

From Vietnam to Nebraska G.I. family becomes U.S. citizens

By Carol Bryant

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Freedom and liberty were the reasons Bit Nguyen, 54, of 2603 W. Koenig St. came to the United States in March 1994 with his wife, three daughters and two sons.

Nguyen was a prisoner of war in a North Vietnam communist camp from 1975 to 1980.

Six of seven members of the Nguyen family became United States citizens on April 6.

"Bit was a captain in the South Vietnamese army. When communists came in, they captured him and put him in prison for five years," Howard Eakes of Grand Island said.

Eakes has tutored Nguyen's son, Huy, in English for three and a half years.

Nguyen; his wife, Vinh Quang Thi Ho, 53; daughters, Kim Thoa Thi Nguyen, 28, Kim Ngan Thi Nguyen, 18; and son, Hoang Tuan Nguyen, 24, were granted citizenship in a U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) ceremony at the Crosier Renewal Center in Hastings.

Daughter Kim Chi Nguyen, 16, became a citizen because of her parents' status change. The couple's son Huy Nguyen, 29, couldn't become a citizen on April 6 because of identity confusion with a California man with a criminal record, Eakes said. Huy is waiting for his paperwork to be processed so he can become a citizen.

The Nguyens own their one-story brick home. Bit, Huy and Hoang work as welders at Chief Industries. Hoang is also a student at Central Community College. Vinh works at ConAgra Beef Co. Kim Ngan is a freshman at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and shares an apartment with Kim Thoa, who does data entry for the INS in Lincoln. Kim Chi is a sophomore at Grand Island Senior High.

The Nguyens waited with 36 others who became citizens and their friends and families in a basement room at the Hastings monastery while immigration workers set up chairs in the Father Benno Room. The citizen petitioners then waited in a line in the hallway.

An immigration worker checked each person's paperwork before the petitioner could enter the room, then directed each person to a table where other immigration employees checked off their names and directed them to sit in numbered chairs. Each person received a program for the ceremony and a small United States flag.

Before the ceremony started at 6:10 p.m., Caroline Pratt, assistant district director for examinations with the INS in Omaha, gave instructions to the participants.

"After the ceremony, make sure your name is spelled right and the country of birth is correct," Pratt said.

She told them what to do during the oath of allegiance.

"You have to raise your right hand," Pratt said. "You don't have to say anything but, 'I do.'"

Tom Shick, director of Catholic Social Services in Hastings, welcomed the crowd to the ceremony. Catholic Social Services provides services to immigrants and assists them in their quests to become citizens.

"It is a long process," he said. "There are many, many stories about the length of time it takes" to become a citizen.

Requirements included taking a written test and being interviewed. The Nguyens took their written tests in Omaha in November 1999.

"That process is extremely important for a number of reasons," Shick said. "You are required to learn about the United States and the United States government. The next step is to participate in the process of contributing to build our country. That's why it's a lengthy process. That's why you have to study. That's why you have to learn the English language."

Elizabeth Arista-Micks, application support center manager for the INS in Omaha, read the names of the 41 participants -- 26 people from Vietnam, 11 from Mexico and one each from Panama, Denmark, Laos and El Salvador. Participants sang the national anthem, said the oath of allegiance and repeated the pledge of allegiance.

The Rev. Jim Lewandowski, an immigration specialist with Catholic Social Services in Hastings, encouraged participants "to vote for officials who will represent your interests."

Then one by one, participants walked to the front of the room, shook hands with immigration workers and received citizenship certificates.

Before coming to the United States, the Nguyens lived in Nha Trang City in southern Vietnam. While Bit was in prison, Vinh sold gasoline, rice and tobacco leaves to support the family.

After the naturalization ceremony, George and Phyllis Harrison and Eakes joined the Nguyens at a Chinese restaurant in Hastings for dinner. Hoang returned to Grand Island to work.

The Harrisons and Eakes met the Nguyens through the Literacy Council of Grand Island. Harrison has tutored Bit for five years. He said Bit could write well in English but had difficulty speaking English. They meet for 90 minutes to two hours every week.

"They're a neat family. They're so friendly and outgoing," Mrs. Harrison said. "They're always smiling."

Kim Thoa graduated from Central Community College last spring with a 4.0 grade point average, and Kim Ngan graduated from Grand Island Senior High in 1999 with a 3.7 grade point average, Eakes said.

"Think how hard they had to work with their limited English," Eakes said. "I'm so proud of the whole family."