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THE VIETNAMESE AMERASIAN RESETTLEMENT EXPERIENCE: FROM INITIAL APPLICATION TO THE FIRST SIX MONTHS IN THE UNITED STATES

LIANG TIEN

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INTRODUCTION

They treat me bad. They tell me I can't do things because I am American. They tell me to go home to America. Everyone says America is free. In my country if you want to buy a stereo you have to go to the government to get permission. I want to come to America to enjoy my freedom.¹

The enactment of the 1987 "Amerasian Homecoming Act" provided an opportunity for Vietnamese Amerasians to enter the United States. These Amerasians are children fathered by U.S. military servicemen and born in Vietnam after January 1, 1962 and before January 1, 1976.² Abandoned by their American fathers, they grew up with the disadvantages of being mixed-race, a racial minority in Vietnam. They are "Children of Dirt" who became the "Children of Gold" as they and their Vietnamese families left Vietnam in search of a better life in the land of their fathers.

In the summer of 1989, Vietnamese Amerasians and their adopted families began arriving at the approximately fifty "cluster sites" located in various regions of the U.S. This article describes the government process and the personal experiences of the Vietnamese Amerasians who were resettled through the United States Catholic Conference Migration and Refugee Services at the Catholic Community Services in Tacoma, Washington, referred to as the Tacoman cluster site. The article follows the process Amerasians experience, from filing for exit documents in Vietnam to six months after their resettlement in the U.S. The information presented in this article is based on the experiences of 33 Vietnamese Amerasians who are non-relative sponsored "free cases" and the 75 accompanying family members who resettled in Tacoma, Washington between September 1, 1989, and March 31, 1990. In addition, information contained in this article is based on a review of the United States statutes, some documents released by the State Department and other governmental entities, and the experience of the resettlement program staff working with the Amerasians in the Tacoma cluster site.

HISTORY

My mother told me my father wanted to take us with him. But the government would not let him. So he gave her the dog tag, in case one day I could leave and come to America.

The history leading up to the arrival of the 33 Vietnamese Amerasians and their families in Tacoma has its roots in the efforts of many U.S. servicemen with Vietnamese Amerasian children. In April of 1975, when the U.S. armed forces withdrew from Vietnam, the U.S. government denied the legitimacy of the Amerasian children's claims to follow their fathers home: in some cases, denying the fathers' explicit requests to bring their Amerasian children with them back to the States. These servicemen and other concerned individuals persisted in exploring ways to bring their Vietnamese Amerasian children to the U.S. The first Amerasians to exit Vietnam left in 1982. They were processed through the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) under the auspices of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). These first few Vietnamese Amerasians were children whose fathers had filed visa applications for them. They arrived as U.S. citizens.³

The first legislative recognition of the U.S. responsibility for the plight of Amerasians was in the form of the Amerasian Immigration Act (PL 97-359) signed in October of 1982. This Act provided immigration opportunities for Amerasians, not their family members, from Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Kampuchea, and Thailand. It explicitly stipulated that mothers must sign an irrevocable release and disavow any future claims on their child, forcing the separation of the Amerasian child from their biological mothers. The Vietnamese government objected to the separation and did not participate in this program. Critics in the U.S. cited the forced separation of children from their mothers and care providers as being insensitive to the human needs of these children.

"On September 11, 1984, Secretary of State Schultz announced on behalf of President Reagan that the U.S. would accept for admission through the ODP over a three-year period all Amerasian children and their qualifying family members then in Vietnam."⁴ With this administrative sanction, the second group of Vietnamese Amerasians entered the U.S. as refugees with their accompanying family members. From September 1982 through July 1989 approximately 8,000 Amerasians and 16,000 accompanying family members departed Vietnam for the U.S.⁵

In December of 1987, still under pressure from servicemen, the U.S. passed the "Amerasian Homecoming Act." This act opened the way for a third group of Amerasians to enter the U.S. with their accompanying Vietnamese families as immigrants with most of the refugee privileges and benefits. This time the Amerasians entered not as unaccompanied minors, but as young adults in the company of their families. This group

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of individuals comprise the 33 Vietnamese Amerasians and the 75 accompanying family members who resettled in the Tacoma Washington cluster site.

FILING FOR EXIT VISA IN VIETNAM

I know we could leave if I had a white boy like my son.

