

# LIFE SUPPORT

Faced with a series of family tragedies, a young girl must find a way to support her mother, disabled father and imprisoned brother.

Words by James Allen

FOR SOME, FAMILY IS A DIFFICULT topic to talk about. Ancient grudges, broken homes and estrangements can cloud memories, but if you are lucky the odd happy moment or two pops up. "My older brother fell out of a fruit tree when I was three," recalls 20-year-old Dung. "We loved climbing trees to pick the fruit, but one day he lost his footing and fell. I grabbed his belt and did all I could to try to stop him falling, but I wasn't strong enough." Slowing his inevitable descent, he escaped any serious injury, and the memory always makes her laugh.

Laughter is hard to come by for Dung. She has overcome family tragedies, personal hardship and has now been given the opportunity of a lifetime. And on a typical rainy day in October on the quiet rooftop of the new KOTO restaurant in District 3, she tells us all about it.

When she was 12, her father had an aneurysm leading to complete paralysis down the left side of his body. This tragedy was a pivotal moment — after

which her family started to change for the worse.

"My father can't do anything for himself. My mother washes, dresses and feeds him," Dung explains, and this is before her mother has to go to work in the market to sell enough vegetables to support the family and his healthcare bills.

A question about her feelings towards her father brings a long thoughtful pause. "He is a good, optimistic person and kindhearted too, even after his paralysis. He has always been gentle with everyone, especially me and my brother." Even when they were naughty, he never laid a hand on them in anger. "He would just speak to us to find out why we had done what we had done," she remembers.

## ◦He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother

Having to adapt to the changes, Dung helped her mother look after her father while attending school. But it was not long before more of the family was chipped away. With one incapacitated father and a



very busy mother, her older brother fell in with a bad crowd and he soon waded into criminal activities. One evening he was caught, and after refusing to give up the co-conspirators who had run away, he was sentenced to 15 years in prison. He was 18 at the time.

"No one has ever told me exactly what happened that night. Theft was involved, but he [her brother] won't tell me. My mother and I cried," says Dung. "My father remained calm; he didn't want my brother to feel completely alone. I looked up to him; he was like a mirror of what I could be. Then he went to jail and everything felt hopeless."

Although he hadn't died, Dung still felt like she had lost her brother and everything became more difficult as she slipped into depression. But instead of

allowing her sadness to envelop her, she became motivated by it. "I was so sad at first; I didn't know what to do. Then I thought it was up to me to do something good after all the bad that had happened. Now I am my brother's hope."

After three years of letter writing and sporadic visits, her brother Tam still tries to look out for his little sister, more than aware that it is now up to her to support their parents. Dung still searches for any evidence or information that can help reduce her brother's sentence. "It's difficult, but 15 years is too long. I just need to gather enough information to secure his release," she says with determination.

## ◦Opportunity Comes Knocking

In 2010 Dung was shown a flyer for KOTO (Know One, Teach One), an organisation

that gives disadvantaged 16 to 22-year-olds the opportunity to turn their lives around. Seizing a lifeline with both hands, she applied and was accepted. There are currently four classes running in Ho Chi Minh City, and with the official opening of the restaurant last month, the trainees are busy at work. As part of her training, she receives hospitality training, English classes (which she loves), lessons on life skills and hands-on work experience.

Dung and her mother arrived at one of the housing facilities and it was only then, as her mother left, that Dung realised what was happening. "I cried and cried. My mother was leaving me and everything was so new and strange," she says.

Splitting her time between busy lunch and dinner services at the restaurant in District 1 and the training centre in District

7, Dung has plenty on her plate. But she is completely supported by her classmates. As trainee Ngoc points out, "We have all learned how to share everything with each other, to listen to other people's problems and to be responsible for ourselves."

"With my two best friends here, we want to open up a boutique coffee joint with cocktails in the evening!" Dung exclaims. "I've really learnt how to value the love and loyalty we have for one another, even our house parents are like family."

With the ongoing guidance of dedicated staff and fellow students, Dung's class will graduate in January 2013.

*The names in the article have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals. The KOTO Saigon Restaurant is located at 151A Hai Ba Trung, Q3. To learn more about KOTO visit, [www.koto.com.au](http://www.koto.com.au). *