucky I've been. The past few years has taught me that while I've had some difficulties in my life, there are always others who have had even more difficult lives. And no matter how hard our lives are, even if we're broke, unemployed and poor as anything - life is still wonderful.

And one reason it's wonderful is because we live in a country that has, at its heart, incredible generosity and compassion amongst its people. I have experienced and have been the recipient of this generosity and compassion. And this has put me in a position to help out those less fortunate than myself. I believe all of us here have the opportunity to help out those less fortunate than us, to give them a chance, and to give them a voice.

I believe that within all of us, is incredible potential, and I believe that we live in a country where anything is possible. If a former refugee with no shoes, who lives in the rougher parts of Sydney, who works in the arts, can be Young Australian of the Year, then anything is possible.

And it's possible because of the quality of soul that's within all of us. Be passionate. Be committed. Be positive. I believe we can make our world a better place.

Thank you.