

909 Mormon St.
Folsom, 95630

folsom-cordova

May 18, 1981

No. 11

Refugee Update

Workshop

There will be a one-day workshop on Indochinese Refugee Mental Health in Sacramento on Monday, May 18th, 1981. The purposes of the workshop are:

1. To inform the general public of the mental health related issues of the Indochinese refugees.
2. To learn the program responses to the above issues by governmental and private agencies.
3. To increase the public's sensitivity to the mental health needs of the refugees.

There will be both local and out of town professional experts on the subjects, and the workshop is offered at no cost to the participants.

Call Ninh Nguyen at (916) 454-3021 by May 1st if you plan to attend. The workshop location is: Lutheran Church of the Master, 1900 Potrero Way, Sacramento (off Freeport Blvd., South of Williamland Park).

TRANSITION PROGRAM

Folsom Cordova School District will provide a four week transition program (July 13-August 7) for newly arrived refugee students. The goal is to teach basic survival English and classroom skills to ease their entry into classrooms in the fall.

Dr. David Kan, Sacramento City School District, is attempting to locate refugees who are teachers in Vietnam, or other Southeast Asian countries. If there are people around who fit this description, there may be a way to recertify them for teaching in this country. If you can help Dr. Kan with his list, please contact him at 454-8295.

FORUM

Recently the Sacramento Area Refugee Forum held public hearings at Will C. Wood Jr. High, Fremont Adult School, and Rancho Cordova Elementary School in an effort to find out what the refugees feel their greatest needs are. In addition to public comment, those attending the meetings completed a basic needs questionnaire. When asked to rank the importance of 13 different areas ("not at all", "slightly", and "very"), the respondents found these six areas most crucial:

1. Learning English
2. Illness
3. School for children/School for adults
4. Finding a job/Training for a job

Concerns such as personal problems, managing a household, bringing relatives to the U.S., child care, and adjusting to life in the U.S. ranked lower.

As part of their job training program, the Indochinese Assistance Center and CETA will be accepting applications from refugees 16-21, for a three month training program. Oanh Nguyen, coordinator of the program, indicates that 50-70 people will be accepted, and they will be trained in technical skills such as typing, keypunch, and word processing. The program is scheduled for June, July, and August. Contact the Center, 454-3021 for information.

SCHOOL

Several district employees will learn Vietnamese, Cantonese, or brush up on English at a summer institute:

Van Thinh
Judy Lewis
Agnes Cheung
Kitty Lew
Gaye Wittkopp
Nhi Luong



EVERYONE SHOULD LEARN
A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

PERSONAL

The following saga was written by a Mills Jr. High student last spring.

I left VietNam on November 7, 1978. It was a nervous day. We had about 63 people, separated into many groups, who came from different cities to Cantho by buses, boats and Hondas so the Communists would not know our purpose. There were twin brothers who were near-sighted in my group.

We came to the secret house. It was a house in a community by a Communist factory which made fish sauce. The owner of that house took us into a somber living room. We stayed there and waited until it got dark. In the meantime, I remembered what the people said about him -- that he was a wily man. He had much money but he always wanted to have more. He organized a separate group and found many ways to go out to the sea. He looked for the folks who wanted to leave VietNam and he talked with them. He knew many ways to get out of VietNam that the Vixi didn't know. If people wanted to go, they had to give gold, diamonds, money to him. Of course, they agreed and for that reason, he made many trips for people and he became a millionaire.

This time we needed his help and he was ready to help us.

The day before I left VietNam, my uncle told me I had to get ready to go. When we got off the bus we waited for the leader outside the garden. Then in about one hour the leader came and took us in the secret house. Suddenly we heard a knock at the door and everything became quiet, but that person went away. In a moment the woman called. We were all ready to leave that house and go to our boat.

I thought our boat must be a big boat as I saw on TV. It was not far -- about one mile -- but it was a dangerous way. We took off our shirts and stepped little by little. It was too dark and raining. The road was made of clay and it was too slippery. One of the twin brothers held my hand too hard because he could get lost if no one took him. When we got on the boat, we were wet, cold and frightened. Then I saw the boat and I had a worry. It was too small and dangerous.

