Western Kentucky University
TopSCHOLAR®

Honors College Capstone Experience/Thesis Projects

Honors College at WKU

2003

Vietnamese in Bowling Green: An American Story

Nathaniel Walker
Western Kentucky University

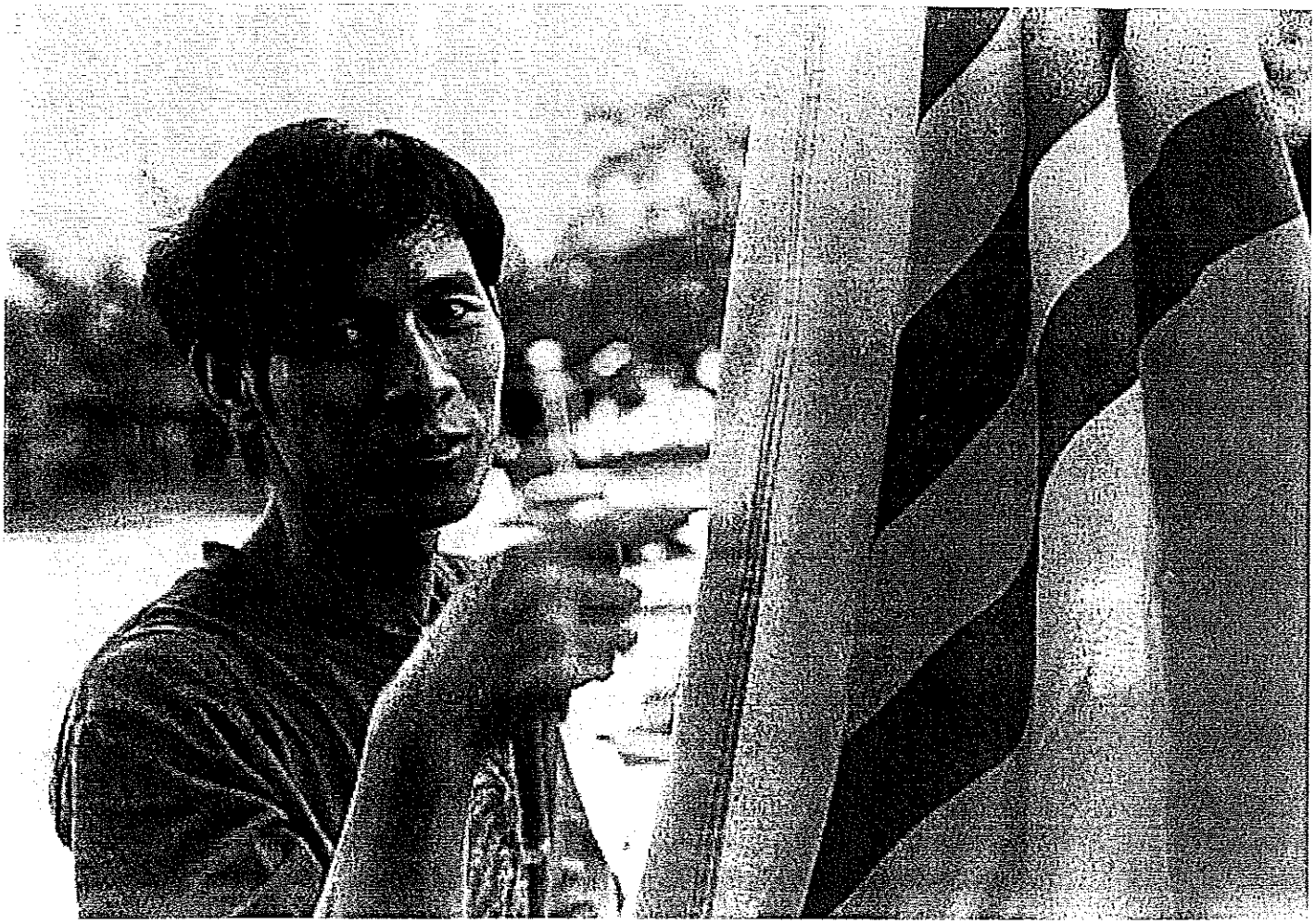
Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/stu_hon_theses

 Part of the Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons, and the Sociology of Culture Commons

Recommended Citation
Walker, Nathaniel, "Vietnamese in Bowling Green: An American Story" (2003). *Honors College Capstone Experience/Thesis Projects.* Paper 164.
http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/stu_hon_theses/164

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College Capstone Experience/ Thesis Projects by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

Vietnamese in Bowling Green: An American Story



Trong Vo, outside the Adult Learning Center.

Senior Honors Thesis

Nathaniel Walker
Spring 2003

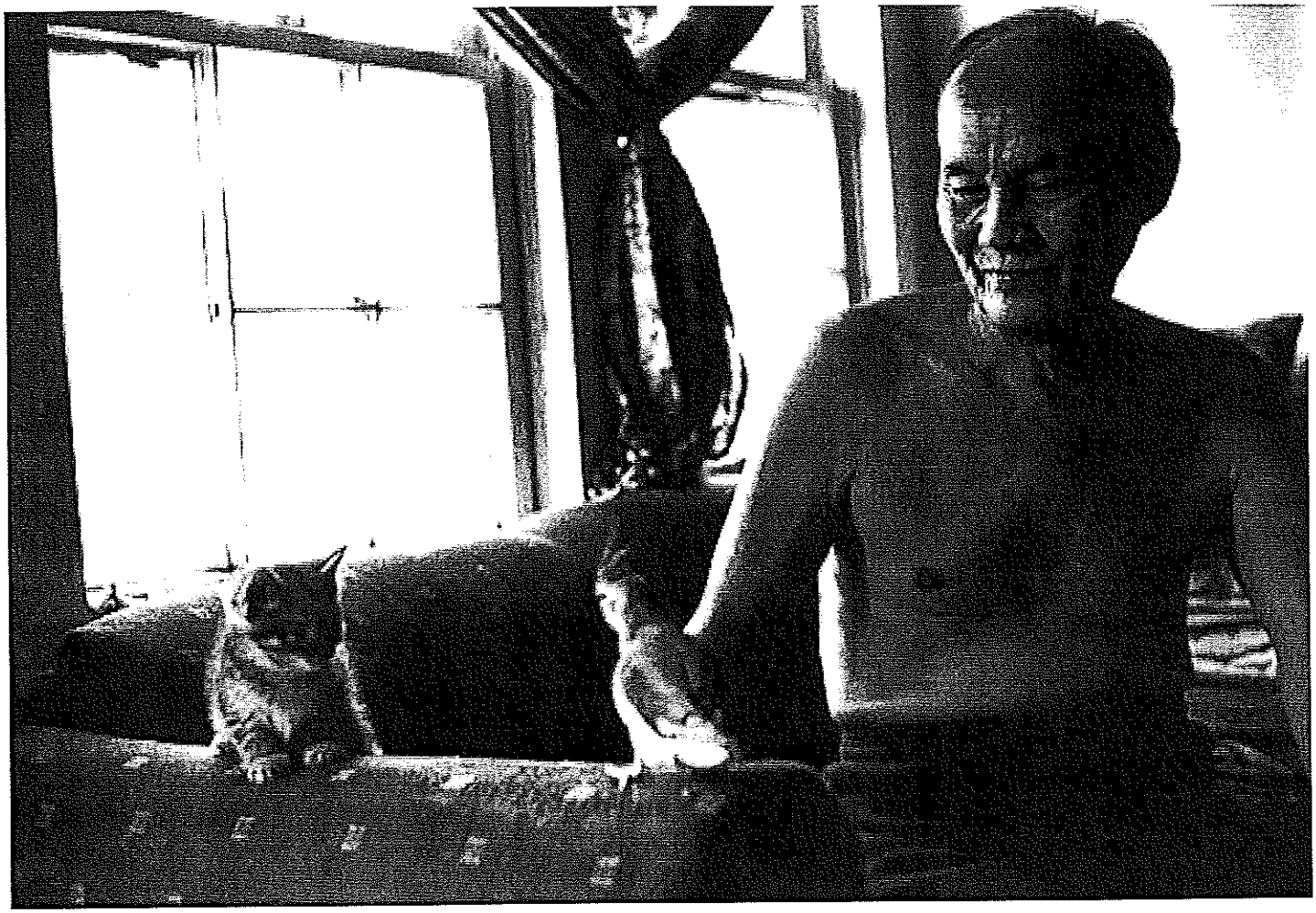
Approved by

Contents

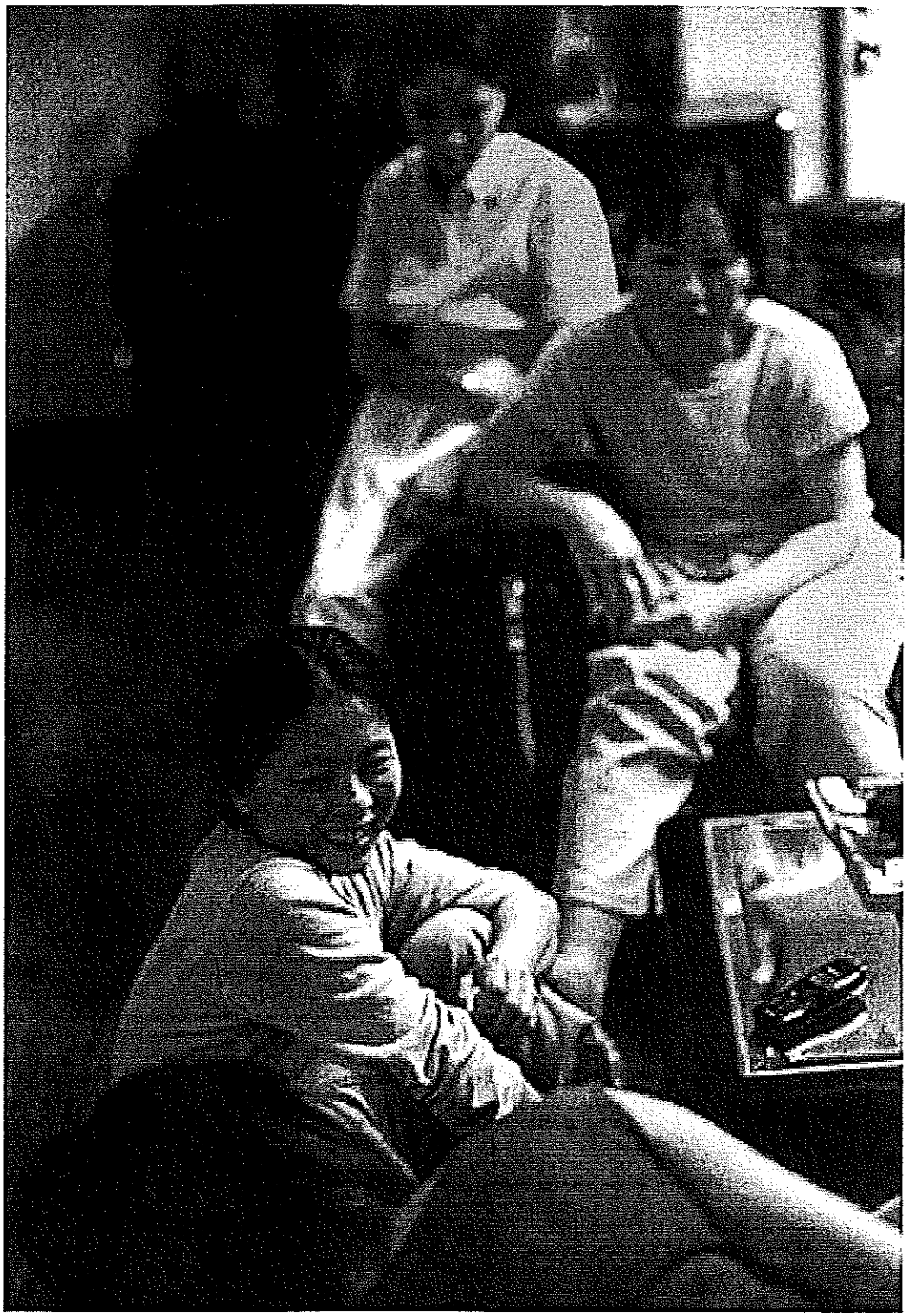
Abstract

Three years in the making, this project delves into the world of the Vietnamese in Bowling Green, Kentucky. It attempts to understand and interpret their complex society by using a combination of photography and writing. Mostly refugees, the three hundred or so Vietnamese share the burden of migrating to a new country with one another. They rely on each other. The community is what inspires them to succeed.

"A Quiet Meeting"



With pride, Thoai shows off his little family. He has lived in America alone for nearly twenty years depending on the Vietnamese community to help him out. Much of his family, including his wife, still live in Vietnam. This photo was accepted into the Capitol Arts annual show in 2000.



The Vietnamese enjoy talking with each other. When they are together, there is always a conversation playing out. Looking back, my project was a conversation between them and me. They enjoyed seeing the photos, but they cared more about me than the project. They let me in because I asked. They let me photograph because I was a friend.

Preface

Why photography? The night of my first class in photojournalism, I knew that photography would play a large role in the rest of my life. It has become a medium for communication. Just like writing, photography can interpret events and tell a story. In this project, I wish to tell the story of the Vietnamese in Bowling Green. I want to show what it is like being Vietnamese in this small Kentucky town, how it feels.

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines the photographic essay as "a series of photographs that conveys a story, usually accompanied by a written text and published as a book or special feature in a periodical" (2000). In practice, most photo-essays concentrate on a particular idea rather than a person or a group of people. They delve into controversial issues such as "racial lines in America," or work done on poverty during the Great Depression by Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Ben Shahn. The images concentrate more on the circumstances and the events rather than on the people. The photo-story, as opposed to the photographic essay, would more closely resemble my work. Perfected by W. Eugene Smith, the photo-

story follows closely a single individual. The images tell a great deal about this person and how he or she affects the community.

My project does not necessarily fit into either of these schools. I feel that the photo-essay is too impersonal, and the photo-story too individualistic to accurately depict the Vietnamese community. Instead, I refer to my work as a photo-ethnography. This idea is not new. The field of visual anthropology has used photography for some time to enhance our understandings of various human societies. The term "ethnography" refers to "the branch of anthropology that deals with the scientific description of specific human cultures" (The American Heritage Dictionary, 2000).

Some people see photography as a way to record their lives, others as "pretty" pictures of sunsets and interesting landscapes. For me, photography is a personal search into different worlds. Diversity fascinates me; it adds immense color to life. Through this exploration, I also hope to relate my new understandings to people unfamiliar with the subjects in my study. This sharing of cultures, I believe, will better help people understand one another.

Through my cross-departmental degree, I have interacted with many different student bodies. The members of the photojournalism program have impressed me as some of the most eclectic and open-minded students of these diverse groups. The entire nature of the class assignments, from a

single portrait to an entire photo-story, hinges on making a connection with the subject and understanding that individual's background. One needs to have a great amount of empathy in order to produce an accurate portrayal. The faculty also plays a large role in tempering the PJ students' worldview. Photojournalism's syllabus requires students to do photo stories on a diverse group of people including a religious leader, a child at risk, an international or non-traditional student, as well as a community leader.

Photography is a powerful tool. We can all remember an image from our past whether it be Steve McCurray's photograph of the green-eyed girl in Afghanistan, her face showing the traumatic effects of war on the innocent, or something else that we can recall in full graphic detail. Unlike motion photography that keeps one's attention by always changing, a photograph allows the viewer to digest and reflect on the image.

Most people are prolific collectors of family photos or pictures of themselves. We keep hundreds of them in large albums and bring them out on unusual occasions, as when a son brings home a new romantic interest and his parents insist on showing off his most embarrassing moments. These windows to the past get placed in lockets so that the wearer can remember someone, perhaps an individual who is no longer living. We treasure these images. They are sacred.

