

Finding a home

How Vietnamese refugee strives to help brothers

Six years ago, Nguyen Dinh Tuong was a teacher in his native Vietnam helping refugees.

Today, in Michigan, he continues to help refugees from Indochina make new homes for themselves and find jobs.

In the intervening years between his career as a teacher in Vietnam and his role with the Michigan Department of Social Services' Indochinese Resettlement Program, Nguyen himself became a refugee from his native country.

Now he is among the members of the Linh Son Pagoda in Detroit. Members are former refugees working to bring 50 families to Michigan and help them through the adjustment period they experienced.

Nguyen was among the wave of Indochinese refugees who came to the United States in 1975. Bereft of his Vietnamese teaching credentials, he sought work in San Francisco.

But competition from Japanese and Chinese workers who knew English

proved to be insurmountable, he recently explicated to a Farmington High School social science class.

Under the sponsorship of a Lutheran church in Warren, Nguyen came to Michigan and took English courses through a community college's adult education program.

"I had learned some English in high school in Vietnam," he told Hal Beardsley's high school class.

"BUT THE TEACHER WAS Vietnamese and the words sounded different."

His mastery of English led to employment as a bilingual assistant with the resettlement program.

"I like working with people," he said. Attired in a light blue sports coat and checked slacks, Nguyen travels to church and school groups explaining the geographical and personal journey he and other refugees make in leaving their homeland.

He tries to impress upon his listeners the pagoda's need for money and



NGUYEN DINH TUONG

support in bringing families from the refugee camps to the state. Fund raising is a large obstacle in

the pagoda's endeavor.

It takes between \$1,000 to \$2,500 to bring a family from a camp in Cambodia to this country, according to Nguyen.

Once they arrive they are catapulted into a new life with the guidance of a sponsor.

Without a knowledge of English, the new arrivals take low paying jobs to support themselves and supplement their income through state and federal welfare programs until they get back on their feet.

The same path is followed whether the person held a job in the professions in Vietnam or was a laborer.

"The government had difficulty in accepting the degree (earned by teachers in Vietnam)," Nguyen said.

TEACHERS, LAWYERS and engineers return to school or abandon their professions altogether.

Doctors have a slightly better time of it because they are allowed to resume practice when they can pass the

medical exams.

Besides the logistics of acquiring a new job, the refugee families face the emotional trauma of leaving their homes to come to a "totally new environment," Nguyen said.

Sponsors help in surmounting this obstacle by acquainting the family with the new culture. The introductory period lasts for about three months. After that, the family should be able to make it through by themselves with some occasional aid.

That aid includes legal problems stemming from a tenuous understanding of the language as well as from having families scattered over two continents.

Some children from Indochina are orphans but others have parents who are unable to leave their country or refugee camp.

For these children, often under the care of relatives, there are problems in obtaining legal guardianship. Documents which parents normally sign are made difficult to obtain by the distance

between parent and child, said John Rennels, a Livonia based lawyer who works with Nguyen on legal matters.

CHURCH GROUPS are the mainstay for helping adults and children leave the confines of a Southeast Asian refugee camp.

But the reaction to this new wave of immigrants has been mixed.

"There has been some opposition," said Nguyen. "But many people still support the refugee program."

The pagoda remains hopeful it will be able to meet their goal of bringing 50 families to the state.

"We will bring the first 50 as best we can," Nguyen vows.

"We are dependant on the favorable response of people in this task. It is difficult business to get some support to this."

Yet hope permeates the endeavor.

"I believe the American people are good," Nguyen said.

Spring soccer being offered

Registration deadline for spring soccer is tomorrow at 4:30 p.m.

The program is open to those in kindergarten through fifth grade. Cost is \$9.

Interested persons may register at the Farmington Hills Parks and Recreation offices at 31555 Eleven Mile.

Teams will be formed by geographical

location and grade. Grade divisions are designated as boys k-1, 2-3 and 4-5.

Girls are divided k-1, 2-3 and 4-5. Teams will play a six-game schedule beginning on April 28, with all games being played on Saturday.

Additional information may be obtained by calling 474-5115.

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