Next day our boat ran on the river of Cantho and stopped on the side of the Mekong River, waited for the smaller boats which would carry the other people, then these people would be changed to our boat. While I sat in the bottom of the boat I saw many strange people that I had never seen before. They were Chinese. Most of them lived in Capiton Hong. The Leader talked with them. If they would give him gold, money, he would take them to get out of VietNam. So they gave their fortunes to him then he took them to our boat. At last we had about 98 people and started to run on to the sea. It was about nine o'clock in the evening. I was stifled and tired. Then I slept.

About three or four o'clock on the first morning I woke up as my boat had many strong shakes. The doctor in our boat went down in the hold and shared medicines with us. The purpose of it was to help us take precautions against seasickness. Next hour people who lacked stamina disgorge and fainted. Then I felt my back wet as the water came through the wood of the hold. I couldn't endure! The air was stifling in the hold. I tried to push my way out and climbed on the bow. All that day my boat was going in the sea zone of VietNam. When the night came, many, many big strong waves came and hit the sides of the boat and our bodies were wet, cold, and afraid.

Next morning early we saw a big ship. Everybody in my boat shouted and shouted but my boat was going slowly and the big boat went fast. Then we knew we had just gone out of the sea zone of VietNam. We were very hopeless and we went on to Malaysia. Three hours later we saw a small ship but my father thought the people on that boat were sea-rovers of Thailand so we didn't call them. At noon the boat driver gave us good news. He said, "In about 6 or 8 hours we will come to the beach of Malaysia." We were very happy. Some of us sang songs. Five hours later, from the radio, we heard bad news. There had been a strong storm in the opposite direction. We were overcome with happiness before, but now we were thinking we might die! Somebody had tears in his eyes; somebody else was praying to the Buddha god. I was sitting on the front of the boat, holding a shirt up to stop the salt water that came over bow.

I looked out into the somber night with a great many black clouds. I was too sad and I thought, "What if we die on the sea?" That would be our fortunes but our grand-parents, uncles, aunts, and cousins, when they knew, would be so sad, too.

The sea was very calm right before the storm. As I thought about it, the sea looked like a person. When it was happy, it was very calm, but when it was angry, it was stormy as right now.

The captain of the boat asked my father what we should do right then. Either we changed our route to Malaysia or we went on, but we didn't know where we were going. At last they decided to change our way to go out of the path of the storm. Then when the storm went away, we could find another way to go back to Malaysia.

I remember it very well. It was a dark and terrible night. We saw the moonlight shine between the black clouds and followed it. It started raining and many, many big strong waves came. I felt sometimes I was on top of the sea and other times I was in the canyon of the sea. Somebody shouted, "We need the light, the light for any ship to see." But we couldn't get the lamp lighted. The wind blew strongly.



In the hold we needed flashlights to see and if anything was wrong we would fix it right then. But we couldn't use them. Some of them were wet. A few of them were broken. We were much afraid. The wind blew strong, stronger, and the waves came high, higher. At last the captain decided to call a lot of people on the bow to go down to the hold because the front of the boat was too heavy and it might dive into the sea. I jumped in the hold. The Chinese were asleep. Most of them looked as if they were dead. Suddenly the boat lay on one side and a wave came over. Right then the water poured on my head. I was cold, angry, and the water poured many times on my head. I climbed up on the bow again. So I sat there when the sun rose up slowly. The first sunlight shone on the sea. It was very beautiful, wonderful. The third morning came early because the storm had gone away.

The captain found the way to go to the beach of Malaysia. About three or four hours later he told us, "We will come to Malaysia at night." But we were not happy about that news...

I was tired, then I slept. When I woke up, so many sounds came. Then I felt not good because the boat was stopped. I asked myself, "Why did it stop?" Somebody told me an answer, "The pinwheel was broken." My uncles dove into the sea to fix it and the boat was still quiet. If somebody would throw something out of the boat, it would excite the sharks to come and the people who were in the water would be in danger. We started to go on after half an hour's stop on the sea to fix the pinwheel.



