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Vietnamese Refugee Demonstrates Here

By Stephen Klaidman

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Le Van Thong is a South Vietnamese refugee and father of six, with more than \$1,000 in uncashed welfare checks, a recent model car at his disposal and the offer of a four-bedroom house in Alexandria with the first month's rent free. But he spent Tuesday demonstrating with his family on a Washington street corner in near-freezing weather to protest his treatment in the United States.

He has not yet indicated a willingness to accept the checks or rent the house. He won't take the welfare money "because where will I live," he says, and he has not decided what to do about the house.

When told his response makes no sense he shrugs his shoulders. Le Van Thong speaks English haltingly and it is unclear how much he understands. He does seem to realize, however, that if he creates enough of a disturbance somebody will do something.

Le Van Thong is a survivor. Since leaving Saigon he has collected more than \$2,600 in benefits from various Catholic groups, he was given a car by an Orlando parish, and he owes \$712 to the La Riviera guest house at 2010 Wyoming Ave. NW.

Richard Logue of Catholic Social Services in Orlando said, "He is a very difficult person to resettle. The toughest I've come across."

Elise Cerniglia, who works for the same agency in New Orleans, said, "I recommended that they send him back to Vietnam. He looked for all kinds of things to stir up problems."

Thong's children, who range in age from 16 to 5, look well fed and they are warmly dressed. They carried signs

saying, "School our dream." They attended school in Orlando, where they lived from September until Dec. 8, when they came to Washington.

Catholic Charities in Washington gave the family \$100 to "tide them over the holidays" and arranged for them to stay at the La Riviera guest house, where they occupied two rooms with four beds and a couch.

On Tuesday morning, they moved out without paying the \$712 bill, according to Willie Ayers, who runs the guest house. Le Van Thong says he and his family were evicted. He does not dispute that the bill is unpaid.

Left behind outside the guest house is the family's Plymouth.

The 43-year-old Vietnamese and his family, all of whom were evacuated from South Vietnam just before the Vietcong takeover in May, 1975, are now staying at the Skyline Inn on South Capitol Street.

They have been almost entirely subsidized since they left Vietnam, either by the federal government or a number of Catholic voluntary agencies.

Catholic Charities has agreed to pay for the hotel room and food for the family for three days, after which Thong, his wife and children will be on their own. Thong said the police will have to throw them out of the hotel and that if they do he will lie down in front of the Capitol.

Yet Thong has only to claim the \$1,021.70 in welfare checks that are waiting for him and move into the house in Alexandria that Catholic Charities has arranged so that he and his family can begin a normal life in America.

He claims to have had a varied employment history in Saigon. He says he holds a law

degree, that he has worked as a nurse, a journalist and a personnel specialist for the U.S. Air Force and that at the time his family was evacuated last spring he was the owner of a drugstore.

The family, on being evacuated from Saigon, went to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines and then, after a 12-day stopover on Guam, to a camp set up for Vietnamese refugees at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. After a few weeks in the camp it was arranged that the family be resettled in New Orleans.

