

## "DOING WHAT YOU CAN": EMPLOYMENT COUNSELLING FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN REFUGEES

by Anne Hume

Mr. Lam is a dignified, slightly-built man who looks much older than his 58 years. He sits erect in his chair, smiling politely, uncomprehending, while his son interprets for him. He has been in Canada for a year and is still unemployed. A tailor in Vietnam, he ran his own shop for over 30 years. But his eyesight is failing, and he is unfamiliar with the operation of electric sewing machines.

After some deliberation, the counsellor in Operation Lifeline's employment office telephones the manager of a small metal company, who has hired a number of ethnic Chinese refugees. The employer can use a man to do odd jobs and general cleaning at a starting wage of \$3.75 an hour. The son translates the information. Mr. Lam looks animated. Yes, he'd like to go and see if he can do the work. The counsellor makes arrangements for the son to take him out to the company. Taking written directions and details about the job, they leave, expressing their gratitude.

Mr. Southavone is 31 and speaks English hesitantly but clearly. He was a carpenter in Laos, making household furniture, but he has never used power tools. His wife can't work because there are six young children to care for. Mr. Southavone needs a starting wage of at least \$5.00 an hour to support his large family. The counsellor contacts a number of woodworking companies before he finds an employer who might be willing to teach him . . .

It is applicants such as these who will most miss the services of Operation Lifeline's employment office, which closed at the end of 1981. Begun as an emergency job counselling service for Southeast Asian refugees in September, 1979, a group of committed volunteers and one paid part-time co-ordinator have handled over 4,000 interviews in the past two and a half years.

### CECs often not enough

Although the initial purpose of Operation Lifeline's employment office was to assist privately-sponsored refugees, the office has seen more government-sponsored refugees. The former seemed to find a ready-made network within their sponsorship groups, while government-sponsored refugees, who had been expected to make use of the Canada Employment Centres (CECs), tended not to use the CECs. It gradually became apparent that these newcomers needed a greater degree of support and personal attention than most CECs in Toronto could provide, and insufficient English and timidity made it impossible for them to make use of the CEC notice boards on which job openings are posted. Also, a considerable degree of experience

with the special problems of refugees is crucial. For instance, when a counsellor unfamiliar with Southeast Asian refugees learns that a 22-year old man is single, he may quite reasonably assume that he has no dependants; although among this group of refugees it is quite possible that such a person might be supporting younger siblings while their parents are still in their former country.

Overcoming these obstacles seems to have been made possible by the fact that the counsellors in Operation Lifeline's employment office were volunteers. The group of men and women who contributed their skills and care to the demanding and often frustrating work of employment counselling were able to provide an atmosphere of friendliness and support, and a degree of personal time and attention that paid workers in a professional organization simply could not duplicate.

When faced with difficulties, we tended to resort to the philosophy, "You do what you can." This might mean asking an applicant to return another day because no suitable jobs were available. On one occasion it meant escorting an applicant with serious mental health problems to a hospital and persuading him to talk with a Chinese-speaking social worker. And it sometimes meant not managing to do anything other than offer understanding and encouragement.

As an emergency service, we tended to stick to the practical goals of finding someone a suitable job at a reasonable wage at a manageable distance from his home. Our attempts at employment orientation did not extend beyond a printed hand-out on Canadian "job etiquette" and occasional assistance in resume preparation. Nor did we take a strong political role of vigilantly watching for possible exploitation by employers.

### Character of applicants changing; sense of urgency less acute

But the peculiar advantages of this kind of office seem to be becoming less and less necessary. Throughout the past year, the counsellors have begun to notice changes in the needs of the job applicants. Many have been in Canada for as long as two years, and now have Canadian work experience. Many have moved to Toronto from small towns and rural communities across the country, often joining relatives who have settled here, hoping that the city will offer even better jobs. A number of applicants are already employed and wish to improve their lot. The sense of urgency is less acute.



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Miss Nguyen, for example, a 26-year-old seamstress, told a counsellor she did not want to work in the garment industry. Several alternative suggestions of available work failed to satisfy her and after a few false starts the counsellor made an appointment for her at the Immigrant Women's Job Placement Centre. Miss Nguyen is being particular. She knows what she wants, and very likely has the spirit to go and find it on her own.

There was also Mr. Tran, a young man who explained that he had just left a \$6.00 an hour job at the airport because his brother had also left there and he owned the car. This young man got a rather stiff lecture on how \$6.00 an hour jobs are hard to come by for a young unskilled worker with little English; how October was a foolish time to give up his job; and how he could have got to work by public transit. His explanation may of course be false - the two men might have left these jobs because of other difficulties they did not wish to discuss. But then he rejected a factory job with union wages and benefits at a starting pay of \$4.20 an hour with guaranteed regular raises. Mr. Tran needs to do some learning the hard way.

