

'Keep Trying,' Urges JKC Semifinalist Hoa Pham

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CLARKSTON, Ga.—Seventeen-year-old Hoa Pham didn't speak English when he came to the United States to join his older brother, but he knew this country presented his greatest opportunity for an education.

"The education system in Vietnam is corrupt," he said. "You have to pay off people, and my parents weren't well connected. They own a small shoe shop in Danang, Vietnam," he said.

When he arrived in Georgia, the teen knew he would have to do well in high school to get into college, but learning English and American culture was a challenge.

"It was crazy. I struggled with everything," he said. "All I would do is point. I would go to the cafeteria, saw the food, but just couldn't say the words. It seemed like I was too old to get it in my head."

But Pham persevered, graduated and entered Georgia State University's Perimeter College, taking several English as a Second Language courses.

Now 21, Pham has been named a semifinalist for the [Jack Kent Cooke Foundation](#) Undergraduate Transfer Scholarship, one of the nation's top scholarships for two-year college students. He is one of two students at Perimeter selected for consideration. [Colton Smith](#) is also a semifinalist.

To be considered for the Jack Kent Cooke scholarship, students must have at least a 3.5 grade point average (GPA) and financial need. Pham has a 3.8 GPA.

Pham has continued to persevere at Perimeter and now speaks English fluently. He sees other international students struggling and helps them navigate the English language, American culture and college life.

“I tell other students that they can do it, but it takes time,” he said. “My advice is if you try hard enough, everything will come to you. Just keep trying.”

Pham is studying computer science and hopes to attend Georgia Institute of Technology after graduating from Perimeter College in May.

“The climate is very hot where I come from, and a lot of older people die from the heat,” he said. “I would like to open a solar company to generate electricity and bring air conditioning to the area.”

The scholarship would help him achieve that dream, allowing him to pursue his studies further, he said.

Despite Pham’s difficulty in learning English, it is now one of his favorite subjects, thanks to his former English professor, Dr. Mary Helen O’Connor.

“She helped me to develop my writing skills, and I learned a lot,” he said. “I even like writing essays now.”

(See [“Where are They Now?”](#) to read about former Perimeter Jack Kent Cooke scholarship winners.)