

A TOUCH OF VIETNAM: THE MAKING OF A VIBRANT COMMUNITY Grant Park Apartments are gateway to new world Community center started by a refugee eases immigrants into the mainstream

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Body

With a few belongings and a dream of becoming a doctor, Linsh Bui left her native **Vietnam** and moved to **Park Avenue**.

Atlanta's **Park Avenue** winds through a stark, sprawling complex of low-income **apartments** near the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. Inside **Grant Park Apartments**, a **vibrant community** is thriving. It's home to some 1,100 Vietnamese **immigrants** and many Hispanics.

Since a **community center** opened there last spring, **Grant Park Apartments** has become a central place for Vietnamese families to begin **new** lives. They learn about the complex by word of mouth and arrive in droves.

That's the case for Bui, who moved there last summer with nine family members. Bui, 21, graduated from high school in **Vietnam** and is eager to continue her education here. But first she must improve her English, save money and learn to live in Atlanta.

Catholic Social Services is helping Bui and other Vietnamese **immigrants** through the Southside **Community Center**, a one-stop shopping **center** of social services in the heart of **Grant Park Apartments**. The **center** is a focal point in the Vietnamese **community** that binds its people together.

At the **community center**, **immigrants** learn where to go for a driver's license and how to use MARTA. They train for assembly-line work and receive medical care. They enroll their kids in Scout troops and find legal help. They learn about child-care options and gather for Catholic worship services.

During an orientation at the **center**, which opened last spring, Bui confidently voiced her biggest concern: "How can I go to college or vocational school?" she asked in her native language.

Everett Gill, state **refugee** coordinator for the Georgia Department of Human Resources, smiled when an interpreter explained Bui's question.

"There are programs to help you do that," Gill told the eager Bui. "I'm glad you want to go to college. You can do that."

But it's hard for **immigrants** to know what resources are available and how to tap into them, Gill said.

That's why the Southside **Community Center** is so important.

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"Tenants here can learn to speak English faster, understand the system better and solve problems on their own," said Gill, who regularly visits orientation sessions.

Experience and a sense of humor

The first stop for newly arrived Vietnamese tenants is the Southside Community Center. The first person they meet is Mr. Tam.

Tam Van Bui is coordinator for Vietnamese resettlement at Catholic Social Services. He's also a refugee himself. He and his family fled to Atlanta from Vietnam in 1975.

Drawing on his own experiences, he uses his sense of humor and persuasive sales tactics to makes life easier for Grant Park Apartments tenants.

"He's the big shot," said Bui Nsau, assistant director at the Southside Community Center.

Mr. Tam encourages tenants to become independent. He tells them they can retain their culture, yet they must resist the urge to live as if they're still in Vietnam.

"If they live here, they need to assimilate," he said. "Education, employment, all these things are important."

Assimilating into American life is easier now that more services are available. Refugees don't stay in Grant Park Apartments forever. Most learn English, find jobs, save money and move away. Some buy their own homes, Mr. Tam said.

But Grant Park Apartments is a vital step in the process. A two- bedroom apartment costs a little more than \$ 300 a month, said community center director Bob Swanda.

Besides Vietnam, Mexico, Haiti and other countries are represented among apartment tenants. Englewood Manor, a crowded public housing complex, is next door.

One of Mr. Tam's greatest challenges is finding activities for teenagers, he said. Fights sometimes break out among young people.

"When kids get bored, they get into trouble," he said.

The Southside Community Center is open to everyone in the neighborhood - not just Vietnamese people. It's a hub for activities sponsored by outside agencies. For example, a camp based at the community center last summer attracted kids of all races and backgrounds.

"For these Vietnamese people, this is their first time to come to America," Mr. Tam said. "I want to expose them to all kinds of positive things."

A place to socialize and learn

About 40 families lived at Grant Park Apartments in 1993 when Mr. Tam approached the landlord about Catholic Social Services opening a community center. He said he wanted to bring services to the Vietnamese people.

"And I don't have a penny for this project," he told the landlord.

The landlord offered a basement apartment, but Mr. Tam asked for something better.

"They need a place to learn, to sit and to socialize," he said.

Today, the community center is in two adjoining townhomes, with a large yard used for volleyball matches, children's activities, even a Buddhist wedding ceremony.

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Mr. Tam solicited donations from local businesses, always including in his sales pitch a reminder that contributions are tax-deductible.

He enlisted the city's police department, the Department of Family and Children Services and other agencies to send speakers to the community center.

"New arrivals are afraid of the police," Mr. Tam said. "But when the police talk to residents, they can show their friendly faces."

One of Mr. Tam's biggest accomplishments was bringing a language school to Grant Park Apartments. Interactive Learning Systems, a for-profit business based on Roswell Road, gives residents access to language training. School staff members and Mr. Tam help students get federal financial aid.

Mr. Tam said his strategy for persuading people to invest in residents of Grant Park Apartments is simple: "I twist their arms," he said.

When Mr. Tam, 48, arrived in Atlanta with his wife and two young children, he spoke little English. He had been a military officer in Vietnam, but worked as a custodian in Atlanta. Social services were not accessible, he said. He charted his own course, eventually attending college and becoming a citizen.

Today, he's happy working with people from his native country, he said. He helps immigrants reunite with family members in Vietnam. He finds nursing homes for elderly immigrants with no income. He reserves burial plots. He researches day-care options for working parents. He seeks out after-school programs and encourages parents to get involved with the PTA.

"I don't do a lot," he said. "But at least I participate in their progress. It's rewarding for me."

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