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# Operation Babylift

## An orphan

Associated Press

FOREST CITY, Iowa — There's a well-intentioned tug of war going on over Doan Van Binh — "Ben."

The weapons are words and legal briefs, fired from the tiny farming town of Forest City, Iowa. They come from a young couple who says God sent Ben to them and a Vietnamese refugee who says she has the spirit of the dragon to regain her little flower.

Four-year-old Ben is the flower, one of more than 2,000 Vietnamese children evacuated last spring during the confusion of Operation Babylift.

On one side are Johnny and Bonnie Nelson of Forest City, Ben's adoptive parents. They received him last May.

On the other is Doan Thi Hoang



Bonnie Nelson and four-year-old Ben

CNDO

sequel

# with too many parents

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S.F. Sunday Examiner & Chronicle, April 25, 1976

Anh of Great Falls, who placed eight children — Ben among them — in a Saigon orphanage during the fall of South Vietnam. Now she wants them all back.

"If she truly loves Ben, she will leave him with us," says Bonnie Nelson as Ben nestles in her arms.

"If they really love Ben, they will let him come to me," says Miss Anh as four of her children crowd around a picture of Ben.

Adoption proceedings are at a standstill. A federal judge in Iowa ruled that Miss Anh is Ben's natural mother and that he must be returned to her. The Nelsons appealed. The Iowa Supreme Court ruled Tuesday that Ben will remain with the Nelsons pending results of the appeal this summer.

It is a case to try the wisdom of Solomon. It's one of the few cases of actual litigation between parents and adoptive parents arising from the babylift. But it's one of many cases of confusion over parentage and orphan status.

The Nelsons say Miss Anh hasn't proved she is Ben's natural mother and that Ben apparently did not recognize her in court. Ben is happy and well adjusted. He apparently is rejecting his Vietnamese background, they say, and to wrench him away from his new ties and new home would be cruel.

They point to the benefits of their home, the presence of a father and Nelson's job as public relations director of Waldorf College, a small Lutheran school.

"We couldn't possibly give our child away to someone who says he's her baby but has no proof," says Nelson, 33, a former Marine and a Vietnam veteran.

The Nelsons have two other children, Bobby, 5, and Julie, 7. They paid \$800 in adoption fees for Ben.

Miss Anh, 34, says a child belongs with its natural mother and she wants to teach Ben his Oriental heritage.

She and her children are sponsored by Methodist churches. They live on welfare and food stamps and pay \$160 a month for rent. Miss Anh takes English language and American history classes every day. Her children do well in school.

To the Nelsons' questions, she says her house and homeland were burning and there was no time for birth certificates.

As South Vietnam was falling, Miss Anh walked 250 miles to Saigon with her seven children, including an infant and the child of a friend.

Believing she would die or maybe never escape, she took the children to the Friends of Children of Vietnam orphanage in Saigon.

"Oriental way," she says, "is all live together, be happy together, die together. But that is old-fashion. Why should I keep my babies with me so they die?"

Miss Anh says she never intended that the children be adopted unless she could not escape in

two years.

But four children were placed with a Denver family, and returned to Miss Anh. The infant was placed with a French family. Miss Anh wants him back but the agency recommends against it. A daughter was picked up by her sister in Saigon. The friend's child is unaccounted for, she says.

Ben is with the Nelsons.

Edward Boyle of Clear Lake, Iowa, the Nelsons' lawyer, says the best interest of the child should come before the right of the biological parent.

In his brief, Boyle presents what he calls Ben's point of view:

"Dear Judge, this is Ben, the little Vietnamese boy the parties are fighting over . . . You see right now I am Ben Nelson, not just 'that Vietnamese kid.' I have an identity in the home of Johnny and Bonnie Nelson. I have a father and mother whom I love dearly.

"I don't want to go to Great Falls and be known as 'that Vietnamese kid, an alien.' There I would have no identity . . .

"Look ahead 14 years, Judge, when I will be 18. Will I be living in Forest City? . . . If so, I will have finished high school. I will then speak the best English I am able to. I will be indoctrinated into the American way of life. . .

"Now on the other side of the coin, Judge, look at me 14 years from now if you jerk me out of the Nelson home and send me to Great Falls, Mont. . . . What will I be?"