

## Common Carrier

# The Valley's Real Wild Flowers Appear As Eager, Active Vietnamese Children

By Payman Jahanbin

Wild flowers grow everywhere and by their nature, bloom and die in the same spot. Only those flowers that are caught in the throes of a hurricane are torn apart, their petals scattered to the wind. The wild flowers of which I shall talk — flowers that grew primarily in the war-torn fields of Southeast Asia — were brought to our valley in 1980.

Although the unavoidable flight of the port of entry children began in Vietnam,

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their exodus was soon joined by migrating tykes from Laos and Kampuchea. Their search for a new homeland has brought hundreds of them to Utah.

I receive and work with these children. And every week I encounter a new face that bespeaks the ordeal of long hours of waiting in refugee camps and the agony of an uncertain future in a large world. The number of these refugees, which constitutes 15 percent of the total student body of the high school at which I teach, is growing at an incredible pace.

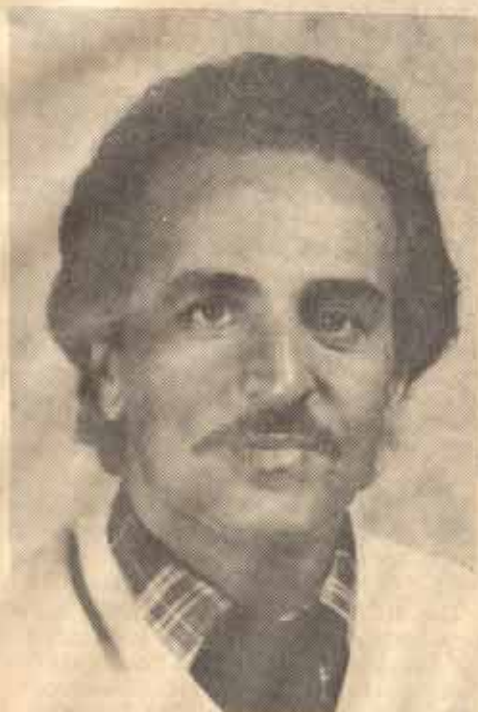
These children fascinate me; more than anything their names charm me. These beautiful names beckon one to investigate the roots of an enduring and rich culture. Names like Huong (Sweet smell), Tuyet (Snow), Thu (Autumn), Nguyet (Moonbeam), Hong (Rose), Xuan (Spring), and Hoa (Flower) will continue to enrich the poems of the future as they have adorned the past. Who but a poet would name her child Autumn or Moonbeam?

Passing through refugee camps they have picked up the English alphabet; and they have little difficulty with the language itself. They encounter difficulty, however, in the area of pronunciation. They cannot enunciate the English sounds properly. The older ones find stumbling through a new language even harder.

To me these kids resemble wonderful birds who, uncaged, invade the fields of knowledge. Their eagerness overwhelms us all. Even the most skeptical of teachers becomes convinced of their innocence and wonders at their sincerity and zeal.

Upon their arrival in Salt Lake, most of these students find a job at a restaurant or a car wash near South High. And surprisingly enough, the area restaurants which offer good service to their customers, can always accommodate one more hand.

Let me tell you a little about Kiet. He is a junior who arrived in Salt Lake about 10 months ago. He is a quiet and patient child.



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He works long hours until midnight in a restaurant near the school. From what little he earns he sends \$20 a week home to his father in Vietnam to keep the family going and he saves some. What do you think he saves that money for? He saves it to realize a dream — to buy a big American car!

Utah, however, is not the land of these students' dreams. To them Utah is a temporary haven plagued with rocky mountain slopes and abundant snowfall. Most of them see snow for the first time when they step off the plane. They all dream of moving to California.

Often I talk to the families of these kids and listen to their future plans. Staying in Utah, or any other state in the union for that matter, is not part of their future. None but California will do. As they move on, their departures plague my life. How can one say goodbye to souls as kind and noble and loyal as these little ones? When I realize that upon signing their departure slip I also sign them out of my life, I cannot unglue my gaze from their innocent faces.

Huy left two years ago; his departure brought tears into my eyes. Uninhibited, I cried in front of the child. And since then, holding back my tears on departure days has been impossible.

The kids in my class had a special name for Huy. Because he was intelligent, agile and pleasant, they called him "Little Rabbit." Often he came to class late. He opened the door quickly and sank into his seat noiselessly. He did not even give me a chance to protest.

Later I learned that at the fall of Saigon, his father had tied Huy with a rope onto his back and brought him to the helicopter. I learned about Huy's sister later when one day I met Huy's father in the city park.

With a heavy heart he told me about Huy's little sister. He told me how Huy's mother had been carrying the little girl in her arms. Plowing her way through the throngs, all heading for the same helicopter, the little one had been suffocated in those tender arms. They did not realize that the girl was dead until the pilot decided to discard some of the extra baggage. Huy's little sister's dead body was thrown out of the heli-

copter by the pilot along with extra baggage.

Departures remind me of little Huy. I am sure that I shall never set eyes on him again but, no doubt, the thought of that bold and courageous child will remain engraved in my memory.

The refugees invariably detest communists. They consider the communists to be the cause of their homelessness. Their hatred surfaces even more when they engage in their little "fights," and call each other "communist."

Although they love American food, they have not forgotten their Chinese-style oily rice and the sweet fragrance of Chinese spices. The longest queue in the school cafeteria is the one leading to Chinese dishes.

Their love for American music surpasses even their love for American food. As the magic of "Break Dancing" worms its way into the school, I see more and more tiny bodies twisting and turning before they fall to the ground. Isn't their happiness the greatest gift one could expect?

Are they the happiest children of this century? Most certainly not. Small and tender, they have accepted their lot and have adopted a new lifestyle. Their happiness is at best relative.

American children pay little attention to these kids. Although both groups are the same age, there is virtually no communication between them. I often wonder why American children should shun these guests. Could it be that our children are disinterested in life outside the United States, or is it because they regard these children as some kind of extra footage, footage that somehow did not get on their nightly television show?

The refugees, too, are similarly plagued. Having spent their few years of life in post-war refugee camps, they are unfamiliar with everything they encounter, the new land as well as the new people — to say nothing of a different and demanding lifestyle.

For how long can we ignore this lack of communication — this shortcoming in our education system? There are over 150 students from Southeast Asia in South High alone. Can we ignore these children and pretend they do not exist; or are we going to enlighten our children — tell them of the historical and the socio-political dynamics that have thrown these refugees into our midst?

Our offspring must know that these children are the sons and daughters of men and women who fought communism on the side of the United States. The communist takeover of Southeast Asia should not also be a takeover of the souls and aspirations of these innocent victims.

Unfortunately, if not all, the majority of American students view these refugees as war refuse placed here by some unknown social service. I believe it is the responsibility of the educational institutions in general, and of our teachers in particular, to soften the blow on these children by placing their lives in proper perspective. This would not only decrease the tension between the host and the guests, but it would also alleviate the pain of adjusting to a new environment for these children.

Salt Lake Valley has nourished none but the best of the wild flowers. We have a tradition of enriching the lives of our citizens by bringing in beauty and joy to their homes. Wouldn't the good care of these wild flowers from Southeast Asia bring in still more joy and good will to us all?

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