The year was 1986, Space shuttle Challenger exploded minutes after takeoff, killing all seven crew members. The catastrophic nuclear accident at Chernobyl and its fallout killed at least 4000 people and over 350000 people were displaced. Microsoft became a publicly traded company and its founder, Bill Gates became an instant billionaire. The Gates Millennium Scholarship has provided over 1.5 Billion dollars of scholarships to high achieving minority students. The Statue of Liberty celebrated its Centennial. Lady Liberty has for over a century become a symbol of freedom; she opens her arms and greeted immigrants onto Ellis Island, her torch lit a new path for immigrants seeking the American dreams. These are events I learned in high school and college.

However, something was missing: the narratives and experiences of my family’s immigration story and stories of countless more refugees from Laos. 1986 was also the year that my family arrived to the United States. We had escaped the aftermaths of the civil war, one that the US Central Intelligence Agency covertly intervened as part of their fight against the spread of communism. We would become a product of a complex immigration system, one that allows families like mine access to the US as refugees, when a century earlier excluded Chinese immigrants and had barred immigration entirely from much of Asia. Unlike European immigrants who arrived on boats onto the open arms of Lady Liberty, my family arrived as refugees aboard Northwest Orient Airline flight number 020. Our journey spanned two and a half years in refugee camps and countless medical exams. I was a four year old malnourished child
weighing 11.1 kilograms, or roughly 24.5 pounds. “The heart and lungs are within normal limits”, reads the x-ray; a sign of final approval for entrance to the United States. Much of this history is not well known, let alone taught in classrooms. It was not until college that I became interested in my family’s experience and journey. My parents once told me that the day we left Laos, my name was written on the sandy shore of the Mekong river, reminding me that Laos would always be a part of me.

We continue to pave our path in this land and begin to tell our stories in hope to inspire others to tell theirs. What’s your immigrant story?