The process of obtaining permission to migrate from Vietnam to the U.S. is complex and requires the collaboration of numerous organizations, agencies and individuals. Procedurally, the experience of the Vietnamese Amerasians does not significantly differ from the experiences of other Vietnamese nationals applying to enter the U.S. under the ODP. The process for the Vietnamese Amerasian “free cases”—meaning Amerasian families without sponsoring relatives in the U.S.—starts with the Amerasian and his or her accompanying family filing for an exit visa with the Vietnamese government. Since migration from Vietnam is voluntary, no action on the part of the U.S. government or Vietnamese government officials can occur unless, and until, the Amerasian makes his or her interest in leaving Vietnam known through the filing of this application.

The nature and extent of the efforts undertaken by the Vietnamese government to inform the Amerasians of their eligibility for migration to the U.S. is unclear. However, it is clear that the Vietnamese government does make it generally known that Amerasians and their adopted families are eligible to exit Vietnam for the United States. This is done through local officials in urban as well as in rural regions. As one adopted father of an Amerasian said, “I know we could leave if I had a white boy like my son.” However, he could not identify the source of the information except to say that “people were talking about it.”

After an application for an exit visa is filed, the Vietnamese government then reviews the applications. None of the Amerasians resettled in Tacoma knew the Vietnamese government's criteria for review. Some suspected that the process is cursory because the Vietnamese government “wants us to leave;” some suspect that if one paid the officials enough there was no problem in processing one's documents.

THE U.S. INTERVIEW

[T]he Americans take me outside in the sun and look at me....

They ask me questions like what do you want to do in America? When you live in America will you think of Vietnam? It makes me scared. I have never do it before. That is the first time I have seen Americans.

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After the Amerasian's application clears the Vietnamese government, their names, along with all other eligible Vietnamese citizens, are forwarded to the U.S. ODP office in Bangkok. The U.S. ODP, based on this list, then compiles a list of individuals to be interviewed by the U.S. This U.S. list is then submitted to the Vietnamese government. The Vietnamese, based on the U.S. list, notifies the families of the date of their interview with the U.S. officials.

Once a month, usually for three weeks of each month, a team of four to five counselors from the USODP program in Bangkok fly into Ho Chi Minh city to conduct the personal interviews with those Vietnamese who have been scheduled by the Vietnamese officials, including the Amerasians. An average of 5,500 individuals are interviewed each month.⁶ Of this number, only a small percentage are Amerasians.

The interview is two days in duration and is conducted in two parts: one part is a face-to-face interview with the U.S. interview team which lasts approximately four to five hours; the second part is a medical examination with the medical personnel from the International Organization for Migration (IOM). IOM, formerly the International Commission for Migration (ICM), is an international non-profit organization based in Geneva, Switzerland. The medical examination screens for all communicable diseases and categories of medical conditions which render an individual ineligible for migration to the U.S. as specified in U.S. statutes.

On the day of the interview all family members appear at the hotel in Ho Chi Minh city which acts as a temporary office for the U.S. team. According to the cluster site resettlement program staff, the Amerasians report that they had to arrange for their own transportation, and some family members were not included in the application due to the lack of funds to transport all members of the family. Once at the interview site, some Amerasians, again due to lack of funds, report spending the night on the street in order to return for the second day of interviews. (Based on hardships of this nature from Amerasians interviewed in the past, the U.S. ODP currently arranges for transport to the interview site, through contracts with local travel agencies, all Vietnamese who are scheduled for interviews and who do not reside in the city. In addition, agreement has been reached for the establishment of an Amerasian Transit Center in Ho Chi Minh City in order to house those Amerasians who are without funds during their interviews and who are awaiting ODP processing and departure.)

One of the primary purposes of the face-to-face interview with the U.S. team is to obtain evidence of Amerasian status. This evidence may be any written documentation such as marriage certificate, birth certificate with the father's name on it, or any pictures of the U.S. father with the Amerasian child. With or without material documentation, the U.S. team conducts a visual examination. Many of the Amerasians in Tacoma describe this visual inspection as being taken outside in the sun

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and their physical appearance scrutinized. As one ODP official stated: "It is very apparent, the Amerasians look very different from the Vietnamese."⁷

ACCOMPANYING FAMILY MEMBERS

I don't know why she [biological mother] don't want me. I don't understand why she did this.

The Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1987 permits family members to accompany the Amerasian. This stipulation has been interpreted and operationalized as meaning one set of family members. Family members are considered to be either the parents and siblings or the spouse and children of the Amerasian.

