

## CROSSING OVER: Boat People Group Helps Refugees Adjust to U.S. Life

by Cindy Elmore



The “fall of Saigon” on April 30, 1975, which ended the Vietnam War, prompted a wave of immigration. More than 125,000 Vietnamese fearing Communist retaliation because of their close ties with Americans fled Vietnam during the spring of 1975. Between 1978 and 1995, a second wave of Vietnamese refugees exceeding a million left Vietnam in small, crudely made boats. Known as “boat people,” they were often attacked by pirates or ended up in asylum camps in Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong or the Philippines, where they awaited entry into new homelands.

Dr. Nguyen Dinh Thang, a native of South Vietnam, entered college after the communist takeover in 1975 but escaped in 1978. In a rickety boat crammed with 500 people and

*Nguyen Dinh Thang  
Executive Director, BPSOS*

*(continued on page 2)*





*Boat People SOS saved thousands of Vietnamese refugees from the South China Sea.*

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unable to eat or drink for three days, Thang endured trials including squalls on the South China Sea and being turned away by Malaysian police after they discovered the boat had too many refugees. As the boat's hull began

to crack, the refugees were forced to jump overboard. Fortunately, Thang survived the ordeal and arrived in the United States seven months later to begin life in a new world.

From the time of his arrival, Thang advocated for Vietnamese refugees and conducted rescue missions while completing his doctorate in mechanical engineering from Virginia Tech and working as an engineer at David Taylor Research Center. In 1988, Thang joined an all volunteer nonprofit called Boat People SOS (BPSOS) to respond to the massive waves of Vietnamese fleeing Vietnam. He guided the organization as a volunteer until he became the full-time executive director in 1999. Partnering with the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees, BPSOS rescued over 3,000 Vietnamese boat people from the South China Sea.

Today, BPSOS has grown into an organization that also deals with community development issues. As a national organization with 14 branch offices and an annual budget of \$4 million, BPSOS has 20 programs that are grouped into four departments: community development, health and mental health, family services and survivor services.

#### *Common Ground*

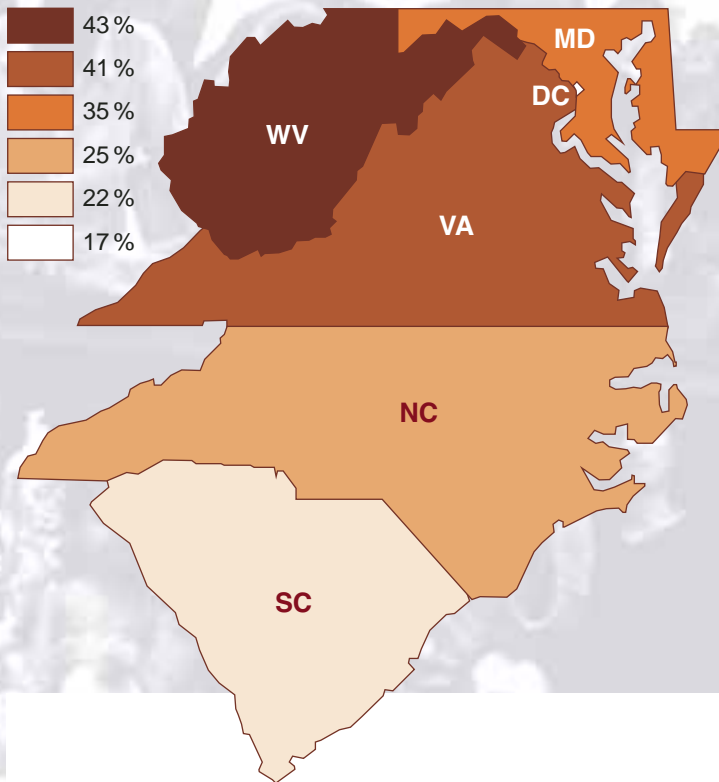
More than two million Vietnamese have immigrated to countries like the United States, France, Canada and Australia. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were 1,122,528 immigrants from Vietnam in the United States during 2000. The foreign-born from Vietnam made up the fifth-largest immigrant group in 2000. Based on the 2000 Census, the largest number of Vietnamese immigrants lived in California (418,249) and Texas (107,027). Although most of the Boat People who fled Vietnam were Vietnamese, a significant minority — about 30 percent — were Vietnamese of Chinese descent. Many of them Cantonese-speaking, constituted the bulk of the middle and large business community in Saigon and other business centers.

