“Straight Into the Wave”: Hung Le

2017. Acrylic on wood. 22 ¾ "w by 8" h.

David Feinberg and Beth Andrews, with contributions from Storyteller Hung Le and from visual artists Michelle Englund, Kimchi Hoang, Jennifer Hensel, Kristin Anton, Sima Shahriar, Paula Leiter-Pergament, Sara Feinberg, Julia Breidenbach, Jane Bollweg, and Annie Nickell.

Hung Le was in the South Vietnamese Navy during the war which meant that if he were identified by the Vietcong after the war, they could put him in prison for up to 5 years. This is why he decided to try to escape. The boat used for his escape was small, old-fashioned, and was not built for ocean sailing. The owner put wood panels on the sides of the boat to make it look like it was suited for an ocean voyage. In the darkness of night, Hung Le and the other people wanting to escape were fooled. Because of his naval background, Hung Le was chosen to pilot the boat.

Soon, government boats started following them, trying to catch them and bring them back. In an effort to get away, Hung chose to sail straight into the large waves. He thought the government boats would not follow because the move was risky. Although the other passenger told him that he was crazy, he responded, “No, we have no choice. Go!”

Even though the journey was windy and dangerous, they eventually made it to the coast of Thailand. There, they encountered a Thai military ship. They told the people on the ship: “We’re looking for freedom. We cannot live with the Communists.” The Thai agreed to help them, bringing the refugees onto their ship. They made Hung stay on his boat because he was the captain, but they tied the two vessels together. As the sun set the waves were getting really big, and he knew that he could not control the small boat by himself. From his Navy experience, Hung knew the boat would sink, and that he had to get on board the ship. He told someone on the ship that he needed to brush his teeth, so they let him on. A half hour later, the small boat sank. They tried to save it, but they couldn’t. Eventually, they reached land, and they stayed there overnight. There were United Nations people in Bangkok who gave them aid.

He was in a concentration camp for about two years because he was in the navy before his escape. The prisoners were given the chance to go work outside in the fields. Outside the camp there were farmers’ markets, and the people knew the prisoners were from South Vietnam. The prisoners bought food from them, and slowly they became friends. After two years, the farmers helped him escape by moving him from house to house. The plan was that he would go out as if he was going to buy food and then they got him to the bus station to escape. Hung truly believed that God helped save him, which is why he has many crosses placed on his piece to represent how God was with him throughout his journey.