In a point of self-criticism, my photography tends to be in close proximity to the subject. My photos often lack a wider view and tend to concentrate on only a couple of people. Perhaps I shoot tightly because I want to bring the audience within touching distance, to feel as though they are in the middle of the action. Or, maybe, it's more personal, and I just can't stand to be outside; I have to be in the midst of the event.

To shoot so closely, I generally use a combination of two lenses. My personal favorite is a Nikkor 50mm, with a 1.4 f-stop. This lens is very clear and can allow higher shutter speeds in lower light. In other words, I can shoot in low-light situations without having to worry about motion blur affecting the image. To give some reference, a 50mm lens has about the same telescopic ratio as the human eye. The second lens is a Nikkor 24mm, 2.8 f-stop. Although this lens doesn't have quite the same capacity in darker areas as the 50mm, it has a wider area of view and a larger range of focus. The large focal range of this lens comes in handy in unexpected circumstances such as when I use a flash on moving subjects. I prefer to hold the flash away from the camera, either far to the left or to the right with one of my hands. Most students have auto-focus that makes this feat effortless, but my thirty-year-old relic lacks such amenities. When using flash, it requires me to hold it, focus, and release the shutter all with one hand. Using the 24mm lens, the area in-focus is much greater, allowing me to concentrate more on composing

and framing the image instead of constantly jostling the camera around trying to keep the dancers in focus.

Why the Vietnamese? It's hard to grasp exactly why I chose the Vietnamese for my project. Western doesn't offer Vietnamese language classes, or any reliable history components to inspire my choice. The "History of Communism" honors class would have discussed it, but the majority of the class elected to talk about the Communist movement in Cuba instead (I was part of the minority). "Buddhism" and "Religions of Asian" both brushed on Vietnam but only briefly. To summarize the decision, they chose me.

Approximately three hundred Vietnamese now live in Bowling Green, Kentucky. They are by far the largest Asian community in this part of the state. I have photographed and studied their society for the past three years. They have given me their time, love, patience, and acceptance.

I first encountered the Vietnamese community in the fall of 2000. At that time, I was working on the Pluralism Project with the religion department. The task at hand was to locate and catalogue the different immigrant religions existing in Bowling Green. Through various contacts, I learned about the Vietnamese congregation that worshiped at First Baptist Church Bowling Green. "What an opportunity," I thought to myself. In the past, I had interacted with many different groups from Southeast Asia: Burmese,

Laotians, Cambodians, some Thai, and Chinese from Southwestern provinces. But from what I understood, the Vietnamese were a different breed of people.

Vietnam was unique. A history of conflict, invasions, occupations, and catastrophic wars had wracked its landscape and shaped its society. The Chinese, the Mongols, the French, and, more recently, the Americans all contributed to the tragedy many refer to as Vietnam. All who came were eventually defeated, but before leaving they endowed this mass of battle-hardened people with a unique understanding of the world.

Much of their culture had become a distinctive brew of widely varying customs. Although Vietnam shared the vast majority of its border with Laos and Cambodia, it acquired its own style of Buddhism, Mahayana, from China (Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand all adhere to Theravadan Buddhism, the more orthodox branch). China controlled Vietnam for over one thousand years, leaving not only religious markings but a Confucian code of laws and educational system, a number of technological, agricultural, and economic advancements, and a pictographic writing system, "*nom*" (today, only about thirty scholars can read *nom*. The Vietnamese Nom Preservation Foundation hopes to preserve and unlock the immense number of documents recording one thousand years of Vietnamese cultural history for native speakers unable to read this ancient text). When the Vietnamese finally broke free of the

Chinese control, they had also developed a tenacious resistance against forced assimilation; this attribute would become invaluable in the trials to come.

The French also left a permanent mark on the Vietnamese society. Even though French control brought much technological advancement, the goal was merely the exploitation of natural resources with little reinvestment into the Vietnamese economy. This lack of contribution left Vietnam dependant on the more powerful exploiter. It was during this time that Ho Chi Minh emerged and established the Vietnamese Communist Party.

In the Sunday service, I recognized one individual, Ta Van Vo, a non-traditional student whom I had shared an English class with at Western. Approximately sixty-five years old, he cared a great deal about education and its benefits for the community. Under the Kentucky educational system, anyone over sixty can have his or her tuition waived at state universities. He described his motivation for taking classes: "I want the young [Vietnamese] people to see me, an old man, going to school, so that maybe they will say 'I can do that.'" In my first photojournalism class, a semester after the Pluralism Project, I used Ta as my subject in the final photo-story.

Fighting for the South, during the Vietnam War, Ta was taken prisoner by the North Vietnamese. After staying in different re-education camps and breaking his leg in a construction accident, he was placed under house arrest.

When the chance came for him to flee to America, he took it, leaving behind his children, then over eighteen, too old to qualify for evacuation themselves.

Fortunate to have an apartment so close to campus, Ta scaled the hill every morning to make the eight o'clock religious studies class with Dr. Trafton. He then spent the rest of the day on-campus meeting with tutors, talking to professors, and visiting the library. In the periods when he didn't have a class scheduled, he sat by himself in a hall and waited for the next one to start.

Because of their age, he and his wife lived on the small amount of money that Social Security supplied, approximately three hundred dollars. For another source of income, they also collected and recycled aluminum cans. The refugee center helped them locate an apartment and a car, although Ta has yet to drive it. When he underwent cataract surgery, the community pulled together in order for him to pay the bills and provided transportation around Bowling Green.

The Vietnamese community instinctively takes care of its own. This communal responsibility is what impresses me most about the Vietnamese community. They cling together, defying daunting hardships with their unique sense of humor and communal orientation. School, work, and money all take a back seat to the importance of the family. In a sense, the entire community functions as a tightly knit family. Most youth even refer to an elderly man as their "uncle" despite having no blood connection.

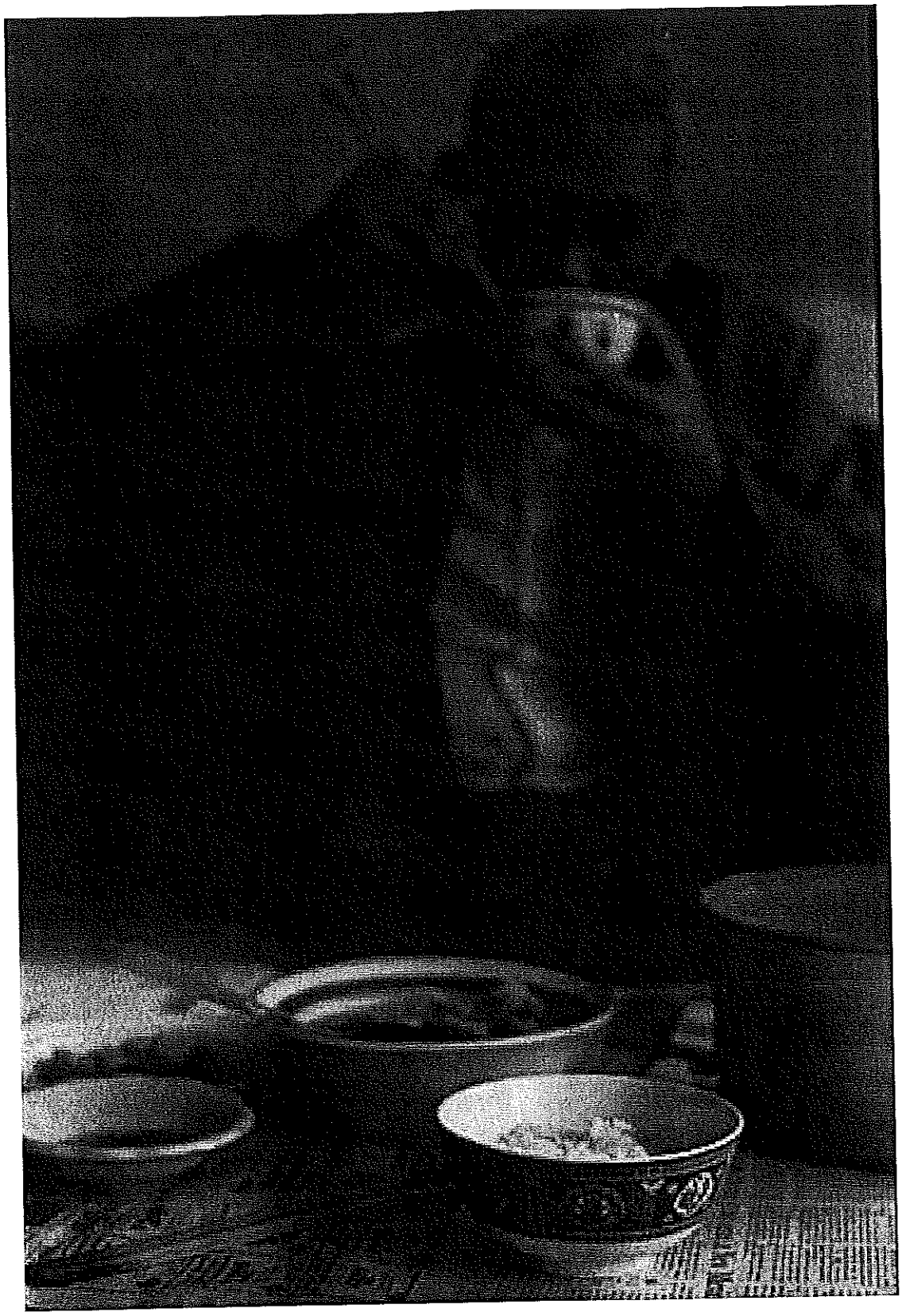
When members of the older generation need transportation or assistance, the younger ones chip in and provide as much as they can. One time, in particular, while I was sitting in Ta Van Vo's house, another man came over and began exchanging money with Ta. After the man had left, Ta told me that there was a woman in the hospital and they were all pooling their money to help her out.

In the early days of the refugee resettlement program, the United States learned that the Vietnamese function better in a community nearer to other Vietnamese. Living in close proximity to members of their culture relieves the stress of resettlement and decreases the intense depression that can accompany the post-war trauma that many of them have experienced.

On one occasion, while I was walking down Center Street between Junior Foods and campus, Trong, who happened to be driving by, stopped and told me that there were a few friends meeting over at Ta's house, just around the corner on 14th St. When I walked over there, Ta, his wife, Linh Phung, another Vietnamese Western student, and several other Vietnamese populated the house. Linh, Ms. Vo, and a couple of girls were in the kitchen fixing *ban ceo*, a pancake filled with an assortment of vegetables and shrimp. They had all gotten together just for a social gathering celebrating nothing in particular, maybe just because it was fall.

After filling up on *ban ceo*, we drove up to Jackson's Orchard near Bowling Green to pick apples. When we got there, we ran into another Vietnamese couple, a husband and wife, who had been soaking up the sun and helping themselves to fresh green apples hanging everywhere. The next couple of hours, we spent laughing and slowly filling up the two baskets the orchard's owners had provided us with. The sun provided a perfect amount of warmth, with the girls climbing higher into the trees to reach the select apples, the ones that are always a little farther up. Triumphantly, we returned to Ta's house with our spoils. There, we rested through the dwindling light on his front porch laughing and speculating on whether some new tenants across the street were from Mexico or some other Central American country.

Back from Jackson's Orchard, eating apples.



A basic Vietnamese meal: a bowl of rice, saucer of fish sauce mixed with peppers, and a broth with vegetables and a few pieces of pork.

Coming to America

On April 29, 1975, hundreds of Vietnamese crowded into the American Embassy in Saigon. A shared fear surged through the crowd: would they be able to escape or would they be left behind to face persecution and possible death? The North Vietnamese had taken Saigon, the final victory in a long, drawn-out war to reunite the country. The Vietnamese on the airstrip, however, had dreaded this reunification. They had fought alongside the Americans to avoid it. Having lost, they and their families would endure severe economic and emotional hardships.

Six different waves comprised the Vietnamese movement to America. The first came with the collapse of Saigon. This group included personnel from the South Vietnamese army and members of its government, as well as many individuals who had worked in some capacity in the war effort. There was no guarantee of safety for anyone who had opposed the Communists. Many also feared that the new government would kill its former enemies.

The second wave, mostly ethnic Chinese who arrived between 1978-1979, was virtually forced out of the country by the new communist

government. Many Vietnamese hated the Chinese, perhaps because of resentment from previous occupations and also because of perceived disrespect China showed towards North Vietnam's budding Communist Party.

People escaping by boat or overland into neighboring countries from 1978 to 1982 made up the third wave. The fourth and fifth waves combined many of the refugees that sought relocation from refugee camps in countries such as Thailand and the Philippines. The sixth wave – consisting of relatives working through family reunification programs – still continues today.

It was during this last wave that two of Trong's brothers, Tan and Thai, along with their families, came to Bowling Green in 2002. They now look forward to the possibility that the remaining sister in Vietnam may join them here in the United States.

The majority of the first-wave refugees had to pass through reception centers on their way to resettlement in the United States. Many were taken first to U.S. military bases in Thailand or the Philippines, then on to Wake Island or Guam in the Pacific, and finally to the United States mainland.

In the camps, the Vietnamese were interviewed and given medical examinations. Camp officials started classes to teach English, provided lectures on American culture, and tried to offer practical instruction, such as how to find a job in the United States. In order to leave the camps, a

Vietnamese individual or family either had to have a sponsor or be able to verify that they had enough money to support themselves. Many families already in the United States, who had relatives in the camps, acted as sponsors – providing their kin with housing and necessities.

In Bowling Green, Western Kentucky Refugee Assistance, Inc., has sponsored many refugees from all over the world. The center helps with food and other basic items. It offers programs that teach English, provide translation assistance, and help individuals find jobs. Marty Deputy founded and continues to direct the refugee center today.

Ms. Deputy wants much more for these individuals than to see them merely survive; she wants them to thrive. In a 1999 interview, Ms Deputy reports, "My husband and I wanted to do something after the Vietnam War. I kept putting myself in the place of those people who lost everything they had – those who were uprooted from their homes and lost their land, I had to do something" (Riley, 1999).

