



From the "Dark Days" of Vietnam to a FAA Dream Job ⁰



When Minh Nguyen landed in the United States as a 15-year-old Vietnamese refugee, he saw this country as his savior, and as a land of promise. He and his parents had survived “the darkest years of our lives” as pro-U.S. citizens in Communist Vietnam, only to be rescued by U.S. policies, including the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistant Act, Refugee Act of 1980, and the Orderly Departure Program, that allowed Vietnamese political refugees to emigrate here.

“The United States gave my parents an opportunity to live again and gave me the opportunity to dream again,” said Nguyen.



15-year-old Minh Nguyen (left) and his mother, grandmother, and father at Tan Son Nhat International Airport in Vietnam, just hours before Nguyen and his parents left to come to the United States.

said. "I pursued that path."

The path became clearer in June 2016 when he was selected to participate in the FAA's Senior Leadership Development Program (SLDP) (https://my.faa.gov/tools_resources/training_learning/sldp_about.html). "The program is really wonderful and unique," Nguyen said. "It's well developed, run by a program management and leadership team who genuinely care about the progress and success of the participants."

The SLDP is supported by executives throughout the agency who serve as mentors, panel members, and guest speakers. The SLDP is designed to develop the internal bench strength of future FAA executives and serves as the premier internal leadership development program in the FAA.

One of the key developmental opportunities provided SLDP participants is the opportunity to serve in rotational assignments. "Rotational assignments are the foundation of the development of our senior leaders," said Joe Kools, director of Executive and Organizational Development in the FAA. "Once a leader has the fundamentals of leadership down pat, there is nothing more important or worthwhile than to gain a variety of experiences that stretch the person outside of their area of expertise and beyond their comfort zone. Learning from experience and gaining cross-functional awareness is the goal, and rotational assignments are the best vehicle to achieve this goal," Kools added.

Nguyen has done more than simply dream: He has achieved. His resume is filled with accomplishments befitting two men. He served as a member of the FAA Administrator's Strategic Initiatives Group, helping the administrator formulate a 5-year strategic plan for the agency. He served in many functions, including chief of staff for the ATO Senior Vice President of NextGen and Operations Planning, acting deputy director for the FAA's Office of Policy and Plans, manager of NextGen Business Case and NAS Modeling, and now acting deputy administrator for the Northwest Mountain Region.

Nguyen's believes his success is attributable to the agency's efforts in promoting diversity through outreach, and through mentoring opportunities that have allowed him to add rungs to his ladder of success.

Seven years ago, Nguyen participated in the "Federal Executive Institute – Leadership in a Democratic Society" program that aims to develop candidates for leadership positions in the federal government. "It inspired me to look more into senior leadership so that I can continue to strive to serve at the best of my capacity," he



Minh Nguyen

Vaughn Turner, vice president of ATO Technical Services and Nguyen's SLDP mentor, encouraged him to take on detail assignments in the field, and initially discussed with Nguyen a potential Technical Operations assignment. But it was a suggestion from Ray Towles and Ravi Chaudhary, the top two officials in the FAA's Regions and Property Operations Office, to take an immediate detail assignment in the Northwest Mountain Region that best fit into Nguyen's broad understanding of the agency and his career goals.

"I've worked on many assignments that enabled me to better understand how the agency works," he said. "I would love to enhance my leadership ability by being out in the regions, in order to live, feel, and understand their business operations and the challenges they face."



Nguyen, then five years old, when he was living with his parents in a small village named An Phu.

Within two weeks, Nguyen was in Renton, Wash., serving as acting deputy regional administrator for Northwest Mountain, with a focus on consolidating the transfer of 1,600 Northwest Mountain employees from four buildings into one new regional office building. "That's a huge undertaking with many moving parts, from building construction, furniture installation, and planning for the actual relocation of 1,600 employees," he noted. If his head wasn't swimming already from his short-notice detail, things were about to get headier.

About a month into his detail, David Suomi, the Northwest Mountain acting regional administrator, announced he was taking a few weeks of leave. Who did he turn to for a replacement?

