

et cetera

Director

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LeBloom pointed out that sponsorship is easier if it is undertaken by a group — especially because of the time commitment required at first, and because individual volunteers often find they can help in some ways but not in others.

"The hardest thing was finding people to drive the family to appointments, because so many people had work commitments," LeBloom explained. She suggested that future sponsors help families find apartments near bus routes and show the families how to use public transportation.

When St. Salome's family arrived, it presented some difficulties the parish hadn't anticipated. The mother had health problems requiring repeated doctor visits. The son wanted to look for his father, a plan that frustrated resettlement efforts at first.

"He didn't realize the country was so large," LeBloom noted. "Once he realized that he couldn't find (his father), he was able to adjust better."

Despite the obstacles, LeBloom felt the experience was a positive one for the parish. "It made us more aware of the needs out there," she said. She assessed sponsorship as "a big job, but not impossible. It all depends on how organized your group is and the needs of the family."

Vince and Maggi Masci of Hemlock also found sponsorship a positive experience. They were involved with sponsorship twice: once as part of St. Mary's Parish in Honeoye, and in January, 1986, on their own.

Their experiences at St. Mary's had prepared them for most of the problems they would face, but when the refugee family arrived they were presented with an unexpected one — the family arrived before the Masci's could find a place for them to live. The family moved in with the Masci's and remained until April.

"We had the room, and it helped them an awful lot to get used to the weather, banking, shopping, etc.," Maggi Masci observed. The family now lives on its own. Mother and son are both employed, and the boy is working toward his high school equivalency certificate.

Sponsors assist refugee families with many of the practical problems of settling, Delaney noted, but from the program's inception counselors at the family center realized that children — particularly the Amerasians — often needed additional help with adjusting to American society. To assist them, a Companions for Refugee Youth Program was developed. The companions function as big sisters or big brothers to the Amerasians, meeting with them several times a month.

Ann Maine became a companion in 1985 after reading about local resettlement efforts. Having been a big sister in college, she knew what being a companion would involve. "A lot of children need someone who is just there," she explained. "Someone they can talk to — someone they can verbalize their problems with."

Maine became the companion of a 14-year-old girl, meeting with her two or three times a month. At first, they did simple activities like baking cookies or gardening, which helped them to build a relationship and gave the girl opportunities to learn needed skills and talk about her life. While gardening, for example, the girl told Maine about her grandfather in Vietnam with whom she used to work in the garden.

Once the initial relationship was established, Maine began adding more demanding activities. When the two went shopping together, for example, Maine would encourage the girl to talk to the clerks. When they were talking together, Maine would ask her to think of better or different ways to express what she'd said, in order to increase her proficiency in English. Maine also began to invite American friends over when she was with the girl so she "could meet them and feel accepted by Americans."

Now enrolled in a local high school, the girl has developed her own set of friends. She still meets with Maine, but less frequently. Sometimes they simply talk on the phone.

"It makes me sad that she doesn't need me as much," Maine acknowledged, "but it's gratifying to see her becoming more confident."

In addition to the sponsors and companions, Delaney relies on the help of the on-call volunteer resettlement aides who provide help on short notice. The volunteers remain involved with the families until sponsors are found, and are then assigned to new families. In the past,

some volunteers who grew frustrated with not being able to develop relationships with the families became sponsors themselves.

Virginia O'Neill has been an on-call volunteer for four years. She began working with the refugees during a time when four to five families were arriving each week, overloading the available sponsoring groups or families.

O'Neill began volunteering because she sympathized with the refugees. "Who wants to go to a strange country, not knowing the language, not having any friends?" she asked.

She was particularly touched by the plight of the mothers of Amerasian children. A number of these women, O'Neill reported, believed they were married to the U.S. soldiers who fathered their children.

"The Americans left, and the women didn't know what happened to them," O'Neill said. Upon arriving in the United States, some of these women set out to find their children's father. But even when their searches were successful, the women were in for a lot of pain. "The men act as if they don't know them at all," O'Neill remarked.

Stories like this can make working with refugees a touching — and sometimes frustrating — experience, Delaney acknowledged. Despite the best efforts of family center staff and various volunteers, some Amerasian youths and their families fail to adjust to American society. The youths — frustrated by language problems and lacking self-esteem and proper role models — sometimes drop out of school or run into problems with the law.

In addition to contending these problems — and with finding sponsors in the first place — Delaney has to deal with annually decreasing federal appropriations for refugee programs. These decreases make sponsors even more important, he said.

"The worst thing about working with refugees today," Delaney added, "is that you don't have time to say, 'I've done a nice job' because there are more refugees tomorrow."

Despite the frustration, Delaney looks forward to working with the new group of Amerasian refugees.

"I like working with them," he explained. "I think part of it's out of a sense of desire to clean up the last vestiges of our Vietnam involvement. Let's tie that last knot."

"After all, they are our kids," he added.

THOUGHTS TO CONSIDER



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FUNERAL DIRECTOR

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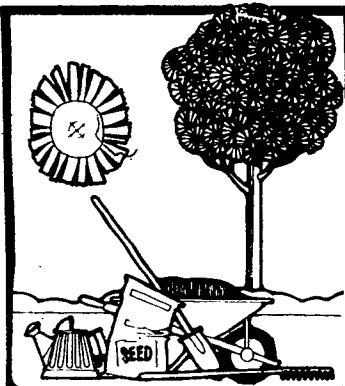
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