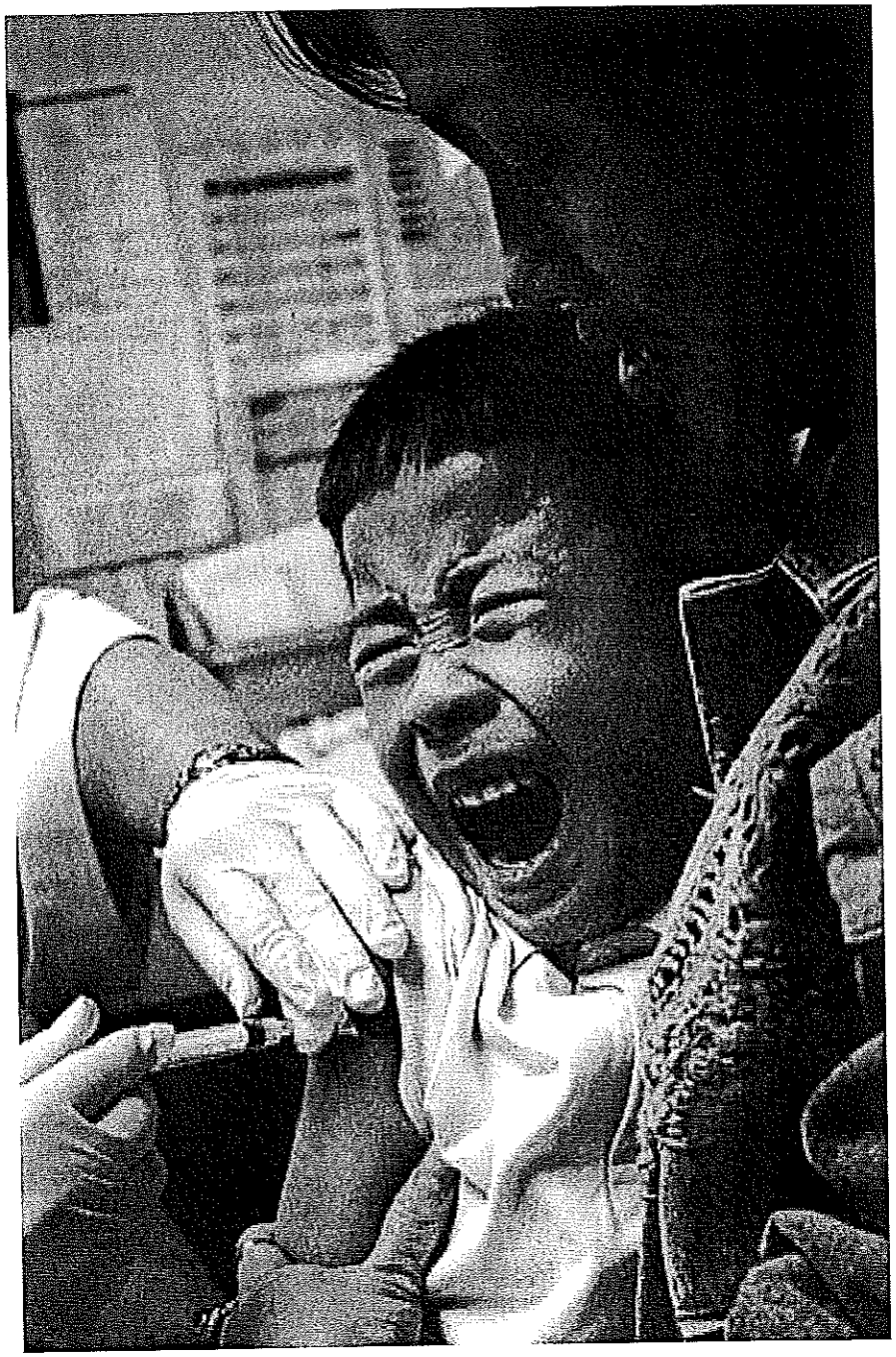
In 1979, she called an agency in New York to see how she could help. With little notice or time to prepare, she was sent two refugee families from Southeast Asia. Since then, her dream has touched over ten thousand

refugees, "people who never thought they would laugh again" (Riley, 1999).

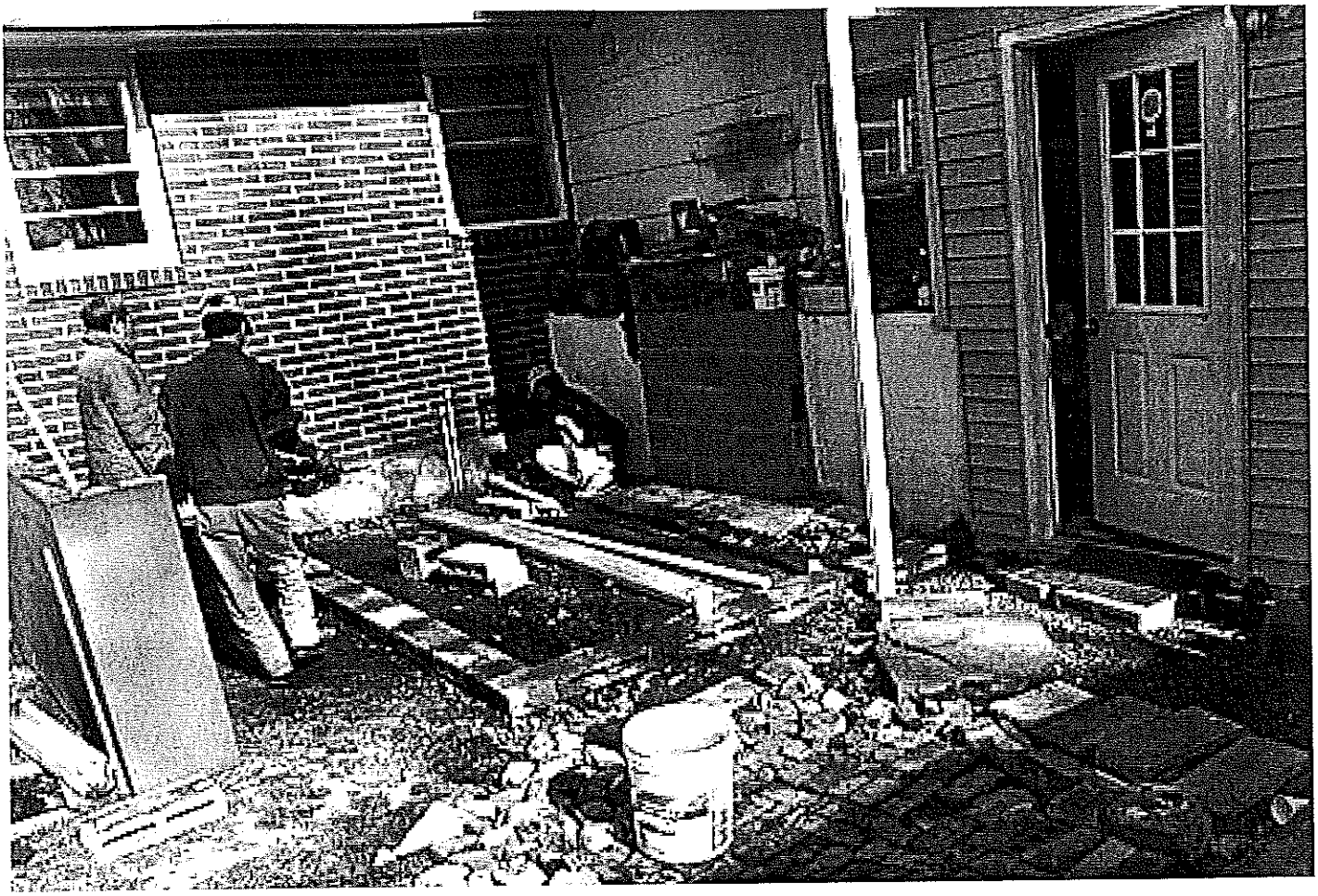
This move would affect nearly every aspect of daily life for Vietnamese refugees who settled in the United States: attitudes toward the family, methods of education, language, even common matters such as the way they shopped for food. They had entered a culture that vastly differed from their own.

At the Refugee center, Linda gives Thai's family some extra food for the holiday, Easter (hence, the bunny ears).

Although never enjoyed, preparing for school in America includes immunization shots. I had just met Thai's family at this point. Witnessing Thoung's dramatic reactions to getting these injections made me feel very conscientious about photographing any further. After every injection, he would glare at me as if asking, "Why are you doing this?" A thought flashed through my mind: "Gee, this kid is never going to speak to me again." Of course, my photojournalist training immediately kicked in: "well, at least I'm getting some good shots, and besides, he doesn't speak English."

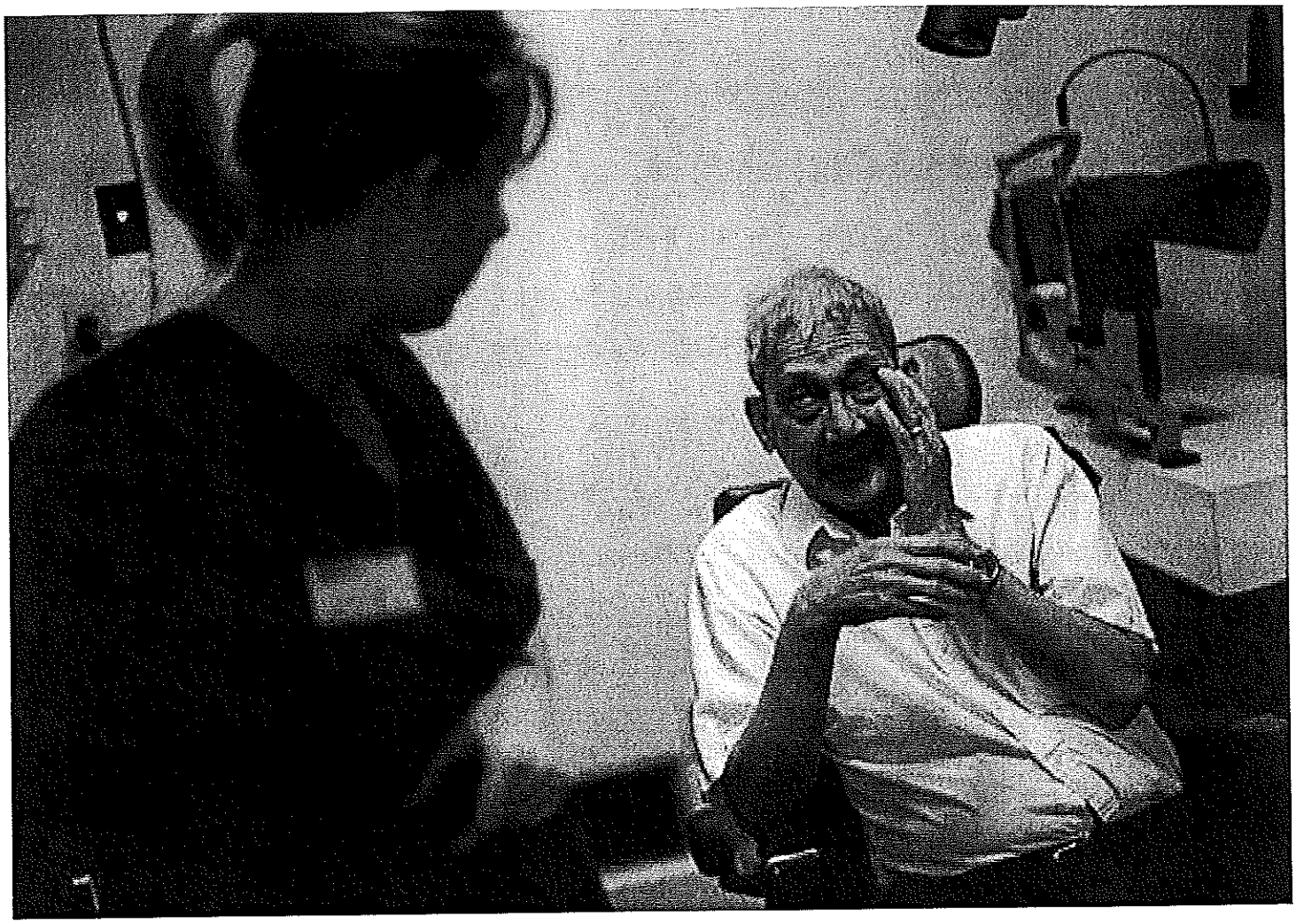


Many Vietnamese were farmers in their country. Continuing this tradition, several have gardens in their homes. They love fresh vegetables. In Vietnamese cuisine, meat takes a back seat to vegetables and rice; it's more like a garnish.

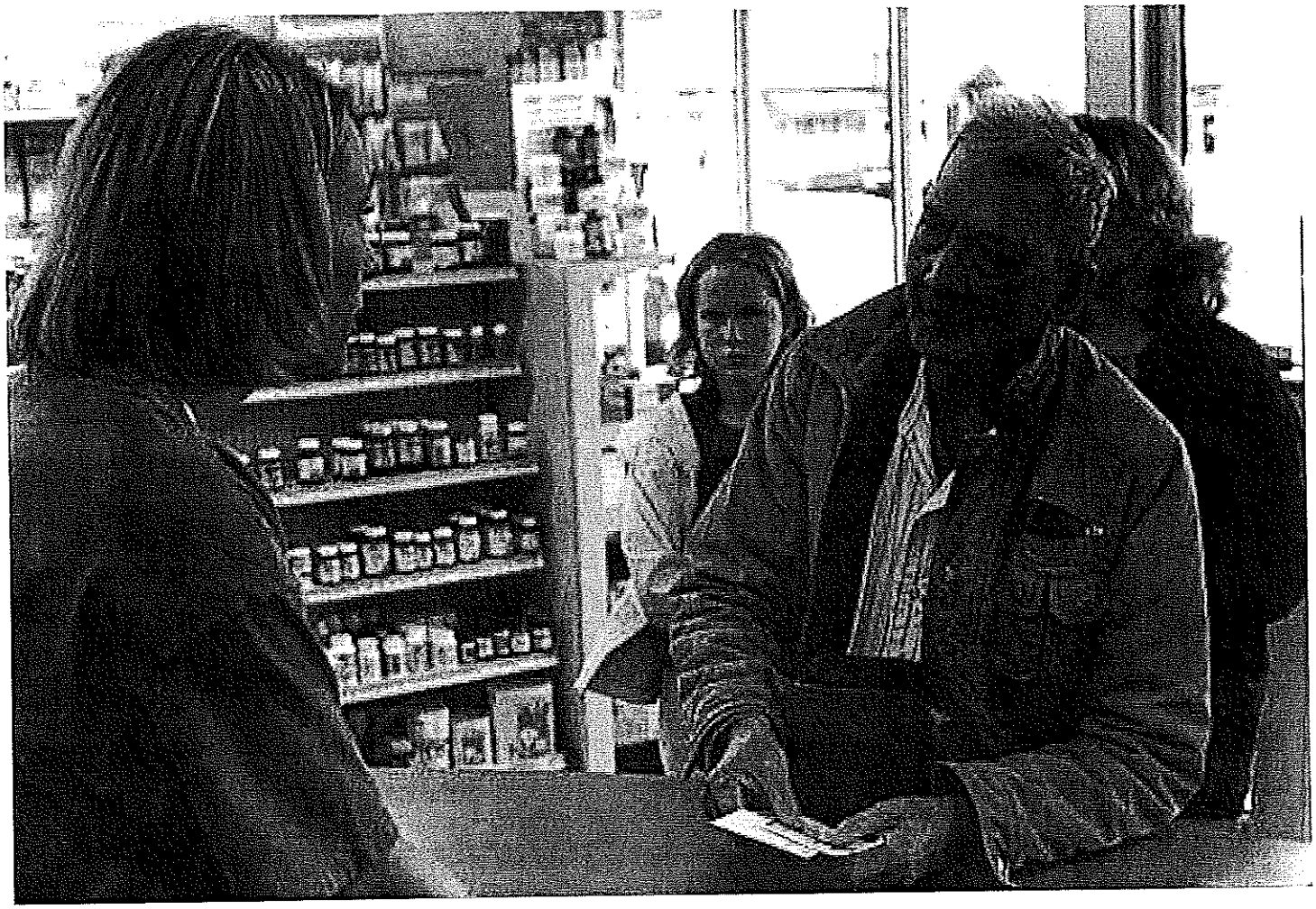


Trong's father has a background in construction. Here, with the help of his sons, he is building an additional room onto the house. They are setting the forms for the concrete. Since they bought the house, they have more than doubled its size by adding another kitchen, and a large, extended living area with bedrooms. In the photo, the red brick is part of the original house; everything else is new.

Post-op checkup.



After Ta's cataract surgery, he is visiting his doctor so that she can see how he is healing.



With an evident communication barrier, many Vietnamese have difficulty in situations where precise information must be given. These kinds of situations are breeding grounds for misunderstandings and frustration.

Timed Exposure.

After Ta's cataract surgery, his wife had to give him regular eye drops to help with swelling and inflammation. Here, she's counting the time in between drops. Nearly blind herself, with cataracts in both eyes, she must look closely to see the watch.

Employment

Finding a job in Bowling Green is one of the most taxing and stressful parts of relocating. Soon after arriving in the United States the refugees begin seeking jobs. They have an immediate need for employment because of the immense costs of relocating – housing payments, food, clothing, and the replacement of the possessions they had to leave behind in Vietnam. Because of this urgency, they tend to accept low-paying, entry-level jobs with the hope of saving money for education or to support other family members. The refugees are very eager to work and usually do so vigorously.