After three days on the sea, most of us were dying of hunger, thirst, and we had nothing to eat or drink. We were tired and weak. We had some trouble on the last day on the sea. At last we saw the light of a park in the city of Malaysia. We were happy and worried because the boat had many strong shakes when it landed on the beach. Maybe it could overturn and we would die.

When the boat stopped, a lot of people jumped down off the boat and pushed it as far as possible, as the Malaysians, if they knew we had come, would pull our boat back into the sea. Another group of people deliberately broke the pinwheel. At last we were pleased about the result. The police of Malaysia came and shouted, "Go back on your ship!" We had to go back on our ship and wait for the morning to come to know about our fortunes.

Many people cried in the night. We thought, "We'll be free!" but our family living in VietNam would never get free. I looked at the line of pine trees on the beach. Their branches, leaves, were down to the beach as the wind blew. A great many small waves came to the beach and ran up on it. The wind, the waves made a nature of music...



As the early morning came, the folks of Malaysia walked on the beach and saw us, the strange people. The police came and checked our boat. At last we walked on the beach of Malaysia. We were dizzy and tired. They took us to a small shipyard. There were about 100 people. Everyday Malaysians brought sandwiches, sardines, and tea to us. There was very little water. We had to make a line and wait for our turn.



Three days later we knew we'd go to Bidong Island and it had about 13,000 people, so we got on the boat and about two hours later we saw an island standing on the sea. It was not big. On the boat we could see many, many blue tents. And we walked on the beach of Bidong Island. There were a lot of people standing and waiting for us to come. They were hoping they would see their family or friends and know about VietNam after they had left. Our boat was the 144th to land on that island then.

The first day on Bidong we built a tent and stayed in it. God!! It had so many flies!! Flies were in houses, on the mountain... They lived anywhere and we called it "Fly Island". Next day we found a house built with logs, wood, and the owner was going to go to the U.S.A. He sold it to us but the house was small. We were 13 people, my family and my uncles. We climbed up the mountain, took wood, and built a small stair in our house.

In the first days on Bidong Island I had many troubles. When I pulled in pails from the well it was very hard. It made me feel tired quickly but always we took about 35 pails a day.

About every five days or a week we went to get our food. There were rice, sardines, and sea fishes but a great many fish had scales. We couldn't eat them. We only ate sardines with rice.

When we came to Bidong Island it was the rainy season. Many wells were full of water. It was easy to take the water, but it was too hard to pick up the wood. We climbed to the mountain to get a lot of logs and brought them home to saw them and had to make them dry enough to use. It was raining almost every day and the way to go to the mountain was very slippery so it was not easy to make the wood dry. When we burned the wood, it was wet and the smoke came out. It made our eyes feel pain...

A few days later the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) called us to come and be interviewed about our profession. We could choose two countries in which to live. We called the country we would come to the third country because we were from VietNam and it was one and Malaysia was two.

One month later, after our lives were stable, we could understand the life of Bidong Island. On that island, we had many divisions: architect and engineer division, supply division, a small station for medicines. The people in each division had their duties. Most of the old people and children were dying because they had diarrhea. We didn't have enough medicine for them. That was to say nothing about November and December...



When the New Year came, 1979, it had many changes. My boat was the 144th but after two months, we had about two hundred and thirty boats and the delegation from Australia came and chose a lot of people to go to their country. They had two preferences. If any family had one of them, they will take them to go to Australia. The preferences were: the refugee had family in Australia or he can speak English and has a profession.

Then Executive Committee decided to build a bridge for the supply division because the beach was shallow and it made it difficult for the supply division to bring food to our island. They had to walk in the water and carry the food to the island. The bridge was made with wood. It was as long and as deep as the boat could sail. It took a long time to finish it. They waited for low tide and made it.



A few days later the delegation from the U.S.A. came and they had three preferences: first, the refugees must have their family with them; second, they had worked for a United States company; third, they were an army officer for the Republic of Vietnam and they had a country that didn't accept them. If somebody was under 18 years old and didn't have his family with him, they would accept him. The delegation of the United States had a last preference and it was that if the refugees had had two countries reject them, the U.S.A. would accept them.

