

A New Home

By Rebecca Muller

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On a trip to Charlotte last summer, I noticed the many restaurants and ethnic stores downtown and in the city's outskirts. From Mexican tortilla factories to African clothing shops, there seemed to be no shortage of these businesses. There was even an outdoor mall called Saigon Square—further evidence of the growing Asian presence in North Carolina.

One part of this diverse community is the Montagnard Dega. The Montagnards—a group of people of several ethnic tribes from Vietnam's central highlands, whose name is a French term for mountain people—spent years fighting against the communist reunification of Vietnam alongside the South Vietnamese and their American allies. The 1975 fall of Saigon sent thousands of Montagnard men into the jungle as a guerrilla resistance force. Eventually, a group escaped to Thailand; in 1986 about 230 men arrived in North Carolina after being granted political asylum. Thousands of Montagnards, including more women and children, have since immigrated to North Carolina cities including Greensboro, Charlotte, and Raleigh.

As a volunteer for the AmeriCorps program ACCESS—Accessing Cross-Cultural Education Service Systems—at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Center for New North Carolinians, I help run an after-school program for Montagnard Dega children at the United Montagnard Christian Church. I recently interviewed Poi Hbuecnie, whose family belongs to the church.

Poi, now fourteen years old, moved to Greensboro at age eight. In my interview with her, she told me that her family was in search of religious freedom and the chance at better education. Since the majority of Vietnamese are Buddhist but most Montagnards are Christian, many found it difficult to practice Christianity in Vietnam. "The Vietnamese government makes it hard for Montagnards to live a normal life," Poi said. "We went to somebody's house to pray and used it as a church."

Poi's family lived in a Vietnamese village called Buon Ea Mta. "If we needed any money, we had to raise cows. We had a small rice field, and the government divided it in a square," she said.

Poi has six sisters and five brothers, all of whom still live in Vietnam. (One brother passed away there before she was born.) Although she does have family who already lived in the United States, she did not know them before moving here.

When she arrived in Greensboro, Poi was placed in the second grade. "I just wanted to go back to Vietnam," she said. "I just stayed in class and didn't talk." She found it difficult

to get used to the many differences between school in Vietnam and the school system here. “In Vietnam if you don’t pay attention, the teacher gets a ruler or stick and hits you.” The school days are also much shorter in her native country, she said, with first-graders and kindergartners starting school at 2:00 p.m. and going home at 6:00 p.m. High school and middle school start at 6:00 a.m. and go until noon or 1:00 p.m.

Soon after arriving here, Poi noticed other differences. “In Vietnam there are less cars; it is all motorcycles. We walked to school,” she said. She was also surprised at the houses in the United States. “[In Vietnam] only people who have money get houses like they have here. The other houses are made of hay, and the ground is dirt. My family couldn’t afford electricity, so we had to use candles for light.”

Poi now lives a life similar to that of other American teenagers. She hangs out with her friends at the mall, or chats with them on Instant Messenger, and goes to school dances. “I like living in a free country—I just do what I feel like doing,” she said. Through the United Montagnard Christian Church and other Montagnard community events, she is able to celebrate this freedom while maintaining ties to the rich Montagnard culture.

At the time of the publication of this article, Rebecca Muller, a 2004 graduate of Guilford College, said that she became interested in other cultures while attending a Miami, Florida, high school that was 70 percent Hispanic. Muller, who described herself as fourth-generation Jewish American, majored in sociology and anthropology, with a minor in Latin American

The Center for New North Carolinians of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro was founded in 2001 for efforts ranging from research and evaluation to outreach and leadership development. Visit <http://cnnc.uncg.edu/>. The Greensboro area has a sizable immigrant population; in fall 2004 Guilford County Schools counted 4,811 students who reported speaking ninety-seven languages other than English at home (including 367 speaking Vietnamese, Montagnard, and related dialects).