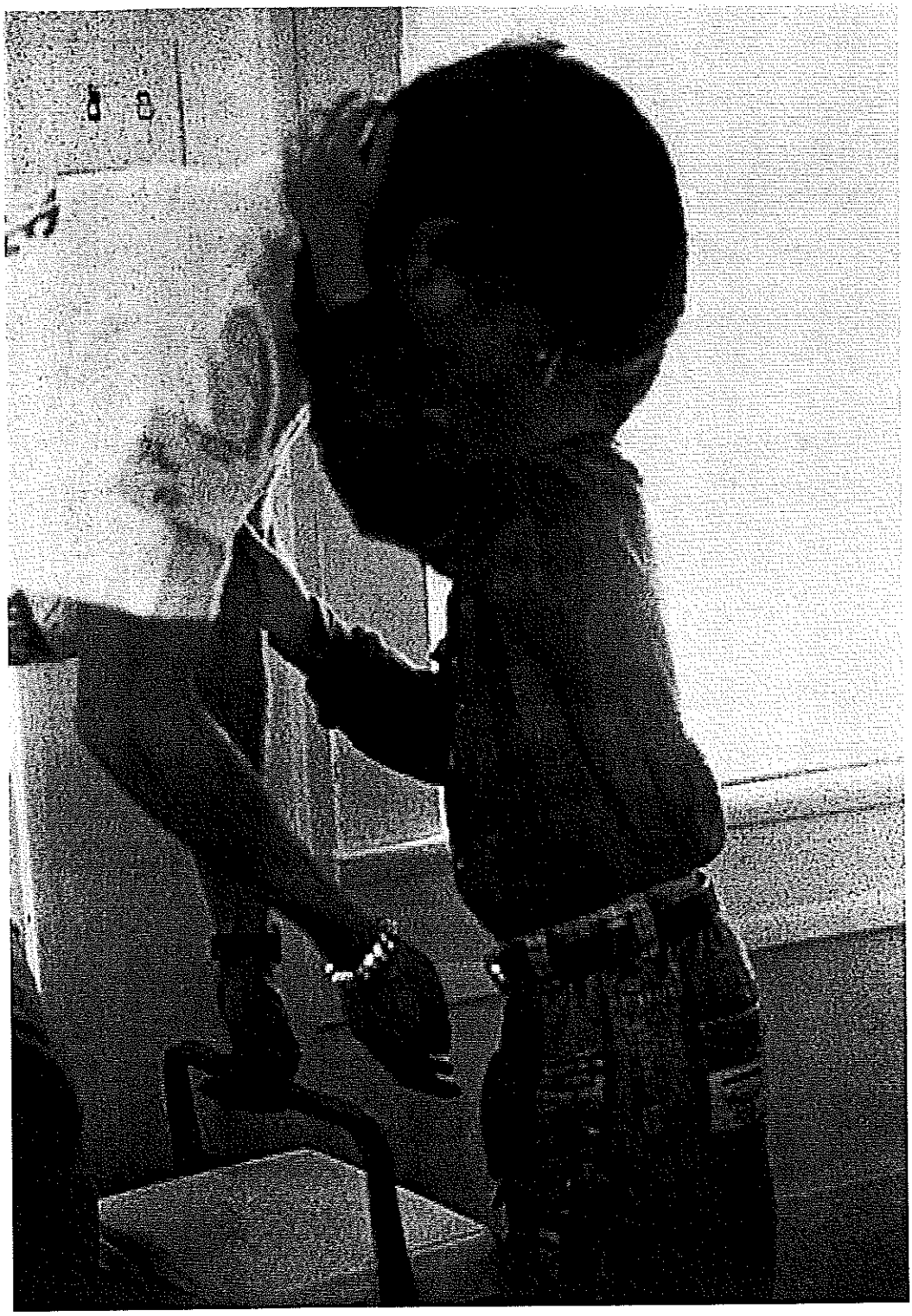
Unfortunately, these qualities of a good work ethic and willingness to take unwanted hours have misled many Americans. In some cases, the Americans fear that the Vietnamese will take away job opportunities from other Americans. More often than not, however, they only take jobs that the Americans don't want.

For many Vietnamese who don't quite have a proficient grasp of the English language, interpreters must accompany them to job interviews, help

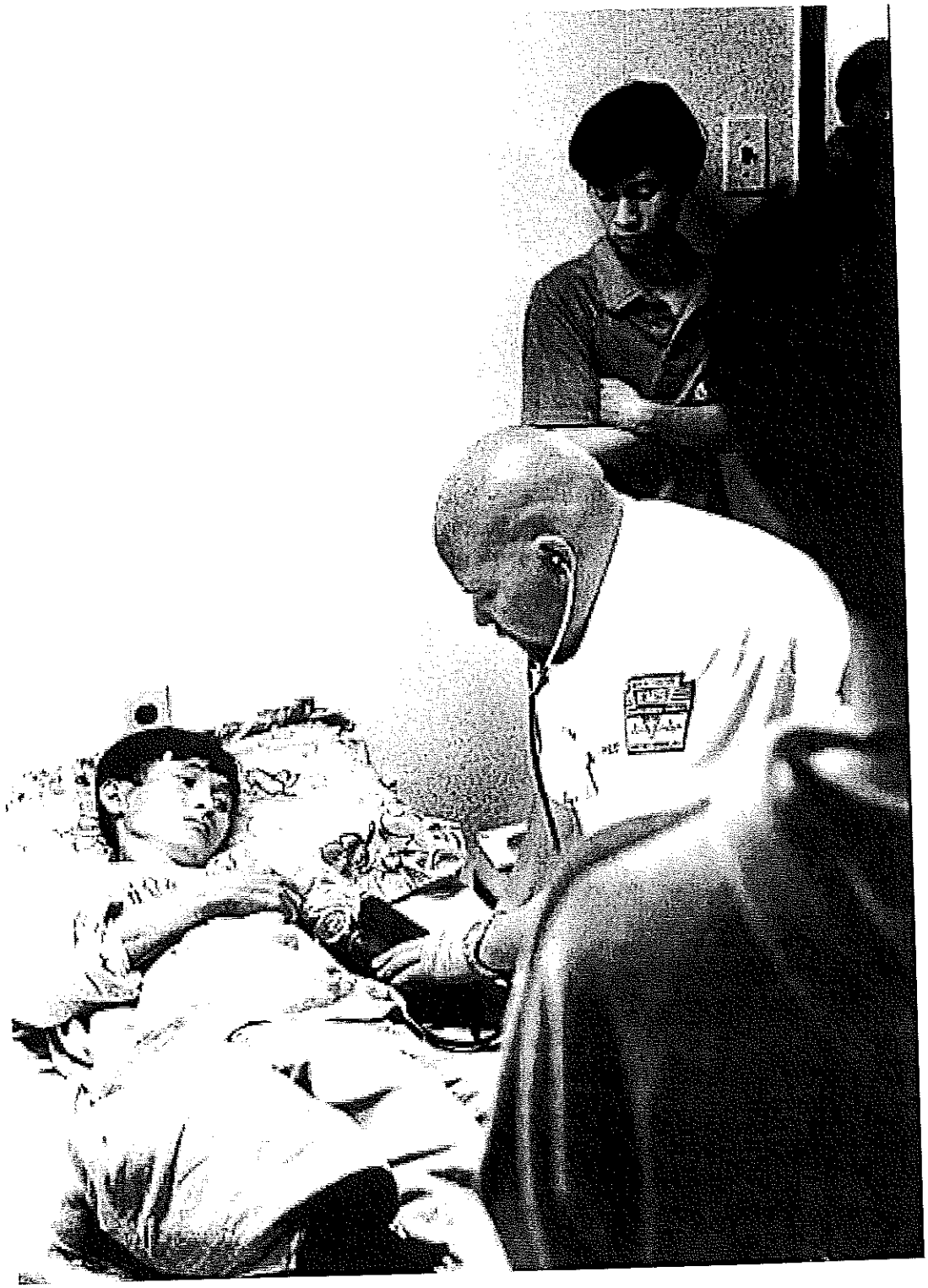
fill out applications, and help in a variety of circumstances in which an obvious language barrier would damage opportunities.

As in other American cities, many choose to work in hair and nail salons, cutting hair or giving manicures. Actually, their presence in this field has changed the industry. They provide the once exclusive manicure for much less cost than the American salons do. This makes the manicure available to everyone, not just the wealthy. Vietnamese beauty shops have popped up everywhere with more young people enrolling in beautician schools. The Vietnamese work ethic becomes increasingly apparent when one man referred to his seventy-hour week as "easy money." Of course, working at a Vietnamese salon is like other social gatherings, with friends sitting together, chatting and joking.

Before Thai could get out of the door to work, Thoung had to give his father one last hug. Thai now works in a Tyson meat plant in Tennessee. He shuttles back and forth with seven other friends.



Weary after a grueling twelve-hour shift in Perdue chicken factory, Tan collapsed just after arriving home.



Owned by An Thai, this new Asian Grocery caters to Bowling Green's growing ethnic diversity.

Lan Luu (left) and Hien Phung (right) laugh together as Hien helps her friend with fresh produce.

At the front checkout counter, Hien and Ni show off a pet hamster to some Vietnamese customers.

An Thai stocks shelves in his store.

As Hien cleans seeds out of the mango, the girls joke and laugh.

Education

The Vietnamese value education highly. They see education not only as an end in itself but also as a process that carries concrete rewards. As persons of knowledge, teachers are considered some of the most important members of society. In the grasp of the Confucian educational system, people memorized vast amounts of information in order to pass the state exams. A successful test would advance their employment and social status to a prestigious level. Anyone, of any social status, could take the exams.

The French introduced the first public school system, emphasizing education for everyone. The students regarded the teachers as role models as well as instructors. In this setting, children were reluctant to question the teachers' statements. Discipline was a very important part of the educational system.

In American schools, the refugees often find a conflict between their old methods of education and those used in the United States. Before, children listened to and learned from the teacher, who was always correct. American students also learn from the teacher but are encouraged to think for

themselves. Many Vietnamese children have difficulty adjusting to this concept. They always agree with everything that the teacher says because to do otherwise would show great disrespect.

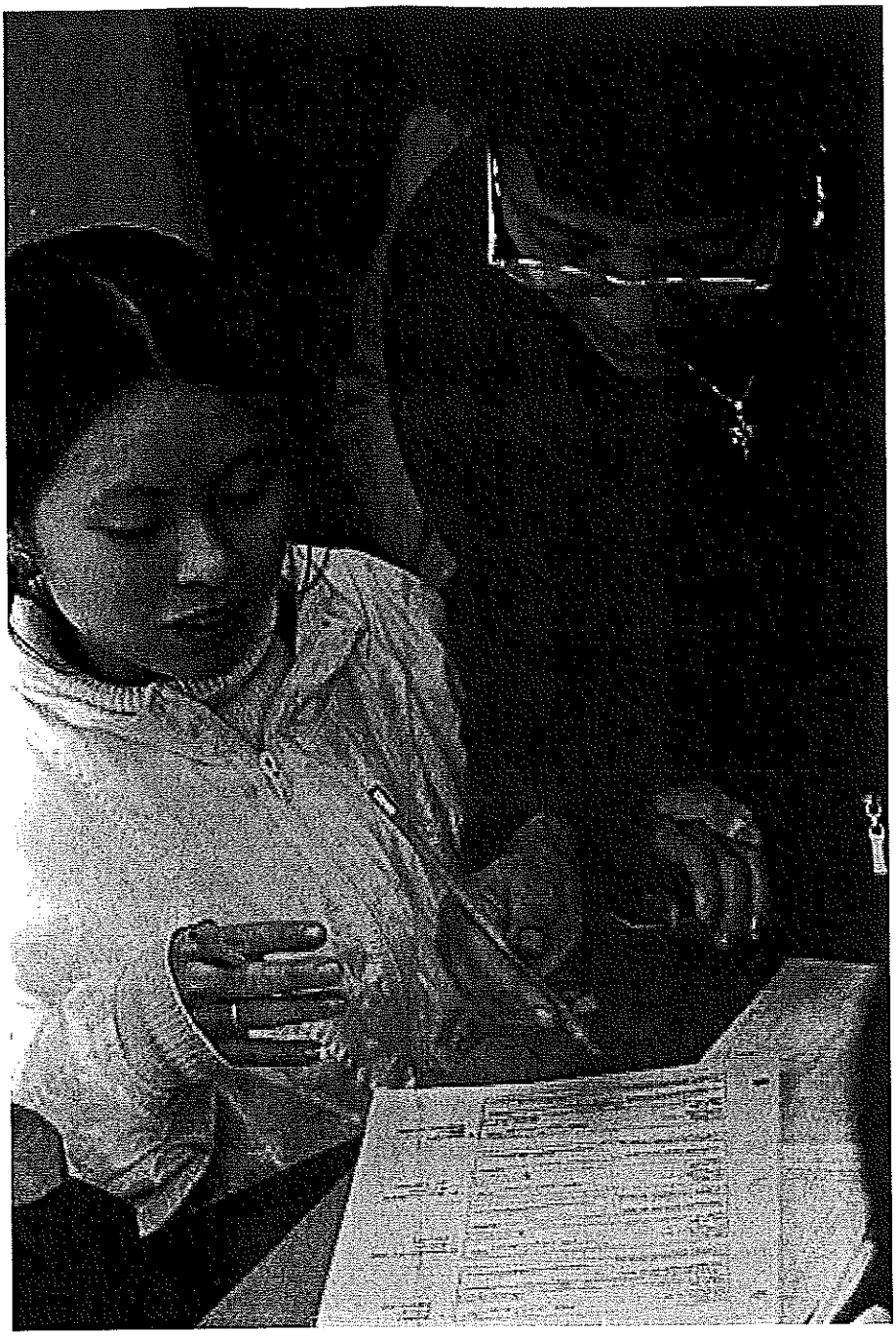
Most new arrivals begin their formal learning process in the Refugee Center studying ESL (English as a Second Language). English is one of the most necessary, as well as one of the hardest, tasks for a refugee to master. The Vietnamese language contains six basic tones, and the sound of each word is part of the meaning of the word. English, which is not tonal, uses one word to mean many things. This aspect confuses many non-English speakers.

Parents prefer that the their children focus on education. In this effort, they often discourage them from working. Money does not matter so long as the children stay in school. Parents believe that the education will pay off in the long run.

