

# a Young

## Ex-refugee gives to Vietnamese community

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — On the night of April 31, 1979, Mai Truong, 12, and 28 other members of her extended family, including her parents and some family friends, got on two motor-powered boats anchored off the shore of the southern Vietnamese island of Phu Quoc. Before they left the island, however, Truong's clan received some parting gifts from the island's authorities.

"Just as we pulled up the anchor, the police fired at us," Truong remembered.

The problem was, Truong and her fishing and farming family were illegally emigrating from Vietnam, seeking a better life abroad. Apparently, someone in their village got wind of the family's plan to leave, and told the local police, Truong recalled. She noted that her family was not harmed by the officers' shots.

Truong recalled this and other stories of her life following the weekly Sunday Vietnamese Mass on Nov. 21 at St. Anthony of Padua's. Truong, 32, attends the church along with her husband of seven years, Tin Pham, and her 3-year-old son Cody Trung. Henrietta residents, the family also attends Guardian Angels Church.

Truong said that her father, who passed away two years ago, had been the mayor of her village under the South Vietnamese government before it fell to the communists in 1975. Fearing reprisal for his association with the old government, he burned all documents about his past and maintained silence about it, she said.

Unlike many other Vietnamese

Catholics who suffered second-class treatment under the communists' anti-religious policies, Truong said her family was allowed to worship at the village church even after the communist takeover. However, her father decided to take himself and his relatives out of Vietnam so that the clan's children might have a better economic and educational future elsewhere, she said.

For four days after leaving Phu Quoc, the two boats sailed west through the Gulf of Siam toward Thailand, she said.

"We said a lot of prayers during that time to Mother Mary," she said.

Twice, Thai pirates stopped the boats, she said. The first group of pirates actually treated them fairly well, giving them food and water after being unable to find any gold on board the refugees' ships. A second group of pirates, however, armed with axes, took her mother's wedding ring, but otherwise harmed no one.

Truong and her relatives sighted a Thai village on shore on the fourth day, and sailed toward it, expecting a welcome from the villagers who came out to greet the boats. It turned out, however, that the villagers were only interested in robbing the refugees, taking virtually all of their possessions.

From there, the two boats sailed to a Thai police station where the authorities processed the refugees and sent them to an area Vietnamese refugee camp. Because her brother had escaped to Thailand, and then immigrated to the United States the year before, Truong said she and her family were able to gain entrance to this country. She came to Rochester with her family in late 1979.



Since coming to the United States, Truong has worked continually on her education as well as devoting herself to serving her fellow Vietnamese Catholics.

A former public school teacher, Truong is currently training for a systems administrator position with a computer firm. She also remains active at St. Anthony's where, over the years, she has sung in the choir and taught girls how to perform traditional Vietnamese dances at social events and liturgies. She noted that the elderly Vietnamese, in particular, enjoy seeing the younger generation carry on the old country's traditions at community events.

"Any time we have a gathering like that (the old people) feel right at home," she said.

She added that she thought it was important to let the younger generation know about their cultural heritage.

"It's something you don't want to lose," she said. "Even if you're here in America, you're still Vietnamese, I'm still Vietnamese."

Truong is also vice president of the Vietnamese Catholic Youth Association of Rochester — Doan Thanh Thieu Nine Cong Giao. She helps to organize such events as bowling outings, picnics and

volleyball games for Vietnamese teenagers and young adults.

Truong went back to her homeland three years ago to visit relatives, and remains concerned about her former fellow citizens. She is currently soliciting friends and other groups for donations to help the victims of severe flooding that took place in central Vietnam this month.

She added that her sister's restaurant, Saigon Palace, 470 W. Ridge Road, will hold a fundraising noodle lunch for flood relief from noon to 3 p.m. on Sunday, Nov. 28. She also said diocesan Catholics interested in donating to help the flood victims can write out checks to: Father Louis Minh Nhlen, St. Anthony's Church, 60 Lorimer St., Rochester, N.Y. 14608. Indicate that the check is for Vietnamese flood relief.

Whether working for flood victims or teaching girls to dance, it's this kind of dedication to her fellow Vietnamese — Catholic and non-Catholic — that has always impressed Ha Nguyen, director of the Diocesan Office of Asian-Pacific Ministries, about her longtime friend, Truong.

"She just has this spirit about her," Nguyen said. "She's always ready and willing to do something."

### Events

Unless otherwise indicated, for information on these upcoming events, call the hotline for Odyssey — the diocesan-sponsored young adults network — at 716/328-3228, ext. 375, or 1-800-368-7177, ext. 375, or visit the Web site at [www.ggw.org/odyssey](http://www.ggw.org/odyssey).

◆ **Thursday, Dec. 9:** Supper program at Blessed Sacrament Church, 534 Oxford St., Rochester. 6:30-8:30 p.m. Volunteers needed to help pre-

pare the meal, set up, serve dinner, organize stock and clean up.

◆ **Thursday, Dec. 16:** Dinner at the Elmwood Inn, 1256 Mount Hope Ave., Rochester, at 7 p.m. Reservations needed.

◆ **Tuesday, Dec. 21:** Crossroads, the young adult ministry at Blessed Sacrament Church, 534 Oxford St., Rochester, is hosting a Mass at 7:30 p.m. Call Chris Hood at 716/271-7240.

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