Though visual inspection is accepted as evidence of Amerasian status, other types of documents are necessary to verify the relationship of the accompanying family members. While the Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1987 permits family members to accompany the Amerasian, this stipulation has been interpreted as meaning one set of family members. Family members are considered to be either the parents and siblings or the spouse and children of the Amerasian.

If the Amerasian is migrating with his or her family of origin, then the mother or adoptive mother, step-father when present, and any half-siblings, when present, may file for resettlement. Certificate of birth is the usual documentation requested as proof of relationship. The Vietnamese and the U.S. government usually accept the word of the filing adult and the Amerasian as to the legitimacy of an individual's claim to family membership status. This ability of family members to migrate with the Amerasian has given rise to government suspicions of Amerasians being sold to families who wish to leave Vietnam for the U.S. Of the families resettled in the Tacoma cluster site, 13 (39 percent) of the Amerasians arrived with their biological mother. Fifteen (45 percent) of the Amerasians arrived with family members who were not their biological mothers or biological half-siblings. Three (9 percent) reported that they had been sold to their present family members for the purpose of migration. Two (6 percent) migrated as independent adults. The adopted family members are usually aunts (the biological mother's sister) and the aunt's families. Migrating to the U.S. is experienced by some of the Amerasians as yet another rejection. One Amerasian's response to the situation of migrating with his or her aunt's family is: "I don't know why she [biological mother] don't want me. I don't understand why she did this."

If the Amerasian is migrating with his or her own family, then the marriage certificate between the Amerasian and her spouse, and certificates of birth of the children are usually requested as documentation of relationship. The Amerasian cannot emigrate to the U.S. with both their family of origin and their own family. This has created difficult

choices and painful situations for married Amerasians with parents. One Amerasian in the Tacoma site migrated with his biological mother leaving a wife and a child in Vietnam. Another Amerasian was forced to break an engagement of marriage in order to immigrate to the U.S. with her aunt and the aunt's family. Increasingly, this situation is thought by many in Congress and the resettlement field to be unacceptable. To rectify the problem, there is currently an effort underway to amend the statutes to allow extended families to remain intact.

After the face-to-face interview, the U.S. government reviews the case. If the Amerasian and the accompanying family members are medically cleared and their status as Amerasian is accepted, the family is accepted for migration to the U.S. Once accepted, the U.S. ODP program places the names of the eligible Amerasian and accompanying family members on the list of eligible individuals and forwards this list to UNHCR and IOM. The UNHCR then works with the Vietnamese government to compile the final list of individuals who receive exit visas from the Vietnamese government.

The Amerasian waits again. At this point the Amerasian and family members are aware only that they have filed for the exit visa, were interviewed by the Americans, and were medically examined. They do not know how their application is processed, or the length of time they must wait before they can depart, or even if they may depart at all. According to the U.S. ODP, the time between the personal interview and the reception of exit visas from the Vietnamese government varies from one to several months, but is always less than six months.⁸ The interval for the Amerasians who resettled in Tacoma ranged from one to four months.

However, the time period between the initial filing with the U.S. government and the interview with the USODP, for the group of Vietnamese Amerasians who are resettled in the Tacoma cluster site, is approximately four years. The time period between initial filing and final notification for departure was approximately four and a half years. This group may have waited an abnormally long time since the ODP was halted for two years, from January 1986 to September 1987.

LEAVING VIETNAM

When all the paperwork is done they tell you to come and take all the paperwork and that's it. You have to bring letter [from the Vietnamese government] and the military will sign it. Then you can leave.

The Vietnamese government notifies the Amerasian and accompanying family members of their eligibility for migration with the issuance of the exit visas. There is approximately two months between reception of the visa and the date of departure. This is usually a time of great excitement.

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All but one of the Amerasians in the Tacoma cluster site had looked forward to going to the United States with great hope. The Amerasians reported anticipating a life without the type of discrimination they experienced in Vietnam. They looked forward to a life filled with material wealth and limitless possibilities. Yet, for many, this departure is bittersweet. It marks the separation from loved ones; people who had cared for them all of their lives—in some cases their mothers, in other cases their spouse and children—perhaps forever.

The Amerasians and their accompanying family members wait at the departure point with their worldly belongings packed into an array of small boxes wrapped in twine or bundled into plastic bags. From this departure point they are transported by local ground transport, to the airport in Ho Chi Minh city. Then they fly directly on to the Philippines.

