

HUMAN INTEREST

Vietnam War's 'Napalm Girl' Sees Her Scars as 'Beautiful' Following Innovative Burn Treatment: 'I Fought for My Life'

BY CATHY FREE · @CATHYJFREE

POSTED ON SEPTEMBER 22, 2017 AT 12:01PM EDT



Kim Phuc and her grandson Kael Bui

// COPYRIGHT ANNE BAYIN

For more than 45 years, Kim Phuc has been known as “The Girl in the Picture.” The memories of June 8, 1972, follow her everywhere, from the convention halls where she now gives speeches to the doctor’s office in Florida where she gets laser treatments for the painful scars that wind across her body like timeworn lace.

Ever since her agony was captured in a famous photo after she was burned by a Napalm blast in Vietnam at age 9, Phuc, now 54, dreamed of channeling that dark day into something that would bring hope and beauty into her life.

And now, with her pain greatly diminished thanks to a dedicated doctor, plus the release this fall of a new book detailing her quest for peace and forgiveness, Phuc is eager to share the progress she has made in the months since she was first profiled by PEOPLE in February 2016.

“My treatment is such a major development in how pain from severe burns is treated that I am hoping to help others who suffer from scars,” she tells PEOPLE exclusively. “So many burn survivors are suffering like I suffered until recently, and I want them to see a doctor and have treatment now, not 45 years later, like I am.”

Now a married mother of two adult sons who lives in Toronto and works as a goodwill ambassador for UNESCO, Phuc thought she would live the rest of her life with severe scars from a napalm drop that scorched her body and sent her running down the road naked during the Vietnam War.



Kim Phuc at 9 years old

// NICK UT/AP PHOTO

The photo that Associated Press photographer Nick Ut snapped of her won him numerous accolades, including the Pulitzer Prize. But the image of “The Girl in the Picture” was far more enduring than anyone imagined.

“To many people, more than anything, it shows the horror of the Vietnam War and any war,” Phuc says of the iconic image. “On that day, as I ran, I thought, ‘This is what it is like to die.’ ”

Phuc was wrapped in a soldier’s rain poncho and placed in a morgue because doctors didn’t see any hope for her survival.

“I fought for my life, though,” she says, “and after more than a year and 17 surgeries, I made it. That is when I learned that the hardship was just beginning. Why did I have to carry these ugly, painful scars? I felt that I would never have a boyfriend, never get married, never have a normal life. It was a very low point.”

Although Phuc dreamed of becoming a doctor and had just started medical school, the Vietnamese government forced her to quit her studies and devote her time to giving interviews once the photo of her became famous throughout the world.

Finally, in 1986, she was allowed to move to Cuba to resume her studies, and it was there that she met her husband, Bui Huy Toan, now a social worker.

“My scars did not bother him — he became my angel,” Phuc says. “Next month, we will have been married 25 years.”

After five years in Cuba, she and her husband defected to Canada, where they raised two sons, Thomas, 23, and Stephen, 20, and now have a new grandson, Kalel, who is 9 months old. “I did not finish my medical schooling,” says Phuc, “because my pain was so great. I knew that it would be too difficult to deal with that pain and also work as a doctor.”



Instead, she now travels the world to tell her story for UNESCO, and she will soon be embarking on a tour for her new book, *Fire Road: The Napalm Girl's Journey Through the Horrors of War to Faith, Forgiveness and Peace*, which will be released by Tyndale House Publishers on Oct. 3.

Earlier this year, she also helped launch the Restoring Heroes Foundation to give wounded war veterans access to innovative medical treatments.

“I want more than anything for my story to help others, especially people who have been burned and injured in war,” Phuc tells PEOPLE. “I spent many years hating the people who caused my suffering. I always dreamed of the day when I could wear a short-sleeved blouse.”

It wasn't until she was watching television one day in 2015 that Phuc realized her dream could come true. She saw a medical program featuring Dr. Jill Waibel, founder of the Miami Dermatology and Laser Institute, who had successfully used cutting-edge laser treatments on burn survivors.

Phuc contacted Waibel, who offered to treat her for free when she learned of her years of pain and emotional distress after the Napalm attack on her village.

After flying back and forth between Canada and Florida for a series of 10 treatments, Phuc's pain has greatly diminished, along with her scars.

“On a scale from 1 to 10, I used to be at a 9 with pain,” she says, “because my burns were so deep, going down to my bones. Now, though, I would say it's half that. I'm at a level 4 or 5. And my skin is much softer in places. To me, it looks beautiful.”



Dr. Jill Waibel and Kim Phuc
// KIM PHUC

Waibel used a combination of more than 50 different lasers on Phuc, searing the scarred skin and leaving room for new skin and collagen to grow.

“Seeing such a beautiful and courageous woman like Kim regain her mobility, sensation and a dramatic reduction in her daily pain level has been so fulfilling for me in my work as a doctor and as a friend,” Waibel tells PEOPLE. “It’s so pleasing to see the successful results of her scar treatments.”

There is also an additional benefit, says Phuc.

“I used to hold my new grandson and could not feel his touch,” she tells PEOPLE, “and now, I can feel him. It’s so beautiful that I want to cry each time he touches me. Because of this treatment, I now have hope, and that’s what I want to share with people. If ‘The Girl in the Picture’ can have hope, then you can have hope, too.”