

One year after sponsors organized

Life begins again for former refugees



The Liew family arrived in Canada under the sponsorship of the Knox Presbyterian-St. John's United Church group, otherwise known as the JKL group. With two sons working in Toronto and other income coming into the family from local jobs held by the family, the Liews are now completely self-sufficient. They reside in this Sheridan Nurseries house on Tweedle Street

In Glen Williams. Pictured above (front row, from left) are Chan Tai Liew, 8, Chi Tai Liew, 10, five-year old Phuong Quy Liew (back row) Thue Tai Liew, 19, Dat Minh Liew, Hong Kieu Liew, 22-year old Phan, and Vi Tai Liew, also 22. (Herald photo)

They came 10,000 miles to build a new community in Canada with the help of western sponsors caught up in an unprecedented show of human compassion. In the following in-depth report, The Herald marks the first anniversary of the decision by local residents to sponsor the immigration of Southeast Asian refugees to Canada and thus rescue them from the huge, fenced-in enclosures of neighboring countries where they fled to escape communist domination. A year after that decision was made, some 50 refugees are now Halton Hills residents themselves, granted by good fortune and human kindness a second opportunity to build their lives anew.

By PAUL DORSEY
Herald Editor

The plight of the "boat people" and their mass exodus from war-torn southeast Asia has been compared to a river of blood flowing from an open wound that we thought had healed.

Halton Hills emerged as one of the many North American communities where private citizens reacted en masse to the tragedies reported daily in the newspapers. Then the flow seemed to stop as quickly as it began, and the refugees are now settled among us.

Some are "a little lonely" and many have encountered difficulties coping with the basics of daily life in Canada, but all in Halton Hills have attained some degree of self-sufficiency only one short year since their sponsors decided it was time to become involved and banded together to help out.

Members of local refugee families gathered for a picnic in May, a short eight months after a handful of Georgetown residents "got involved" and filled out the necessary immigration forms which would effectively liberate a second handful of people - the refugees - from teeming encampments in Malaysia, Hong Kong and elsewhere.

When Don Long, Al Gogan, Howard McLean and one unidentified sponsor signed those documents July 18, 1979, they marked the official beginning of a wave of support that was mustered here under the auspices of the Toronto-based Operation Lifeline campaign to rescue the refugees.

SPONSORS ALREADY

The Georgetown Christian Reformed Church congregation was by then already collectively sponsoring the immigration of a first refugee family, their involvement ensured by their church's international commitment to help the people of southeast Asia. (Appropriately, the family brought to Halton Hills

by the largely Dutch-Canadian congregation - the first to finally arrive here - is related to the group sponsored by the Park Lifeline group.)

At least 12 other groups of local residents followed the example set by the Christian Reformed and initial "Georgetown Lifeline" groups, sponsoring in all the arrival of some 50 Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian expatriates.

"The way I see it, there are two halves to life: during the first half, you're seeing what the world can do for you; during the second half, you're thinking more about what you can do for the world."

Don Long's paraphrasing of the famous quote by John Kennedy came during a recent interview held on the first anniversary of his group's decision to file sponsorship papers. Mr. Long was asked to reflect on his own motivation for the action.

"At the age of 20, I don't think I would even have considered anything like this," he said. "But I read about the situation and was considering making a donation to Operation Lifeline. We ended up forming a group, and I believe we'd do the same for any destitute group of people, regardless of their ethnic background or whatever."

"I think we've proved there are enough humanists here, people with kind hearts, and that we can do the job for anyone. Can you imagine what it would have cost the government to stage a rescue mission like this?"

BIG RESPONSE

The enormous response Don Long and his fellow sponsors received to their initial decision has left Mr. Long with a lasting belief in both the basic altruism of people and the power of such far-reaching, grass roots movements. It was the people of Canada and Halton Hills - not a level of government or any single agency - he stresses, who so effectively "cast the lifeline" to those living every day in a

crisis situation at the refugee camps.