Under an agreement with the U.S. State Department and the various Voluntary Resettlement Agencies (VOLAGs), the IOC makes all travel arrangements, provides all necessary travel documentation, and administers all necessary immunizations. IOC asks the family to sign a promissory note to repay the cost of the flight from Bangkok to the U.S. beginning six months after their arrival in the U.S. Payment is made through their VOLAG. This is the first time in the process of migration that the U.S. asks the Amerasian to pay a fee.

State Department releases do not indicate any fees or payment for any segment of the migration process except for the flight ticket. However, an informal survey of the Vietnamese Amerasian families in Tacoma suggest that the average amount of money spent in the process can range from one to four teal of gold. (One teal is equivalent to one ounce of gold.)

Philippine Refugee Processing Center (PRPC)

It's like an army camp, not like here. I don't like it there because nothing to do there. It's boring. Leave home for one, two, three, five hours to school, then go home and have nothing to do. For six months you have to live there.

Upon arrival in Manila, Philippines, the Amerasian family is met by PRPC staff at the airport and transported to the camp site. The PRPC is where U.S. bound Asian refugees receive cultural orientation and English-as-a-Second-Language classes (CO/ESL).

Up to this point, the migration experience of Amerasians does not significantly differ from other Vietnamese nationals who are bound for the U.S. under the ODP. However, starting at the PRPC, the Amerasians are processed in "clusters." The U.S. policy of resettling Amerasians in clusters is an effort to increase their network of social support.

Amerasian families are usually housed together in a portion of a barrack-like structure. There are approximately sixteen bunks per building. They receive rations of rice, meat and other items, depending

upon the size of the family. Their daily routine consists of attending ESL classes and CO classes. They are in ESL classes an average of eleven hours a week, and in CO classes for an average of eight hours a week. The ESL classes teach basic survival proficiency in English. The CO classes introduce the refugees to common U.S. cultural skills, ranging from identifying how Americans write their names, to problem-solving skills in the work place.

The staff of the Tacoma cluster site reports Amerasians' complaints about PRPCs: 1) ESL teachers, who are Philippine nationals and could not accurately impart the American accents of spoken English; 2) Cultural orientation classes which ill prepared them for daily living in the U.S.; and, 3) Poor environmental conditions.

Amerasians were surprised to discover that after six months of ESL classes in the Philippines, they were not able to understand English in conversation with U.S. speakers, nor were they able to make themselves understood by native English speakers. They often made statements like, "The Philippine camp ESL teachers had different accent. The teachers did not talk like the Americans here."

The cultural orientations did not prepare the Amerasians for life in the States. The Tacoma cluster site report having to show every incoming Amerasian family how to use major home appliances such as the stove and vacuum cleaners; how to use personal care products such as shampoo and deodorant; how to use public transportation, etc.

Recent arrivals complained of significant food shortages in the PRPC. Stories of either not having been given the full quota of their food rations, or of receiving spoiled inedible food were common. In addition, two families claim that young Amerasian females were sexually abused. These were recounts that camp guards detained young Amerasian women for minor infractions of camp policies, such as breaking curfew. The women were placed in detention for the night in a facility shared with male prisoners. The families claim the girls were sexually abused while in detention.

LEAVING PRPC

About five months into their six month stay in the Philippines, the process for departure is initiated. The Amerasian is given the opportunity to indicate a preference for the geographic location of their resettlement site. Most Amerasians do not have preferences. Some may indicate a preference to join a close friend or relative. None of the Amerasians in the Tacoma cluster site gave a geographic preference.

A month before the departure date, the PRPC staff notifies the VOLAG of the approximate date the family will be ready to leave, and of their destination. The VOLAG national office attempts to honor the family's request. It is the experience of the resettlement agencies that, unless this request is honored, the refugees will move to their preferred destination within two to three months of their arrival. The secondary migration is a financial hardship for the family, and disrupts their

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resettlement process. If no preference is provided by the Amerasian family, then the national office distributes the cases among the fifty-odd Amerasian resettlement cluster sites.

Once the destination is decided, the local resettlement agency is contacted to confirm that all arrangements to receive the family are indeed in place. These arrangements primarily include the assurance of a sponsor who is ready to receive them. The VOLAG in the Tacoma cluster site acted as the sponsor for a few of the families in the first three months of the program. Other initial sponsors included several local Vietnamese associations and individual volunteers from the general community.

