

WHAT'S YOUR STORY

How 'Ong Bob' — that is, Uncle Bob — became a part of my Vietnamese family

'He never asked for credit or recognition. He just wanted friendship.'

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Robert Sargent was among the Canadians who welcomed Vietnamese refugees with open arms starting in the late 1970s. (Courtesy of Paul Nguyen)

*Just one year after his parents arrived in Canada as refugees in 1979, **Paul Nguyen** was born in Toronto. One of the first adults he ever laid eyes on was Robert Sargent, one of the many Canadians who welcomed Vietnamese boat people with open arms. To Nguyen, he quickly became "Ong Bob," an uncle figure who had a profound influence on him. Throughout 2017, we're asking Canadians, "What's your story?" Nguyen shares his.*

After drifting at sea for three days, Boat 11 made it to Terengganu, Malaysia.

My parents were among the 97 onboard, carrying little more than extra clothes. After being kicked out and sent to Bidong Island, where they spent several months in a crowded refugee camp, they were accepted to Canada. They landed in Toronto in February, 1979 — their first winter.

During the first few weeks, they stayed inside and ate instant noodles. To get to the subway, my father carried my mother because she only owned sandals.

It was around this time that they met Robert Sargent.

- [Then vs. Now: From Vietnam to Syria, how refugees have found new lives in Canada](#)

The 55-year-old was part of a church group who visited the hotel to welcome the boat people. He befriended my parents and offered to show them around town. My parents didn't know much English, but they talked through "body and hand language." He became their connection to the outside world.

Robert was there every step of the way, a surrogate parent to many refugee families. He showed them Christmas parties, bobbing for apples and how things worked in Canada. My parents and many other Vietnamese affectionately called him "Ong Bob," which means "uncle Bob."



"Ong Bob" introduced Paul's family to new traditions, like bobbing for apples. (Nguyen family album)

Chosen family

My parents had arrived in Canada not knowing anyone, but Uncle Bob made them feel like they had a family here.

Like the time my parents had to find a room to rent but were turned away at the door. The landlord said the room was "for a lady." Upon hearing this, Uncle Bob visited the landlord and presented his business card from the Anglican Book Centre. He fought against discrimination and helped my parents secure that apartment.

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Before I was born, Uncle Bob threw a baby shower for my parents. They received many gifts of clothing and a second-hand crib — a gesture my mother would never forget.

After I was born, Uncle Bob was present for many of my fondest memories: going to African Lion Safari, celebrating New Year's Eve, watching VHS movies and sharing family dinners. His favourite Vietnamese dish was chả giò.

And in the later years, I learned about my parents' journey through him.



Paul Nguyen snuggles a new toy on Christmas 1983, as Uncle Bob looks on.

A legacy of love

My childhood was as Canadian as it gets — street hockey, tobogganing, *Hockey Night in Canada*. Uncle Bob was my connection to the past that my parents seldom talked about.

It was through Uncle Bob's detailed recollection that I learned about my family's history, and the larger ordeals of the boat people.

- [When Canadians came together to help Vietnamese refugees](#)

Uncle Bob's compassion, generosity and kindness affected me profoundly. He never asked for credit or recognition. He just wanted friendship. He changed my outlook forever and made me think "how can I give back?"

“ It was through Uncle Bob's detailed recollection that I learned about my family's history, and the larger ordeals of the boat people.”

In 2015, he passed away at age 90. Just as he'd witnessed the start of my life, I was there to witness the end of his.

He died just a month before I was honoured at Rideau Hall with a Governor General's Award, recognizing my community work, which was inspired by him.

Being Canadian and free, I believe it's in our nature to embrace others seeking the same freedoms. Uncle Bob taught me that it's our responsibility to help those cast adrift. I'm proud to say his legacy lives on in me.



Paul Nguyen and Robert "Uncle Bob" Sargent pose together in 2010.