



No longer safe in their own country ravaged by war, they fled, only to experience unspeakable horrors at sea when they were intercepted by pirates.

THOSE who made it to land spent long periods in refugee camps where they were again exposed to abuse and exploitation. Vulnerable, frightened, desperate people are easy targets.

A flimsy 17-metre fishing vessel carried the first Vietnamese refugees into Darwin Harbour on April 26 1976. This marked the beginning of a wave of refugees fleeing from post war Vietnam.

Nam and his parents arrived in Melbourne in those early years. The adjustment was hard. Nam's father had been an engineer in Vietnam but with no recognition of his qualifications, he could only find work as a cleaner. Nam's mother was lonely and she grieved for the way they lived with extended family back in Vietnam. Tensions rose and before long, Nam's father left. His mother's loneliness increased and she slid into depression and anxiety. Every time Nam went out, she fretted. When would he be back? Where was he going? How long would he be away?

Nam found his mother's anxiety suffocating and he was angry that his father had left them. He found relief in drugs. He slid into heavy use and began offending to support his habit. Nam's mother now lived in fear. He became violent and began selling their household possessions. His life was out of control and finally a prison sentence, although deeply shameful for her, gave Nam's mother some respite.

Brosnan Centre staff visiting the prisons saw many young people like Nam and recognised a new approach was needed. They did not have the language or the cultural understanding. And so Hieu Nguyen came to work at the Brosnan Centre in 1992. Like many he visited in the prisons, he too had escaped Vietnam in a leaky boat. His memories still haunt him.

Nam's mother did not visit him in prison and, still fearful he would return to his old ways, she did not want him

back home when he was released. So he went to live in a house which Hieu shared with recently released young Vietnamese men, just around the corner from the Brosnan Centre. Hieu visited Nam's mother and listened to her fears. He showed her that Nam needed her support if he was to make a new start in life. They would never be able to live together again, but they could still be connected.

Those who went to prison were not the only ones in the Vietnamese community who needed help and support. Families caught between two cultures were struggling. Parents yearned for the way of life they knew in Vietnam. Children growing up in the Australian way felt lost between two cultures.

At the Vietnamese Welfare Resource Centre, Son Nguyen and Kim Nguyen have worked with families on the Flemington housing estate for many years as they have faced the grief and pain of the past and made new lives

in a strange and different country. The trauma of escaping from a brutal war, the loss of professional and social standing and the dislocation from the familiar have left many families vulnerable and fragile. In 1996 this work became part of the newly formed Jesuit Social Services.

As the early challenges of new settlement are gradually overcome, as new cultural ways are negotiated, Son and Kim have brought people from the community together to share their stories. Talking openly about difficulties has not been part of the Vietnamese way of coping, but talking has brought the possibility of finding new ways of strengthening family relationships.

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