

INTRODUCTION

Imagine you are 14 years old. Hormonal changes, pimples, self consciousness -- the works. Now imagine that all that is the **easy** part of being you. For you are an immigrant; you have left your home and friends, you don't know anybody at school, your family is split between two countries, you don't know your way around your new city, and you don't speak English.

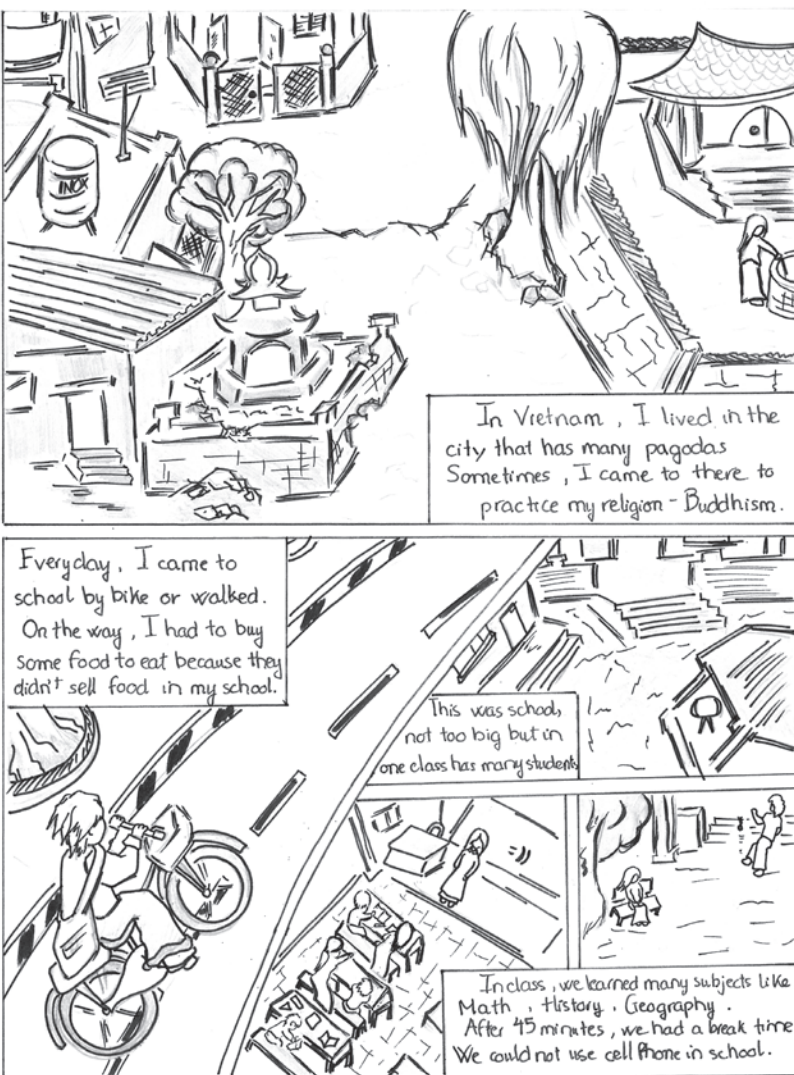
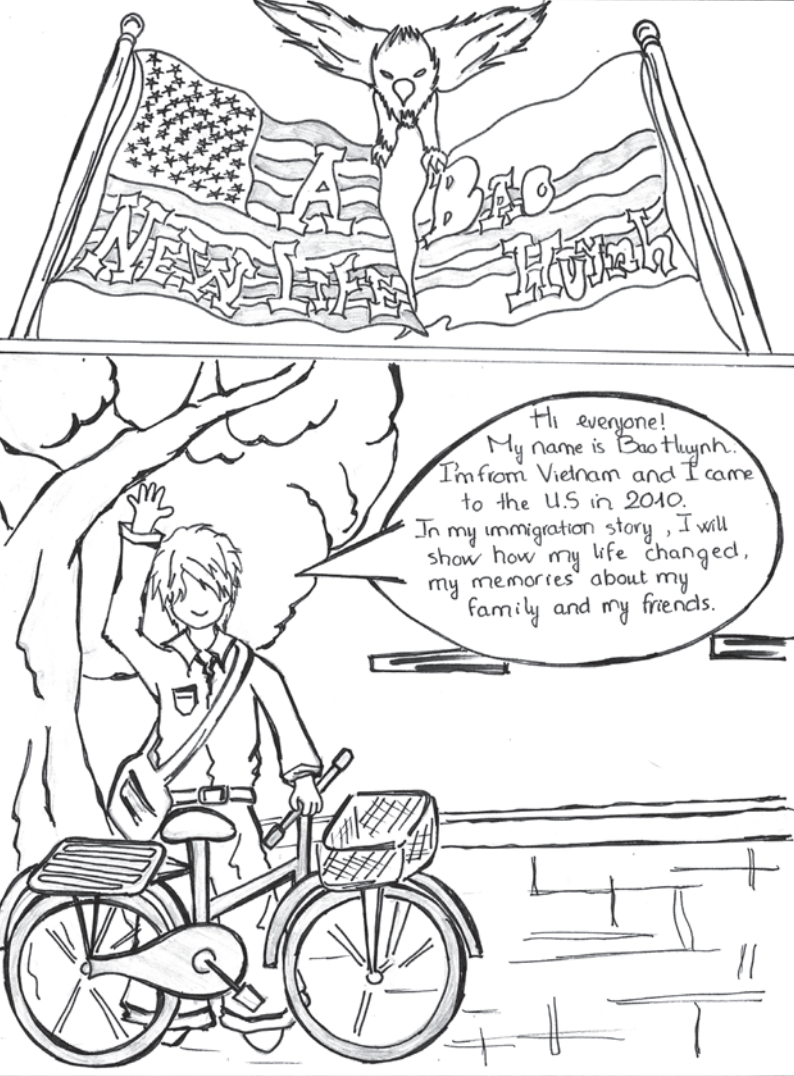
When I began teaching at Oakland International High School, I had lofty ideas about the world events and issues I would be able to discuss with such an international mix of students. I too am an immigrant; I left Vietnam as a refugee when I was a child. But what I quickly realized stood between us was a language gap wider than any ocean. My pseudo-command of three other languages didn't even begin to cover the multitude of languages that my students spoke.

