Tan Le was voted Australian of the Year in 1998. This is her story.

Journey, October 1981

Tan Le, her sister and mother escaped Vietnam on a boat measuring 15 metres by 4 metres. She remembers the journey as fearful, dark, misty and silent. The boat was crowded with 161 people of all ages.

Her mother, Mai Ho, had made the decision to leave her country for the future of her children. She knew there were chances of getting shot or attacked by pirates and perhaps they would never reach the shore. She had planned that if pirates caught them, they should die together as a family rather than see each other die.

Later in the journey Tan remembers asking her mum if they were going to get any clothes in Malaysia, because her clothes had been blown off during the journey. After spending three months in the Malaysian refugee camp, they were on a plane to Australia, the trip took 8 hours.

Arriving, January 1982

The Le family thought Australia would make their dreams come true and they would have a future. Mrs. Ho had felt proud that she and her two daughters had a new life. A new land that they would make their home and belong there. To Tan, the official welcoming into Australia was having somewhere to stay, something to eat, ordinary Australians offering them gifts, wishing them good luck.

Her family didn't speak any English and to them it was important to be able to communicate. They had wondered if they'd be tolerated and then accepted in the new community.

Settling

Tan's mother worked at a farm for a while, before working over-time at the Holden factory in Port Melbourne, to provide her daughters the chance to attend school. Finally Tan and her sister Thanh came to Saint Monica's Primary School in Footscray.

Tan says the best thing about Saint Monica's was that she felt a part of the school community; her friends were great because they had accepted her and the teachers encouraged her to learn. Miss Marcella DiDonato symbolized this acceptance for who you are, and not what you look like.

On the documentary 'Australian Story' Miss Marcella said, "The teachers were aware of some of the students experiences, and this was constantly in the back of their minds." Mrs Muriel Alexander, who still teaches, remembers Tan always had a smile on her face, was polite, friendly and was a leader.

Schooling, 1989

At the age of eleven, Tan experienced a school (a private girls' school) that wasn't accepting; she wasn't as rich as many of the students. She looked different and so she stood out. She remembers many children said, "You're Vietnamese", "You Vietnamese-girl", "Ching-chong" and told her to "go home". She asked herself who she was, she thought herself as Australian yet people called her Vietnamese.

"Tan was depressed and grew skinnier. I didn't realize until half a year passed," Tan's mother said on 'Australian Story'. Tan says that to a young person not being accepted can hurt them in very deep ways. She says that she looked forward to class because she couldn't face recess and so she hid in the library.

Both mother and daughter had cried about these complications, her mother had then thought herself silly for putting her daughters in such situations. Tan moved to a new school in Year 9 and says there was always a fear and the sense of rejection was very strong. Former English teacher Ruth Willis remembers Tan as someone who was concerned about the effect of society on peoples' lives.

Further Study, 1993-1998

When Tan was 15 she joined the Australian Vietnamese Resource Centre, which was in need of someone bilingual to help fill out forms. She was voted chairperson of the Australian Vietnamese Resource Centre at the age of 19. Before becoming chairperson she was voted treasurer.

She went onto Monash University at the age of only 16. In 1997 she was awarded a KPMG scholarship and completed her Commerce Law degree near the end of 1998. She became a lawyer and joined a law firm called 'Freehills'. In 1997 Tan's mother was elected to the Council of Maribyrnong and soon after became the Mayor.

Awards, 1998

In 1998 Tan was awarded the Australian of the Year award for her community work.

Tan Le thought the values of the Australian of the Year award in 1998 was to unite Australians and what they do to help make our nation a better place. She travelled to Asian countries as the Young Australian Ambassador.

She was a special guest on the channel nine show 'This is Your Life' for Sister Trish Franklin who is currently working in Vietnam. On the show she said her wish is to let all Australians know of Sister Trish's wonderful work because she had visited her in Vietnam during her tour. She commented on how Sister Trish gave of herself so freely and that the Vietnamese people couldn't thank her enough. In 2005 Sister Trish received the Order of Australia (AO) in the General Division in honour of the Queen's birthday.

2001

In 2001 Tan Le founded a company called SASme. The company's research and business operations are in both Australia and Asia. Their vision is to research and develop technologies that will help to improve the wireless landscape of the future. Tan is among three other co-founders of the company, Nam Do, Duc Ngo and Duc Tran, all of them talented in mathematics and physics.

Tan has represented 'Australians All' by being a goodwill Ambassador for Australia in Asia, and a Patron of the Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development Program. She was also an Ambassador for the Status of Women in 2001. She was a special visitor to the United Kingdom as a guest of the British High Commission and Foreign Commonwealth Office. Tan has been appointed to a number of major Boards including the Australian Citizenship Council, National Committee for Human Rights Education in Australia and RMIT Business in Entrepreneurship.

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Interview with Mrs Alexander (current teacher) August 2005

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