Waiting on the World

At the corner of Second Avenue and Pike Street hangs an old neon billboard. It struggles to stay alit as night falls upon the city.

Standing with her back towards the board, she stares as cars zoom by her. The longer and harder she stares, the faster the cars pass -- until they are nothing more than mere streaks of light. All around, things are beginning to move, flying by her as the cars had done.

She remains still.

Stuck.

Glued to the sidewalk that she has grown far too familiar with -- while the rest of the world leaves her behind.

2:55 a.m. Yen Nguyen wakes up from the recurring scene that has plagued her for more than six years. For her, it is not so much a dream as it is reality.

“I feel trapped,” Nguyen said. “Unable to take the next step, unable to make a move, unable to progress in my life.”

Nguyen is an illegal immigrant.

“I’ve lived like this for 15 years,” Nguyen said. “It wasn’t my choice.”

At the age of 13, Nguyen was brought to the U.S. by her parents through a visitor visa. Their visas, however, expired five months after their arrival in 1994.

“My parents came here with the intention of never returning to Vietnam,” Nguyen said. “I do not blame them for coming illegally. They brought me here not to cheat the immigration system but to give me a free education.”

In 1999, after five years in San Jose, Calif., Nguyen and her family moved to Seattle where she graduated from Evergreen High School located in Burien.

“We wanted our daughter to have a good education, find a well-paying job and be successful,” said Nguyen’s mother, Thuy Pham. “Unfortunately, her education stopped after high school.”

Nguyen made several attempts to attend college, but because she is not a U.S. citizen, it was impossible to even apply.

“My school counselor did tell me about Running Start,” she said, “but the cost of books was much too high.”

Unlike other students, Nguyen’s textbooks were not covered by the program because she didn’t have a valid social security number.

“There was nothing that I could do at that time,” Nguyen said. “My only option was to wait.”

Now, 11 years later, Nguyen is still waiting.

“This year she is turning 29 years old,” said Nguyen’s father, Duc Nguyen. “She has no real education, no real career, no real life.”

“Both of my parents are sick,” Nguyen said. “My mom is a diabetic and my dad is suffering from heart disease. They need medical attention but we just can’t afford it.”
Nguyen tries to make ends meet financially by working as a waitress at a local restaurant. Because of her father’s heart condition, he had to quit his job as cook while her mom sews for a small clothing store.

“I have two younger siblings,” Nguyen said. “One 16 and one 18, both are still in high school. My mom and I barely make enough to support the whole family.”

“We don’t want Yen to give up,” her mother said. “We are holding onto one last hope.” That hope is a House bill called the Dream Act. The Dream Act is a part of the current immigration reform pending Senate approval. It gives undocumented immigrants a chance to gain permanent citizenship if specific criteria are met, one of which is completing a college degree.

“The Dream Act is the only way our children will be able to go to school and become a citizen,” her father said.

“In honor of MLK weekend, my church is organizing many volunteer opportunities for the community,” Nguyen said. “I intend on running my own project to raise awareness for the Dream Act.”

“I am done living under the radar,” Nguyen said. “It is time for me to make that move.”

2:55 a.m.

Nguyen rubs her tired eyes. So many mornings has she awakened prematurely from her dream, squinting at the bright red light of her alarm clock. Sinking into the crater of her bed and burying herself in her oversized comforter, she awaits the arrival of her usual guests: self-pity and depression.

But they do not come.

Not this morning. This morning she is different, determined to break the mold that has shaped her life for so many years.

This morning, the world will have to catch up to her.