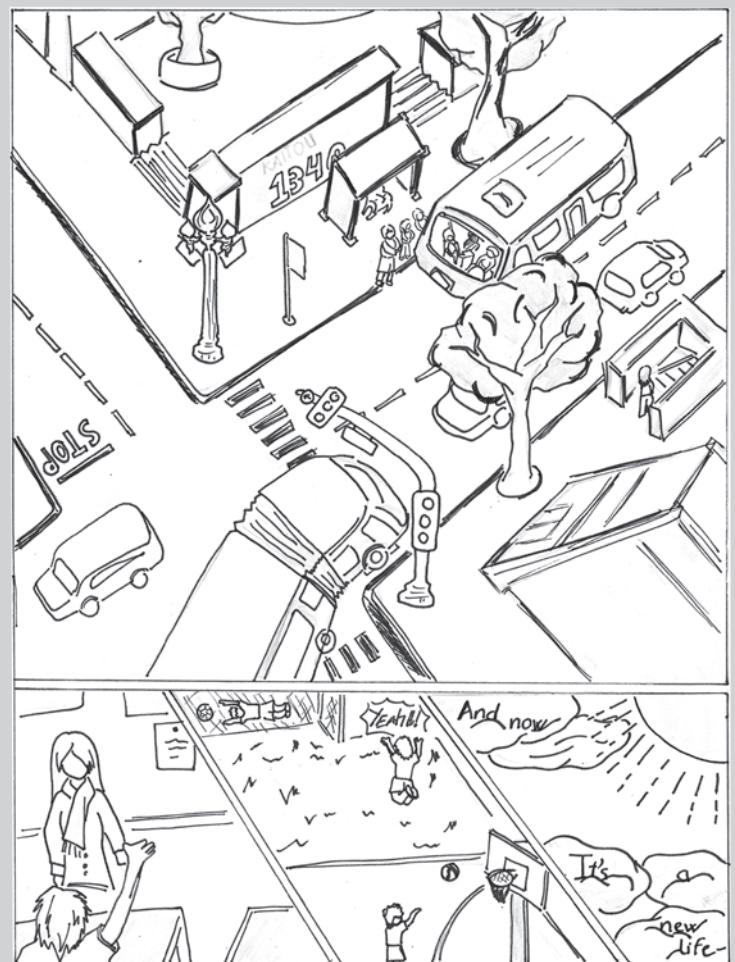
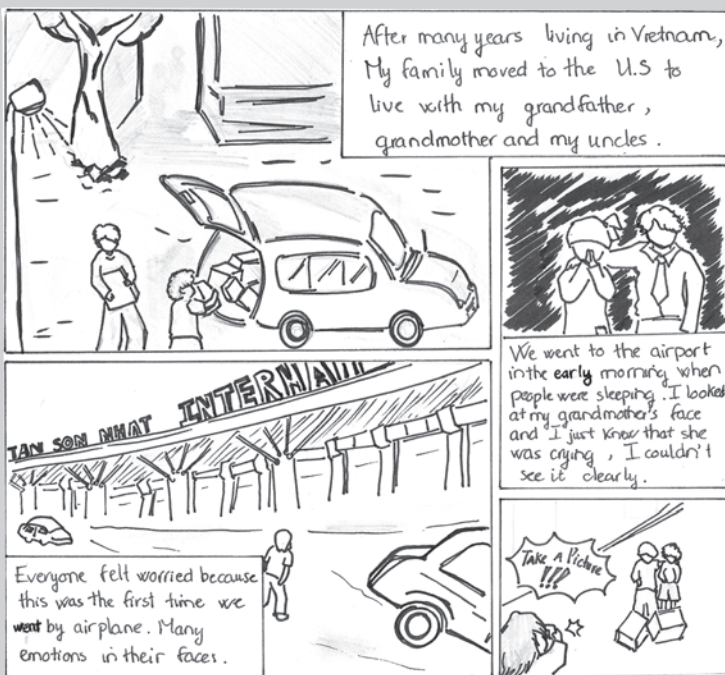
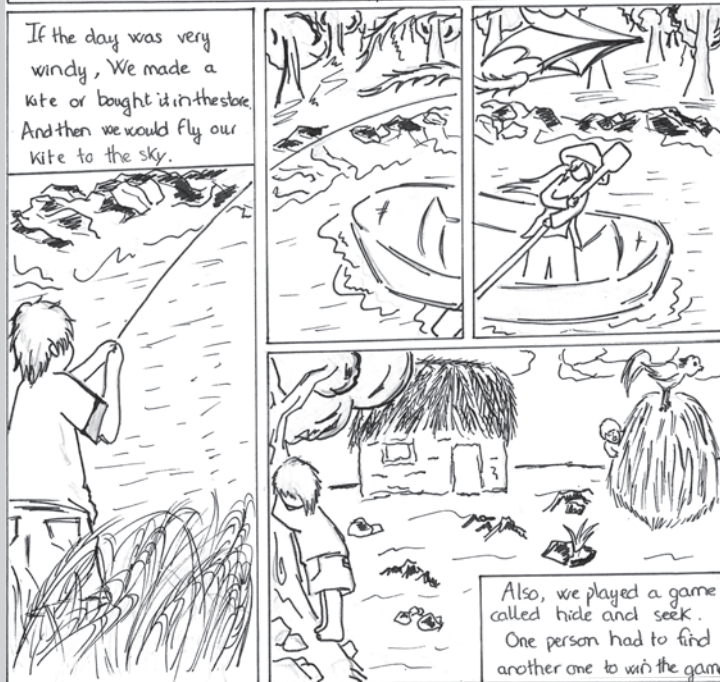
The comics project began as a way for me to better understand my students. I found that if I taught everyone a new language, governed by a few simple conventions like panels and speech balloons, then we would have a common way of communicating that allowed students to surprise me. Over the years, as I learned to ask them better questions, my students have surprised, informed, inspired, and moved me to tears with their stories.