The process of notification and confirmation usually takes approximately two to four weeks. Once assurance from the local VOLAG is confirmed, then the PRPC staff notifies the Amerasians of their destination in the U.S. The VOLAG national office in New York notifies IOM to make the reservations and schedule the flight. The IOM schedules a departure date that is usually set for one to three weeks after completion of the CO/ESL curriculum.

On the departure date, each member of the family is allowed to carry two pieces of luggage and is outfitted with an IOM bag full of official documents. The family boards a bus for the Manila airport where they then board a commercial flight for the United States. Even if no other families are coming to Tacoma, there are usually families flying to other U.S. destinations, so the family often travels with hundreds of other refugees. The usual duration of the flight is eight to eleven hours, depending upon whether or not the flight is direct or includes a stopover in Tokyo. This travel period is again a time of great anticipation, anxiety and sadness. During the six months in PRPC, the Amerasians and their accompanying families often make friends with fellow camp mates and teachers. The sadness of leaving these new friends and the familiar camp, as well as the anxiety of heading for an uncertain future in the U.S., are acutely felt during the hours spent on route to the U.S. mainland.

Local VOLAGS vary greatly in the models employed to resettle new arrivals. While the federal government and the voluntary agencies try to provide the Amerasian accompanying family members with some consistency through the use of cluster sites, they experience the resettlement process differently from site to site. The remainder of this article reflects the experience of Amerasian resettlement through the Tacoma, Washington cluster site.

ARRIVAL

Everything so big and big noise.
There are so many Americans here.
I thought I was in heaven.

For these Amerasians, the port of entry is SeaTac International Airport. After landing, the Amerasian and the accompanying family members navigate through customs for about two hours. Most of this time is spent standing in line to pick up luggage. When the wait is finally over, "an official looking person" gestures for the IOM bag and the luggage. The customs officer rifles through the bags, looking at everything in them, and pulls out various pieces of paper from the IOM travel bag. The usual inspection for refugees consists of a very brief search of all possessions. The examination of the documents consists of verifying the authenticity of the passports, the presence of the I-94 issued by the U.S., and medical documentation of current immunizations.

After clearing customs, the family finally steps onto the soil of the country that will be their new home, a place they have anxiously anticipated for months and sometimes years. They are exhausted and hungry.

Emerging through the door to the international arrival waiting area, the Amerasian and accompanying family members first meet their sponsor and the local resettlement staff. The sponsor/resettlement program staff, and the Amerasians have no prior knowledge of each other. Sometimes new arrivals offer unexpected surprises—pregnancies or physical disabilities—with which the local staff and sponsor must cope.

Most families expect their sponsor to greet them at the airport and to be there for them from that time forward. Indeed, the best sponsors are waiting with flowers or some small welcome gift. After meeting their sponsor, and prior to leaving the airport, the families make one last check at the IOM desk in the waiting area to confirm their arrival.

The Amerasians in Tacoma report that their first impression of the U.S. was formed during the car trip from the airport to Tacoma. They were impressed by the loudness and largeness of everything—big cars, urban freeways, high-rises and tall people, the cold weather, and the large number of non-Asians in the U.S.

FIRST TWO WEEKS

You [the sponsor] take care of us. You find us a job. You help us.

Overwhelmed by physical exhaustion, the environmental differences, a long international flight, and days of tiring anticipation, it can be weeks before the new arrivals feel like themselves again. However, instead of rest and relaxation, they are off to a new world filled with countless changes and challenges. From the airport, the new arrivals travel with their sponsor for about a forty-five-minute car ride to Tacoma. At the end of the ride, the family arrives at the Amerasian Program's transition house.

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The Tacoma cluster site rents a house close to the office for the specific purpose of housing newly arrived Amerasians and their accompanying families. The family can live in this house for two to four weeks, depending upon the time it takes for the sponsor to make long-term housing arrangements. Usually the Amerasian Program staff or the sponsor readies the house for new arrivals. The house is stocked with enough food to last a few days and some basic cooking equipment, including a rice cooker, bowls and eating utensils. Beds, bedding and furniture are provided by the VOLAG or sponsor. The family pays for a portion of the rent, the purchase of the food and kitchen items out of the family's reception and placement grant. The reception and placement grant is funded by the federal government and issued by the VOLAG to the family on the day of arrival. Each family receives an average of \$200 per person, depending on family size.

