

inside



VIETNAMESE REFUGEE MADE GAINESVILLE HOME AND STARTED RESTAURANT
... The Dragon Gate Inn provides jobs for non English-speaking Vietnamese

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SISTERS FLED VIETNAM BY BOAT

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... Lan (left) and Am Tong work at The Inn of the White Lotus

Living in a new country brings hope to Vietnamese

By CARMEN LOPEZ
Alligator Staff Writer

Each Saturday, they gather among the Oriental trappings of the Dragon Inn to eat, renew friendships and discuss their new lives.

They gather to keep alive the hope that maybe someday families will be reunited — the families divided after the 1975 flight from Vietnam.

Hoang Doan, owner of the Inn, is one of several hundred Vietnamese refugees who has made Gainesville home.

But Doan, along with his mother and sister, continues to think of Vietnam.

"We would like to go back," Doan says, "but we feel like this is home. You cannot know what has happened there (Vietnam) since the Communist take-over."

He does know, however, that many of his friends and relatives are dead or in concentration camps.

Doan's serene manner would never indicate that the adjustment to American life has been difficult for he and his family, and he admits he is better off than most area refugees because he speaks English.

"It is very hard," Doan says. "They (refugees) cannot

work outside because they don't speak English. I opened this restaurant to help myself and to help them find work."

For Doan, who directed a quick-action unit which rescued downed American pilots from the Cambodian border, the escape came none too soon.

Assisted by the American Embassy, Doan escaped just one day before Saigon fell to the Communists.

The Tong sisters also escaped with less than a day to spare.

In a small boat, the five women left Vietnam, and joined a large raft with other fleeing refugees on board. For days, there was no food or water, and for some on board, the escape ended at sea.

Finally, they were picked up by a large ship and taken to Guam. Shortly afterward, the sisters came to Gainesville to be sponsored by Edward Carroll, a UF nuclear engineering professor.

Today, the entire family, including several cousins who have come to America, manages the Inn of the White Lotus.

Carroll agrees with Doan that jobs for refugees are difficult to find, and echoes Doan's sentiments about opening the White Lotus. "The whole idea was to put people to work and let them go to school."

The money the family saves goes partly to efforts to bring

the Tong sisters' parents and younger brother to the United States via France.

"It's very sad," Carroll says of the separation. "The family is very close. A lot of men came over and had to leave their families behind."

One of those men is Khoi Ngo, a cousin of the Tong family, who left behind his wife and five children. Surrounded by their pictures, he can only hope he will see them again.

Carroll says he has watched the transition of his "family" from refugees to "Americans".

"I think the outward appearance has changed, but they are still the same inside, in the way they behave to one another."

Am, 21, may not look like the typical student in her traditional Vietnamese dress, but she shares the major concern of any college student — finding a job when she graduates from her computer science program.

And while jobs are scarce, both Carroll and Doan agree the refugees are becoming more independent and are feeling more at home.

Doan, who takes pride in the Vietnamese food he serves, says he likes people to feel at home in his restaurant and adds that his children have become fond of American eating habits.

"They like McDonald's and Burger King," he says, "not Vietnamese food." I don't think they will want to go back to Vietnam."

In a corner of the Inn of the White Lotus, there is a small statue of Buddha. "It's for good luck," Carroll says.

And probably for hope. Hope that the separation of Vietnamese refugees from their families is not forever and hope that the transition into American life will become easier as the time passes.

"There is always hope," Carroll says.

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