

The sacrifice and gratitude of Vietnam's refugees

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Vietnamese Americans must not forget to pay back moral debt to the American people who came to their rescue during their time of need.

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In the annals of the Vietnamese migration history, May 19th, 1975, is remembered as the day the first Vietnamese refugee families began arriving in the state of Washington under a humanitarian project initiated by former Gov. Dan Evans.

It also marks the beginning of an era during which hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese were forced to leave their homeland in search of safe haven in neighboring Southeast Asian countries. This first wave of refugees was soon followed by subsequent migrations of more than 1 million people in the following years, both from South and North Vietnam.

Many did not reach their destinations and perished during their search for freedom. An estimated one-fourth to one-third of those who attempted to flee from the totalitarian regime died or disappeared. This number did not take into account all the horror stories of starvation, piracy and diseases that these people suffered on their journey.

From the standpoint of the Vietnamese migratory experience, this was an epochal event. It was the first time in the history of this war-ravaged nation that such a large number of its own citizens was forced to emigrate overseas, leaving behind their ancestral land.

Forty years after safely reaching the other side of the Pacific Ocean — thanks to a concerted effort of the international and domestic resettlement organizations, and spearheaded by the federal and state governments — many refugees from Vietnam were successfully resettled across Washington, with the largest group in King County.

Over time, Vietnamese refugees have blended successfully into the multicolored ethnic tapestry of their adopted homeland. Looking back, this successful transition could not be

achieved without the help and support of the citizens of Washington state, who opened their hearts, their arms and oftentimes their homes, to welcome the refugees.

The Vietnamese-American community, as a collective, should never forget to pay back that moral debt to this country and the American people who came to their rescue during their time of need.

Fulfilling that obligation can take many forms, ranging from trying to become better and more productive citizens, to actively participating in building a stronger community. Vietnamese Americans should always remember that this state offered them a second chance, and it is imperative to help build it into a stronger place for everybody to live and raise their families, both for the present and future generations.

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