**Thien-Ai Nguyen**

When asked to describe herself, Thien-Ai Nguyen selected words such as diligent, hard-working, and devout. She forgot to mention that she is also articulate, selfless, and delightfully honest, but that’s probably because she is also very modest. ESOL Professor Irina Patten who teaches at Lone Star College – Fairbanks Center said, “Thien-Ai is an exemplary student. All of her ESOL instructors noted her superior academic performance, her motivation, and enthusiasm.” So let’s add intelligent, motivated, and enthusiastic to the list of adjectives that describe this tiny powerhouse.

Born in My Tho, Vietnam, Thien-Ai only spent the first 13 years of her life in her homeland. Because of the political situation in Vietnam, both of her parents ventured abroad seeking better opportunities for their small family. When Thien-Ai was only two years old, her mother left for Germany where she eventually started a successful grocery business. Her father left Vietnam two years later to immigrate to the United States. Therefore, Thien-Ai spent the majority of her childhood with her maternal aunt’s family. Her cousins became more like siblings, and because of her aunt’s vocation as a Protestant pastor, Thien-Ai developed a strong belief in God.

When she was in 7th grade, Thien-Ai joined her mother in Gelsenkirchen, Germany. She remembers the move as a difficult transition. The new language and culture were daunting. However, Thien-Ai persevered, and even though she was initially demoted to 6th grade due to her lack of knowledge of the German language, she made up for it by jumping from 7th to 9th grade later. She also admits to struggling with English at the time, “In Germany it was really hard. I failed English miserably. Nobody is perfect.”

Three years ago at the age of 20, Thien-Ai and her mother joined her father in Texas where she began her studies at Lone Star College. She believes that the ESOL department has “an amazing program” and she felt “really comfortable with the teachers.” She feels especially indebted to Mark Fisher, Professor of ESOL at Lone Star College – Fairbanks Center. Through a variety of teaching methods, Professor Fisher instilled confidence in this student who once struggled with the English language. Thien-Ai remarked, “He taught me everything about English. I learned a lot from this teacher. I would recommend him for every single student who wants to study English. He was just great.” Fisher remembers Thien-Ai as “one of those amazing students you never forget. She was over-prepared for each assignment and is one of the most pleasant, hardworking students that I’ve had the pleasure to teach. I truly miss having her in my class.”

Because her ESOL classes had equipped her with a solid foundation, Thien-Ai found making the transition to mainstream classes such as biology and chemistry fairly easy. Now a pre-pharmacy student at Texas Southern University, Thien-Ai is taking the first steps towards earning her Doctor of Pharmacy. However, she still remembers Lone Star College with great affection. She misses the friendly environment and being able to utilize services such as the Tutoring Center. On a recent trip back to the campus she had the feeling of, “Finally, I’m home again.”

She would encourage new ESOL students to not take for granted the very services that she now misses such as visiting teachers during their office hours or going to tutoring. She advises taking advantage of every opportunity to improve yourself. Don’t be afraid to speak English and try to make American friends. This advice is not given lightly, and Thien-Ai is living proof that diligence leads to success.

However, for Thien-Ai success is not measured only by having a lucrative career. In addition to working as a pharmacist one day, she also hopes to do missionary work in developing countries. Her giving spirit will surely touch more countries than the three she has already called home in just a little over two decades.