Once in the house, the new arrivals are given a tour with instructions on how to use all kitchen appliances, all instruments in the bathroom, and the control for the house's central heating. After the tour, the sponsor usually leaves the family to themselves. It is not unusual for this to be the first time the family has been alone since leaving Vietnam.

The next morning, the sponsor, with staff assistance, appears at the transition house to shepherd the new arrivals on a series of visits to government offices. Within the first two to three weeks each family is taken to the following places:

- 1) the bank, where they may cash their reception and placement grant check;
- 2) the social security office, where they apply for social security cards;
- 3) the health department, where they receive refugee and health screening;
- 4) the licensing department, where they receive an alien identification card;
- 5) an ESL class, where they enroll the adults for English classes;
- 6) the school administration building, where the children are enrolled in public school; and,
- 7) the welfare office, where they apply for refugee assistance.

During these first few weeks these new arrivals are totally dependent upon the sponsor, the VolAg staff, or volunteers for transportation and interpretation. Each stop at a government office is always the same: the officials dig into the IOM bag, take out forms, and then hand over more forms. These forms are then handed over to the sponsor who fills out the necessary information. Often the new arrivals experience this process as a blur of forms, appointments and new people. In general, there is an overload of information, much of which only begins to make sense with the passing of time.

THE FIRST TWO MONTHS

My English is not good. I can't get a job with my English. My welfare check stop soon. I don't have good English to go to school or to get job. I wish I come to America when I was younger so I have more time in school to learn English.

As the dust settles from the flurry of activity in the first two to three weeks, the new arrivals settle into the semblance of a new daily routine. The adults attend English classes and those under 21 attend the public schools. However, the seeming normalcy of a daily routine does not diminish the urgent problem of securing affordable permanent housing and an income to assure the provision of such basic survival needs as food and clothing. Like all other refugees, the family is faced with the need to make long-term plans.

With assistance from the sponsor, they have secured the necessary documents to qualify for public assistance. This becomes the family's source of income for the next two to twelve months, depending upon how quickly the adult members become employable and actually find jobs capable of supporting the family. All of the families resettled in Tacoma initially relied on public assistance. One month after arrival, Washington state recipients receive approximately \$325 in cash each month for adult individuals over the age of eighteen. In addition to cash assistance, public assistance for refugees also includes medical coverage under Medicaid and food stamps. (The amount of cash assistance and food stamps varies from state to state.)

When public assistance is secured, the next task is arranging for long-term housing. The search for housing is frustrating. The family is usually taken to view apartments and houses by their sponsor or the resettlement staff. Because they are new to the country, the new arrivals are unable to determine what constitutes fair rent, a desirable location, or reasonable access to public transportation. Sometimes the family is unable to assess their own financial situation. At the Tacoma cluster site, the resettlement staff encourages the family and the sponsor to locate housing in close proximity to the resettlement office. This region contains a high concentration of other refugees, and is within walking distance of all major social services needed by the new arrivals. This requires negotiation between the family, sponsor, and program staff. The majority of Amerasians and their families choose housing close to other newly arrived families.

FIRST SIX MONTHS

Things are not what they tell us in Vietnam. They say America will give you a house, a car, and money when you come. They say you don't have to work in America. Why don't they tell us what it's like?

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The family will usually have received their first public assistance check and will have arranged for a permanent place to live within two months of arrival. Their attention is then turned to long-term planning for employment. While new arrivals are encouraged to seek employment as soon as possible, the resettlement staff and sponsors often recommend they spend some time taking English classes before attempting entry into the job market or before undertaking vocational training. Individuals with poor English skills and less than six years of formal education cannot manage in the mainstream vocational or community college environment. Nineteen (57%) of the Amerasians in the Tacoma cluster site had less than six years of formal education in Vietnam, and none had high school or equivalent education or training. All of the Amerasians were initially placed in some type of educational program.

Individuals who are under twenty-one years of age and who do not hold a high school diploma are eligible to attend public school. Twenty-two (66%) of the Amerasians at the Tacoma site are below age twenty-one. They all initially chose to enroll in the public school system. The eight Amerasians who are over twenty-one chose to attend ESL classes. (ESL classes are held daily in three different sessions. Amerasians may attend one session per day, plus one additional class per week.) In addition to ESL classes, the Tacoma site has developed specialized training programs in cooperation with local schools. These programs address the training needs of Amerasians who are pre-literate. Thirteen (39%) of the Amerasians have less than four years of formal education. They participate in special tutoring sessions in literacy and math to acquire basic skills.