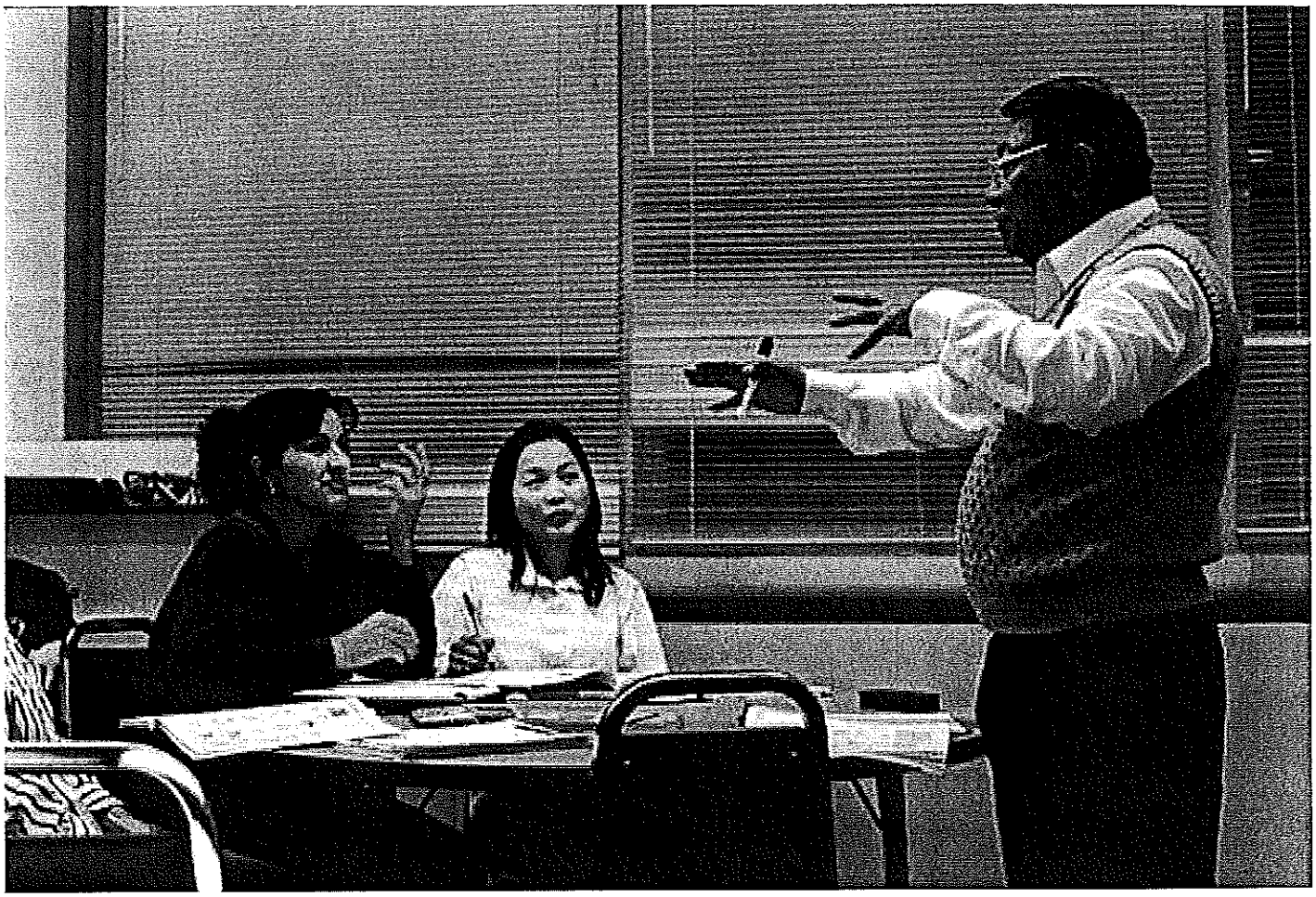
Parents treasure education both for the pure value of knowledge, and also for the more tangible future rewards of money and a secure life.

Homework.

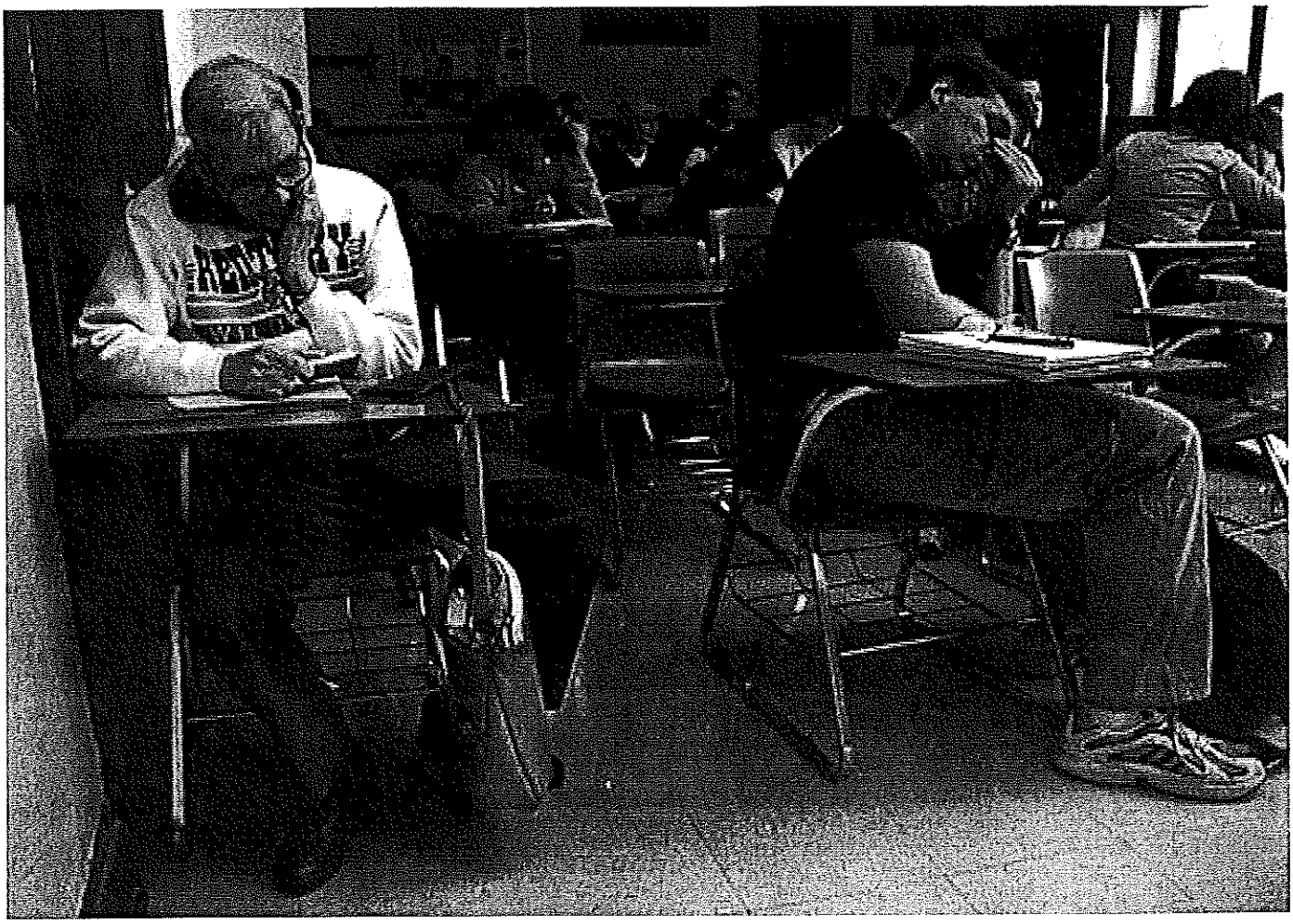
If anything is taken seriously around the home, it is schoolwork. Although today's assignment only comprises elementary English vocabulary, it is nevertheless an essential chore. The rest of the day Thoung will play and do whatever he wants, but for now, only his studies matter.



In an E.S.L class at the Refugee center, the teacher gives Ms. Tan Vo a little help answering some questions. This photo tells a lot about the Vietnamese attitudes towards the teacher by what it shows and also doesn't show. When a PJ instructor was looking through the photos that I shot of this meeting, she said that I missed the crux of this interaction, the eye contact. From a purely compositional standpoint, she was right. Eye contact, whether with the camera or another person in the photo, has unique aesthetic qualities; it shows a true connection. After talking with my professor, I reflected on the instance, and I specifically recall Ms. Vo not once making eye contact with her teacher. To do so would have been disrespectful according to Vietnamese culture.

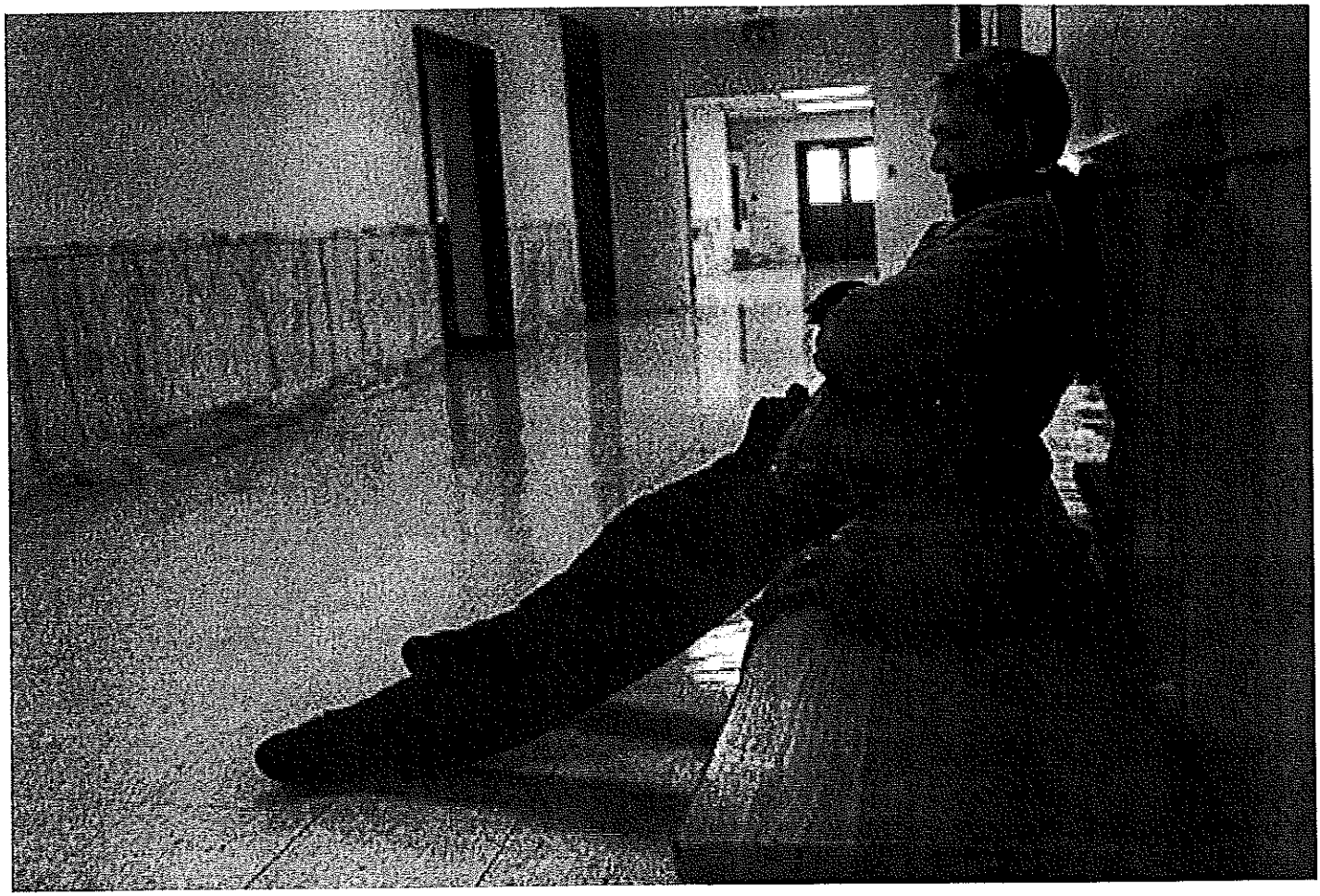


Bowling Green Technical College, offers E.S.L classes for new Refugees and anyone else. Boonsong Areepanthu teaches here and also at the Adult Learning Center. Once an immigrant from Thailand, Boonsong received his master's degree at Western and then his doctorate at Vanderbilt. His unique family embodies the multicultural trend emerging in Bowling Green. Boonsong speaks four languages: Arabic, Thai, Lao, and English, and his wife is a Copt from Egypt.



In juxtaposition with his nearly unconscious classmate, Ta Van Vo prepares relentlessly for this early class

Betwixt



During periods when Ta doesn't have a class scheduled, he waits patiently for the next one to begin.

Family

The family holds a pivotal position in Vietnamese society. It is everyone's responsibility to help the family survive, and yet, the size of an extended family can make it difficult to find housing in America. Families want to establish themselves as close units, but often they cannot find adjacent housing large enough to accommodate twenty to thirty relatives.

The Vietnamese family experiences a great deal of pressure in trying to adjust to the American way of life. In the United States, a family usually consists of a father, a mother, and children. In Vietnam, the family combines a much wider range of relatives: parents, children, grandparents, married children, aunts, uncles, and a variety of other relatives. In some cases, all these members of the extended family may share a single household.

However, in Vietnamese culture, the older a person is, the more he or she is respected. Young people are always expected to seek the advice of older persons within the family. Children are taught to listen to and accept the decisions of their elders. In traditional American families, however, individual members are more independent. In the United States, children are taught and advised by their parents in a less structured way.

Children

The Vietnamese household takes good care of the children. Much of daily life revolves around their needs. To a great extent, the children receive little restraint on their activities or behavior. They turn the entire house into a playground, running around, jumping on couches, climbing on everything. At First Baptist Church, Bowling Green, the childcare workers refuse to care for the Vietnamese children during their service, saying that they are too rowdy and uncontrollable.

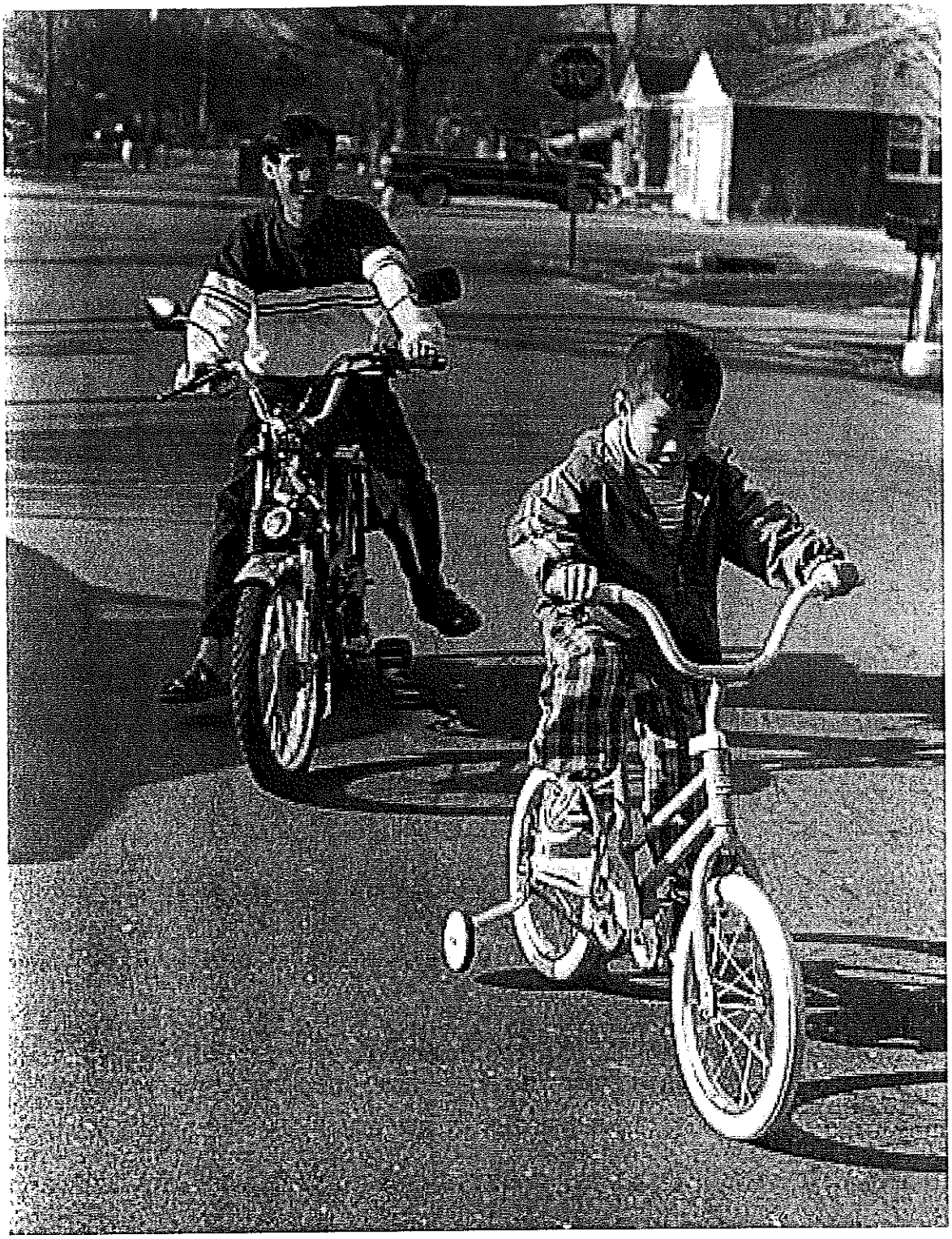
Education restricts the child's freedom. When time came for Thoung's homework, his mother wielded a stick and spoke sharply. I had never before witnessed any disciplinary measures in their family. Although Thoung cried the entire time, his mother did not relent until he had finished.

