

Eighth-grader keeps God first at spelling bees

By David Sedeño
The Texas Catholic

On March 9, St. Mark the Evangelist eighth-grader Theresa Tran will stand on stage at the George W. Bush Presidential Center with other competitors of the Golden Chick Dallas Regional Spelling Bee.

She may be asked to spell something like "bewusstseinslage," or "metempsychosis," or "diaspora," or a word she has never heard. Even before she thinks of asking the judges the meaning and origin of the word, she will already have done something that has come natural to her when all eyes are staring at her.

"I will say a prayer and ask God to be with me," the soft-spoken student said recently as she talked about the upcoming competition.

Theresa qualified for the regional competition after winning the Diocese of Dallas Spelling Bee and then won first place in the Dallas County Private School Spelling Bee. If she does well at regionals, she could qualify for the Scripps National Spelling Bee.

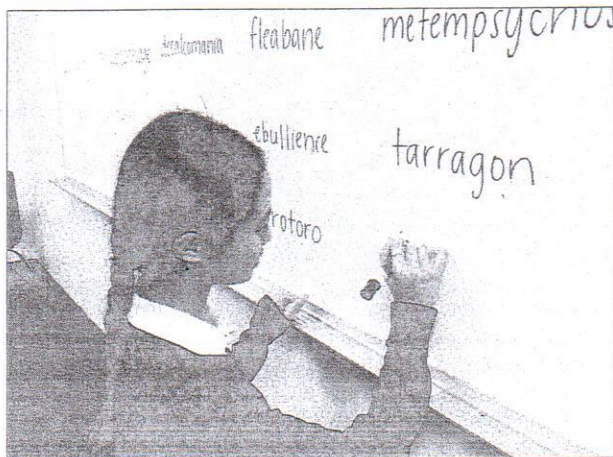
Theresa has been competing the past several years in the spelling bees, making it to the third round of the national competition last year.

"I always found spelling really interesting, especially the English language because it is based on other languages, like Latin or Greek, and the combination of all different types of languages combining to form one word or multiple words and I really have found that really interesting," Theresa said. "That's why I love spelling."

Family journey

One of the words that Theresa has had to spell in the past is "diaspora," and if asked again she won't have to ask the judges for the meaning because she knows it very well. Her parents, Charles and Kim Tran, are among the several million people who have fled their homeland of Vietnam in the past 40-plus years since the communist regime captured South Vietnam and the capital city of Saigon in 1975.

To know Theresa Tran's name, her story, and her commitment to working hard is to know the story of her parents, too, their own hardships, faith and their love for St. Mark the Evangelist Catholic School.



DAVID SEDEÑO/The Texas Catholic

St. Mark the Evangelist eighth-grader Theresa Tran practices spelling words that may be given to her at the Golden Chicken Regional Spelling Bee in Dallas on March 9.

In 1987, Kim Tran said, life under the communist regime proved too futile and repressive that her parents sent the then-17-year-old Kim Le and two siblings out of the country. They traversed through the jungles of Cambodia before making it to Thailand, where they were placed in a refugee camp waiting for sponsors to a Western country.

"I was miserable and cried every night," Kim Tran recalled. "I missed my parents and my three older sisters who were still in Vietnam. I wrote letters home telling them how terribly I missed them."

The three siblings were sent to the Philippines and after a year, they were accepted by the United States as refugees. In the spring of 1989, they were relocated to Dallas. She went to community college during the day, did textile work at night and went to church on Sundays.

In the year 2000, she was introduced to Charles Tran, who had a similar story. In 1982 at the age of 12, he escaped from Vietnam with his family, among the first wave of boat people to arrive in an Indonesia refugee camp. Later that year, the family was relocated to Ottawa, Canada and he grew up and went to the university there. In 1998, as a software engineer, he relocated to Denver.

In the summer of 2000, Charles

and Kim were introduced by Charles' aunt in Dallas. Kim was working as an administrator for a private health clinic in Dallas.

They had a two-year long-distance relationship and they were married in July 2002 at Mother of Perpetual Help Vietnamese Catholic Church in Garland and then settled in San Diego.

Catholic faith

In the summer of 2004, with Kim three months pregnant, Charles lost his job. The family relocated to Dallas and made ends meet by working at a convenience store and doing all they could to stay focused.

"During this time of hardship, my prayers concentrated on our daily needs," Kim Tran said. "I prayed for our daughter who was soon to be born and for my husband to find employment."

Their little girl was born in January 2005 and they named her Theresa, in honor of St. Therese of Lisieux. Later that year, Charles Tran found a software engineering job.

By the time she was ready to go to school, Kim and Charles Tran knew that there was only one place for her: St. Mark the Evangelist Catholic School. Theresa has literally grown

up in the school, entering as a pre-kindergarten 3 student and will graduate in the coming months.

"Catholic education is very important for us for her to grow up in the faith," Kim Tran said. "We know it costs a lot for Catholic school, but we don't mind. We can eat less and support her because Catholic school is very important in her life. It is her foundation."

Theresa Tran began competing in spelling bees in the fifth grade, advancing further in the competitions each year. Every night, she does her homework and then studies a bit more on some spelling words that she has been given or finds through her own research via the dictionary or the internet.

And later this month when Theresa Tran is up on stage, she will concentrate on words, listening to the pronouncers, concentrating on the judges, ignoring the audience, particularly her nervous mother, and doing what has helped her so far.

"I will say, 'God, Mary, please stay with me on this word. Help me to focus and please guide me to spell this word correctly.'"