

Children of Vietnam gambled lives on a brighter future

By Teresa A. Parsons

At 15, Mai Thi Nguyen could easily pass for someone who has always lived in a safe, sensible place like Gates, in a comfortable home like the Connollys'. Curled up in a rocking chair before the television set, she looks and talks very much like an average teenager despite her accented English.

Told in that setting, her story sounds virtually unreal. She told of her escape from Vietnam nearly five years ago in a boat she shared with more than 150 other people for seven days. Her tone was matter-of-fact as she recounted being shot at and robbed by Cambodian pirates, running out of water and watching those around her die of thirst and exposure. She might have been explaining the story of Peter Pan.

Liem Dinh, 19, also escaped from Vietnam in a boat — a 14-footer crammed with 42 other people. "We tried to get to Singapore. We waited for an American boat to pick us up for two or three days," he recalled. Finally they were picked up and taken to a refugee camp in Indonesia, where Liem waited for almost a year to get into the United States.

He was born in Saigon, as was 15-year-old Cuong Nguyen. Although the two lived within miles of each other, their journeys to the United States couldn't have been more dissimilar had they come from different planets.

Cuong, whose father was an American, left on an airplane with the official blessing of the Vietnamese government thanks to the Orderly Departure program. A product of recent improvements in relations between the United States and Vietnam, Orderly De-

parture allows a certain number of Amerasian children to emigrate each year.

Cuong and Mai were sent from Vietnam by relatives who hoped they would find a more promising future elsewhere. "My mother wanted me to come to America to have a good life," Mai said.

A trace of defensiveness for Vietnam surfaced in Cuong's explanation. "I heard about this country in letters from my relatives. They said it was a good place," he said. "I miss my family. I wish they were here."

Liem retains no such nostalgia for life in Vietnam. "If your father worked for the Americans, (as his did) you didn't have any future," he said. Barred from higher education, Liem was also unable to find a job. Because his mother was the family's only wage earner and the family had little prospect for the future, leaving the country seemed his only option.

"I'm here for freedom," he explained. "Here you have no trouble. In Vietnam, a kid can go to jail just for saying something he doesn't even mean. You trust no one."

Ironically, Cuong and Liem, who once lived in separate worlds within the same city, now share a home on the other side of the world in Penfield, where they live with Amy and Robert Dorscheid.

Despite the different routes and reasons that brought them here, Mai, Cuong and Liem each got the chance for a different kind of life because the Connollys and Dorscheids were willing to sponsor them.

But there aren't nearly enough of those people, according to the Catholic Family Center's foster care agency, Homefinders.



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Liem Dinh, 19, (far left) and Cuong Nguyen, 16, (second from left) are the most recent of four Southeast Asian minors Robert and Amy Dorscheid have sponsored.

Since 1979, 81 children between the ages of 11 and 17 have been resettled by Homefinders, primarily in Monroe, Ontario, Wayne and Livingston counties.

For every Mai, Cuong and Liem who finds a sponsor or relative in the U.S., there are ten others still in the refugee camps. They are growing up in barracks or tents, without privacy or family, education or job prospects, waiting for someone in some country to accept them.

And the rejections hurt. Mai recalled that West Germany agreed to take several of her relatives, but not her. "I don't know why," she said with a shrug.

The Dorscheids and Connollys responded to announcements Homefinders placed in parish bulletins for similar reasons — to share their comfortable lifestyle, to offer others the opportunity for a better life, to redress the harm done to children in the name of global politics.

But they relate to their foster children very differently. The Dorscheids treat Cuong and Liem as relatives, perhaps, but not as their children.

"We're not their parents because of their ages and because they already have parents," Amy explained.

"We're somewhere in between uncle and older cousin," Robert added.

Mai, on the other hand, calls Clayton and Louise Connolly "mom" and "dad."

Louise Connolly knew as soon as she heard Mai's name that she would be their new daughter. She had long been interested in foster care, and in a moment of prayer, a name came into her mind.

"It was something like Marie or Mary," she recalled. Later, when she called Homefinders, they told her that a 13-year-old named Mai was on her way, but already had a sponsoring family.

"Somehow, I knew in my heart it would fall through," Louise recalled.

She was right.

Clayton was away for the weekend when she made the initial call.

"When I got back, she said 'How would you like another daughter?' and right away I got the wrong idea," he remembered, laughing.

Their approaches may differ, but both families agree that sponsoring refugees has been an unequivocally satisfying experience.

So satisfying, in fact, that the Dorscheids have sponsored four unaccompanied minors from Vietnam since 1981.

Each has presented a different challenge, they agreed. The first boy was of high school

age, but had no formal education beyond the fourth grade. "He was the first in his family to finish high school and earn a diploma," Robert said.

After seeing family and friends drown when their boat sank, the Dorscheids' second guest arrived deeply depressed. Since then, he has found work and moved into an apartment with four other Vietnamese men.

Because of Cuong's academic potential, Amy and Robert are encouraging him to work hard in high school and to plan on going to college.

With Liem, their challenge was to help him control a temper which frequently got the best of him. In fact, he was placed unsuccessfully three times before he came to them.

All four of their guests were placed initially with other area foster families. But that's not unusual, according to the staff at Homefinders.

"It works out best when people (sponsors) have the least expectations," said Bernadette Slater, of Homefinders.

"Sometimes, sponsors try to be too strict or they get impatient," Robert said, explaining that older children in particular may not want a substitute family or parents, but rather security and friendship.

"It's hard for them to trust," Amy added.

Louise Connolly confirmed Robert's observation, noting that her children were very impatient for Mai to become like them. "I think it came as a surprise to them that she was a real person with likes and dislikes," she recalled. "They had to learn to be sensitive to her feelings ... They also had to learn to share us," she added.

All of which was positive growth as far as the Connollys are concerned.

"We're a pretty average family — not perfect by any means — but we thought we could provide something better than what she had," Louise explained. "You don't really know what to expect, but you know if it's right."

Families who apply to sponsor an unaccompanied Vietnamese or Amerasian minor are screened and if accepted, attend training sessions. Homefinders also provides ongoing support for both sponsor and refugee.

The financial commitment required of a sponsoring family is minimal since the Department of Social Services pays for medical care and provides a stipend for food and clothing. For more information, call Homefinders at (716)546-7220.



Fifteen-year-old Mai Thi Nguyen (left rear) has adapted well to life with a "pretty average family" — the Connollys. From left are Dr. Clayton Connolly, Paul, Suzanne (on the floor), Neil, Louise and Brian, (standing at rear).

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