Some scholars suggest that the experience in America has lessened the parents' control over their family: "...children of immigrants develop autonomy and parents lose authority in family life in their new world" (Thai, 1999).

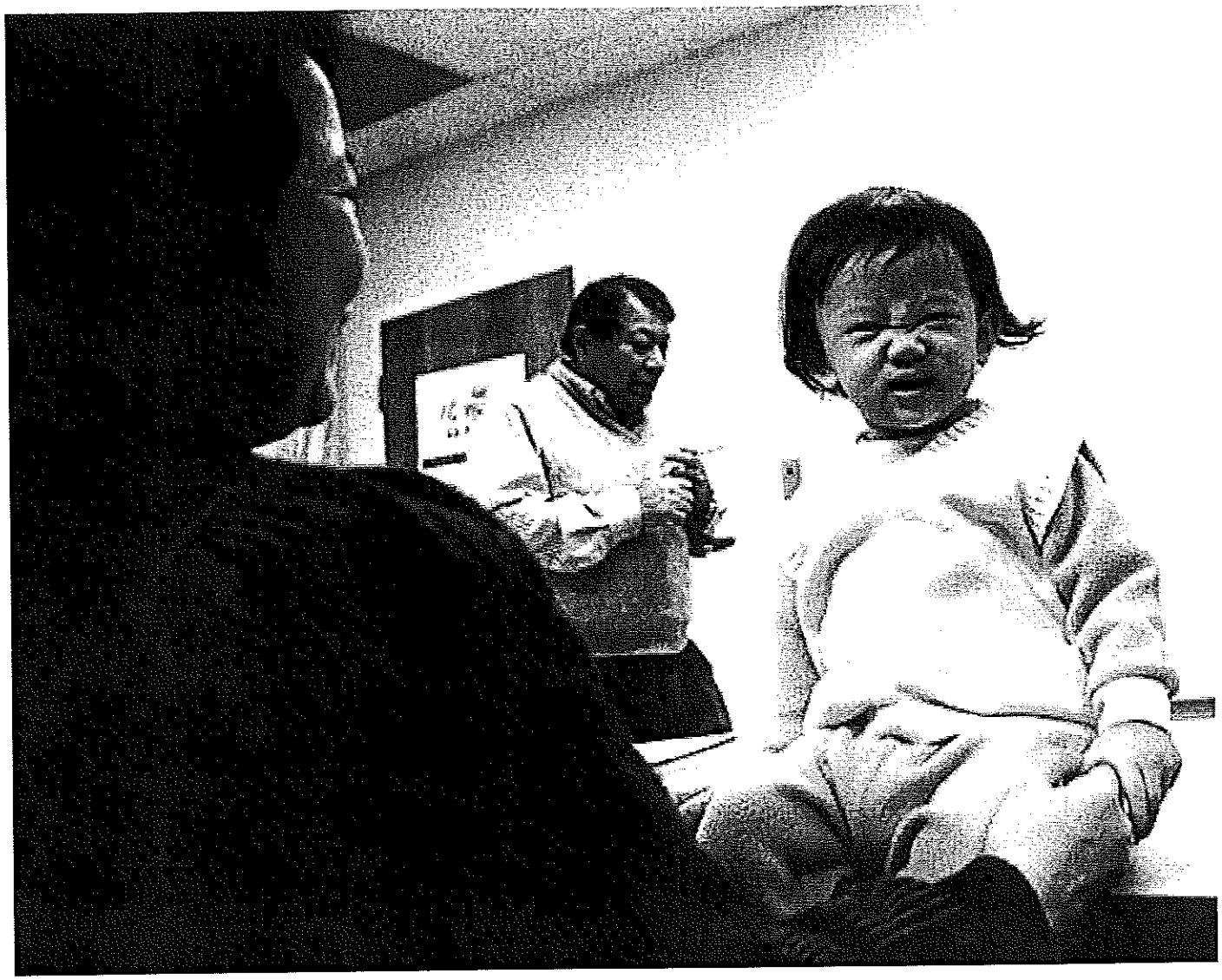
Playing, doing whatever he wants.

Some days are too nice to stay indoors.

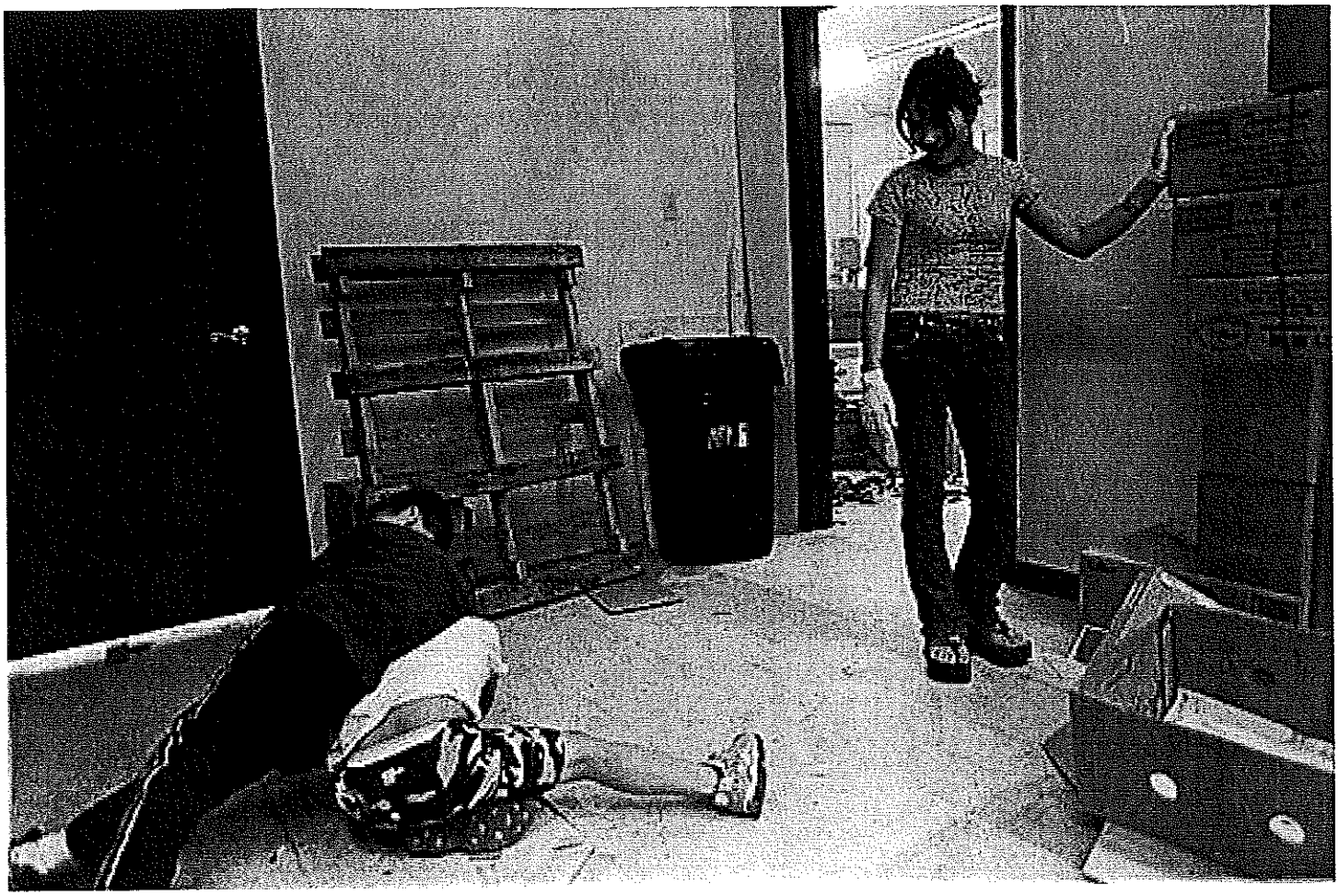
The Vietnamese have a difficult time during our winters. Thai's family arrived in the midst of a cold February and held up indoors as much as they could. I regret not having any photos of them playing in the snow. But it wasn't because I missed the shot by not being there; they simply didn't play in the snow. I was there, inside, sweating. In a house full of electricians, one could bet that they would have their heater working at full throttle.



With his eyes bound on the finish line, the third mailbox on the left, Thoung peddles as fast as he can. Trong coasts languidly behind, humoring his young competition.



The Adult Learning Center offers childcare for those that come to learn E.S.L. However, some kids either prefer to stay with their parents or are too wild for the child care workers to handle.



Lan Luu watches with amusement as the An Thai's boys wrestle in the storage room of the Asian Grocery.

Dating

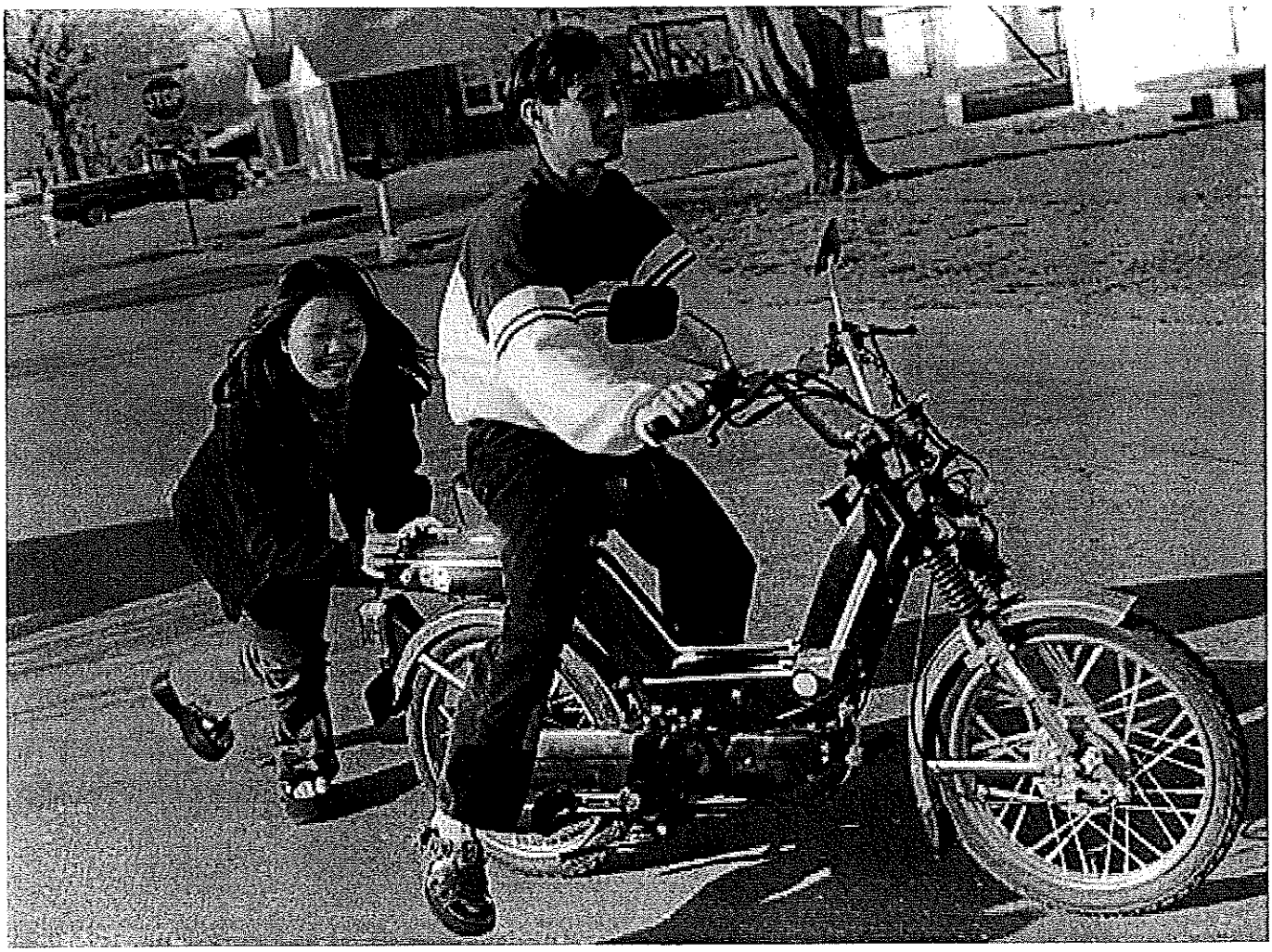
Few social engagements carry as many emotional and psychological complications as romantic courtship does. For Vietnamese refugees in Bowling Green, the complexities multiply ten-fold. Questions such as 'whom should I date – another Vietnamese, an American, another Asian?' 'what will my family think if I date outside of our culture?' immediately come to the forefront.

In Vietnam, these questions, more than likely, wouldn't be considered. Romance and love rarely lead to marriage arrangements, and in traditional families, dating is all but forbidden, especially for females. Among many restrictions, parents don't think that girls should stay out late with males. They also put a very high value on chastity (mainly concerning females).

For the Vietnamese-Americans, a romantic relationship supercedes other priorities. In traditional culture, dating leads directly to marriage. Americans view dating as serious only after one proposes marriage or the couple begins living together. For the traditional Vietnamese, dating is a community affair. When interest is shown, the girl and the boy usually tell their parents about

the other person and his or her social class and economic position. Provided with their parents' permission, they can then start courting but only in a group setting with other people around. The two may kiss each other only on the cheek, or offer a brief hug when saying goodbye. To do anything more intimate would be to risk having people talk and spread rumors. The main reason behind all the restrictions is the importance of reputation. "Reputation is very important," says Linh Phung, a junior at Western.

For the female, reputation is even more crucial. If something does happen between a couple, such as a pregnancy out of wedlock, "they blame the girl first," insists Linh. Ling goes on to explain, "If something happens like that, they will say all kinds of things behind the girl's back like 'what kind of girl is that?' 'who could have raised her like that?'"



Getting started sometimes needs a little push. Here, Han gives Trong that little assistance to get going.

Still a kid at heart, Trong spins Han in an aisle at Walmart.

Marriage

The wedding is another showcase of communal life for the Vietnamese. Traditionally, weddings are held from October to December. The wedding is an important day for Vietnamese people. Both the bride's and groom's families invite relatives, friends, and guests to the occasion. On the wedding day both families become very busy decorating and arranging the house. In this wedding, Treu and his bride wear traditional outfits. However, it has also become customary for both the bride and groom to wear European style dress.

On the day of the wedding, before the sun has a chance to rise, the Vos house bustles with excitement. As in much of the Vietnamese culture, this event contains a plethora of symbols. The subtext is everywhere: everything means something. The morning of the ceremony, the groom's mother will visit the bride's family and present them with two gifts – a sacred plant representing respect, and pink chalk, the color of happiness.