Trang Khanh Tran, who oversees BPSOS's community development department, can also relate to the experiences that many Vietnamese have faced. The oldest of seven children, Tran recalled her father's heroic prison escape and how he relied on his naval training to guide him to safety. She also vividly remembered the cries of her younger brothers and sisters when Communist soldiers came to her home threatening to imprison her mother for concealing her father's whereabouts. But cries turned into smiles when the family received a letter from her father that he had arrived in the United States and his plan to work for



*Among the rescued immigrants were hundreds of children.*

**Asian Born as a Percent of Foreign-Born Population in the Fifth Federal Reserve District**

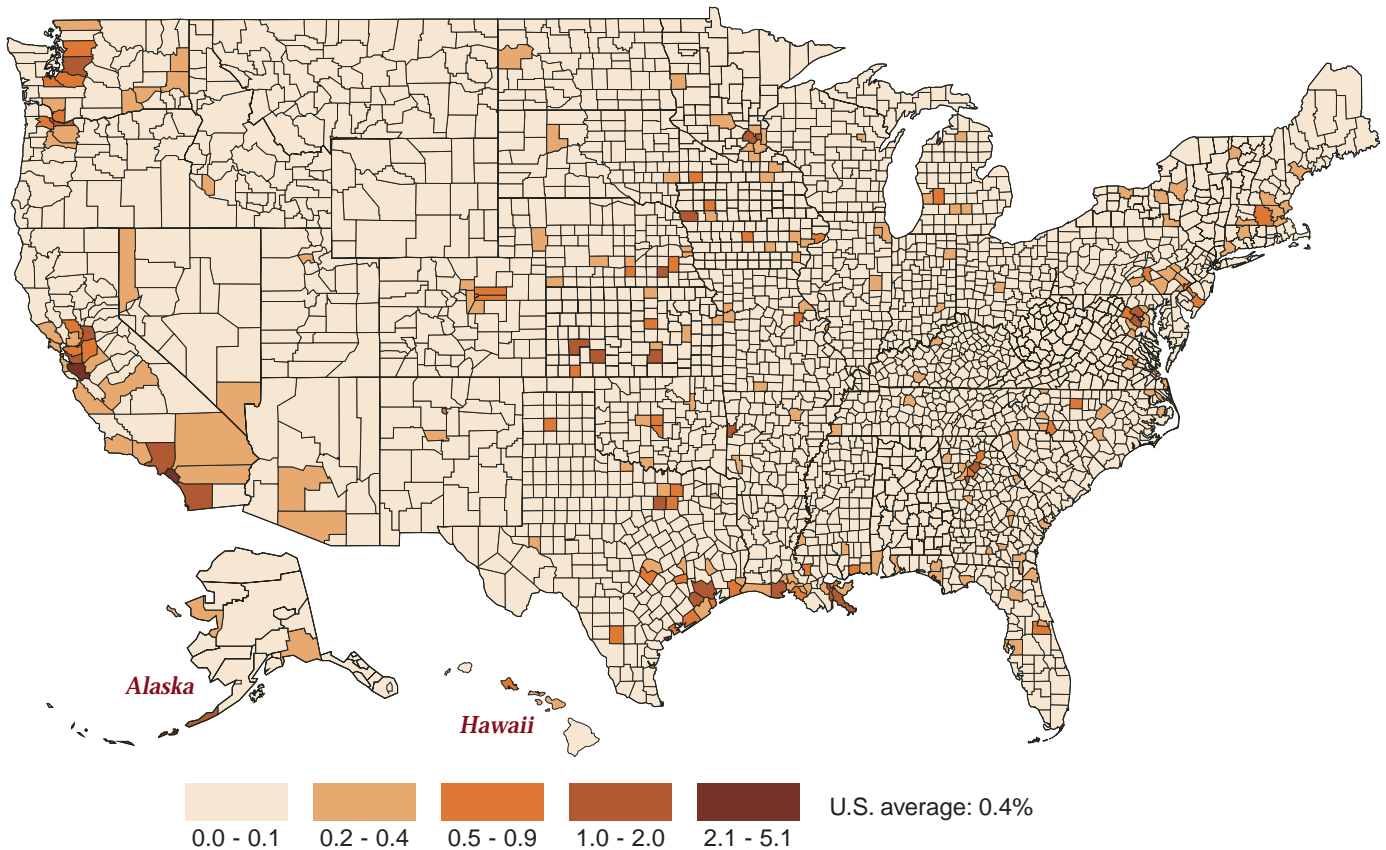


*"My parents always taught me to be grateful for what I have been given... BPSOS is my way of giving back."*

*Trang Khanh Tran*

*Trang Khanh Tran  
BPSOS Community Development Department*

**The Foreign-Born from Vietnam in the United States as a Percentage of Total County Population, 2000**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Census 2000. Summary File 3.



*BPSOS community development staff seeks to assist Vietnamese refugees and immigrants through two key programs, Road to Independence through Savings and Education (RISE) and Neighborhood Empowerment Support through Teamwork (NEST). From left to right: Lien Hoa Nguyen, Ouyen Nguyen, Uyen Dang, Thang Phan and Khanh Tran.*

their passage money. After 12 years, her father's diligence was rewarded when all of his family was reunited in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia.

Tran's experience drives her passion for assisting Vietnamese people. "My parents always taught me to be grateful for what I have been given," she said. "BPSOS is my way of giving back." For this reason, Tran left her computer programming job at the NCI Information Systems to work long hours with BPSOS assisting Vietnamese immigrants.

#### *A New and Extended Focus*

In 1990, BPSOS moved its headquarters from San Diego, California, to Falls Church, Virginia, to better respond to major shifts in U.S. and international policies towards Vietnamese boat people. According to Thang, "Vietnamese boat people were no longer treated as refugees after 1988 and all the camps were closed in 1996." Due to these changes, the focus of BPSOS changed. Since most of the boat people had either been repatriated or resettled by 1996, BPSOS shifted its mission to helping and empowering Vietnamese