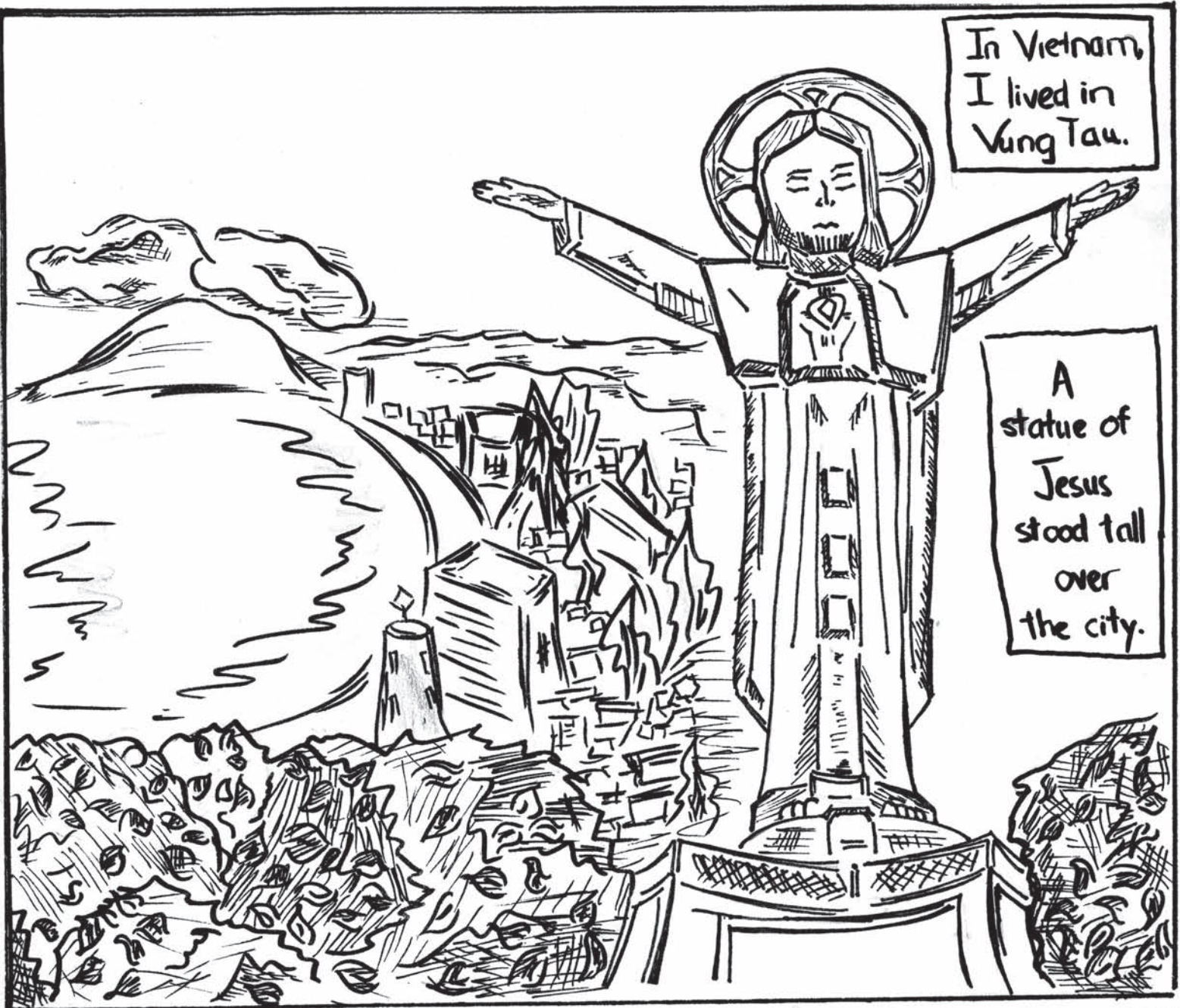
And these stories are just the tip of the iceberg. This year, an 11th grader named Bao rewrote the immigration story he did for me as a 10th grader. The original story, shown on these two pages, is undoubtedly beautiful but maybe just a little generic. Bao told me that the first time around, he was shy about sharing with other people the personal details of who he was. The second time, he said, he opened his mind a little more. He had more experience, and he reflected more deeply about his characterization. Bao's second version is on the pages that follow. It's a fantastic story about childhood, adolescence, and nostalgia that reminds me of Rob Reiner's film *Stand By Me* or François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*. Here is a young man who is becoming a storyteller; he is learning by figuring out what his own story really is.

