



## Tuyet Le

January 20, 1972 - February 8, 2025

Our beloved Tuyết Anh Mong Lê died on February 8, 2025, just weeks after her 53rd birthday. She was diagnosed with late-stage lung cancer several years ago. She took her last breath in the loving embrace of her closest family and friends.

Tuyết was the daughter of Kế Văn Lê and Liên Thị Mộng Nguyễn. She arrived into the world on a hot day. On January 21, 1972, temperatures in Saigon ran into the nineties. And yet, her father named her Tuyết—Vietnamese for snow. Maybe he knew something. Three years later, when Saigon was captured by North Vietnam, the Lê family was forced to flee. Their refugee journey brought Tuyết to Milwaukee, and she went on to make a life in Chicago. The rest of her birthdays were wintry; many were dusted with snow.

Tuyết family restarted their lives in Milwaukee with \$75. Her dad worked double shifts as a machinist. Her mother cleaned hotel rooms downtown. Her siblings were constantly herded into

chores, but not Tuyết. She once told her grandmother she felt bad that she didn't have "a job" to help her parents. She was the youngest. And she had another challenge. At 11 months old, she was diagnosed with polio, which, in turn, caused scoliosis. She didn't walk until she was three. From the age of five to almost ten, she was in a bulky body-brace twenty hours a day. She spent months of her childhood in the hospital for corrective surgeries. So she couldn't help the way her siblings could. Her grandmother told her something that stuck: "Your job is to study." Tuyet took that job seriously. She attended Nicolet High School, where she drew inspiration from the life of Harriet Tubman; then patched together scholarships and grants to attend Northwestern University. At Northwestern, Tuyết majored in Fine Arts. But she also found her voice as a young civil rights leader. At home, she had never heard her parents tell their own story. At school, Vietnam wasn't a place, but a war. On campus, Tuyết started to organize classes on Asian American History, and began to push the University for a formal Asian American Studies program.

A short decade later, Tuyết was the new Executive Director of the Asian American Institute, which she turned into the powerhouse that is now Asian Americans Advancing Justice | Chicago (Advancing Justice |Chicago), the premier Asian American civil rights organization in the region. She became a force for Asian American advancement, immigrant justice, racial equity, and disability

rights. She graded politicians on Asian American inclusion, and once failed the Governor and Cook County Board President to prod them into action. When Chicago's Mayor Daley attempted to throw Asian American contractors out of affirmative action for construction projects, she galvanized the community to fight back. Years later, she won. She inspired a thousand people to brave an epic election-season snow blast to demonstrate Asian American voting power. She built the first-ever Asian American Caucus of State Legislators. She fought to redraw Congressional districts to give Asian Americans a voice in democracy.

And she did it all in her very own way—the way of kindness, so different from the hardscrabble world of Chicago politics. It was deeply moving. Perhaps that was why hundreds would come each year to hear her keynote speeches at the Advancing Justice | Chicago annual gala. Over her 18-year tenure, this became Chicago's “state of the Asian American community” address. In one of these speeches, Tuyết told the story her parents never did, about their refugee journey. She turned it into a story about kindness.

The Lê family left Saigon on a dangerously crowded boat that was stranded at sea for days, about to burst at the seams. Then a Taiwanese ship pulled alongside. They had orders to rescue only the

refugees of Chinese descent. Among the hundreds on the boat there were only two—a father and a daughter. Tuyết recounted:

“The Taiwanese offered them passage onto their boat. But the family refused to go, unless we could all go with them. The daughter explained that we were kind enough to have taken them along with us. She said that in return, she would rather stay with us, facing uncertainty, than abandon us. The Taiwanese relented and allowed all the women and children onto their ship. The men followed behind in the fishing boat. They led us to the Philippines, where we were processed as refugees, and within less than two days we were on our way to the United States.”

