

From 'boat people' to solid citizens



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Editor's note: Sarah Jennings is an Ottawa writer, arts broadcaster and developer. Her column appears here every fourth week.

A little more than 25 years ago, a disastrous war in a distant land helped change the face and citizenry of Ottawa.

Prior to 1975, there was little evidence of any Oriental community in Ottawa other than a few scattered shops and the occasional restaurant serving the most basic food, unlike Vancouver or Toronto, which had large, thriving Chinese populations.

After the fall of Saigon in 1975, millions of Vietnamese, who found themselves not in a liberated country but under Communist rule, fled in flimsy boats to refugee camps throughout Southeast Asia and Japan.

By 1979, the plight of these so-called "boat people" was desperate. A reported 500,000 had already perished at sea trying to escape. Images of overloaded ships and barbed-wired refugee camps flashed around the world and a spark of humanity was lit in westerners, including Canadians.

In Ottawa, a progressive and creative mayor, Marion Dewar, with a group of socially minded citizens that included a handful of Vietnamese-born people already here, hatched a plan called Project 4000, that would bring eventually bring nearly 4,000 refugees to Ottawa, sponsoring them and looking after their wellbeing when they got here. (The initiative would help spur the

federal government into action: Ultimately, well over 100,000 Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Chinese refugees arrived in the country.)

An agronomist, an economist, a business professor, a lawyer/poet and an electronics technician are among those I spoke to about how things are now, 25 years on. Theirs isn't a North-American kind of style, given to pop psychology chatter or complaints on the hardships of life. Rather, they are dignified and quiet-spoken about the horrific experiences that changed just about everything in their lives. Over 60 per cent of university-educated Vietnamese left. Most had to abandon the professions for which they were trained and repeat their entire education. Accepting entirely different values, they have merged quietly into the city's mainstream, helping their community grow by sponsoring other family members and acquaintances.

It's hard to say how new culture insinuates its way into an established way of life. A stroll down Somerset Street, past today's lively array of Asian grocery shops and now-myriad Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Chinese restaurants, is one sign. These, and the influence of Vietnamese food on menus all over the city, speak to the impact of food and cuisine. Vietnamese-Ottawans mention this, with pride and delight.

But far from the exotic pleasures of food-shopping, the Vietnamese community as a whole has established itself in a remarkable way in the city's most important industry. Skilled at production and assembly, its members have become the back-bone of Ottawa's high-technology manufacturing. By 2000, according to a *Citizen* business report, at least 2,000 Vietnamese were working in this sector, representing nearly one-third of the entire Vietnamese-speaking community and roughly half its working-age population. Reliable, tenacious and hard working, they earned a reputation for a work ethic that is helping

carry them through high technology's recent difficult downturn.

Curiously, unlike other Asian and European immigrants, few entrepreneurs have emerged so far from this group. Perhaps this is because of the ancient values that still govern Vietnamese life. Among professions, scholars come first, followed by agronomists and skilled craftspeople. Businesspeople are at the bottom of the list.

Still, the urgent insistence for good education that parents have pressed on their children ensures that the new generation are high-achievers and likely to fill the top positions now out of reach of their parents.

The most serious issue confronting the community today is the problem of its elderly. Here they face the same problem as other Canadians, despite their strong tradition of "extended family." With both parents working and children out of the home, the elderly, rather than being the traditional centre of the household, are left alone and isolated. Lack of knowledge of English has exacerbated the problem, and the reluctant solution has been to create recently a non-profit housing project, "Van Lang" (the early name of Vietnam when it created more than 4,000 years ago), at Scott Street and Churchill Avenue, where the elderly can live and socialize with one another.

This shift from the old ways has been hard, and what is really needed is a nursing home for these seniors, something complicated by a lack of multilingual social services in the city.

The most important thing we've learned from the Vietnamese, says one activist who helped them through the time of settlement, is about loss and resilience. All the refugees lost their homeland, the *que huong* that is always carried in the heart, the beloved that has gone forever. But in Ottawa they organized quickly, and have worked together over the past 25 years to become what they now are, an integral part of the city. Solid citizens.