

# FIRST VIETNAMESE REFUGEES' ARRIVAL, 9 AUGUST 1975

The first group of 326 refugees from Vietnam arrived in Brisbane on 9/8/75 and were comprised of 223 people from St. John Island, Singapore, and 103 from Perhentian Island, Malaysia. One-third of the group were ethnic Chinese. The refugees were housed in Wacol Migrant Hostel, west of Brisbane. The Commonwealth Departments of Social Security (until January 1978) and Immigration and Ethnic Affairs (February 1978 – 1987) were in charge of the Hostel.

Nancy Anderson, Senior Social Worker in the Migrant Services Unit, Department of Social Security, recalls: "I remember the planning for the arrival of the first Vietnamese refugees in 1975. I engaged a large number of interpreters and went with a busload of interpreters to the airport to meet the refugees. When the 747 landed and the Vietnamese disembarked, I think it was Bang who stepped forward to organise them. Many charity organizations, such as the Red Cross, St. Vincent de Paul, Salvation Army and church groups, were on hand to distribute toys, clothing and blankets etc. The ESL teachers at Wacol were delighted to find that the Vietnamese were determined to learn English, unlike other new settlers who had seemed more interested in working and earning money than learning English. Departmental social worker Julie Roper was employed at Wacol for two years. Trung Viet Nguyen and his brother Paul Truong Nguyen were also engaged as welfare officers about the same time."





## STARTING A NEW LIFE IN WACOL

Wacol Hostel was the first experience of a tranquil and peaceful environment in a long time for the adult refugees, and probably the first ever such experience for the children. To assist the refugees, there were welfare officers and bi-lingual interpreters employed by the Commonwealth and State Governments, as well as volunteers from the Red Cross, St Vincent de Paul and other charities and community service organisations. English classes conducted by ESL teachers and bi-lingual teaching assistants were offered to adults and children, with most of the classes held in locations inside as well as outside of Wacol Hostel.

The refugees were most often visited by a handful of the Vietnamese ladies who were married to Australians, as well as a few Vietnamese Colombo Plan students in Brisbane who were left behind after the fall of South Vietnam. These compatriots offered great assistances and comfort to the newcomers. There were many social and communal occasions and there was a strong sense of unity. The refugees were also introduced to new culinary experiences, some of which, such as lamb, represented an acquired taste.



*Wacol Migrant Centre - 27 August 1975*



*Wacol Migrant Centre - 27 August 1975*



*Pearl Arnold, Wacol Migrant Centre - 27 August 1975*



## ADULT ENGLISH CLASSES AT WACOL HOSTEL

When Tom Ellis, the Officer-in-Charge of the Adult and Child English Programs in Queensland at the time, was advised of the arrival of a large number of refugees in Brisbane, he appointed Anna Kohler to organise the Adult Migrant Program at Wacol Hostel, Eila Curtis to organise the classes for primary school-aged children at Darra State School and Adele Rice to cater for the high school-aged students conducted from Phoenix House in Adelaide Street in the city.

Anna and Trung Nguyen, himself a refugee, started the very first adult English classes at Wacol Hostel, shortly after the arrival of the first refugees in 1975. The team of teachers included Jan Kohn and Bill Eggington. The English language program focused on the practical language the newly-arrived refugees needed to enable settlement into their new life in Brisbane.

Links were made with Ipswich TAFE and students attended courses in subjects such as mechanics, cooking, hairdressing and sewing. Teachers also organised many excursions and outings for their students. All ESL teachers still speak very fondly of their Wacol days.

A Childcare Centre was opened next to the adult English classrooms, and parents could happily leave their little ones there whilst attending classes. This was free-of-charge and allowed them to pop in to see their children during class breaks.





## MIGRANT EDUCATION: PHOENIX HOUSE, MILPERA & DARRA

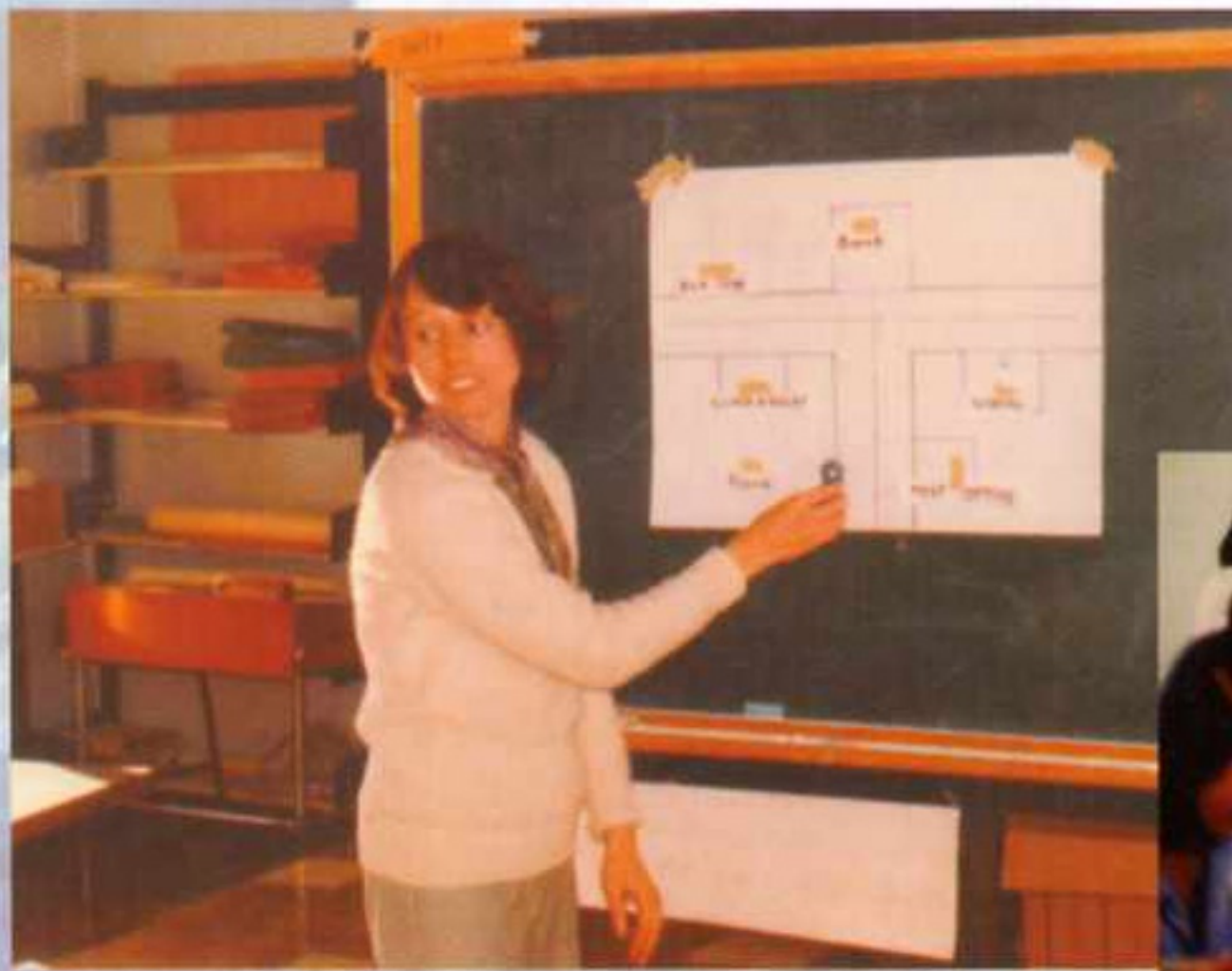
The Vietnamese students of secondary age travelled by train to the city where intensive English language classes and high school preparation took place at Phoenix House. As the program grew classes were extended to other sites around Brisbane.

Corinda Special School was opened in 1979 and then Milpera State High School was opened in 1984 at Chelmer., with Adele Rice as its first and only principal to date. Teachers have very fond memories of their experiences working with the refugee students, mainly because they were motivated and studious.

Younger refugee children attended the Special Education Unit at Darra State School or the Darra-Jindalee Convent. The teachers were wonderfully supported by bilingual teacher aides, themselves refugees.

Everything was different for both teachers and learners but by working together, many innovative teaching projects took place with great success stories.

ESL teachers have said it was a wonderful decade for them, professionally challenging and exciting, for learning about settlement and for forming lifelong friendships with Vietnamese people whom they admire so much.





## INTEGRATION INTO THE COMMUNITY

As soon as the Vietnamese refugees settled in at Wacol, they began to wander around and explore their new homeland. The young adults went to such schools as those outside Wacol and at Phoenix House in the city, whilst the older family members did the shopping at their favourite places in Darra and Inala. When they were sure of their surroundings, they could then move around with confidence.

The very first thing they did was to start to look for work. With the help of the CES, they got jobs at : Golden Circle Cannery "The Pineapple Factory" in Northgate, Stubbies Clothing in the Valley, Ingham Chickens in Park Ridge, Queensland Glass in West End, The Oyster Factory in South Bank, G. James Glass in New Farm, Wacol Catering in Wacol. etc. you name it. Some of them even got jobs as domestics with Australian families, despite their lack of English. They were very happy and proud to be employed. The first thing they learnt at work was "Hi Boss. Any overtime, Mate?" They loved overtime and the bosses loved them too, as they could hardly get any Aussie workmates to do the overtime work at the time. The Vietnamese refugees certainly were well-embraced by the local business community.

The second thing the young Vietnamese did was to buy a car while the families did was to buy a house. Some families started to move out of Wacol, with the help of Merv Hart, Wacol Housing Officer. Owning a house means "A Home" was no longer a remote dream to these refugees. They loved the banks and the banks loved them too, because their housing loans were paid off within 5 to 10 years instead of the normal 25 to 30 years for an average Australian family.

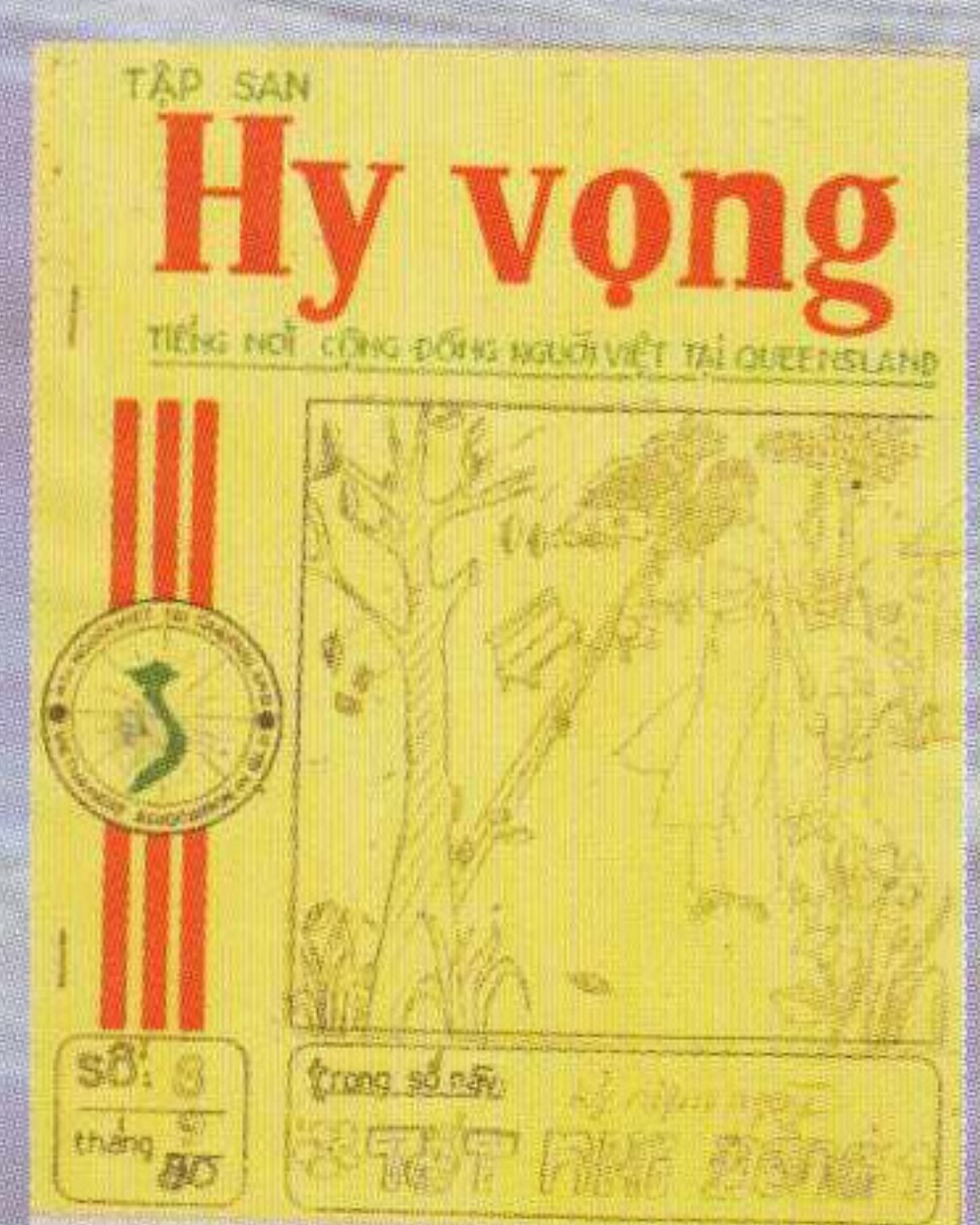




# BECOMING ORGANISED INTO SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS ENTITIES

One of the first steps taken by the emerging community towards establishing their identity in their new home was the formation of community, professional and religious associations. The Vietnamese Refugee Association of Queensland (VNRAQ) was formed in 1976 and The Vietnamese Buddhist Association of Queensland Inc. (VNBAQ Inc.) was formed in 1977. The Vietnamese Catholic Community was also very active in the early days.

We believe that these three institutions were paving the way for many more Vietnamese social bodies to be formed in the following decades. Now in Brisbane, we have over three dozen of active Vietnamese organisations. The Chairman of the founding committee of the VNRAQ was Mr Lan Luong and its first President was Mr. Chau Thien Nguyen (1976). The founder of the VNBAQ Inc. and its elected first President was Mr Trung Viet Nguyen (1977). The VNRAQ was the predecessor of the present Vietnamese Community in Australia, Qld Chapter.





## PILOT SHARE-FARMING PROJECT FOR THE REFUGEES, 1976 – 1978

This project typified the self-help and independent spirit of the new arrivals. Of the first arrivals, a group of 10 Vietnamese refugee families, including 15 young children, and a single man (Nguyen Van Thanh) were sent to a town called Laura, in North Queensland, located between Cairns and Cooktown, to do a Test Pilot of a Share-Farming Project at Lakeland Downs peanut farm.

The project started well. The first crops grew beautifully and the refugees were excited with the high hope of success. Unfortunately, due to the drought, the peanut crops failed. They tried again, a second crop was planted, but the bad luck repeated - the second attempt also failed to produce any peanuts.

To their great disappointment, The Department of Immigration and other State Departments involved in the scheme, the Company of Lakeland Downs and the 10 families realised their dream of owning a piece of land in the future was lost. The families started to pull back to Brisbane – the last family left in April, 1978.





## THE FIRST VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE SCHOOL IN BRISBANE

The first Vietnamese Language School in Queensland was founded in 1981 by the President of the Vietnamese Refugee Association of Qld, Mr Trung Viet Nguyen, with Mr Khanh Van Nguyen as the school's first principal. Enrolment on the opening day numbered 40 pupils. The school was on the grounds of Wacol Hostel and was held on Saturday mornings. Presently – after 24 years – the school has expanded to six suburbs in Brisbane with a total enrolment of over 700 students.





## THE PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT: A rare occasion for the Vietnamese refugees

The Prime Minister, the Right Hon. Malcolm Fraser, visited Wacol Migrant Hostel on the morning of March 18, 1981, arriving in a RAAF Chinook helicopter. We believe that this is the first and only time an incumbent Prime Minister has ever visited a Vietnamese refugee camp in Australia.

Everyone in the hostel was excited, especially the Vietnamese themselves. It was the first time, since leaving their war-torn country, that they were welcomed and cared for by a leader of the host nation, Australia.

The Prime Minister was greeted by Mr Trung Viet Nguyen, the President of the Vietnamese Refugee Association in Queensland, and offered a bouquet of flowers by Tuyen Nguyen, a member of the first group of Vietnamese refugees who arrived on 9 August 1975. A number of banners were displayed, reading "We are Grateful to Australia" and "We Traded our Lives for Freedom". Mr Trung Viet Nguyen presented Mr. Fraser with a bark painting, titled "Fly to Freedom" by Mr. Thoi Chanh Bui.

