

Sister shows the way;

Vietnamese nun eases transition for immigrants in Atlanta area, giving a voice to those least likely to be heard;

International Atlanta: A look at our community and its impact on metro Atlanta

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

July 23, 2001 Monday,, Home Edition

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Section: **Metro** News;

Length: 744 words

Byline: AHAN KIM

Body

Pregnant with her sixth child and barely getting by on a welfare check, **Vietnamese immigrant** Cam Ho was in desperate need of help.

That's when she found **Sister** Christine.

The Catholic **nun**, whose full name is Christine Truong, **showed** Ho how to get Medicaid and helped provide food and clothing for her children. Because of her help, Ho, who had considered an abortion, decided against it.
AJC

That was three years ago but the Chamblee resident, who moved to **metro Atlanta** in 1997, still cries when she recalls that dark time.

"Without **Sister** Christine, I don't know how hard it would be," Ho, who speaks little English, said through an interpreter.

Since moving to **Atlanta** a decade ago, Truong, 49, has become one of the **metro area**'s leading advocates for **immigrants**. She speaks for those whose **voices** are **least likely** to be **heard**: poor families living in run-down trailers, elderly people who don't speak English and parents frantic as their teenagers run away and sometimes vanish into street gangs.

Through her nonprofit organization, Good Shepherd Services, Truong helps **immigrants** throughout **metro Atlanta**. Her organization, which is funded through state and federal grants and private donations, provides a variety of services. The organization has a \$600,000 annual budget.

The centers help **immigrants** find jobs and child care, locate neighborhood Asian grocery stores or understand their child's report card.

And Truong knows how to work the phones. Her calls to lawyers, judges and immigration officials often bring swifter resolution of green card and other legal problems.

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"I think she's a second Mother Teresa," said Louise Radloff, chairwoman of the Gwinnett County school board, whose district includes a large Vietnamese population. "She's strong-willed, has tremendous convictions and is absolutely committed to the people she serves."

The vast majority of immigrants who come to Good Shepherd centers for help are Vietnamese.

Staffed with 13 full-time employees, Good Shepherd has offices in DeKalb and Gwinnett. A Clayton office is scheduled to open this month in response to the rising influx of Asian immigrants.

Georgia's Vietnamese population has more than tripled from 7,800 in 1990 to 29,000 in 2000, according to census figures.

Radloff said Truong encourages Vietnamese parents to get involved in their children's education. Good Shepherd runs an after-school program where kids do their homework until their parents get off work.

During the summer, kids take part in summer programs that serve as day care for working parents.

The centers bustle with activity from morning to evening. Immigrants of all ages take English lessons, socialize and share resources. Truong estimates that the centers assist more than 4,000 people a year.

"Sister Christine is trying to create something out of nothing," said Larry To, a member of the Good Shepherd advisory board. "She's not common folk, she's a person with a special mission in her life."

Soft-spoken and diminutive, Truong says simply that she finds joy in "reaching out to people who nobody pays attention to."

"She is teaching them how to fish for themselves," said Baoky Vu, a Vietnamese activist and officer in the local Vietnamese American Public Affairs Committee. "She is very much committed to the belief that everyone should have the same human rights."

Truong's mother died when she was 16. She lived with her father and six siblings in Saigon until joining the Sisters of Good Shepherd convent at age 20.

Two years later, Truong felt the tremors of bombs exploding around her and heard reports of people she knew being killed.

While waiting for a chance to escape, she and other nuns rescued more than 150 orphans whose homes were bombed, she said. She huddled in a hotel room with the children for 24 hours until a plane was available to fly them out.

Ten days later Saigon fell.

Truong did missionary work in Hong Kong and other places around the world for 15 years before settling in metro Atlanta. The rest of her family escaped Vietnam a few years after she did, settling in Texas.

There are more than 6,000 sisters in the Good Shepherd order worldwide, with about 150 provinces in the United States and four in metro Atlanta.

Although eager to bring attention to the struggles often faced by immigrants, Truong deflects the spotlight from herself.

"I'm just trying to give meaning to these people," she said.

Graphic

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Photo:

Sister Christine Truong comforts Tram Hyunh, 7, at the Good Shepherd Services Center in Chamblee. The center helps **immigrants** adjust to their new surroundings. "I'm just trying to **give** meaning to these people," Truong said. / RENEE HANNANS / Staff Photo:

Sister Christine Truong Photo:

Sister Christine Truong, in her Chamblee office with client Nghe Bao and caseworker Hoa Trung (on phone), says she's "reaching out to people who nobody pays attention to." Good Shepherd has offices in DeKalb and Gwinnett counties. A Clayton County office is scheduled to open this month. / RENEE HANNANS / Staff

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (90%); IMMIGRATION (89%); GANGS (89%); CHILDREN (89%); PREGNANCY & CHILDBIRTH (79%); YOUTH CLUBS & ACTIVITIES (78%); MIGRATION ISSUES (78%); POOR POPULATION (78%); FAMILY (78%); CHRISTIANS & CHRISTIANITY (78%); PARENTING (77%); PARENTS (76%); NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS (76%); ABORTION (74%); MEDICAID (74%); SENIOR CITIZENS (72%); CLERGY & RELIGIOUS VOCATIONS (72%); EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES (71%); AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS (68%); GRANTS & GIFTS (66%); LAWYERS (65%); SCHOOL GRADE REPORTS (64%); JUDGES (64%); FULL TIME EMPLOYMENT (64%); SCHOOL DISTRICTS (63%); CATHOLICS & CATHOLICISM (57%)

Company: MEDICAID (58%)

Organization: MEDICAID (58%)

Industry: MEDICAID (74%); BUDGETS (73%); LAWYERS (65%); GROCERY STORES & SUPERMARKETS (53%)

Geographic: **ATLANTA**, GA, USA (90%); GEORGIA, USA (90%)

Load-Date: July 23, 2001