LOCAL // BAY AREA & STATE

SF teen fled China 4 years ago. Now, he’s taking 4.0 GPA to Stanford

Jill Tucker June 4, 2019 Updated: June 4, 2019 9:25 a.m.

Mai, hugging his friend Alexander Lobato (right) is headed to Stanford, four years after moving to the U.S. from China. Photo: Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

Jiayu Mai (left), graduating student member of the school board, and friend Zicheng Xu (right) pile up Mai’s coursework on the last day of school at San Francisco International High in San Francisco. Photo: Photos by Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle
Mai, student member of the S.F. school board, spoke no English four years ago, and worked his way to academic excellence. Photo: Photos by Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

Jiayu Mai walked off an airplane four years and six days ago to start a new life in San Francisco.

He was 15, spoke little English and bore emotional and physical scars from his abusive father. The abuse was so severe that he fled China with his mother and stepfather, his family abandoning financial security and their home to keep him safe.

Like many young Chinese students, he adopted an Anglicized name, one with an initial sound similar to his given name, but easier for English speakers to pronounce. He could have picked Greg or Gabriel, or Glenn.

“I actually chose this name from the British King Arthur legend,” he said. “There is a knight called Sir Galahad in it, and I just like the spirit he embodies and his part of the legend.”

The gallant Galahad of legend sought the Holy Grail. Galahad Mai went after the American dream.

On Tuesday, Mai, now 19, will receive his high school diploma and in the fall, head to Stanford University, his acceptance spurred by a perfect 4.0 grade point average, a 1520 out of 1600 on the SAT and an eye-popping resume, including a year serving on the San Francisco Unified School District school board as a student delegate.

Several elite colleges offered Mai a spot, but he settled on Stanford, one of the most selective universities in the country with less than a 5% acceptance rate in recent years.
As with all worthy quests, Mai’s journey was formidable.

The pain his father inflicted lingered, and he recalled spending most of his free time that first year alone, lacking even the $3 needed to accompany classmates to a juice store.

He nearly dropped out after his first year at San Francisco International High School, which serves recent immigrants. He felt he needed to work to help ease his family’s financial struggles.

“My mom kind of forced me to go back to school to learn English,” he said. “She made a lot of sacrifices.”

So Mai, who is still known to everyone as Galahad, threw himself into school and learning English. He read book after book, copying unfamiliar vocabulary.

Soon he was his family’s designated interpreter, making phone calls to iron out problems with a utility service or navigate governmental bureaucracy. His confidence grew after each successful interaction with Comcast customer service or a public agency’s automated phone system.

“Those things are hard; they feel hard and very confusing,” Mai said, of the nerve-wracking phone calls. “They really gave me a sense of pride in a way.”

He recounted thinking that if he could navigate a phone call with a cable company, perhaps he could pull off college. Mai laughed as he shared the memory — with Comcast serving as this Galahad’s metaphorical sword in the stone.

With his English improved, Mai threw himself into school and extracurricular activities.

He participated in clubs and organizations, advocating for mental health among other issues, and ultimately running for district-wide student advisory council, and then in his senior year a position on the school board, where he advocated for students as the board addressed student assignment, school lunches and other issues.

He was a critical player in getting the board members to reverse an April decision to cancel the school meals contract. The cancellation had left the district without a way to feed students starting in the summer.

Mai chastised the board for failing to poll students about the quality and taste of the food, which was cited as the reason to end the contract.

“It’s not really fair to the students who love the food,” he said at the time.
His eloquent arguments in public meeting and the press impressed elected officials.

“He’s like a rock star,” said board member Rachel Norton, who started to cry as she described the “incredible” student he’d become. “He has really embodied that both in his personal story, what he’s managed to achieve so far in his young life, but also because of his sweetness and his bright future that he has in front of him.”

Across the district “Sir Galahad” has left his mark.

“He’s definitely a knight,” said Brittany Ueno, his former chemistry teacher and adviser. She added that Mai is focused on raising awareness on issues that he feels strongly about. For example, he made a video about mental health, an issue still stigmatized in Asian communities, she said.

For him, it was never just about getting good grades, she said.

“There’s a purpose behind his drive,” she said. “As a teacher that’s why I do that work, to see students passionate to use their academic skills to a great purpose.”

Mai credits his mom, his teachers, district administrators and counselors in his school’s wellness center with pushing, guiding and supporting him as he recovered from childhood traumas. He thinks the boy who walked off that plane four years and six days ago would be shocked at the Stanford acceptance — or even that he would eventually be able to tough it out on the phone with a customer service agent.

Mai said if he could, he would tell that boy, “You did really great.”

For now, Mai hasn’t chosen a college major, but is interested in studying the human brain or psychology. With high school wrapping up, Mai said he has thought a lot about his life so far, the story of a low-income, English-learning immigrant in a country divided over the idea of immigration. “People often stereotype,” he said. “It’s not an efficient way of understanding the world. I want to serve as an example to counter those stereotypes.”

Jill Tucker is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: jtucker@sfchronicle.com