Thus, on the recommendation of a majority of the volunteers, the employment office closed at the end of 1981. Toronto has developing communities of ethnic Vietnamese, Lao and Cambodians who are becoming increasingly self-supporting; and a large Chinese community. The recent arrivals from refugee camps are joining relatives here and therefore have the beginnings of their own networks through which they can find jobs. On the whole we feel reasonably confident that the employment needs of most refugees in the Toronto area can now be met by CECs or individual ethnic associations, or the Immigrant Women's Job Placement Centre.

Nonetheless, a certain ambivalence remains as we gradually wind down operations. Is it too soon, given the significant number of people still coming for assistance? Has the gap in services been

sufficiently bridged? What about the bleak winter months ahead? What of the Mr. Lams? The Mr. Southevones? Even the job seekers with reasonable English who arrive in the office with the daily paper, having circled specific want ads, often lack self-confidence and an awareness of the fact that they are capable of finding a job on their own. The distinction between offering emergency services and fostering dependency can be a very fine one.

**Long-term considerations**

Looking ahead, it is difficult to anticipate the specific needs of future refugees. Not every group might need employment counselling to the extent that the Southeast Asians did. But our experience tempts us to urge that funding for special employment counselling for refugees must be assured where inadequacies in existing services are perceivable, and great sensitivity to the special needs of refugees must be used in judging when such inadequacies exist. Several cities in Canada have met this need through non-governmental, multi-ethnic agencies that provide job placement assistance to refugees and immigrants of all national origins, and work hand-in-hand with the network of ethnic-specific agencies that deliver other kinds of services. We would like to see

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**OUTREACH**

The Canada Employment and Immigration Commission's Outreach programme provides funding for special programmes designed to extend employment-related services to people who, for one reason or another, are unable to benefit from the services of Canada Employment Centres. Refugees, partly because they are assisted through special settlement programmes, have never been a priority target group for this funding programme. However, a few programmes assisting refugees and immigrants are currently being funded by Outreach, and community needs are assessed locally.

Toronto follow this example.

Most important, of course, is a receptive climate in the community. A number of employers have risked financial sacrifices in hiring refugees, and have demonstrated considerable faith and goodwill when communication is strained by language limitations or cultural misunderstandings; and for many the risk has paid off.

For all of us, if we have the imagination to grasp what refugees resettling here are enduring, and the compassion to help them adjust, perhaps we can enhance their courage and determination and, therefore, their chances of succeeding. This may be another variation of "doing what you can". □

*Anne Hume is the former Employment Co-ordinator for Operation Lifeline, Toronto.*

## **VIETNAMESE IN THE YUKON: CONTENT TO STAY WHERE THERE ARE JOBS**

*by Nancy MacMillan*

*Nancy MacMillan is the former Co-ordinator of the Vietnamese Support Project, Whitehorse.*

Snow, cold, isolation, long dark days, perhaps even an igloo. These are images that many people have of the Yukon — and moving 70 people here from the steamy climate of Vietnam may seem like madness.

But the first thing that any Yukoner, whether Native, English, French or Vietnamese, will set you straight on is that conditions are not so barbaric as many people think. The summers are beautiful and the long daylight hours make for a very active season. The winters may seem as long as they are cold, yet out of the 70 Vietnamese who settled here during the past two years, 60 have not yet been lured away to the bright lights and warmer climates of Edmonton and Vancouver. Living in this small community has some compensations to offer.

The Tran family was the fourth of thirteen families to settle in Whitehorse. They arrived on a snowy November day and their sponsors settled them into a townhouse. By various means of sponsorship, other Tran family members have also come to Whitehorse, making an extended family of 23, which has meant a great deal of mutual support. Having other families here already also made it much easier to understand and cope with the new surroundings, says 16-year-old Mi Tran. It has also meant a sufficiently large and cohesive body of people to support a food-ordering service from Vancouver, allowing the families here to enjoy their own type of food.

### **Sense of belonging**

The Vietnamese acknowledge that learning English is easier in Whitehorse than in a larger city where it would be easy to find lots of Vietnamese- or



**Summer outings for Vietnamese young people in Whitehorse.**

Chinese-speaking friends. Also, the sense of belonging that comes with living in a small community, walking down Main Street and exchanging greetings with people you know, is a pleasure much appreciated after a vacation in Edmonton or Vancouver, and one that is causing several families to think twice before moving "Outside".

### **High pay helps family sponsorship**

Most important, pay is generally quite good in the North. Because becoming self-sufficient and capable of sponsoring other family members is top priority for many of the Vietnamese, the comparative boredom and isolation are of secondary importance.

Even 800 miles north, in Inuvik, Northwest Territories, where people from Whitehorse are considered "Southerners", the one Vietnamese couple still there is satisfied for the time being, because they have good jobs. Myli is making Inuit parkas at the sewing centre, and Nhan is a truck driver for the army. The other three couples who were placed there left, Myli says, because of boredom and because of relatives in other cities. But Myli and Nhan are saving money to sponsor their parents in Vietnam and only afterwards, they say, will they move to a bigger city.

The question has been raised as to whether refugees should be placed in such isolated, extreme areas. Obviously each person's adaptive ability is different. It does seem however, that on the whole most situations can be gotten used to, as long as job