

# Marking 20 Years in the Lives of Southeast Asian Refugees

■ **Commemoration:** Panel discussions and cultural events at Cal State Fullerton help to illuminate and recognize the local Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian communities.

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FULLERTON—They came to the United States from Southeast Asia with more emotional baggage than worldly possessions. Since then, the refugees, who were forced here by the winds of war, have mostly rebuilt their lives.

Now, as they commemorate their 20th year in their adoptive land, these former refugees can look back at what they have achieved in a relatively short time and look ahead to new challenges.

Such is the theme of "Refugee Life in the United States: The First 20 Years," a series of cultural events launched by Cal State Fullerton on Friday to recognize the presence of the refugee communities—the Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian—on campus and in the county. The series include panel discussions, photography and art exhibits and workshops. It ends April 19.

The series also is the first of many planned events that will be celebrated by various Orange County organizations within the next two months.

During the opening ceremony attended

by about 75 people at the University Center, James Freeman, professor of anthropology at San Jose State University, hailed the emigres collectively as a group for not only being survivors of war but also for being able to adjust and adapt to their new home.

"In many places, they have revitalized deteriorating sections of towns," said Freeman, author of "Hearts of Sorrow," which chronicled the hardships of Vietnamese Americans. "Where they have been able to find work in our difficult economy . . . they have, by and large, gained a reputation for efficiency, hard work, and high standards of performance."

But Freeman and other speakers on a panel also pointed out that while there have been many success stories, failures and tragic occurrences in the Southeast Asian communities have also been numerous. The problem of the generation gap between parents and children still has to be tackled, they said. So must the issues of poverty and lack of education.

"There are people, that even 10, 20 years later, who haven't made it," said Chea Lim, youth counselor with the Cambodian Family Inc. of Santa Ana. "These are people

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## 20 YEARS: Still More to Be Done, Some Say

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who cannot get out" of public housing and assistance.

Prany Sananikone, director of UC Irvine campus and community diversity relations, said the Laotian community still had a way to go in its efforts to improve. "We are the poorest and least educated" of the Southeast Asian refugees, he said.

Some of those who attended the opening ceremony and the symposium were openly emotional with the recognition of their rebuilding efforts.

"It's been a long 20 years. It's been a historic 20 years," said Mai Le, 30, of Laguna Niguel, who had tears in her eyes. "We've done a lot to establish ourselves here in Orange County and elsewhere, but I feel there is much more to be done. But it's good to get this recognition now."

While the symposium was taking place, an exhibition by the Vietnamese-American Science and

Professional Engineering Conference also attracted many in the next auditorium. The exhibition featured photographs and biographies of Vietnamese Americans who have excelled in the field of science and engineering.

"We wanted to show that the Vietnamese have made great contributions to the nation that sponsored us," said Minh Trong of Westminster, who published "Pride of the Vietnamese," which profiles more than 100 Vietnamese Americans who have made contributions to art, literature, business, and science fields.

"We didn't come here to live off the generosity of America. We give back just as much."