Concurrent with ESL and other basic education, new arrivals who are over twenty-one, and all other adult family members, are encouraged to improve their employability through enrollment in a refugee employment program. The employment program provides employment counseling, pre-employment training, and information about job openings.

As of March, 1990, there were twenty-two Amerasians attending high school. Six Amerasians are attending vocational training school, and one is working to pass his GED while awaiting financial aid to attend college. Three Amerasians, two mothers of Amerasians, and one step-father have become employed. One Amerasian and his mother were employed within the first month of their arrival. Most, however, choose to first improve their English and vocational skills before seeking employment.

By the end of six months, the family has established a new set of routines and relationships that address their immediate and long-term needs. The combination of stable housing, school and training, employment services, and a new network of friends serve as a foundation to meet future challenges.

BEYOND THE FIRST SIX MONTHS

My mom don't understand. I want to do American things. She wants me to be like I was in Vietnam.

Because refugee public assistance is only available for twelve months, the need to become employed arrives quickly. Amerasians and adult family members must answer difficult questions in a relatively short time frame: What kind of job is best? How much do I need to earn? How much English and training do I need? Integration into the mainstream American community is hindered in large part due to the Amerasian's lack of English and transportation.

Depending upon their educational background and their individual motivation, it may take from six months to over a year before an Amerasian young person is able to converse with a native English speaker. Their mothers, stepfathers, and older siblings may never have sufficient command of English to make themselves understood without an interpreter. This greatly inhibits interaction outside of the Vietnamese community. Feelings of isolation and alienation which persist well beyond the first few weeks of resettlement are not uncommon.

Financial limitations make it infeasible to purchase a car. Public transportation has many limitations in a society that relies heavily on individual auto transportation. Until a license can be obtained and a car purchased, new arrivals walk or depend upon friends, sponsors, or resettlement program staff for transportation. This hinders the Amerasian's ability to attend training institutions, find jobs, and engage in recreational activities.

Beyond these seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the typical resettlement experience for new arrivals is further compounded by strained family relations. The "children of gold" were prized as tickets to passage out of Vietnam. Once in the U.S., they have lost their original value, and those "families" constructed for convenience are no longer obligated to remain a "family." To date, five of these "families" have separated from the Amerasian.

Family relationships are further strained by the young Amerasian's struggle for individuation. The Amerasians in Tacoma range from age 15 to age 24; 21 is the modal age. This is a period when young people normally establish a household of their own and decrease dependence upon their family of origin. Though there have not, to date, been any marriages in the Tacoma Amerasian community, there have been romantic liaisons among the Amerasians. Two young women have temporarily moved in with their boyfriend's families, and one family has refused to allow their son's girlfriend to move in with them. These romances have produced stress for the family as well as the community.

Finally, program staff have observed that Amerasians, once they reach the U.S., are more likely than other Vietnamese youths to adopt their American surroundings. Their assumption of American ways is

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aided by their physical appearance, and further separates them from their families. Strained family relationships inevitably develop in response to a member of the family who rebels against Vietnamese values and too quickly adopts American attitudes and habits.

Conclusion

Migration from Vietnam and resettlement in the U.S. is a lengthy process for Amerasians and their accompanying families. For some of the Amerasians in Tacoma, this process began when they were only ten years of age. They arrived with great hopes and dreams of a better life, but the Amerasians quickly became aware of the numerous challenges they must face in adjusting to the radically new and different American culture. Gold does not flow in the streets; not everyone is rich, or even well-off. The lack of English and job skills foster feelings of alienation. Amerasians are threatened, once again, with living on the economic margins of a society. The transition from Vietnam to the U.S. does not come easily. Vietnamese-Americans, the latest legacy from the Vietnam war, face daunting challenges to realize the goal of the 1987 Act for an Amerasian Homecoming.

¹ All quotes are from Amerasians and family members resettled at the Tacoma cluster site.

² As defined by PL 97-359 Sec. 584 (b) (1) (A) (i)

³ Migration and Refugee Services of the United States Catholic Conference, "To Welcome the Amerasians: An MRS Staff Report," Oct 1988.

⁴ Embassy of the United States of America, "Amerasian Processing: U.S. Orderly Departure Program (ODP)," memorandum, A-36, released 1989.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Interview with staff of ODP program, Washington, D.C. office, 1 Feb 1990.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*