immigrants and refugees in the United States. The organization began advocating for Vietnamese immigrants, assisting more than 1,500 refugee families in their social and economic adjustment to life in America. "Few organizations concentrated their resources and energy on domestic issues facing Vietnamese," Thang said. "We launched a major campaign on naturalization and started 20 programs for other unmet needs. Currently, we are at the forefront of anti-human trafficking. We offer everything from A to Z to help people out," he said.

Providing a host of services, BPSOS's community development department has two key programs, Road to Independence through Savings and Education (RISE) and Neighborhood Empowerment Support through Teamwork (NEST). RISE helps low-income refugees and immigrants from Vietnam build financial assets by opening initial bank accounts, encouraging savings through individual development accounts (IDAs), hosting tax clinics, assisting with homeownership, providing financial education opportunities and offering microenterprise education.



*A new resident to the United States, Kim Le, sought the help of tax preparers at BPSOS.*

Since a significant number of low-income Vietnamese remain “unbanked” due to the lack of trust of financial institutions, BPSOS offers a project under RISE, called First Accounts for Immigrants and Refugees (FAIR). According to Thang, “Vietnamese are wary of financial institutions because in 1975 banks in South Vietnam were taken over and the people lost their savings. As many as 30 percent of Vietnamese do not have checking accounts and stash cash at home.” Through FAIR, BPSOS has assisted 165 refugees and immigrants in opening their first bank accounts. Supported by the U.S. Treasury, FAIR increases financial awareness and encourages immigrants to develop relationships with financial institutions.

In addition, BPSOS has assisted 3,000 low-income, Vietnamese-American families with income tax preparation, yielding \$3 million in tax refunds and credits. These tax clinics encourage Vietnamese-Americans in their duties as taxpayers and make them aware of benefits such as the Earned Income Tax Credit. In addition, BPSOS has developed software that allows non-English speakers to fill out in their own native languages forms from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and other government agencies. When the forms are printed, an English version is provided for submission to the IRS. Kim Le found out about BPSOS tax clinics on the radio and in the newspaper. A resident of the United States

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*Nguyen Dinh Thang*

for only one month, Kim Le said, “I came to BPSOS for advice on taxes and they helped me prepare the taxes for my parents.”