So when you read these stories, remember that they are the first attempt by a person still forming his or her identity in an environment and language that is not native. Look deeper to imagine what more surely lies beneath. Look forward to picture the future of these teenagers who have already experienced so much. Recognize in them their great potential.

Thi Bui
Art Teacher, OIHS

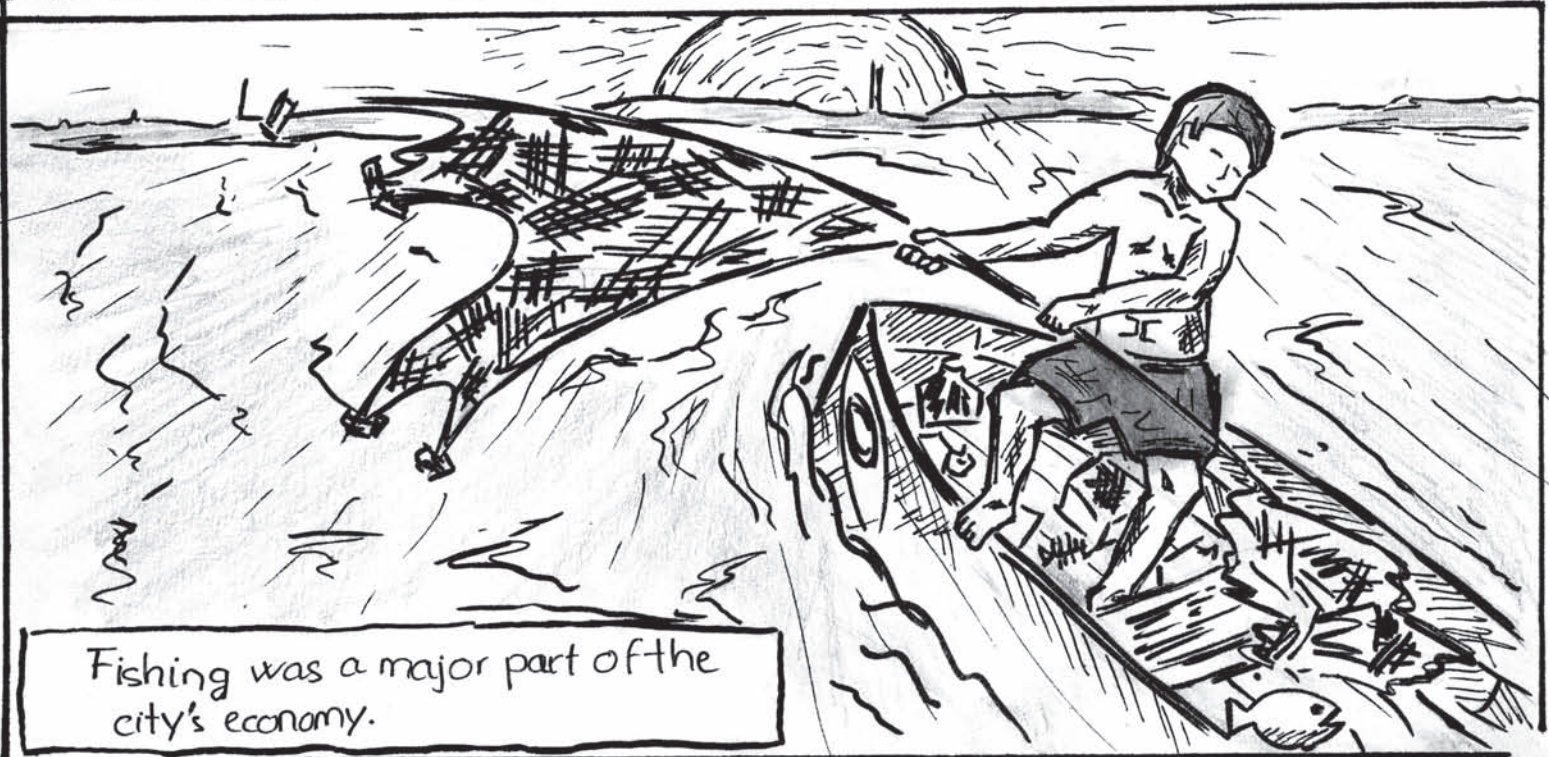






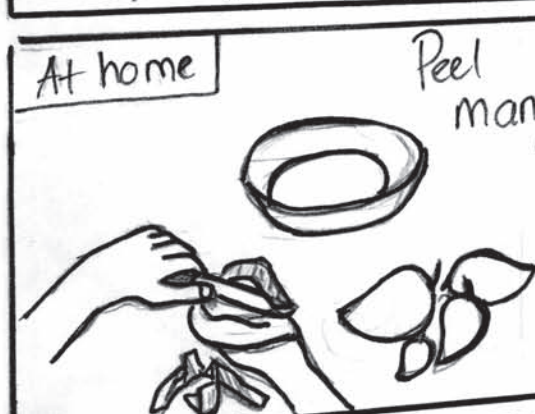
In Vietnam,
I lived in
Vung Tau.

A
statue of
Jesus
stood tall
over
the city.



Fishing was a major part of the
city's economy.

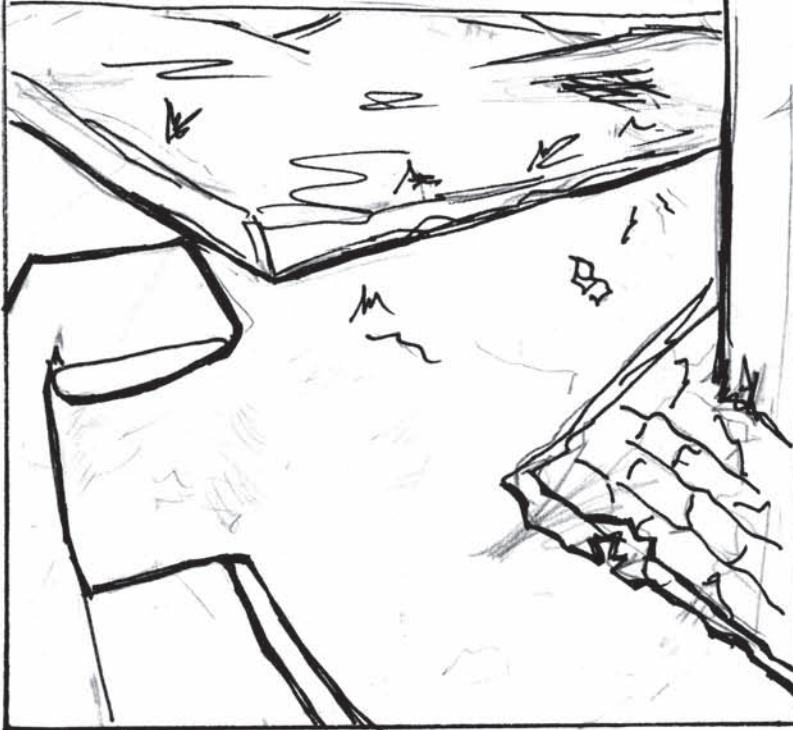




...was fun and more important
it was free. :)



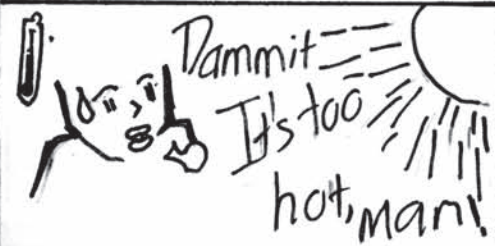
Afterwards, we went to the Soccer field when the lights were on.



We sat there for a long time:



One time my buddies and I hiked up a mountain and cut down some trees. For what? We'll find out!



Was it crazy?
There were up to ten of us crossing the streets with trees on our shoulders.

Those trees were very valuable.