We were interviewed with the third preference by the U.S.A. We had to wait for them to come back from their country and check what we said. If we said everything true, they'd accept us.

A lot of people on Bidong Island had an idea that they wanted to build a temple and a church for a purpose: so they would always have Buddha and Jesus near by them. The temple and church were on the hill. We had to make a stairway to go up. It was made with logs and wood. When they were finished, every evening a lot of people went to the temple and the church to pray for their families in Vietnam or those who had died.

In March and April life on Bidong Island was very happy because many delegations from different countries came and interviewed us. Everywhere we saw faces full of hope.

A delegation from Holland came and made a film about the life and people on Bidong Island. After they returned to their country and told people about the refugees, they came back to Bidong with big money. They brought some presents for us - milk and cakes for the babies.

The delegation from the U.S.A. came back again and we were very happy in that time. We only waited for our name to come up on a list to go to the U.S.A.

The rainy season finished and the hot season came. The water in every well was shallow. It was a long time to wait for the water to come out. A great many people stood by the well and when the water came out, they pulled it up. Sometimes we had to line up and wait for our turn. About four or five hours we stood and waited for it. When it was our turn, it was still a long time to get the pail full of water. We saw it was too difficult for us and we waited for night to come. At about two or three o'clock in the morning, we went to the well to take the water. There were a few people and we were able to get it easily to use for the next day. Two weeks later we couldn't get the water at night because a great many other people were standing there waiting for it to come out, too. All the water in every well was salty. We couldn't drink it or use it to cook food.

A ship with good water came and provided water for us. We took the water according to how many people were in our family. Suppose the family had two people - they took one pail for two days to drink or cook. Again we had to line up and wait for our turn. Every two or three days the ship came back and provided the water. The water supply committee was established at that time.

Bidong Island was a small land but right then there were about forty thousand people living there. Several people had to build a stair for the new people who came.

The UNHCR intervened with Malaysia about providing food for us. At last the Malaysians agreed and every three days we received our rations.

The Malaysians decided to blockade their sea zones. Any boat that came into their sea zone or came to their land, they pulled out. The Malaysians said they would return the thousands of people on their beaches to Vietnam. We understood. It was impossible to return us to Vietnam but it could happen for a lot of boats on the sea right then. We were worried for them.

In April or May a big boat from France came to our island for the purpose of providing us with a hospital. The boat was like a hospital and it stayed near Bidong Island for two months. The name of the boat meant in English, "Light Boat."

After two months, the boat was ready to go back to its country and the people on it, doctors and nurses, decided to give us all of the medicines and the tools for the hospital on Bidong Island. The hospital would be built in twenty days. It would be finished before the boat went home. The architect and engineers division would build it with all the men in their division.

We saw the ship that carried the good water had trouble on the way from the port of Malaysia to Bidong Island because if the weather was bad it would be late. The Malaysians built a big pool to hold the good water in it and we could take the water easily. But it wasn't finished before we left Bidong Island.

In June, 1979, our names were on the 312th list to go to the United States. How surprised we were! How happy we were! When we got on the boat to leave Bidong Island, we waved our hands to say good-bye to our friends and we looked at the mountain. Eight months ago when we came here the mountain was full of trees. All of it was covered by the green of their leaves. Now the mountain didn't look like when we came. A great many trees had been taken for different purposes: to build houses, to use for cooking...

After we left Bidong Island, we came to the capitol of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. We waited for our turn to get on the airplane. There we had a bad time. We waited for water to use, we lined up for water to drink, we lined up for bread, butter, sugar for breakfast, rice, food for lunch, dinner, and so on...

At last we got on the plane. A wonderful dream! When we lived in Vietnam or on Bidong Island, never did we think that one day we'd come to the great nation with 52 states. Now the dream was really to be. We must thank God for helping us cross the sea with our lives safe.



...Maybe I missed something in my story and I didn't remember exactly the time when something happened. I didn't have enough English to describe the life on Bidong Island and what I wanted to tell. I'll try to learn more--as many words as I can...

The author now attends high school in the City school district.

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TO:

