

British Columbians Respond

Refugees from Vietnam Arrive in Canada

By artist Chrystal Phan



A 1980s newspaper photo from 100 Mile House demonstrates how British Columbians across the province stepped up to welcome the refugees. The Tu family of five were sponsored by the Catholic parish of 100 Mile House. Credit: Courtesy of 100 Mile House Press.

How did British Columbians react to the news that they would be welcoming thousands of refugees into their communities in only two years?

After hearing about the struggles of Vietnamese refugees, Canada committed to resettling 60,000 refugees in less than two years. This was a short amount of time to prepare for so many people. Where would they live? How would they eat? British Columbians had to act fast.

Not everyone supported the idea. Their opinions, written in local newspapers, expressed thoughts like “Asians Preying on Us,” “Hordes Will Take Us Over,” “Boat People: Not Our Problem” and “Am I Expected to Pay for These Costly Folks?”

Most British Columbians, however, believed they had a moral duty to help. Nearly a thousand citizen groups formed to personally sponsor incoming refugees. It was the first time in Canadian history that private citizens could do so. Supporting letters to the same newspapers had titles like “Racism Not for Canada” and “Time for Us to Give.”

British Columbians raised money and arranged housing and employment for those who resettled in Victoria, Smithers, Golden and everywhere in between. The small town of Comox even offered to host a welcome facility to process as many as 30,000 refugees.

To help with medical needs, the BC Legislature passed a Refugee Settlement Act in 1979. This gave refugees free medical insurance, hospital care and paid for medications and medical supplies for up to one year.

Because of this humanitarian attitude of wanting to help others, Canadians received the Nansen Medal, an award for humanitarianism from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in 1986.