

**Battered immigrant women need shelter to call their own;**  
**Cultural barriers can prevent their seeking help, with tragic results.:**

**DeKalb groups aim to change that.**

The Atlanta Journal and Constitution

December 8, 1996, Sunday,, ALL EDITIONS

Copyright 1996 The Atlanta Constitution

**Section:** LOCAL NEWS; Pg. 01D

**Length:** 770 words

**Byline:** Elizabeth Kurylo; STAFF WRITER

## **Body**

---

Six years ago, My Thi Huynh fled Vietnam for a better life in the United States.

In many ways she succeeded. She had a good job at a hotel near Hartsfield International Airport. She, her parents and her three daughters, aged 4, 2 and 11 months, shared a house in Riverdale. She could speak a little English and drive a car. The American dream was becoming a reality.

It all came to a halt in August, when Riverdale police found the 24- year-old woman in the kitchen of her home with a fillet knife in her chest. They issued a murder warrant for her ex-husband, Cuong Thang Chau, 27. His car was found in Houston in September, but police are still looking for Chau.

Huynh's friends say she was a battered wife. But she refused to go to a battered women's shelter.

Social worker Thi Duong, who had helped Huynh for six months, said Huynh didn't want to go to a shelter because she would "feel like a foreigner" there. "I offered to take her, but she didn't want to go," Duong said.

Had there been a shelter for immigrants, staffed with people who speak many languages, understand other cultures and serve ethnic food, Huynh might still be alive, Duong said.

Now, two groups in DeKalb County are trying to help women like Huynh. The DeKalb Junior League and Save the Children's Refugee Family Violence Prevention Project are trying to raise \$ 100,000 by January to open a shelter for immigrants and refugee women who are victims of domestic violence. The International Women's House would open in DeKalb next year.

"The shelter would be full if it was open now," said Julia Perilla, a psychologist who counsels Hispanics on domestic violence.

The International Women's House would be the first immigrant battered women's shelter in the Southeast.

Plans for the DeKalb County shelter call for a four-bedroom, three- bath house that could hold 12 residents, including children.

As metro Atlanta's foreign-born population grows, so does the need for special services that cater to them. There are more than 266,000 immigrants in metro Atlanta, representing at least 70 countries.

Battered immigrant women need shelter to call their own; Cultural barriers can prevent their seeking help, with tragic results.; DeKalb groups aim to change that.

From July to September this year, 29 immigrant women with 40 children asked for help and temporary housing because of domestic violence, according to Lydia Jankovic Gottlieb, who was named executive director of the International Women's House two months ago.

Officials say Huynh's case was typical of domestic violence cases and of the special problems of battered immigrant women. Friends say Huynh's ex-husband, Chau, abused her.

"She was afraid," Duong said. "He threatened to kill her and the family. They were all afraid of him."

In May, Riverdale police charged Chau with rape and aggravated assault, but the charges were dropped when Huynh refused to testify against him. She was afraid of what he would do when he got out, friends say.

Huynh divorced Chau two months before she was killed, and she had a court order to keep him away. But he wouldn't leave her alone.

"He stalked her," Duong said. "He came to her work. He came to her house."

Friends believe Huynh would have gone to a special shelter for immigrant women. "It's difficult for mainstream shelters to serve refugees," Gottlieb said.

The language barrier is the biggest obstacle, but cultural differences are important, too. In some countries, for example, beating your wife is not a crime, making immigrant women perhaps even more reluctant than other battered women to report the abuse.

And if an immigrant woman leaves her husband, she's often leaving the only community she knows in this country.

"American shelters are for Americans . . . for people who can function independently," said Nelli Vergilis, a case worker at Save the Children. "Our clients are newcomers . . . new in society. They cannot understand how it works."

Vergilis said she has many clients who left mainstream battered women's shelters after a few days because of language and cultural barriers.

One woman, a 22-year-old Iraqi who was pregnant with her second child, went to a shelter after her husband cut her twice with a knife. But she returned to her husband after three days because "there were so many problems," Vergilis said.

"She didn't speak any English; it was very hard to communicate," Vergilis said. "She started to feel very lonely."

Vergilis said she has at least three other immigrant clients who need the safety of a shelter.

"To rescue them is not possible," she said, "but to make them feel comfortable is possible."

For information on the International Women's House, contact Lydia Jankovic Gottlieb at 404-299-8670.

## Graphic

---

Color Photo: Cuong Thang Chau, shown in his wedding photo, has been charged with murdering My Thi Huynh (right). / Special

## Classification

---

Battered immigrant women need shelter to call their own; Cultural barriers can prevent their seeking help, with tragic results.; DeKalb groups aim to change that.

**Language:** ENGLISH

**Subject:** IMMIGRATION (89%); DOMESTIC VIOLENCE (89%); **WOMEN'S SHELTERS** (89%); TEMPORARY **SHELTERS** (89%); **WOMEN** (89%); DOMESTIC OFFENSES (89%); DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROGRAMS (89%); FAMILY (78%); REFUGEES (78%); FAMILY LAW (77%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (76%); MURDER (75%); CRIMINAL ASSAULT & BATTERY (73%); ARREST WARRANTS (71%); MIGRATION ISSUES (66%); APPOINTMENTS (50%)

**Company:** POLICE FOUNDATION (57%); SAVE THE CHILDREN (54%); POLICE FOUNDATION (57%); SAVE THE CHILDREN (54%)

**Organization:** POLICE FOUNDATION (57%); POLICE FOUNDATION (57%); SAVE THE CHILDREN (54%); SAVE THE CHILDREN (54%)

**Industry:** HOTELS & MOTELS (57%); AIRPORTS (57%)

**Geographic:** ATLANTA, GA, USA (92%); GEORGIA, USA (91%); UNITED STATES (92%)

**Load-Date:** December 9, 1996

---

End of Document