

# Refugees Deeply Appreciate American Independence

By Teresa A. Parsons  
 They may not be obvious, but there are undeniable similarities between a small, soft-spoken Vietnamese woman named Duong San, an attractive young Rumanian chemist referred to here as Anna, and the pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock a few hundred years ago. All of them came to America for largely the same reason — to create the possibility of a better future for their children. And perhaps more than most of us, they appreciate the meaning of our Independence Day celebration.

Like the American colonists, San and her 11-year-old son, Duong Tuan Anh, were victims of oppression in their native land. As the mother of an Amerasian child in post-war Saigon, 42-year-old San found herself and her child the targets of abuse and persecution that her gentle-sounding, limited English can only describe in the most superficial way as "difficult." She recalled that, aside from the constant fights and beatings he took, when Anh fell and cut his face on the sidewalk, staff at a nearby hospital refused to stitch the cut. San believes it was because of his American features.

"It really makes you count your blessings and thank God you were born here," Joan Hannah said of sponsoring refugees. San and Anh, who came here three months ago, and Phan thi Do and her 14-year-old son, Phan Ngoc Thanh, who have been here just one month, are the second group of Vietnamese sponsored by a committee from Our Lady Queen of Peace Church in Brighton. Members are Hannah, Muriel Trunfio, Dorothy Kaiser, Drew Werner and Anne Bergan. For close to 20 years Hannah and Trunfio have worked together on right-to-life issues, and Hannah views their sponsorship of Amerasian children as a natural outgrowth of that involvement. "They really are our children," she noted. "I feel we owe it to them."

Before the Americans left Vietnam, San had a small chicken farm and worked in an American club. She told Hannah that when the communists came, they took everything she owned, put a nominal value on her

possessions and told her she could draw \$50 per month on the balance until the money was gone.

Along with other Vietnamese who had associated with Americans, San burned or otherwise destroyed all evidence of her past connections, including the pictures and letters she had saved from her son's father. With a bittersweet smile, she recalled a letter asking her to come to the U.S. and marry him. With traditional Vietnamese respect for a parent, San instead obeyed her mother, who advised against the move. Now she regrets the decision, but no longer blames the mother she will probably never see again.

For Anh and San there were no possessions to regret leaving behind and not much of the Vietnam San loved 20 years ago — only relatives and friends. And while San dreams of someday going back to her country for a visit, her son Anh says "go ahead mom, but I'm staying here."

For Anna, a 32-year-old Rumanian refugee, coming to the U.S. meant leaving more behind — almost everything she owned, her fiance and family, and a country that retains more of a hold on her heart and loyalty.

"I am in two parts," she said with tears on her face and in her voice. "Part of me is here, but part is with my family in Rumania."

Although she's slender and fragile-looking with a face that reflects pain and sadness even when she smiles, Anna's story defies any impression of helplessness. With four friends, she tried to cross the border to Germany, was apprehended and sentenced to six months in prison. At that point she sought to go to Germany for an operation to reverse the hearing loss she is suffering. Although she was scheduled for release after four months, Anna served the full six.

Prison was a development which didn't seem to daunt her. Describing it simply as a "limited space," Anna said she was required to work in the prison garden during the summer months and in a factory in the winter. "My family was very sad to see me there," she said, adding that luckily they lived nearby and came to visit her often.



Jeff Goulding / Courier-Journal

Gathered in Muriel Trunfio's back yard in Brighton are: (left to right) Phan Ngoc Thanh and his mother, Phan thi Do, and Duong Tuan Anh with Duong San. The boys love fishing, computers, soccer and basketball.

Like Anna, her fiance and friends have been imprisoned for requesting to leave Rumania. When asked what reason the court gave for jailing her, Anna seemed not to understand the question. Words were not the problem — she seemed incredulous that anyone would need a reason to go to jail.

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In Rumania, however, a passport is only

the first step in leaving, and the government goes to great lengths to discourage any further action. Gaining her passport, Anna lost her citizenship and in effect became a non-person, unable to hold a job or marry. Supported by her family and fiance, she spent most of the next three years keeping the document up to date with periodic renewal stamps, each of which carried a fee.

Finally last September, she was notified that she would be allowed to leave, but it was another six months before the dream came true.

At the heart of the decision she, her fiance and friends, who are now in Sweden, made was the belief that they could never find fulfillment in Rumania, not for themselves

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