

Alex Yuan

Professor Kai Wen Yang

ASA 001 A04

10 Jun 2024

Unity Makes Strength

A Village Called Versailles is a film about Vietnamese Americans fighting the government for the good of their homes and communities. It's the story of how the people living in a New Orleans neighborhood called Versailles turned a devastating disaster into a catalyst for change and an opportunity for a better future. Versailles is a New Orleans East public housing project that was first resettled in 1975 by a tight-knit group of Vietnamese refugees who fled to New Orleans to escape the war. To find peace in the easternmost tip of New Orleans, residents grow vegetables in the bayous and attend Mass on Sundays. Thirty years after their arrival, Versailles is at a crossroads. The working-class enclave of 8,000 people now thrives with material success but is unsure of its identity. Elders look at their American-born, hip-hop-loving grandchildren with suspicion, questioning the young people's cultural allegiance and fearing they will move away and leave the community behind. On the other hand, the young people see their elders as isolated, but are frustrated by the lack of trust in the Vietnamese-speaking older generation. The residents of Versailles are

legally American citizens but feel uncomfortable as Americans, perpetual outsiders to the city of New Orleans, largely ignored by the government. Of course, such a situation was changed in the protests that followed.

This film is a co-production of S. Leo Chiang/Walking Iris Films and the Independent Television Service, in association with the Center for Asian American Media with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The goal is for audiences across the U.S. and around the world to be able to see and hear about this previously unknown Vietnamese American community and the hardships and struggles they have faced, in the hopes that more people will be able to know their story. This story focuses on New Orleans in August 2005 after it was devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Most residents evacuated Versailles, but 400 people stayed. Trapped after the levees broke, residents were transported to the living nightmare that is the New Orleans Convention Center and then dispersed across the country after the evacuation. Some were taken in by relatives, while others were housed in Hurricane Katrina shelters, where they relied on inadequate help from translators to cope with the massive red tape of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The war forced them out of Vietnam thirty years ago, and many of them wondered why their homes were being taken from them again. Six weeks after the flood, residents were allowed to return to "look and leave", but they couldn't leave. During the day, the group

repaired their homes and then drove 30 miles to the west side of the city, where flood damage was minimal and they could sleep on church floors. Help came from outside, too, mainly from idealistic young Vietnamese Americans. Shortly after the initial group returned, Fr. Vien appealed to the community to come back for Mass. With the church's help, the Versailles neighborhood was more than halfway back when the rest of New Orleans was just recovering from the brunt of the flood.

Community leaders in Versailles have taken the initiative to develop ambitious redevelopment plans, including their senior housing, a cultural center, and a community farm and market. But the real difficulty they faced came when Mayor Ray Nagin used his emergency powers in February 2006 to open the Chef Menteur landfill for toxic Hurricane Katrina debris disposal less than two miles from Versailles, with no environmental impact study, no protective liner at the bottom of the dump and was right next to the body of water that flooded the neighborhood in the first place.

Community residents in Versailles fought back, packing the public hearing with hundreds of residents and making Vietnam's presence felt in the city for the first time. Legal battles were fought at the state and federal levels. Demonstrations at City Hall prompted Mayor Ray Nagin to promise a moratorium on dumping until tests could be completed to secure the landfill, a promise he failed to honor. Tired of being passed over, the community went broke and staged protests at the landfill to shut it down. At

the protests, old and young people stood side by side, chanting in English and Vietnamese. They refused the garbage unloading trucks. They spoke with passion for the whole world to hear, achieving unprecedented unity. Eventually, Mayor Ray Nagin backed down and closed the landfill. The community's voice was finally heard. On the other hand, Versailles residents now have a new sense of identity and pride. Their determined drive to return and rebuild has inspired and empowered other New Orleanians to do the same, and their impressive victory over the Chef Menteur landfill has earned them a political voice that cannot be ignored. More importantly, as the community celebrated the Lunar New Year once again, Fr. Vien proudly said: "Now, no one would dare speak about rebuilding New Orleans without mentioning our community, because They know we are back. They know we are here." (Leo Chiang)

Once upon a time, the Versailles family was known as the quiet Vietnamese refugees east of the city. Now, they are New Orleanians. They are Vietnamese Americans.

In their resistance, they succeeded in bringing the Vietnamese American community together with other Native American communities, receiving support from many Native Americans as well as at the federal level, and traversing different social classes. As an Asian, this reminds me that Chinatown has a similar resume of protests, such as the vote to stop the East Side rezoning plan in New York's Chinatown, which came to fruition after years of struggle." If we don't unite, we will all be displaced".

As a multiracial society, resistance will allow more voices from our community to be heard, so that more people can learn about their ethnicity and integrate into the community." After all, this is our city" (Zishun Ning). And in many ways, we still need to fight against things that don't make sense.

Work Cited

Leo Chiang, "A Village Called Versailles" Walking Iris Films, 2009.

Zishun Ning, "Unite Against Displacement: The Bowery Tenants' Story"

<https://vimeo.com/294354765>, 2008.