After helping bring some 50 refugees safely to our shores, after triggering similar organizations in Milton and Orangeville, after conducting a campaign organized enough on the local scene to impress workers at Mississauga's Canada Immigration office, after gathering enough household items and clothing to insure generous comfort for Halton Hills' new arrivals, and after monitoring the local situation for nearly a year, Operation Lifeline's "Georgetown branch" is ready, in one sense, to close its books.

More donations will be accepted and channelled to the refugees through the Toronto office, Mr. Long said, but for the most part, Halton Hills' former refugee families are now very much citizens in their own right, most of them eager to improve their respective lots further from the basic hospitality and shelter they gratefully found here on their arrival.

SEVERAL 'HEROES'

The local Lifeline campaign has produced several "heroes" both well-known and anonymous, who are without exception modest and entirely unassuming about their contributions. From the unidentified woman who decided that refugees in town could be the beneficiaries when she refurbished her whole house, to the quietly thorough language training provided by Tom Whittam and others, a relative handful of volunteers have transformed what may have been a frighteningly uncomfortable visit to a foreign world into a moderately comfortable new beginning on life.

Language training for the refugees is at once their biggest single obstacle and the focus of their chief ambitions. Volunteer and paid teachers, using sketches and much resourcefulness, have largely



TOM WHITLAM
English training the key

John Street, Georgetown, resident Tom Whittam has been playing an important part in the lives of the Vietnamese residents since they arrived in Canada: teaching them conversational English.

Mr. Whittam, who has a B.A. in Russian language and linguistics from B.C.'s Simon Fraser University, works as an electronics technician at Varian Canada Ltd. He says the opportunity to help the refugees came when he saw one of the notices from Georgetown Lifeline asking for assistance.

"The classes grew in various stages," Mr. Whittam told The Herald. I guess we started with about 10 people and it grew to about 20."

During the summer, the classes have been held on and off in Georgetown and District High School and at the home of a Delrex resident. The classes aren't held as frequently now because of the summer vacation slowdown.

"I've been teaching them a conversational style of English," Mr. Whittam said, adding that he hopes to introduce "imaginary situations into the lessons."

"Right now we just try and get into a conversation," he said. He feels his involvement with the Vietnamese refugees has been a "rewarding experience."

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Transplanted community spreads roots in Halton Hills

By CHRIS AAGAARD
Herald Staff Writer

During the past 18 months, 13 southeast Asian refugee families, mostly Vietnamese, have settled in Halton Hills since leaving teeming refugee camps overseas.

Thanks to the generosity and concern of numerous sponsoring organizations and associated individuals, these families have adjusted remarkably well to the language barrier, different customs and even the harsher climate. More importantly, most families are now completely self-sufficient and all have at least one member of the household within the local work force.

A large number of the work-

ing adults have found jobs at Sheridan Nurseries, Maple Lodge Poultry Farms in Brampton, Meadow Glen Skrow cannery, and Superior Glove Works in Acton.

ADAPTING

Dat Minh Liew, his wife Dong Kien, and their five children were brought into Canada by the St. John's United-Knox Presbyterian Churches, otherwise known as the JKL group. A grandmother, two of Dat's nieces and a 22 year old woman, Phan Quy, also were sponsored with the family.

Dat is now working at Sheridan nurseries and Dong and Phan have jobs at Meadow Glen Cannery.

Dat's two nieces and his older sons work in Toronto and study English at night. The younger Liew children will be entering public school in Glen Williams in the fall.

Although the JKL group maintains a fund for the family, the Liews are now completely self-sufficient and are adapting to a Canadian lifestyle in their Sheridan Nurseries employee's house in Glen Williams.

The Cao family, sponsored by the Acton Lifeline group, is also making out nicely in their rented house in Acton and, this year, proudly boast a luscious garden in their small backyard.

Phuong Cao and his wife,

Trong, both work at Superior Glove Works, although they are temporarily laid off during the summer plant shut-down. With two members of the family working, the Caos are a hair's-breadth away from complete self-sufficiency, a goal which all the refugee families in Halton Hills reportedly pursue with a passion.

The Caos' oldest boy, Lam, 16, now speaks "passable English" and his brother and sisters - 13-year old Julia, Theng, 11, and his sister Hoa, seven, - are also taking English lessons within the community.