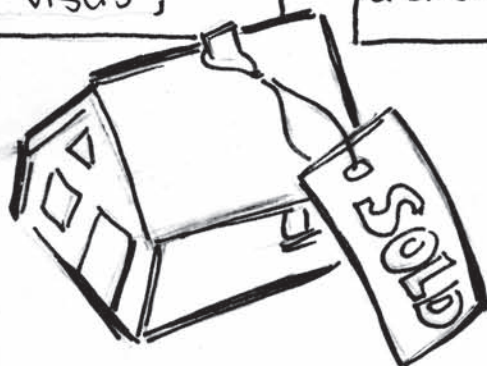


Happy New Year 2007

We stole them anyway!!



When we got
our visas,



we sold our house and rented
a small one to live in.



Using that money,
we booked our flights

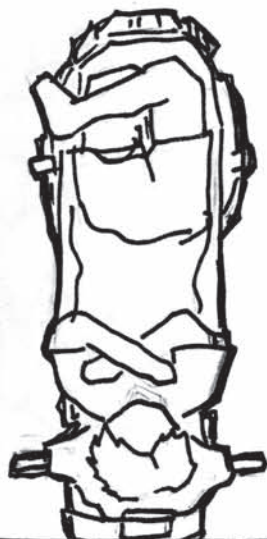


I still went to school.
Still boring as usual.

Lying on my hammock,



I looked at the moon,
wondering...



How
is my life
going to
be in
the U.S?

Maybe



Hamburgers

Pizza

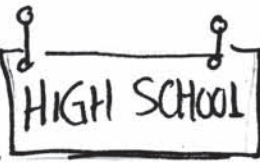


New
clothes

Or



Teacher

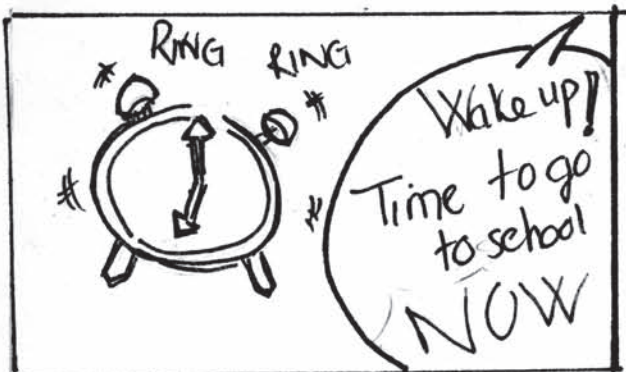


speaking English!!
30°F 60°F

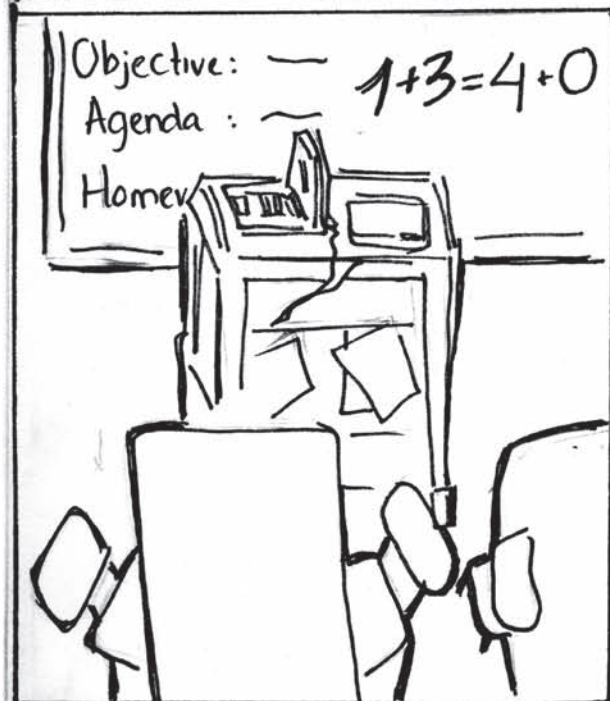
I went to sleep and
tried not to think about
tomorrow.



Slowly, slowly
I closed my eyes and
fell into darkness.



Almost two years have passed but I still feel like the first time I came to the U.S.



Life goes on and so do I.
I'm happy to be here,
I wish for all of us to be healthy and
successful in life.

