

Escape

Cranbrook student relives flight from Vietnam

By JOE MARTUCCI

Although only 14 years old, Cranbrook School student Hong Tran has endured more hardships than most do during an entire lifetime.

Hong, a ninth-grader, hasn't seen his parents in more than a year and is several thousand miles from home.

But that's just for starters. Hong is a refugee from Vietnam. The story of his journey from Saigon to Bloomfield Hills is the stuff of which good novels are made.

Though not yet fluent in English, Hong seems surprisingly well acclimated to his new environment. Soft spoken and mature beyond his years, Hong recently related his adventures while relaxing in his tiny dorm room at Cranbrook.

It began in 1975, after the Communist takeover of Saigon, where he lived with five brothers and sisters and his parents. His father was an affluent businessman, but Hong says, "when the Communists came he lost his company and our house."

"Before the Communists, we were very comfortable. My dad didn't have to work hard because he was a boss. I miss my house. It was very big. The maid cleaned for us and we didn't have to work."

Hong's parents arranged an escape plan through a friend, but the family had to wait nearly three years before the flight took place.

Hong began studying English a year before he left Vietnam. A bright student, he also speaks Chinese and French.

MONTHS OF effort and planning eventually paid off when it was arranged for Hong, two sisters, one brother, a brother-in-law and a cousin to escape on a fishing vessel. The refugees were then to be transferred to a freighter and taken to Japan with the hope they would eventually make it to the United States.

"That night (of the escape) we were walking in the forest to the sea where the fishing boat was waiting. It was very dangerous and we had to be quiet. If one of us had got caught, we all would have got caught."

Hong and his companions had to swim a considerable distance to the boat. And to make matters worse, there was a severe storm.

"I was not so scared," said Hong, recalling the darkness and choppy seas. "The boat wandered in the sea for two nights and three days. We didn't have enough food to eat, so you had to be brave."

After connecting with the freighter, Hong and his family spent a night docked in Thailand and then set out for Japan, arriving 11 days later.

Hong lived in Japan for eight months, picking up a bit of the language while relocation efforts were underway in the United States.

In April of this year, arrangements were made through St. Olaf Lutheran Church in Detroit for the family's settlement here. Richard Turnquist, a teacher and member of the church whom Hong describes as "my friend," helped obtain financial aid at Cranbrook for Hong.



Cranbrook became home for Hong Tran after a Detroit man helped obtain financial aid. (Staff photos by Stephen Cantrell)

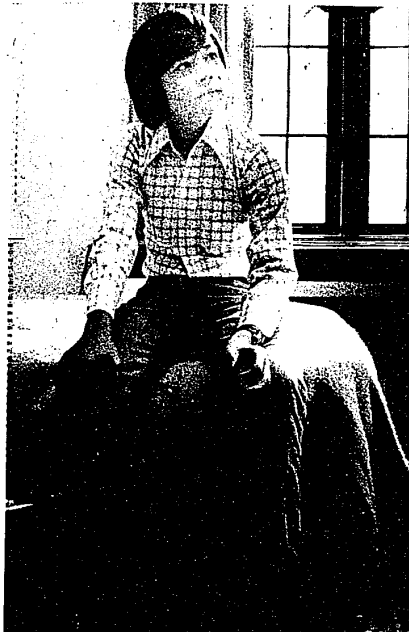
Hong's family is now scattered all over the globe. He has a sister in Detroit, another sister and a brother in Hong Kong and his parents have moved to Malaysia. Hong hopes to see them soon—they are planning a visit next month.

Hong says he doesn't miss Vietnam, or at least the Vietnam he knew after the takeover.

"It was bad. The government is bad and the rules are bad."

Hong hopes to be a businessman or mechanic some day. Of the other live-in students at Cranbrook, he says "most are nice." His best friend is a Chinese youth.

Hong is still getting used to American customs, and sports—particularly basketball—seem to have captured his fancy.



Now settled in a Cranbrook dormitory is 14-year-old Hong Tran.

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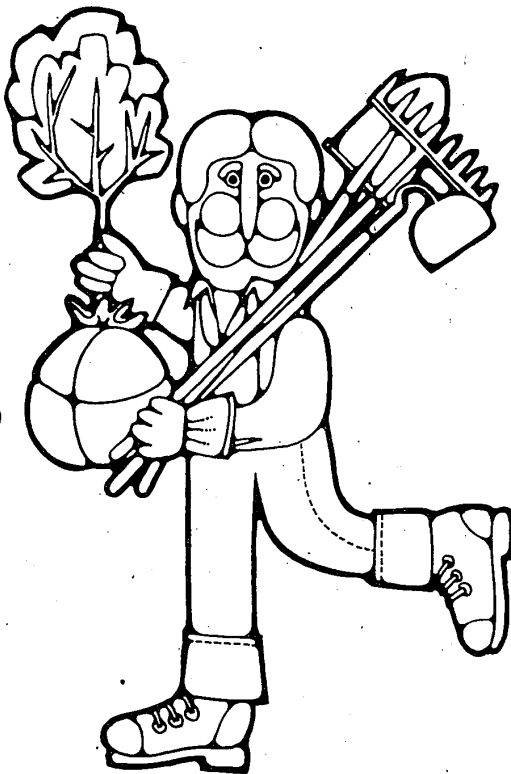
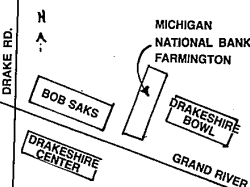
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