Although they arrived in Canada as recently as March, the Huynh family of six is now

financially independent. However, the Huynhs maintain contact with their sponsors, the Norval-Huttonville churches, even though they live in Brampton, where they are closer to Maple Lodge Poultry farms.

THREE ADULTS

The three adults in the family, To, his wife Tu Nhi, and her cousin Ngu, all work at Maple Lodge and were taking English classes four nights a week throughout July.

The Huynh's 19 year old son, Quoc Hong, has been sitting in on English classes and will enroll in grade nine in Brampton this fall. His two sisters, 15-year old Duen Linh and Boi Linh, will also be entering school this year.

Cong bullets, Mekong River challenged Gui family of 7

It's hard to believe that the Gui family, now settled into a townhouse in Brampton, once ducked communist bullets as they fled their native Laos by swimming and boating across the Mekong River.

The family of seven, sponsored by the Project Ark group in Georgetown, arriv-

ed in Canada in February. Fifty-eight year old Chau Qua Gui and his wife Y-My have passed their money-making responsibilities onto their oldest children, 20-year old son Coc Va and 17-year old daughter Chan, who both work at Maple Lodge Poultry Farms near Huttonville.

Another son, Khleng, 15,

shows promise as a mechanic and will enroll in a Brampton high school this fall. Meanwhile, Khleng has been contributing to the family income from his summer job as a dew worm picker.

TAKING ENGLISH

Like many other southeast Asian refugee families in

Halton Hills, the Guis have been taking English lessons from Tom Whittam. Thirteen-year old Hong, her sister Wenh, 11, and their brothers, Man, 11, and Giang, 7, will enter school this fall.

The Guis began their stay in Georgetown by moving into the Glen's St. Alban's Church rectory. Six weeks ago, the family moved to more spacious quarters in an Ontario Housing Corporation townhouse on Brenda Court in Brampton. Living in subsidized housing means that the family is "pretty well" self-sufficient; Project Ark is keeping in close touch.

Mr. Harris said that there had been some doubts whether the relatively small Project Ark group could sponsor such a large household.

"We thought the Guis would be too big a task for our group," Mr. Harris told The Herald, "but we felt we should help families that otherwise wouldn't normally be helped."



The Herald's headline from July, 1979, could not anticipate the tremendous response local residents offered founders of the so-called Georgetown Lifeline group, formed initially as a five-member sponsorship co-operative which established the precedent for another 13 groups. In all, more than 50 southeast Asian refugees were brought to Halton Hills by local sponsors.

Firm shared space, compassion



REX HESLOP and RUD WHITING

Community service is important to Rex Heslop, head of Rex Heslop Associated Companies International, and Rud Whiting, the firm's marketing manager, so when they were asked to lend Operation Lifeline some storage space for the furniture being collected for refugee families coming to Halton Hills, the answer was, "Of course!"

"It's part of the service we provide to the community," Mr. Heslop said. "With Mr. Whiting and his service club (the Kiwanis) and me with mine (the Rotary Club), the idea is to give service to the community, yourself and

through your business."

Mr. Heslop is a member of the Rotary Club and the Georgetown Racquet Club, and is active in supporting the Muscular Dystrophy Association of Canada. He also plays golf in his spare time.

Mr. Whiting, who moved to Streetsville from Oakville three years ago, was halton's member of parliament from 1968 to 1972, and remains active in the Liberal party. He is a director of the Georgetown Chamber of Commerce and president of the Kiwanis Club. He is also a director of the Halton Hills Christian Men's Fellowship.



The Muensaveng family - Khammeng, 21 (centre), his wife Devane and his 16-year old brother Vinay - are now quite settled in their apartment across from the old area in Georgetown. Sponsored by the "Glen Williams Group", the family fled their native Laos and stayed in a Thai refugee camp before travelling to Canada. Proof that things are looking up for Khammeng, who works at Sheridan Nurseries, and Devane who has a job at Maple Lodge Poultry Farms, is the anticipated birth of their child, expected sometime later this year. (Herald photo)

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