The night before the wedding, the bride's mother will comb her daughter's hair for the last time. The Vietnamese believe that this action will bring luck and happiness in the bride's new home. When a daughter marries,

she becomes part of her husband's family, and in most cases, she will live with them for the rest of her life.

The morning of the Treu Vo's wedding before the sun had risen, his family and friends gathered in a fleet of cars preparing to drive to Louisville. Two and a half hours later, the entourage pulled into his bride's home. Already assembled, cars of the bride's family and their community littered the street and corral the house.

Inside, people crammed shoulder to shoulder. The two young lovers stood in the middle with their parents in front of a Buddhist shrine encompassing the entire wall. Praying to Buddha and their ancestors, they asked for permission to join (I can only assume that permission was granted). Restricted by the close quarters and the large crowd, the family engaged in a gift-giving ceremony in which they placed offerings on the large altar. Everyone was squeezing, grinding, and swirling like dough in a bread machine with different members of the community giving speeches and proposing toasts. When the time came, the groom and his mother adorned their new family member with a ring, a necklace, earrings, and some more jewelry.

Shooting this part of the wedding was very tricky. Compounding the problems of a room already filled to the brim, the largest person by far, me, laden with three cameras along with a backpack full of film, lenses, and other

camera supplies, relentlessly jostled around the room crouching, stooping, and twisting while snapping photos. The room also had very low light. The two windows were cloaked with heavy blinds and a couple of layers of people. The altar on the other wall did have a good amount of candles, but this light source would also set off the fire alarm as the wedding reached top speed.

As the program inside came to an end, young, unwed girls in matching pink outfits formed two lines facing each other outside the house, preparing for the couple to come out. These girls' job was to launch handfuls of seeds at the newly joined couple as they came past. Perhaps this event was evidence of more integration of American traditions.

The groom's car bore markings of this event. In the back window, someone had outlined a large heart in frilly paper. The rest of the vehicle was garnished with more frilly paper and shaving cream. On the one hand, it looked equipped to carry a newly wed couple to their next destination. On the other, it looked like an aerodynamic version of a Macy's float. The next destination was the groom's home in Bowling Green. In less time than it took to drive to Louisville, we found ourselves back on the highway retracing our steps to the highly anticipated feast.

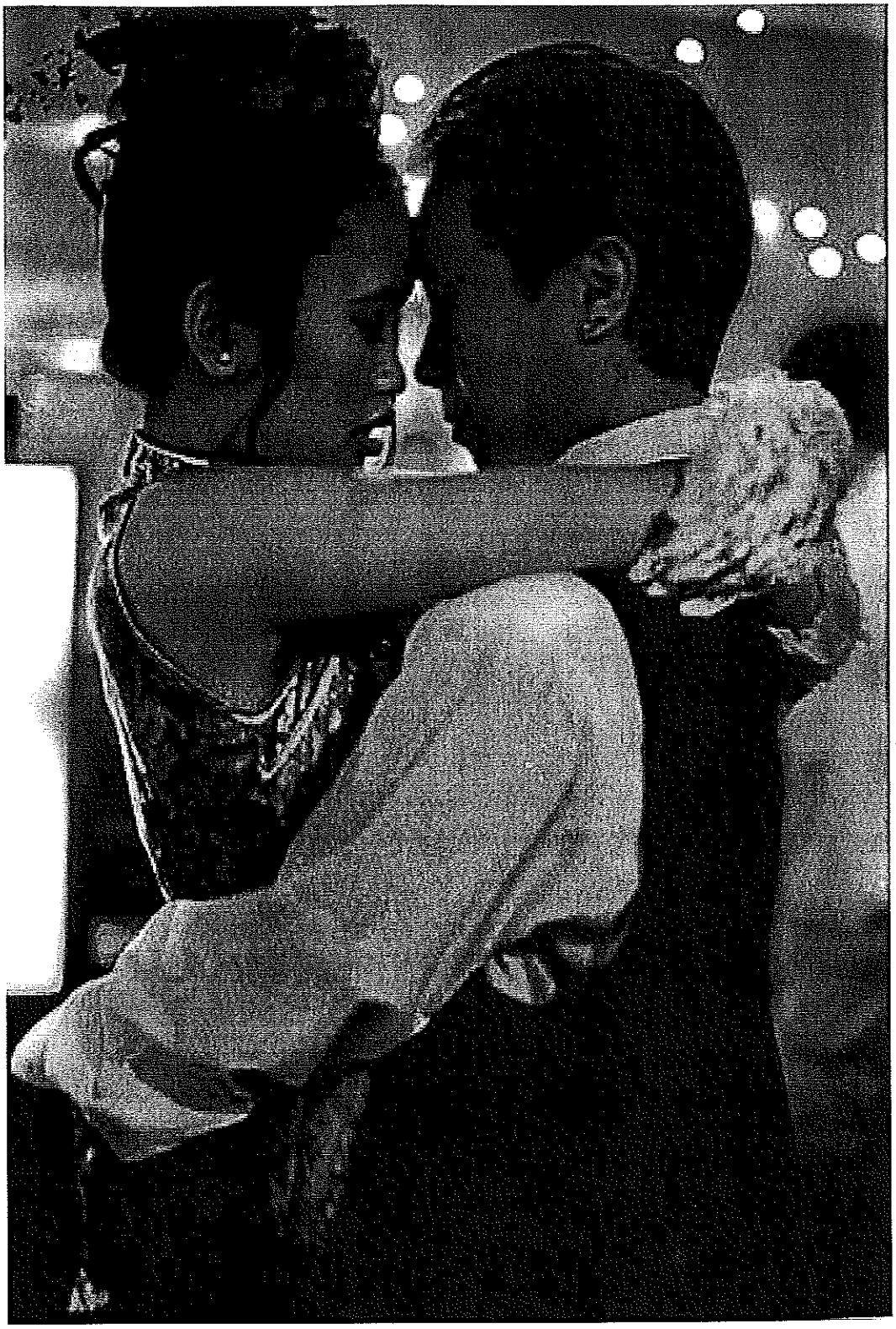
Usually, both families follow the ceremony with a meal at a restaurant. However, Bowling Green does not yet have a Vietnamese restaurant, or at

least none to speak of (there is one Vietnamese-owned restaurant, Kyoto, but it features Japanese cooking). In lieu of this custom, the Vos paid some friends from Lexington to come and cook a massive feast for the occasion.

A toast to the new bride and groom inside the bride's house. She will now leave this home to join True's family. The house shrine is on the right.

I enjoy this photograph. Two themes play out in this image. On the one hand, a little boy framed by arms, coat tucked against his torso, makes his way through the crowd completely unconcerned with the drama playing out overhead. On the other, the girls above collaborate to ensure that the fish sauce makes it safely to the table without landing on someone's back.

The three-day wedding has finally come to an end. The crowd has dwindled. Inside, dirty dishes, folding chairs, and heaps of confetti, paper napkins, and plastic cups litter the house. But outside, music plays softly enough to let the couple forget, if just for the moment, all of the chaos the day has presented.



Religion

Being separated from family members, homes and friends, the South Vietnamese immigrants are also distanced from everything they held sacred. Gone are the thousand-year-old temples housing monks and priceless teachings. Gone were the burial sites of their ancestors. Upon arriving in Bowling Green, they find themselves in a strange country with no temples close by.

Religion plays an ever-present role in the Vietnamese culture. Interestingly, the Vietnamese religious makeup enlists a number of different beliefs. The acceptance to include a variety of beliefs in one's personal religion is prevalent among the Vietnamese. One may observe this syncretism throughout the culture. For instance, shrines in homes do not only connect them to the Buddha but also to their ancestors, remnants of ancient ancestral worship.

Buddhism dominates most of Vietnam. This religion emphasizes the necessity of giving up attachment to worldly objects in order to gain true peace and contentment. In many senses, it is a very flexible religion. The

Vietnamese have constructed shrines within their new homes to which they offer food and other items to the Buddha and their ancestors.

China has left a great impression on the Vietnamese society by implanting two powerful schools of thought, Confucianism and Taoism. Many people think of Confucianism as a philosophy rather than a religion because it lacks an ordained clergy and includes no discussion of salvation. It views the family as the foundation of social order; some of its primary virtues include kindness and tolerance.

Taoism has flourished for two thousand years in Vietnam. It teaches that humankind needs to find harmony by returning to natural ways of life. It also stresses harmony between individuals and nature. Those who practice Taoism avoid confrontation.

The French first introduced Christianity to Vietnam. Actually, ten percent of Vietnam's population practices Roman Catholicism. It was this evangelistic movement that brought Vietnam the Romanized script, *quac ngu*, they use today. A Jesuit priest, Alexandre du Rhodes, devised the system in the seventeenth century in order to propagate Christian beliefs more easily. This innovation also greatly improved the literacy of the country; before, only the wealthy and scholarly were familiar with the earlier *nom* system.

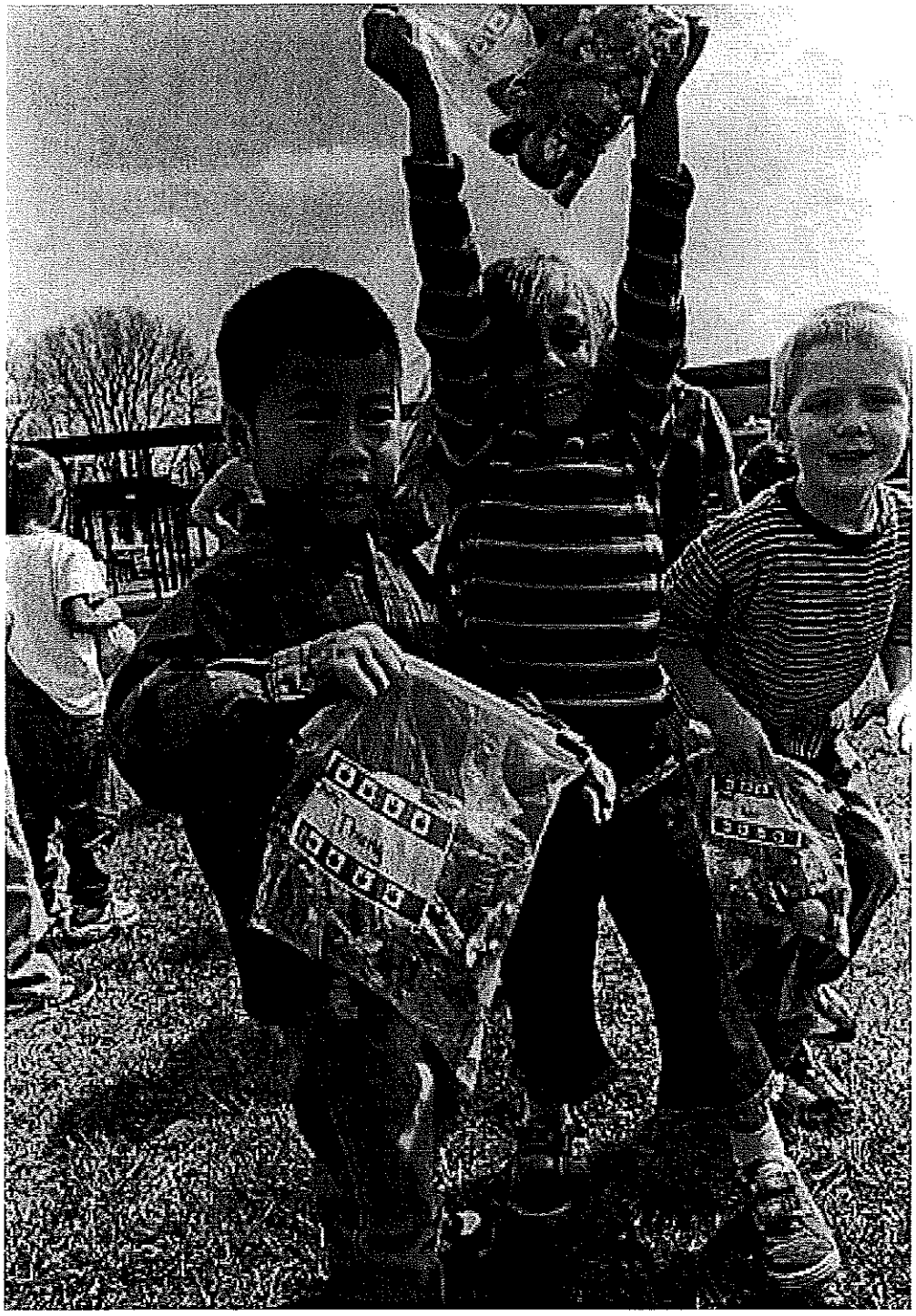
First Baptist Church in Bowling Green has opened its doors to its new neighbors, providing a room for them to have service in. Every other Sunday

a Vietnamese pastor from Louisville comes to lead. Unlike the Laotian and Cambodian groups, the Church involves itself very little with this group. Many of the Vietnamese attending the sermon learned of Christianity when they were in the refugee camps. This early contact has given the Vietnamese a slightly different take on Christianity than what the Southern Baptist doctrines hold.

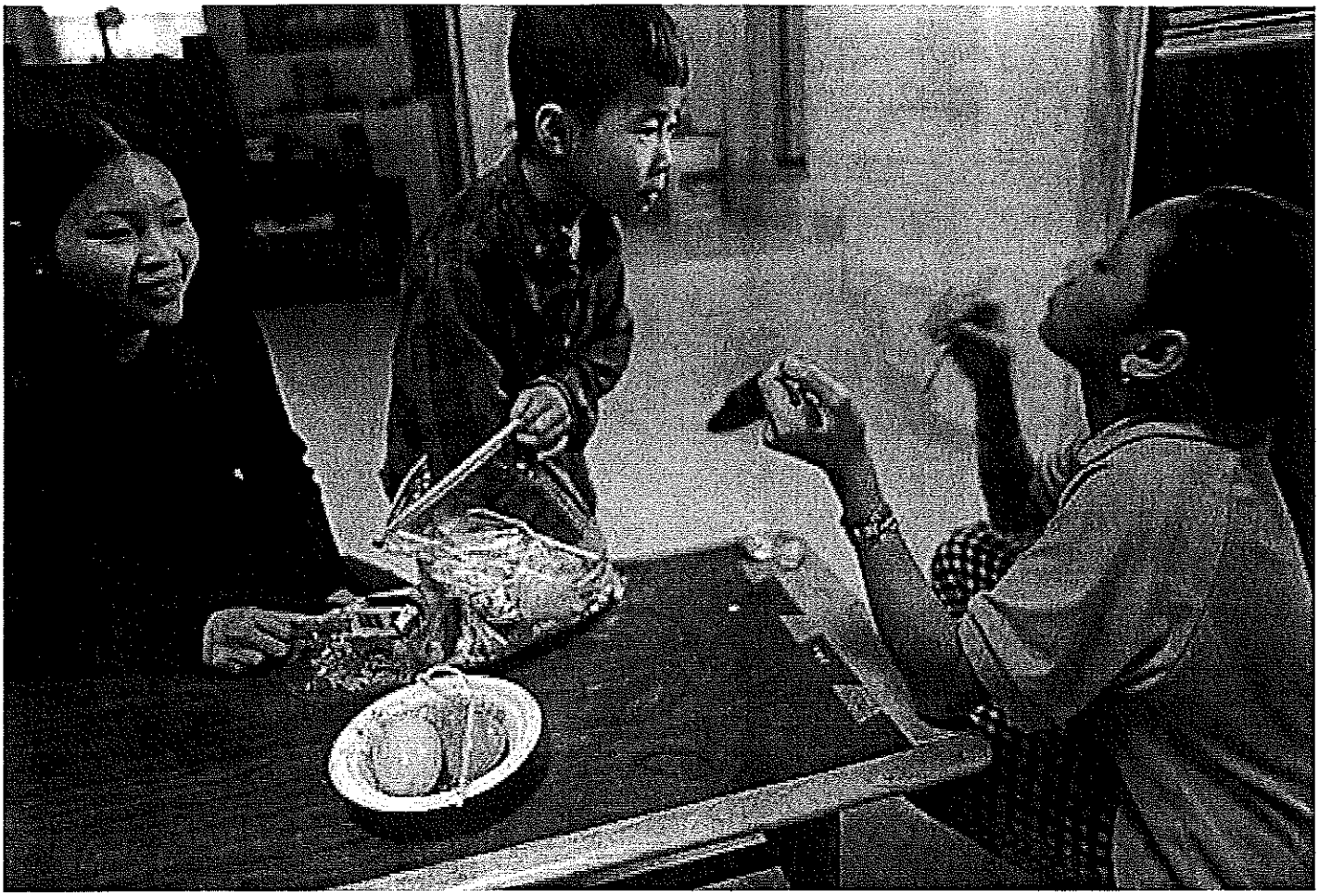
Translation

Although Ta Vo and his wife regularly attends the Sunday service at First Baptist Church Bowling Green, their religious background includes portions of different faiths. In the front room of their home, a shrine on the wall adorned with flowers, Christmas lights, and incense reminds them of their Buddhist roots. In a sense, they translate these different faiths to fit into their own personal religion. For many Vietnamese, religion, whether Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, or a mix of several, exists to help someone become a better person.