To the Asian American, immigrant rights, disability rights, and civil rights communities, Tuyết was a gentle, generous, and mighty leader whose kindness was matched only by her integrity; she was a wise coach and sagely counselor. To her family and friends she was also many other things. An artist. A printmaker. A knitter and crocheter of warm things. A biting satirist (she convened a secret event called Lunar Lunacy, a Lunar New Year satire of Asian Americans, politicians, and others). A pho-club founder. An original member of the British Humor Society. A binge-watcher of cozy mysteries. A jigsaw puzzle fanatic. A friend to birds and plants. Her songbird laughter will ring through the rest of our lives.

Tuyết will be forever missed by her siblings Vân Anh M. Lê, Thu Anh Lê-Schlecht, Huy Q. Lê, and Tấn H. Lê; her many cousins, nieces and nephews; and her extended family including Saket Soni, Esther Hurh, Tony Streit, Gary Hsin, Elaine Kuo, Clarita Santos, Steve Merritt, Joanna Su, Elvin Chan, Dayo Gore, Mehrdad Azemun, and Jee Yeun Lee. We chose a green cremation, according to her wishes. As she was being cremated, fresh snow fell softly over Chicago, commemorating her name.

If you'd like to contribute to her memory, please donate to the Chicago Botanic Gardens in Tuyết's honor ([chicagobotanic.org/donate](https://chicagobotanic.org/donate): select "Tribute Gifts"). Tuyet was also a strong supporter of the following organizations: Asian Americans Advancing Justice | Chicago, Access Living, Vietnamese Association of Illinois, Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, Rockwood Leadership Institute, and WTTW.

Celebration of Tuyết's Life: 2-5pm (eulogies begin 3pm) Sunday, July 20, 2025, Chicago Botanic Garden, 1000 Lake Cook Road, Glencoe, IL 60022.

Condolence cards and letters may be sent to:  
The Family of Tuyet Le  
c/o Inclusive Funeral Care  
4880 N. Clark St.  
Chicago, IL 60640

Arrangements by Inclusive Funeral Care, 773-370-2959 or [www.InclusiveFuneralCare.com](http://www.InclusiveFuneralCare.com)

# Previous Events

## Celebration of Life

JUL **20**. 2:00 PM - 5:00 PM (CT)

Chicago Botanic Gardens

1000 Lake Cook Road

Glencoe, IL 60022

<https://www.chicagobotanic.org/>

*2pm guest arrival 3pm eulogies reception to follow*

# Tribute Wall

MJ

“ We met Tuyet while we were all students at Northwestern University. We immediately fell in love with her wicked sense of humor, her deep intelligence, and her unwavering loyalty to family and friends. We had the privilege of knowing Tuyet for the next three-and-a-half decades, visiting her whenever we were back in Chicago and hosting her in our home in San Francisco. Our children had the honor of meeting her and falling in love with her as well. We will never forget Tuyet's infectious laugh, her deep and intelligent repartee, her generosity and thoughtfulness. We will always remember how her eyes lit up while discussing her work or something else she was passionate about, how quick she was to respond with a witty joke or comeback, and the ways in which she thought about her loved ones even when she hadn't seen them for a while. Tuyet was one of those rare individuals whose integrity, honesty and compassion were on display always. Although she wasn't mushy or overly sentimental, she put love into everything she did. To say we will miss her is an enormous understatement. But Tuyet came into this world and her sheer existence made it a better place, so for that we are thankful. And her memory and spirit live on in everyone and everything she touched. We are sad that we didn't know about her illness or we would have insisted upon spending more time with her. But we are grateful for the time we did have. Rest in peace, beautiful Tuyet. Love, Maryann, Steve, Ava and Ryan

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Maryann LoRusso and Steven Jo - November 05, 2025 at 12:47 PM

MA

“Tuyet and I were college friends, and we met when we lived in the same dorm (1835 Hinman, aka the lakefront condos) during our 2nd year. We spent a lot of time together our last two years at NU, between the Asian American Studies student-organized seminar, taking a women's studies senior seminar together in which we co-authored a senior thesis, convening (with Delida Costin, Dayo Gore and other amazing souls whose names my brain has smoothed away from easy recollection) an annual women of color summit as an act of self- and community-care before we had the phrasing to describe what we were trying to do, and serving on student government (again with Dayo) our last year of undergrad, to name a few things.

