

# Refugee's Early Fortune Turns to Trouble

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CAMAS, Wash. — Within hours of landing here last spring among the first of 130,000 South Vietnamese refugees to seek new homes in the United States, Nguyen Dinh Tri had found a job, earned his driver's license and purchased a used car.

Once an affluent construction contractor, the impoverished but eager 55-year-old outlined his future plans then as follows: "Get job. Work hard. Save money. Buy land. Build."

Three months later, Mr. Tri looks several years older.

He no longer has a job. He is in debt for a second car. His eight children have applied for free school lunches. There are frictions with his sponsor. And he is receiving supplemental welfare.

Today, as the optimistic hopes of spring shrivel before the cold fall realities of rebuilding a life from scratch, Mr. Tri says, "I happy to come here. But I have many problem."

## Joined by Relatives

Mr. Tri's difficulties began several weeks after he started work. By then, four other refugee families, a total of 33 more people all related to him somehow, joined Mr. Tri in Camas, a quiet old stagecoach stop (population 6,000) named for a local wild flower.

The other refugees also had higher educations. But unlike Mr. Tri, they had spent considerable time in United States Government refugee camps where their American counselors described the many forms of government benefits — especially welfare — available to them.

Thanks to this education, each month each of these

*This is another in a series of articles following selected Vietnamese refugees through various stages of adjustment to life in the United States.*

husbands not working receives a welfare check. It is only slightly smaller than Mr. Tri received for his 40-hour weeks loading and oil-



Thuy Tri, 8, in Betty Hennessey's second-grade class in Camas, Wash.

ing wool carding machines starting each day at dawn at the nearby Pendleton Woolen Mills.

Welfare enables the other men to spend their days studying English and interviewing for better-paying jobs they consider more commensurate with their credentials, which in one case includes a Ph.D. in mathematics.

On the other hand, Mr. Tri, whose status as eldest brother affords him a major clan role, came home tired from his blue-collar job, the kind of work that in his culture one does not return to without losing face.

In July he told a visitor: "I must get a job to use my head. I want the freedom to work but not to be a slave."

Not long after, he began complaining of nerve trouble and then he quit his job, to the vocal disappointment of Jim Collins, his sponsor. They have not played tennis together since.

There was also disagreement over Mr. Tri's purchase of a second car, a 1972 Ford Galaxie. Mr. Collins, a former Seabee who speaks Vietnamese, felt the purchase was an imprudent attempt to play a Vietnamese version of "Keeping up with the Nguyens." Apparently from savings, the other families

had purchased large late-model cars, which in Vietnam were signs of status.

Mr. Tri maintains that his first used car, a dented nine-year-old Ford Fairlane, regularly breaks down.

Mr. Collins then wondered out loud how the new cars would look to the many local citizens who had donated clothing and groceries to the needy families.

Still when the subject came up at a church meeting, Mr. Collins defended Mr. Tri. "He has the same right to make dumb decisions as anyone else," Mr. Collins said, "including myself. I bought a motorcycle last year that I never use."

Mr. Collins, who has adopted Vietnamese twins, believes his responsibilities as sponsor include "honest criticism."

"They are adults," he says, "they can calculate the need for groceries against the need for a new car. I help them, but I don't coddle them. I guess they resent that."

Thus, when the \$150 August rent was 10 days overdue on the five-bedroom home the Tris rent from Mr. Collins, he went by to collect. "I have financial responsibilities," he said, "and they must learn they do too."

Mr. Tri's problems also include language. "We know now English is most important thing, is necessary to learn it first," says Mr. Tri, who hopes to attend college this fall.

Like other Vietnamese refugees, the Tris speak some English.

Without fail, the Tris troop to thrice weekly evening classes in English, for which the teachers quickly learned the men and women must be separated to be effective. With the sexes mixed, women never participate because in Vietnamese custom the male is the family spokesman.

#### Son's Move Cuts Income

Faced with the language barrier, Mr. Tri's eldest son Trung quit his job at the Pendleton Woolen Mill to attend high school. This cut the family's income by a third.

Mrs. Tri, at 46 perhaps the hardest family member, still wakens before 6 A.M. to report to the mill. She brings home about \$330 a month. After work she squats by a cutting board on the kitchen floor, preparing the ingredients for the next day's meals.

The Camas public schools, like Mr. Collins, the sponsor, are also encouraging self-

reliance among the Vietnamese. To stimulate use of English, no two children among the 33 Vietnamese pupils in the 2,250-pupil system are assigned to the same classroom, and a full-time language tutor is planned.

#### Teachers Not Questioned

Each weekday morning now the Tri children, from 8-year-old daughter Thuy up to 18-year-old Trung, remove their sandals, don their new tennis shoes and run through the dew-covered grasses to school.

There, teachers have been briefed on cultural gaps. These include the slurping of soup and cutting in lines, neither of which is impolite in Vietnam.

There have been some misunderstandings. "He just won't look you in the eye," said one concerned teacher. To Vietnamese though, deferring one's glance from a superior's eyes is a sign of respect, not shiftiness.

Some Vietnamese students find it hard to question a teacher, which they always were taught is disrespectful. And Mr. Tri's 11-year-old son Hao boarded a school bus one day mistakenly believing they all went past his house.

But on the whole the first few days of school have gone well. "Everybody listen now," Mrs. Betty Hennessey told her throng of second-graders in Room 9, "we are very lucky this year. We have been picked to have a



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**Nguyen Dinh Tri, once a construction contractor, with five of his eight children at the family's rented five-bedroom home.**

special person in our class. She is Thuy. And we all get to be teachers this year."

There was a round of applause and cheers. Todd Perman described his summer vacation ("We found this

rock at the beach and it's worth \$50, my dad said.") Marvin Rice read the luncheon menu. The class worked on riddles ("What has teeth but never bites and you use it in your hair?"). And every-

one drew pictures too.

Then little Kim Hopkins raised her hand. "Teacher," she said, "Thuy certainly is doing a nice job, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is," said Mrs. Hennessey, "yes, she is."