

# One Couple's Fight to Keep Their

By Joan Chatfield-Taylor

Kathy and Dale Strand of Altoona, Wisc., came to San Francisco this week to fight to keep the three Vietnamese children they took into their home during the orphan airlift last April.

The three children — Rebekah, 7, Rachel, 5, and Aaron, 2 — have been named as the plaintiffs in a lawsuit that claims that they are among many children who arrived on the airlift during the U.S. pullout from Vietnam and were placed in American homes in spite of their having parents in Vietnam able to care for them.

The Strands brought the children here to participate in an interview to determine why they were sent to the United States and whether they wish to return. The interview did not take place, and they have since returned to Wisconsin.

According to their lawyer, Paul Metzger, Muoi McConnell, the Vietnamese nurse who was scheduled to do the interview, was out of town. Tom Miller, the lawyer for the opposing side, said that he learned only last Friday that the children were coming and there was not time to get a child psychologist versed in the case to do the interview.

It was one more frustration for the Strands. After almost a year of legal maneuvering, they are no closer to knowing the fate of the children.

The children themselves are radiantly happy and ebullient, chatty in English and clearly fond of the solid, kindly couple they call Mommy and Daddy. They were noisy and energetic, running from room to room in a suite at the Westbury Hotel as the Strands told their story.

It began five months before the babylift, in December, 1974, when they applied to adopt a Vietnamese child, to add to their family of three biological children and an adopted Korean girl. Late in March of last year their application was approved, but the fall of South Vietnam to the Communists had already begun and they had little hope that there would be a child available for them.

On April 15, 1975, Dale Strand, a certified public accountant, received a phone call at his office, asking whether he would be willing to take a family of



## Kids

three Vietnamese children who had just arrived in San Francisco. Two days later the children had arrived at the Strands' house in the countryside outside of Eau Claire, Wisc.

The children settled in happily, and everything was fine until last May, when an Immigration Service officer came to their house.

"He didn't say much, but we knew something was amiss. On the second visit, he said that one of our children was listed in the lawsuit and that we should contact a lawyer," recalled Kathy Strand.

That was the first indication they had that the three children might not



be eligible for adoption. Later, as the children's mastery of English grew, they talked about their life in Vietnam.

"They were a close family, and say good things about their mother, and they were concerned about a little brother who died.

"They have never said that they wanted to leave us. They said that their parents told them to come to the United States. Rebekah is quite frightened of being separated from us. When she heard we were coming to San Francisco, she made me promise, cross my heart, that we wouldn't leave them out here," Mrs. Strand continued.

Nevertheless, the Strands didn't want the children to be interviewed without their being present.

"I think that the wrong person would push too hard and frighten the children. We tell them to be honest, that's part of their upbringing. We feel that we could help this rather than hinder it."

The Strands point to the fact that the children have at least nine relatives in the United States, including the children's aunt, who ran an orphanage in Saigon and was responsible for bringing them to this country. According to Matzger, these relatives agree that the whole family made the decision to send the children to America.

The people who brought the lawsuit claim that parents may have made this decision in a state of panic and that they should be given a chance to reconsider, now that life in Vietnam has stabilized. According to Matzger, the relatives who are in the U.S. feel that to communicate with the parents might put them in danger of retributions from the current Vietnam regime.

"It's a decision that they made that they have to live with — tough as it is," said Dale Strand. "Do they have to live with it? Or are people all over the world going to be able to turn up and claim

## **The Dale Strands with Rachel, Rebekah and Aaron**

their children on the basis that their situation has changed?

Kathy Strand said, "I think there are other people's rights to be considered. I feel that biological parents are held up on a pedestal where we don't always deserve to be. I don't think blood is thicker than water. These people who have brought this suit just don't know what an adoptive mother feels."

The Strands are also concerned that their children have become pawns in the growing controversy about interracial adoptions.

For the moment, the Strands are the only family directly concerned by the current lawsuit, but the decision about Rebekah, Rachel and Aaron is being watched by hundreds of worried American parents whose Vietnamese children have still not been declared eligible for adoption.

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