Easter!

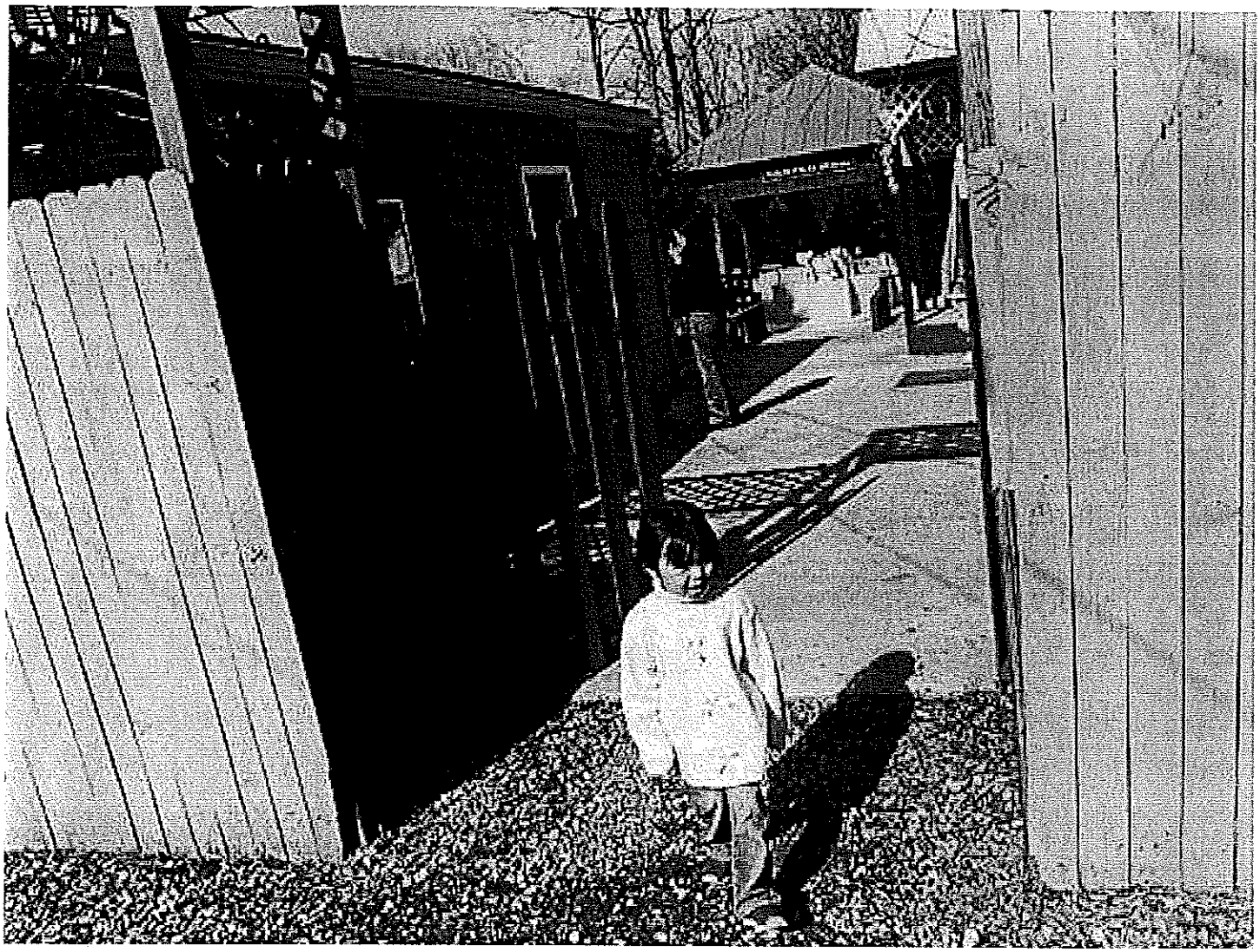


Although the American children here are excited about a man holding a camera, Thoung has grown accustomed to my ever-present gear and instead scans the rest of the field looking for more Easter eggs. It is his first Easter. At home, they will not celebrate. As Buddhists they are not acquainted with Easter. School, however, makes no exception for Buddhists, and chooses to introduce this holiday as an American one minus the religious connotations.

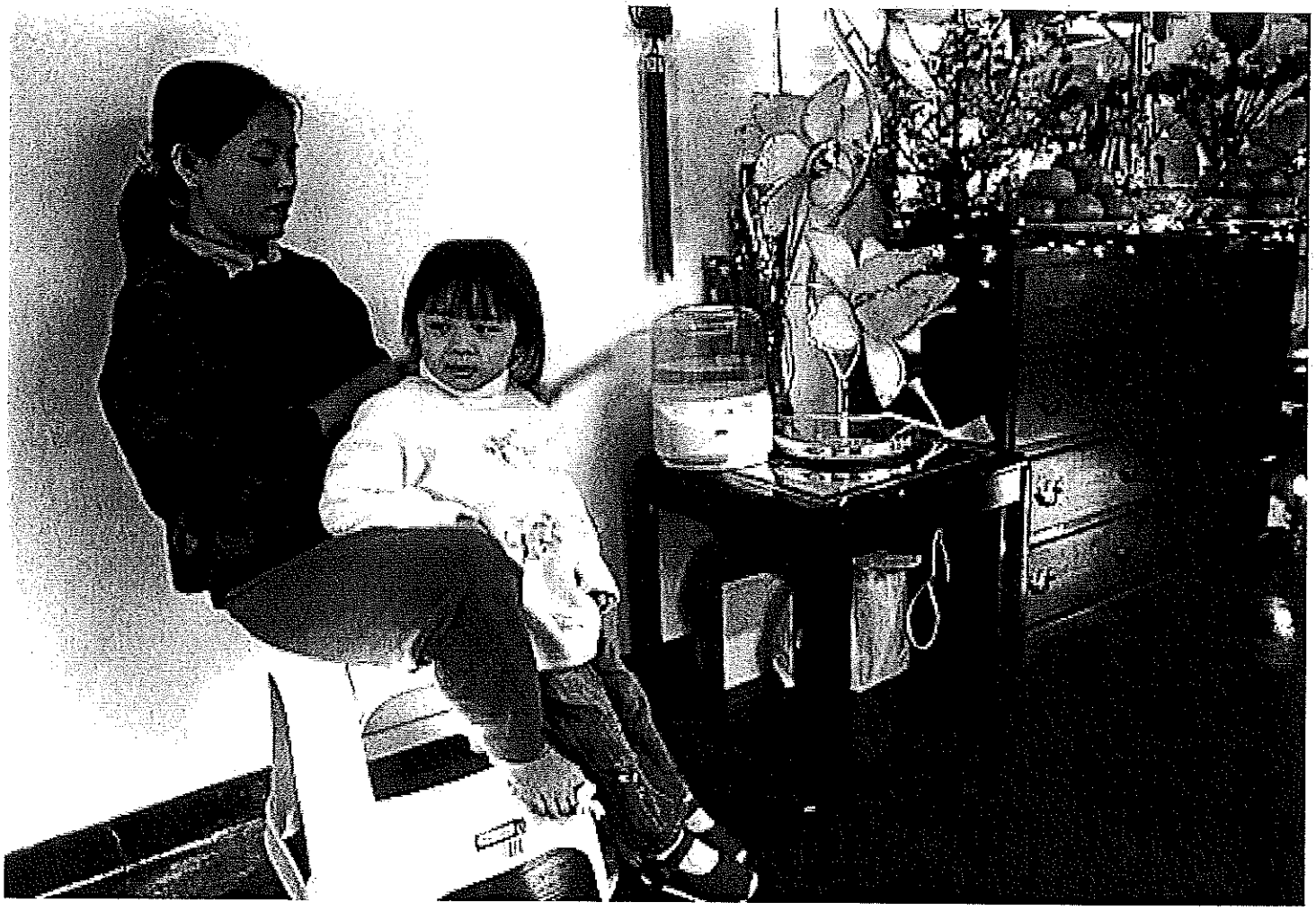


Share.

Although reluctantly, Thoung divvies out his Easter spoils.



The Vo family visits a small Vietnamese temple in Portland, Tennesseee.



Ms. Tan Vo helps Vi Vo with her hair before going to the Vietnamese temple in Portland Tennessee. The odd assortment on the chest-of-drawers beside them is the house shrine.

Moon Festival

In Vietnam, Têt-Trung-Thu (tet-troong-thoo), or the Mid-Autumn Festival, is one of the most popular family holidays. It is held on the 15th day of the 8th lunar month.

Vietnamese families plan their activities around their children on this day. In Vietnamese folklore, parents work so hard to prepare for the upcoming harvest that they leave their children to play by themselves. In an attempt to make up for lost time, parents use the Mid-Autumn festival as an opportunity to express their love and appreciation for their children.

Appropriately, the Mid-Autumn Festival is also called the Children's Festival. In Bowling Green, this tradition continues in the Vietnamese-American community. *Trung-Thu* activities are often centered on children and education. Parents buy lanterns for their children so that they can participate in a lantern procession at dawn. In this demonstration the lanterns represent brightness, while the procession symbolizes success in school. Children also perform traditional Vietnamese dances for adults.

Like the Chinese, Vietnamese parents tell their children fairy tales and serve mooncakes and other special treats. A favorite folktale is about a carp

that wanted to become a dragon. The carp worked and worked and eventually transformed itself into a dragon. This is the story behind the mythical symbol *Cá hóa Rông*. Parents use this story to encourage their children to work hard in order to lead happy, content lives.

The Vietnamese also have a story about how the Moon Lady ascends to the moon. A man named *Chu Coi* finds a lucky tree that has special healing powers. Because this tree is sacred, people are forbidden to urinate at the foot of the tree. Unfortunately, *Chu Coi's* wife, Chi Hang, forgets the rule and urinates on the tree. One day, while she sits on the tree's branch, the tree starts to grow rapidly until it reaches the moon. Chi Hang now lives on the moon as punishment for desecrating the sacred tree.

Dunn Nguyen leads the ceremony indoors. He is the most outstanding figure at the Vietnamese Sunday school, often leading the service himself.

Encountering a New Culture: the Vietnamese Way.

Assimilating into a new culture is very difficult. Misunderstandings often emerge in this process. Simple aspects that many people take for granted may cause confusion on each side. In Vietnam, it is polite to look away when speaking to people and rude to look directly at them. Americans feel quite the opposite, and view it as a sign of respect to make eye contact during conversation. Without understanding this discrepancy, Americans may easily mistake the Vietnamese indirect form of communication as being rude and unfriendly because they apparently ignore those speaking to them. Things as simple as hearing strangers say "hi" or "hello" take some time to get used to, especially for newly arrived refugees.

Actually, America is laden with cultural misalignments. Because the Vietnamese associate the color white with death, imagine the innuendoes a hospital might present with doctors and nurses clad in white uniforms in white rooms, and so on. Groceries host a whole new world of airtight packaging, fast food, frozen dinners, and labeling. One family browsed the aisles for hours viewing labels on cans and boxes thinking that the pictures showed

exactly what was inside of the containers. A little girl stood terrified; her eyes were transfixed on a box picturing a monster crouching over a bowl of cereal.

Outside of casual acquaintances, interaction between non-Asian Americans and the Vietnamese is almost nonexistent. There exists an apparent apathy or disinterest among the Americans to interact with their international neighbors. A chaplin in Bowling Green told me about speaking with an American high school student concerning her thoughts on the international presence; she confirmed that the international students stayed with themselves and the Americans stuck to themselves. This sort of segregation dominates most of the community. Thai notes that "Asian Americans more often than not identify themselves as being different and not fitting in with their peers, especially whites" (1999).

Many of this second-generation find themselves part of a difficult marginal sub-culture while growing up. Parents want the children to learn and assimilate into the American culture. On the other hand, they're also concerned about their children losing their culture and warn against becoming *my qua*, "too Americanized."

Bowling Green is unique for its large international population in contrast to its more rural setting. Many people see Kentucky as an unlikely location for concentrated immigration. While Coastal areas have large international

communities generations old, Kentucky has only in recent decades seen a true immigrant presence. However, little conflict has arisen as result of the new arrivals. In fact, the only mention of conflict involving refugees in the Daily News, Bowling Green's local newspaper, was when several Bosnian men attacked another Bosnian refugee because his mother was part Serb.

Special gatherings such as the annual International Festival attempt to spark an interest in diversity. The International Coffee House has offered an ongoing celebration of the cultural diversity at Bowling Green Senior High School. Five years ago, the school's women's club started the event in order to promote cultural awareness and better appreciation for each other.

At school, most students stay within their own ethnic groups rarely attempting to learn about other people's cultures. With little doubt, it is easier to surround oneself with people that share a similar background. Branching out takes someone completely out of his or her comfort zone. Many barriers restrict communication between individuals of different cultures. This aspect is inevitable, however. The differences will always exist, but the barriers can be bridged.

Building a bridge can only happen on an individual basis. It starts with an initiative; someone needs a reason to venture into uncharted territory whether it from pure curiosity or part of a school assignment. For the

In the language that I share with the Vo family, the majority of the vocabulary centers on food.

References:

Dsilva, Margaret U., Whyte Lisa O. (1998). Cultural Differences in Conflict Styles: Vietnamese Refugees and Established Residents. Howard Journal of Communications, 9, 57-68.

Edom, Clifton C. (1976). Photojournalism. WM. C. Brown Company Publishers, Dubuque, IA.

Farber, Don, Fields, Rick (1987). Taking Refuge in L.A.: Life in a Vietnamese Buddhist Temple. Aperture Foundation.

Gaines, Stevie (2001, October 9). International Students Given a Translation Booklet. The Bowling Green Daily News.

Lee, Jeanne M. (1985). Toad is the Uncle of Heaven. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, NY.

Nguyen, Ly Thi (1998). To Date or not to Date a Vietnamese. Amerasian Journal, 24(1), 143-169.

Riley, Jason (1999, August 31). Unsung Hero. The Bowling Green Daily News.

Robinson, Richard H., Johnson, Willard L. (1997). The Buddhist Religion: a Historical introduction. Wadsworth Publishing Company, Belmont, CA.

Stalcup, Ann (Oct, 2000). A Hmong Wedding Celebration. Faces 17, 2 (32). Cobblestone Publishing, Inc.

Thai, Hung (1999). Splitting Things in Half is so White. Amerasian Journal 25 (1), 53-88.

Tran, Barbara, Troung, Monique T.D., Khoi, Tuoung Luu (1998). Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry & Prose.