A TALE OF TRAGEDY ON VIETNAM'S ROADS

A father shares his daughter’s story in the aftermath of her death.

“Tragedy strikes in a quiet village

It was early morning, around 6 AM on March 18, 2019. On a street in Pleiku City, a peaceful city with less than 500,000 people, two 13-year-old girls rode their bicycles to school, a road they had memorized as part of their daily commute. One of those girls, Ngoc, would be tragically killed before ever stepping foot into the classroom.

A few minutes away from the two girls was a bus carrying 16 passengers, traveling at an excessive speed, estimated to have been driving as fast as 60-80 km/hour. A speed well over what is considered safe in any area—much less a school zone. At this speed, the bus was completely unable to slow down or stop upon approaching the school. The speeding bus crashed into Ngoc, heavily injuring her before she died in a hospital later that day.

More than a year later, we visited the school gates where Ngoc was killed.

A risky road to education

In Vietnam, especially in rural areas, it is typical for schools to be located on, or near, provincial highways. The road in front of Ngoc’s school is no exception. The poorly paved road is often frequented by motorcycles, trucks, and large buses, driven by those who are likely desperate for sleep after multiple overnight and long-haul trips. Students are seen walking across dangerous conditions to enter their school gates, one of the last places that a student should ever feel unsafe.

Unfortunately, children are not unaccustomed to the dangers still present on Vietnam’s roads.
Students crossing the street in front of Ngoc’s former school. According to a local street vendor, these pictured road markings are new and were not visible at the time of Ngoc’s death.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) in an article reported by VnExpress published just one week before Ngoc’s crash, Vietnam ranked as a country with one of the highest rates of road deaths in all of Southeast Asia, right below Thailand. The WHO also estimates that road traffic injuries are the leading cause of death for those aged 15-29 years in Vietnam.

A family's story, a little girl's dreams

Strangely, on the day of the crash, there was a scheduled traffic safety performance at Ngoc’s school, in which children would participate in awareness-raising activities for road safety issues.

When we sat down with Ngoc’s father, Tran Van Son, who agreed to share his daughter’s story, we learned that Ngoc was, in fact, supposed to perform in the traffic safety exhibit that day.

“It was a strange coincidence. That day, she was on her way to talk about road safety,” he shares. “I remember that morning, she had stuffed her performance outfit in her backpack. She wore her little green pants and a white shirt, her regular school uniform, and left with her best friend. They always walked to school together.”

Unfortunately, a bus that was driving too fast prevented Ngoc from ever performing that day.

Son’s eyes start to water, a smile curving at the edges of his mouth. “Ngoc had big dreams. She always looked up to my sister, who is a make-up artist. She said that she wanted to be like her aunt. She was only ten years old, but already envisioned her future.”

We see children crossing the road every single day. Meanwhile, buses and trucks are driving so fast. It’s not a good situation for the children.

Tran Van Son works in construction. He was often working long hours and wasn’t always able to be at home to spend time with his children as much as he hoped. His wife, he explained, also works to provide for the family. Ngoc and her brother were often home with their grandparents, but Ngoc learned to take care of herself.
In front of Ngoc’s school sits a row of street vendors selling various breakfast items, like sticky rice and sweetbreads. The primary intention of these vendors may be to sell their goods, but because of their proximity to such risky road conditions and the potential for witnessing accidents, they are also caring community members who seem worried about the children’s safety.

“The roads are not so safe,” explains one vendor as she scoops sticky rice, not looking up from her stall.

According to Son, it was not the school officials who first saw the crash happen, but street vendors lined outside of the school gates. Classmates and peers also witnessed the horrific scene, in which the bus dragged Ngoc’s body 20 meters after crashing into her.

“When Ngoc and her friend approached the school gate, Ngoc stopped to purchase sticky rice from a street vendor, while her friend went inside the school. That’s when it happened. I was at work when I found out. I was in complete shock. To this day, I don’t know if she died in the hospital, or on the road. My memory of that day is so traumatizing. I just remember arriving at the hospital and feeling as if I was going to faint,” says Son.

Street vendors act as advocates for road safety

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“We see children crossing the road every single day. Meanwhile, buses and trucks are driving so fast. Some bus drivers are maybe coming from Saigon, perhaps they are headed to the North, to Hanoi. They’ve been driving for hours in the middle of the night and don’t know there’s a school here. It’s not a good situation for the children.”

No matter the starting point or end destination of these buses, many rush through the quiet community where Ngoc attended school, placing community members and children at risk each day.

Another vendor mentions a fatal crash that took place a year or so ago, but does not share too many details with us. “There are some road markings now that you see,” he says, pointing to a couple painted rumble strips. But they weren’t here before. Some bad traffic crashes happened, so then the road markings were painted,” he murmurs.

“She was such an independent girl. She was only ten years old, but already envisioned her future.
AIP Foundation, an international road safety NGO that has contributed to reducing road crash fatalities and injuries in Asia and Africa for over 20 years, has worked to improve the safety of students through school zone safety work in Pleiku.

Advocating for speed reduction in Pleiku’s school zones

Over the last two years, the organization has installed road modifications, like zebra crossings, raised crosswalks, speed bumps, refuge islands, traffic signs/warning lights, safety railings, and sidewalks, drastically improving the infrastructure near primary schools in the area. These modifications, though seemingly simple in design, are proven to save lives. A new sidewalk can reduce the number of people hit by vehicles by 90%.
The last plate for Ngoc

Tran Van Son has undoubtedly experienced immense grief following his daughter’s death, but over the past year, he has found ways to cope and create normalcy.

Following the road crash, Son decided to move back to his hometown, a quiet village called Kon Tum, about 50 km north of Pleiku.

Although the two provinces are only about an hour apart, his son and wife still live in Pleiku City. On the weekends, Son will drive back and forth between Pleiku and Kon Tum, ensuring that quality time between him and his son is not sacrificed despite the physical distance.

“After the crash, I decided to move back to Kon Tum, my hometown but I didn’t want to disrupt my son’s schooling. Maybe next year, we’ll move the family back together in Kon Tum.”

We share our gratitude with Son for our conversation together, thanking him for his remarkable generosity and vulnerability in sharing his daughter’s story with us. He is silent for a moment.

Son asks, “What does a person do when they have lost their child? What can I do?”

“Though it is hard to talk about Ngoc, I will share my story if it can help another family. If it will make people realize that they should not drive fast on the road or if it will prevent this from happening again.”

Yet, Son’s courage and generosity do not end there. He begins to talk about the driver who killed his daughter and, with a striking sense of ease, declares, “There’s no use for me in holding onto anger. If I only think about my sadness, it will be impossible to move on. It’s sad. He’s [the driver] a young man, no family, who had his whole life ahead of him. Now, he will spend the next years of his life in jail for one terrible mistake he made. He will lose part of his life now, too. I don’t want that, I just don’t want this to ever happen again.”

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Tran Van Son says that these days, his family copes with grief in the best way that they can.

He points to his father, who is sitting inside the house, next to an altar set up for Ngoc. A traditional offering in Vietnamese homes for those who have passed is carefully laid out. “We loved her so much,” he says.

“Everyone loved her. Her grandparents adored her. Especially her grandfather. They were inseparable.”

“I come from a big family,” he continues. “We get together for dinner almost every week, me and my siblings, and Ngoc’s grandmother always saves one plate of food. At the end of the meal, she brings the plate to Ngoc’s altar. The last portion is always for her.”