BPSOS also offers several IDA programs around the country for Vietnamese. According to Tran, to date, 120 Vietnamese immigrants have saved \$1.2 million towards a home, business, education, car or computer. Half of the \$1.2 million comes from the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement program that matches participants’ savings in a 1:1 ratio. Coming to the United States on July 2, 2000, Hai Kieu worked as an elementary school principal in South Vietnam, overseeing 500 students and 13 teachers. “I saved \$2,000 to buy a computer through the IDA program,” she said. “I hope to use the computer to start a business with the help of BPSOS.”



*Hai Kieu expresses her gratitude to BPSOS for the opportunity to establish her financial independence through the IDA program.*

*“What we thrive on as a democracy is the structure of a civil society. Strengthening that in the Vietnamese-American community is my contribution to this country.”*

*Nguyen Dinh Thang*

Since most Vietnamese immigrants were small business owners in South Vietnam, BPSOS’s microenterprise program has been vital to Vietnamese immigrants’ assimilation into the United States. “We are encouraging Vietnamese to open their own business,” said Thang. With funding and volunteer support from Citibank, BPSOS clients receive free small business education and counseling. Recently, BPSOS also developed a business plan for home-based childcare businesses.

Using the FDIC MoneySmart program translated in Vietnamese, financial educators at BPSOS have taught over 200 refugees and immigrants about debt management, credit building and personal finance. “We advocated with the FDIC for translation of MoneySmart into Vietnamese. Before the translation, teaching financial literacy was difficult if a person did not speak English,” said Thang. As result of the financial education process, BPSOS also has secured \$2 million in mortgage loans for 20 families.

