

How the Vietnam War's 'Napalm Girl' Is Finally Getting Her Scars Treated – 43 Years Later



For the past 43 years, Kim Phuc has learned to live with constant pain.

In June 1972, when she was just 9 years old, Phuc suffered burns on over 65 percent of her body when American forces mistakenly dropped napalm bombs on the South Vietnamese temple where she and her family had taken refuge.

Associated Press photographer Nick Ut's photograph of her running naked and screaming from the flames became an iconic image of the Vietnam War – and earned him a Pulitzer.

Over the years, Phuc made peace with what happened to her – forming a foundation to help other child victims of war and traveling the world as an inspirational speaker to share her story of love, hope and forgiveness – but gave up on ever finding relief from the pain.



South Vietnamese forces follow after terrified children, including 9-year-old Kim Phuc, center, as they run down Route 1 near Trang Bang after an aerial napalm attack on suspected Viet Cong hiding places on June 8, 1972.

NICK UT / AP

"I prayed I'd have no pain, no scars in heaven," Phuc, 54, tells PEOPLE.

Then fate intervened.

A few years ago, Phuc traveled to Ohio to speak to a local rotary club. In the audience was David Waibel, 71, of Troy, Ohio.

"I had no idea all Kim had gone through until she spoke to our group," Waibel tells PEOPLE. "Somewhere along the way, she mentioned the pain from her scars and even showed a little bit of them."

It just so happened that Waibel's daughter-in-law is Miami dermatologist Jill Waibel, who has pioneered a technique for burn victims using fractional lasers.

"I waited until people cleared away, went up afterward and said, 'I think my daughter-in-law could help you,'" says Waibel.

He gave her Jill's contact information and Phuc did reach out, but it wasn't until September when she was able to actually start the treatments.

Hampered by finances (she and husband, Bui Huy Toan, 56, live off his salary as a social worker), Phuc didn't have enough money to pay for the treatments or for the expenses associated with traveling from Toronto, where she lives, to Miami.

So Jill, who had already agreed to do the treatments for free, found a donor willing to cover travel expenses for Phuc and her husband.

"I was really moved by Kim's story, mainly because of the pain she's in," Jill says. "She is an incredible symbol we have of civilians hurt in war. Now we have these lasers that can help."



So far, Phuc has had three treatments (she is getting them every other month and expects to have 7 total) and says she already feels a little better.

"My scars are a little bit lighter, a little bit softer," she shares.

Jill thinks she can get them to the point where they'll be almost invisible to the naked eye, but for Phuc, it's more about being pain free.

"It's not about having my scars gone," she adds, "but about relieving the pain I've endured for 43 years."

In the meantime, she's continuing to travel and deliver her inspirational message.

"I'm so thankful to be alive – to help one person, to make a difference," she says.