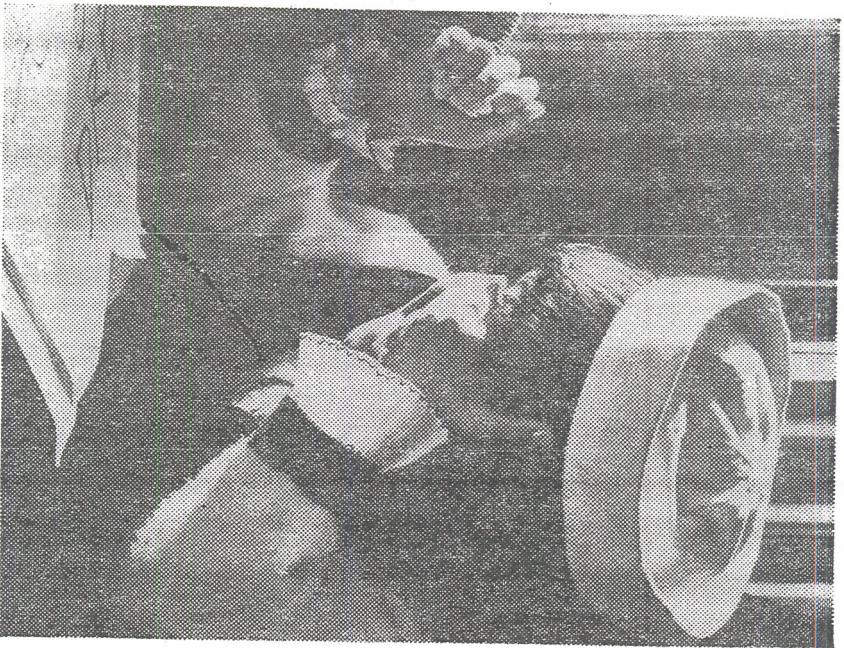
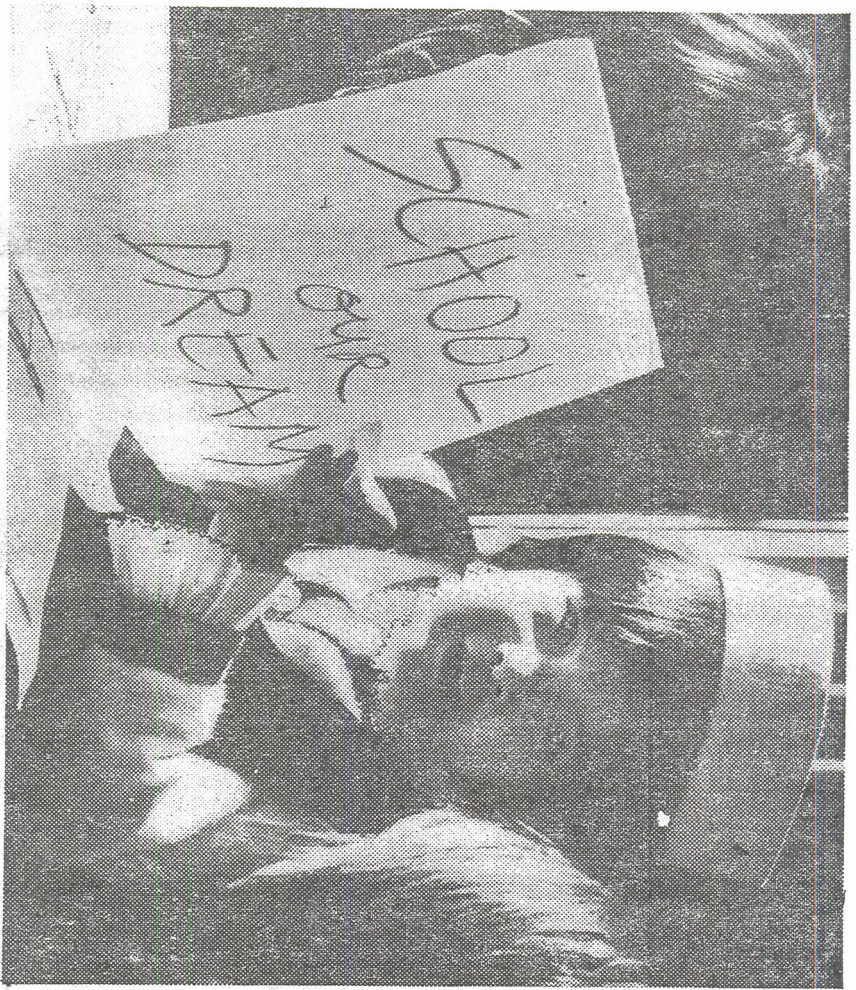
Up to that point there is little disagreement about the family's odyssey. But from the time the family got to New Orleans until now Thong tells a story that is in constant conflict with the versions given by the agency representatives who have dealt with him.

In New Orleans, for example, Thong says, he and his family were taken to a "completely bare house without a stove 20 miles from downtown." Mrs. Cerniglia says the house was brand new, had a refrigerator, stove, air conditioning and was furnished. She also said it was eight to 10 miles from downtown New Orleans.

In Orlando, where Logue says the family was given a house "I'd be happy to live in," Thong complained that it was not six bedrooms as had been promised. The parish that sponsored him in Orlando gave him a car and found him a job in Orange Memorial Hospital.

The job, Thong said, was as a urology technician at \$2.65 an hour. He quit, he said, when they wanted to demote him to nurse's aide. He could not remember if that entailed a cut in pay.

He came to Washington, he wrote in a mimeographed sheet that he was handing out



Thu Hien Leanh Thiong, 5, holds sign she carried in Vietnamese family's demonstration. . . . then covers her eyes and tries to repeat the sign's words in English.



Photos by Frank Johnston—The Washington Post

Le Van Thong, left, and his family picket on Connecticut Avenue NW against treatment family has received in U.S.

on the street, because, "When I was without a job for a period, living in a destitute condition so we have to go somewhere to look for a job."

"We came to Washington D.C.," Thong's mimeographed sheet continues, "to seek help from the Voluntary (sic) Agency and Task Force for Vietnamese

refugee. We have been living, sometimes hungry sometimes full and freezing in the winter for the past month — now we are pushed out by the guest house."

The Indochina Task Force, which is staffed by a number of government agencies, arranges for volunteer agencies such as the United States Catholic Conference to place refugees in communities. The voluntary agencies, in turn, farm out the refugees to local agencies such as Catholic Charities in Washington.

Thong said on Tuesday that he was fed up with Catholic Charities and would not deal

with them anymore, although it was not clear why. He went to the Capitol by taxi, paying the fare out of \$20 he borrowed from another Vietnamese on the street in front of the Washington Hilton.

He met with a staff member of a subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee that deals with immigration matters and after a lengthy discussion agreed to get in touch with Catholic Charities again.

Catholic Charities wanted him to return to the guest house, but when he refused, they agreed to let him go to a nearby hotel because of their concern that the children might have to spend the night on the street.