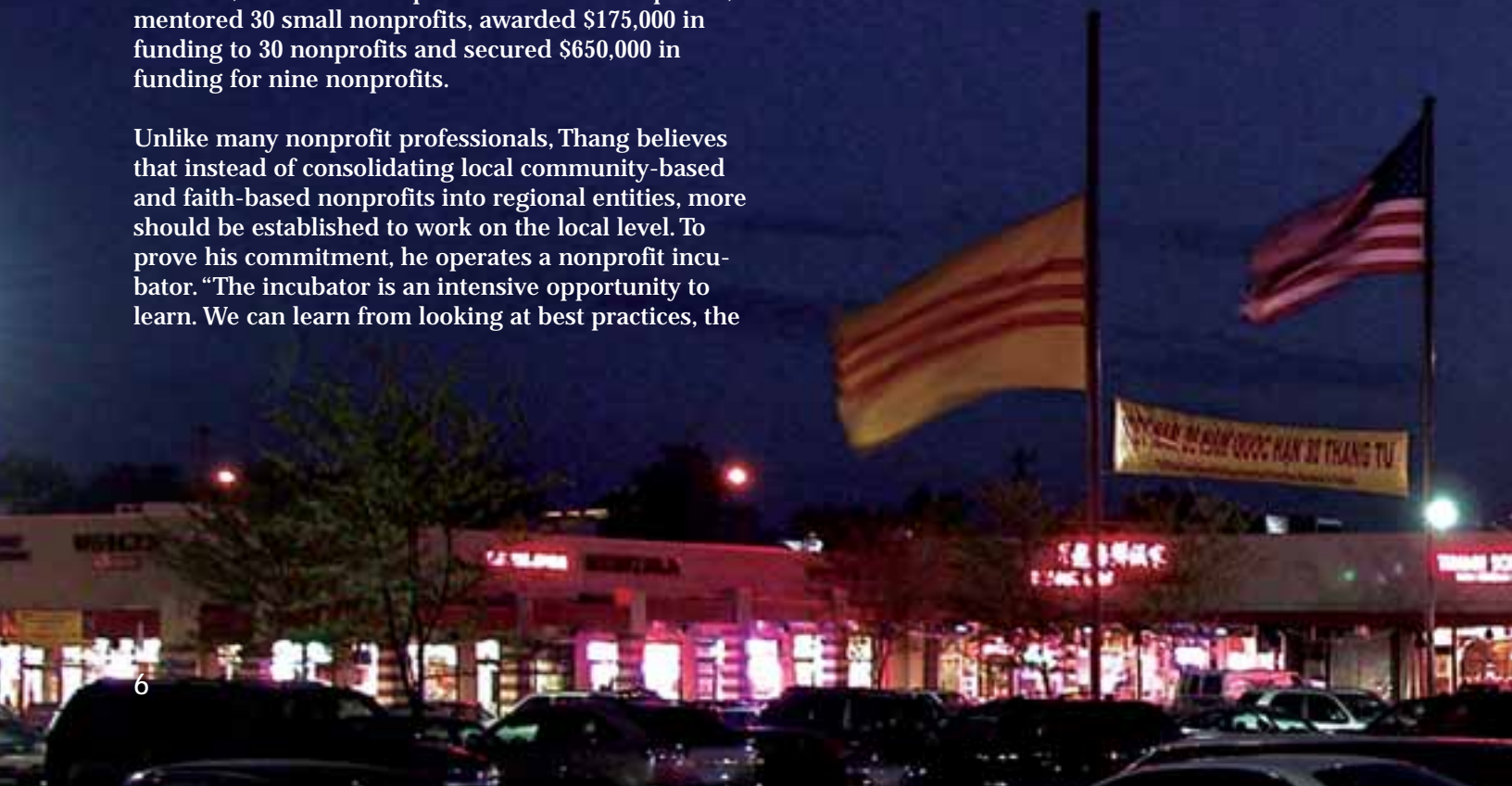
#### *Planting Nonprofit Organizations*

The second part of the BPSOS community development program called NEST works to plant nonprofits, including community development corporations (CDCs), in Vietnamese communities. Through the initiative, BPSOS has helped form 12 new nonprofits, mentored 30 small nonprofits, awarded \$175,000 in funding to 30 nonprofits and secured \$650,000 in funding for nine nonprofits.

Unlike many nonprofit professionals, Thang believes that instead of consolidating local community-based and faith-based nonprofits into regional entities, more should be established to work on the local level. To prove his commitment, he operates a nonprofit incubator. “The incubator is an intensive opportunity to learn. We can learn from looking at best practices, the



*Eden Center, the largest Vietnamese business district on the East Coast*



competition and through collaboration,” said Thang. Even though he realizes that the creation of more nonprofits results in greater competition for federal and state funding, he believes that competition is essential. “We want competition so that we won’t become complacent and these nonprofits are the bricks and mortar of America’s civil society.”

#### *Communicating the Message*

Currently housed in the nonprofit incubator is the Vietnamese American Television Station. The program manager, Shandon Phan, looks to Thang to learn nonprofit fundraising strategies. This is one of the many advantages of working in close proximity to the executive director that co-founded and developed BPSOS.

In addition to the television station, BPSOS publishes *Mach Song*, the largest Vietnamese-English publication, which has a monthly circulation of 75,000 and is distributed in 35 cities. Reaching 120,000 listeners, BPSOS also operates four Vietnamese-language radio programs in 35 cities. These communication vehicles strive to increase financial literacy among Vietnamese immigrants by featuring topics such as tax issues, identity theft, debt management and predatory lending.

#### *Surviving and Thriving*

The neon lights at the shops in the Eden Center, the largest Vietnamese business district on the East Coast, communicate a story. The vibrant greens, pinks and oranges represent the effervescent spirit of Vietnamese Boat People that have risked everything to live the American dream. Assisted by BPSOS, Vietnamese are offered resources that help them to fully tap into political and economic freedom. With a work ethic that is unfamiliar to many cultures, the staff at BPSOS toils from early in the morning to late at night to assist Vietnamese refugees and immigrants in their pursuit for freedom and a quality life. Always looking for more ways to give back, Thang said, “What we thrive on as a democracy is the structure of a civil society. Strengthening that in the Vietnamese-American community is my contribution to this country.” *MW*



*Shandon Phan, Program Manager, VATV*

