



Vieng's sister shares poignant message

Text: By ELIZABETH MELVILLE

"We came to the United States 27 years ago looking for a life of hope and a new beginning," read Amphay Phovixay Wednesday morning on behalf of her family following the conviction and sentencing of Charles Travis Manley for her sister's murder.

"Our hope for a new and happier life was shattered when our older sister, Vieng, was brutally taken away from us."

Amphay's poignant words echoed in the hearts of most everyone in the Harris County Courthouse despite her tiny frame and tiny voice.

Amphay was only 13 when her sister was abducted on Oct. 10, 1987, after getting a flat tire on U.S. Highway 29 near Moreland. She and her family waited for answers for two years before a timberman found skeletal remains in November 1989 in a remote, wooded area of Harris County in the triangle of Whitesville, West Point and Pine Lake. It wasn't until October 1991 that Vieng Phovixay was brought back to Newnan and buried in Oak Hill Cemetery.

The Phovixay family had some answers, though tragic, but they still sought justice for the member of their family who had been their link to an unfamiliar world.

Kham and Savang Phovixay, Vieng's parents, came to America from Laos, their native country, in the late 1970s under the most desperate of circumstances. Savang had served as an adviser for the American forces and, as a result, was targeted by the North Vietnamese and captured. Kham sold everything the family had and bribed the guards at the prison where her husband was being held.

After his release, the family escaped by raft to a refugee camp. They were "adopted" by First Baptist Church in Newnan and brought to the United States.

The Phovixay family overcame more than most to enjoy the freedoms of America, only to be disappointed by the reality that senseless violence exists in every part of the world.

"This tragedy has affected us in numerous ways that words can't describe," Amphay continued in court Wednesday.

Last week, she spoke openly about the family's ongoing problem with trusting people. Her parents, heart-broken and devastated by the loss of Vieng, abandoned efforts to learn English and to adopt this country's culture. They had embraced America and were wounded irreparably in the process.

Amphay has spent her life hoping to be successful enough to provide for her family and one day find justice in her sister's murder. She's now accomplished both.

Prior to Investigator Clay Bryant re-examining the cold case in 2005, the Phovixay family had even looked into hiring a private investigator to sift through the evidence. They always had the nagging suspicion that Vieng's case was solvable and that if they had been wealthy or were prestigious Americans, the case might have been solved shortly after Vieng's remains were discovered in 1989.

"We all have often wondered what [Vieng] could have become as a young woman," Amphay read Wednesday. "She had so many big hopes and dreams that will never be fulfilled. We also have missed the opportunity to know our niece or nephew, and we wonder what he or she would have become."

Amphay shared with the jurors the good news that her niece was born on Aug. 30 and given the name Alexanderia Vieng.

"We will tell her as she grows the significance of her middle name," she continued.

She thanked the jurors for their "wisdom" and "intelligence," which have done nothing short of renewing the family's "hope and spirit," according to Amphay.

After 20 long years of injustice and seven painful days in trial reliving the horror that extinguished the life of Vieng and waiting anxiously for a verdict, they finally heard the word they'd dreamed about for so long — "guilty."

The word took some time to sink in for members of the Phovixay family, the Manley family and everybody else in the courthouse Wednesday morning. Everyone had braced for a mistrial, and everyone — regardless of whether they believed Manley was guilty of malice murder or not — was shocked by the outcome.

The jury's verdict effortlessly slipped from Judge Bill Smith's lips onto numb ears. Moments later, the families melted into tears — some of despair and some of bittersweet joy. The Phovixays erupted in celebration and relief.

Judge Smith ordered Manley to his feet to receive his sentence. Without hesitation or sympathy, he told Manley that he will spend the remainder of his natural life in prison. As Manley collapsed into his chair, he wiped tears from his eyes.

Family, friends and investigators stood together outside the courthouse, clinging to the moment. Reality interrupted, though, as bailiffs laboriously dragged from the courthouse the pine tree on which Vieng's body had decomposed.

No one will probably ever really know what happened in the woods of Harris County the day Vieng was murdered, and perhaps it is better that way.

Don Helms, a family friend, shared an appropriate quote.

"Justice delayed is not justice denied," he reminded.

Helms said in an interview prior to the start of the trial that the family had already grieved and had accepted the fate of Vieng, but that they sought justice.

Although the Phovixays were unsure of the next chapter in their lives, they left with something priceless, according to Amphay's statements — "peace."