*I still remember how we were both so cash-poor that during our senior year of college we would "splurge" once or twice a week by splitting a \$3 veggie burger from the student union grill for dinner. And it was soooo satisfying--not because the veggie burger was particularly tasty (because it was pretty awful), but because sharing with Tuyet was one of life's true pleasures, and sharing a laugh with Tuyet was always THE BEST because her musical laugh (especially when she couldn't stop) was one of the many gifts she so readily shared with others. Though we largely lost touch after college, I am so grateful and feel so blessed to have known her and shared every moment I did with her. Her sense of fun, humor and almost perpetual good cheer were only matched by her energy, determination, deep set of values, and keen intelligence. Words won't ever do justice to Tuyet (apropo of an artist perhaps?), but her loving and beautiful obituary comes remarkably close.*

*I am so glad that about five+ years ago (? , pre-pandemic at any rate) on her way to a Buddhist retreat in Northern California, I got to see her again, along with Gary Hsin, Elaine Kuo and Freda Lin. Though I still have questions (Did she really go an entire week without talking?? If so, how was that even possible?!), I am just so grateful to have had this bright shining light of a person in my life early on. And I am so sorry for everyone's loss, as Tuyet's passing*

*from our world is immense, shocking and much too soon. May you be at peace, my friend, but also giving the powers that be all the straight talk and sh\*t they deserve, as kindly, honestly and wittily as you always do.*

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**Michelle Angier** - February 19, 2025 at 05:24 PM

MD

“ *Tuyet indeed made the world a better place and I am sorry she is gone too soon. She is an institution in the non profit and Asian American community in Chicago and I am grateful to have crossed paths with her.*

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**Madeleine Doubek** - February 19, 2025 at 12:24 PM

MF

“ *I only had the opportunity to meet Tuyet twice. The second time was at a Japanese restaurant. We spent a lot of time talking to one another. Tuyet was sincere, honest and absolutely fearless in talking about her life, her activism and her infirmities. She knew instinctively how to draw out the best in people. It is rare in life to find someone who is able to so quickly find and to latch on to a common headspace. I am sorry there was no time for a third get together. She will be missed.*

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**Mark Forman** - February 19, 2025 at 11:45 AM

ER

“ *I never had the privilege of meeting Tuyet in real life... We met through the Coaching for Transformation program and I remember her as a thoughtful, caring, and reflective coach committed to social justice. To her family and loved ones, I am so sorry for your loss. I wish her well in whatever comes after our physical death and hoping she is finding peace and is free from suffering.*

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**Emily Roh** - February 18, 2025 at 04:03 PM

JS

“ *Tuyet has made our world a better place, she embodies the definition of a true leader (inspirational, humble, full of empathy, visionary, action-oriented, and a great sense of humor - all the aforementioned embraced with her love for people). While my heart is broken, my life has been enriched having Tuyet as part of my life journey. Tuyet is a hero and words cannot express how much she will be missed. I already see her smiling down on us and asking us to continue the work that needs to be done for a better world. May her memories be a blessing.*

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**Jose Santillan** - February 17, 2025 at 08:51 AM

MA

“ *I have so many wonderful Tuyet memories. Seeing David Bowie together. Her smile and laughter. But maybe most of all, I remember her taking the time to teach me to draw portraits. I was just her friend's little sister. But she took the time for me. She was so generous and kind. It's a loss beyond measure.*

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**Mariah** - February 14, 2025 at 10:56 PM

EH

“ *Tuyet, you were my dearest, closest friend. I'm a better, more confident person because of you. Keep laughing! I miss you so very much.*



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**Esther Hurh** - February 13, 2025 at 02:42 PM

YO

*I'm so sorry, Esther. I forever remember you both side by side during our Northwestern days.*

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**Yogita** - February 13, 2025 at 03:26 PM

LL

*I recall how Tuyet spoke of you, Esther, when she and I were roommates after college. Your friendship clearly was so important to her.*

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**Lorna Luebbers** - February 28, 2025 at 09:10 PM