Saigon to Spanish Town

They began migrating to Baton Rouge almost a decade ago from a country halfway around the world, with little more than a determination to find a better life.

Now many have mastered the southern Louisiana variation of English, for the most part, and are blending in with the American way of life.

Some of those who came have blended in so well they have opened businesses of their own and achieved success in professional fields.

They are Vietnamese refugees, a new American breed.

The new arrivals in Baton Rouge have been helped in their battle to adjust by the Refugee Resettlement Program, which has given aid to almost 1,400 since its doors opened in 1975. The Vietnamese were the first refugees brought to Baton Rouge through the program and are also the largest single group here.

Dr. Y-Duc Nguyen is one of those who has made a successful transition from life in Vietnam to life in the United States. He is now director of medical services at Greenwell Springs Hospital. His wife, Loan, works in accounting at the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board.

They and their five children live in north Baton Rouge.

While both had the advantage of a college education before coming to the United States, the road from refugee in 1975 to a new career in America has not been an easy one.

"Originally, I am from North Vietnam," says Du, who prefers to be known by his first name. "I moved to South Vietnam in 1954 after the communists took over North Vietnam."

Then in 1975, the communists took over South Vietnam and Du was forced to move

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Vietnamese

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again, this time to the U.S. He was a doctor in Vietnam and served in the Vietnamese Army until 1970.

"I came directly to Baton Rouge from the refugee camp in Arkansas," Duc says. "The reason I came here is because I have a friend who is an American doctor." Duc, his wife and three of his children spent two months in the refugee camp.

"At that time we didn't know anything at all," he says. "If I could make $200 or $300 a month that would be enough for my family, because we didn't know what our future would be. I didn't know if I could practice here, go back to my profession here.

Duc's friend agreed to act as a sponsor for the family and they were allowed to come to Baton Rouge through the refugee resettlement program. Duc attended college for two years, first in Florida and then in Oklahoma, so he would be allowed to practice medicine here.

"My wife was a lawyer in Vietnam," he says. "But when she came here she had to go working at it. It was very difficult for us to adjust to the new life here, especially the customs are completely different and the language is completely different.

Besides working for the state, Duc still keeps close contact with other Vietnamese through his private medical practice, he says.

"I open my private practice mostly in the evening after state working hours," he says. "They come to my office and I see them."

He has begun organizing other Vietnamese doctors in the Vietnamese Physicians Association, a state organization that now has some 70 members, he says.

When asked what he likes best about America, Duc gives a quick answer:

"Freedom.

Anh-Dung Nguyen, a local engineer, agrees.

"Freedom, I would say, is the most precious thing in life," he says. "In a country like Vietnam right now you don't have much. Very few freedoms. But here you have everything."

Nguyen served as a lieutenant in the South Vietnamese Navy and was a naval academy graduate in engineering. He first left Vietnam to further his education, he says.

"I left Vietnam in 1974, just about a year before the war ended," Nguyen says. "I had a scholarship from the University of Michigan, a joint scholarship between the University of Michigan and the Vietnamese government.

"After working for two companies in Michigan and Pennsylvania, he now works for a local construction company and lives with his wife Thanh-Hai and their three children in subdivision of Hoover Ridge.

"When I came here I came alone," Nguyen says. "My wife and my family were still there. Right after South Vietnam fell to the communists, she tried to get here so she was one of the boat people. At that time our first child was seven months old.

His wife came to the U.S. in August 1977 after spending about six months in refugee camps in the Philippines and in California he says.

"When my wife came I hadn't finished my school yet so at that time it was really hard time," he says. "I worked at night from four until midnight to support my family and pay for school."

"Right after the fall of Vietnam, because there was no existing South Vietnamese government, my scholarship was cut off, so I had to pay all the tuition and other expenses for school," he says. "I was there in OK, because I got the degree in December of 1975 and luckily I got a job right away.

Nguyen says hard work is also the reason Vietnamese usually do well in the free enterprise system in America. "I would say one of the characteristics of the Vietnamese people is hard working, they really work hard," he says. "I think that contributes most to the success of our people here."

"I'm an engineer and, of course, I would like to advance my career," he says. "But I say I'm happy with what I have and what I'm doing.

"But preserving the Vietnamese culture is as important as success in a new culture."

Nguyen says.

"We speak Vietnamese at home," he says. "What we try to do is keep whatever we think we have here at home good and learn from other people what is good."

While some Vietnamese have been able to re-establish old careers and open new ones and others have opened businesses, Thanh Ba Huynh and his wife Nga Nguyen have open Kim-Thanh Jewelry, a fashion jewelry shop and clothing and grocery store that offers imported Asian food and clothing material.

Huynh was a lieutenant in the South Vietnamese Navy until he was captured and jailed by the communists for three years, later escaped, leaving his wife and child in Vietnam, and finally ending up in a refugee camp in Indonesia.

Nga Nguyen later escaped to a camp in Malaysia and was the first of the family to come to America in June 1980.

The family was reunited when Huynh came in September 1980.

Both speak only limited English. Huynh Tran, a Refugee Resettlement Program caseworker, translated for them.

Tran said the couple left Vietnam, even after Huynh was released on parole because they feared further problems with the communists.

"People released by the communists are not safe to live at home," Tran says. "Even if they were released by the communists they keep watching them day after day.

"They think that in the future, the communists would capture them again and put them in jail," Tran says.

"I was afraid the communists would arrest me again so I left my wife," Huynh adds.

Both agree that learning the language was the first big problem they faced in coming to America.

"We do not know how to speak English well," Nga Nguyen says. "When we saw Americans we were so afraid but we tried to learn. We learned English in my country, everyone has to learn the language to be able to survive.

"I could make people to open the store because of the light job market in his newly acquired field of drafting.

"We went to some of our friends who had already opened a store and we learned how to operate businesses. We learned and had some help from my friends."

"I never thought that we would be able to do anything here," Nga Nguyen says. "We had some help from my friends."

"I went to the store, which has been open about six months, is 'so-so' the couple says. And the language barrier is still a problem.

"Right now we learn English from our children," Nga Nguyen says. "They go to school and they come home and teach us."

"A lot of them come over with the typical immigrant's view of the United States, streets paved with gold, the whole bit. It's a little bit disillusioning when they find out that a lot of us have been here working all of our lives and it's still kind of month to month."

Lenora Maatouk