"As you're doing a detail, you focus on what you're assigned to do," said Nguyen. "For my case, it was pretty unique, because I already came in with a broad knowledge of the FAA organizations and their key players, and understood the broad scope of NextGen. In addition, I felt that Dave Suomi trusted my intuition and decision making ability ... so, he allowed me the opportunity to step in and step up and act for him."

"Minh was a godsend and he began adding value immediately upon arrival," said Suomi. "He took on the oversight of the two separate teams charged with the policy and implementation of the campus relocation from Renton to a new consolidated office building scheduled for early 2018. It is a very complex move with dozens of moving elements with differing schedules that must be carefully choreographed to be successful. Additionally, he has represented me at a number of meetings and has always demonstrated a calm, professional and respectful approach," Suomi added.

Nguyen has given much thought to career development within the FAA. His own path has been well thought out. He came to the agency from the private sector, where, he said, companies' "bottom-line attitudes, profit driven in decision making didn't quite align with my principles.

“I knew one thing for sure, that going to the FAA would be the right decision for me,” Nguyen continued. Plus, the security of a government job would help him laser-focus on his mission, goals, and work objectives without having to worry about contracts expiring and other private-sector distractions.

Nguyen’s success has not been a lone achievement. “It has been years in the making, with the commitment and the investment of many other mentors in the FAA and other government agencies,” he explained. “In order to help yourself become successful, you need three types of people.”



The future office of the Northwest Mountain Region. Nguyen has been instrumental in consolidating employees from other locations into this new building.

The first type is a mentor to whom an employee can turn to for insight and advice. Agencies have advisors, big corporations have advisors, Nguyen pointed out. “Why can’t an individual form a group of advisors or a personal board of directors that would help him/her navigate and advise on a career path?”

The second type of person is a coach, “someone who will bring the best out of you,” he explained. “Coaches don’t help you navigate, or guide you through your career. Their focus is to bring the best out of you by maximizing your strengths, so that you can offer your best and most authentic self.”

Nguyen counts as a third necessity a sponsor, or “champion.” They reach out and act as an advocate for their mentee when the mentee is not at the table. “That’s very, very important,” said Nguyen, who, he says, has had great mentors at the FAA and other government agencies.

“I’ve been very fortunate to have many mentors to count on over the years. I have learned a lot from them, and I have been paying it forward”



Nguyen (right) with other members of the Leadership Team at the new regional office building.

Mentoring is not a one-way street in Nguyen’s thinking. As vice president of the Asian American Government Executives Network, he had championed the development of an executive coaching program and recruited 85 senior executives across the government, including seven FAA executives. He also recruited 12 executives to participate in speed-mentoring to support the DOT Secretary’s AAPI Heritage Celebration in May 2017. He has personally mentored two dozen people over the years.

He received the 2017 Federal Asian-Pacific American Council (FAPAC) Civilian Award (https://my.faa.gov/focus/articles/2017/05/Awarding_the_Promote.html) for significant contributions in representing, promoting, and expanding Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders at all levels of the government.

“The Asian-American population is about 5.6 percent of the United States,” he explained. “In terms of Asian American employees in the federal government, it’s less than that. The Asian Americans holding senior management positions is a lot less than that. We all have a lot of work to do.”

Nguyen touts the FAA’s effort in promoting diversity and bringing in more minorities. What’s needed, he said, is to put the right person in the right position to promote diversity in every line of business and staff offices. That’s

diversity in valuing different perspectives, and nationalities. “If you put the right person in place, one who is passionate about diversity, automatically you’ll start enhancing diversity,” he said.

Beyond recruitment, Nguyen wants “to help Asian Americans understand the role of the government and why they need to participate more in the government. What’s important is that you’re helping highlight some of the initial contributions of Asian Americans and foster greater relationships with the Asian community by highlighting these successes.” He also has appeared on numerous television programs to promote diversity and highlight the contributions of Asian Americans to the U.S government.

In a nutshell, Nguyen continues to strive to contribute his best to the agency, and to the U.S, as a way to give back to the country that gave back his parents to live their lives freely, and gave him the opportunity not only to dream, but to achieve.



Nguyen appearing on the Saigon Broadcast Television Network to highlight the contributions of Asian Americans to the U.S government, and to promote careers and leadership for Asian Americans in Government.

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