

# The Lion in Fields Corner: Building a Vietnamese Community in the New Boston

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**The Lion in Fields Corner**  
**Building a Vietnamese Community in the New Boston**

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**Thesis Advised by Carlo Rotella**  
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Two hours into the Tet celebration, a pack of young men and women rush in carrying a black duffel bag and giant, fluffy lion's head. Already clad in black martial arts robes, two don sparkling red pants and throw a brilliant yellow cape over their backs. Another pulls a paper mache Buddha-head over his face. In seconds, the students have disappeared within an eight-foot-long-fiery-orange lion and a cheerful, fan-waving Buddha. The lion dance, I am told, is about to begin.

I have been invited to the Tet New Year celebration on January 20, 2006 at the Kit Clark Senior Center in Dorchester because Lanchi Pham, Kit Clark's Vietnamese Liaison, knows I'm writing my senior thesis about Boston's Vietnamese immigrants and Tet is the most important holiday of the Vietnamese calendar. Though the official first day of the Year of the Dog is January 29, there will be a glut of Tet celebrations in the weeks ahead as each neighborhood organization hosts a gathering of their own. Pham drags me around the room, introducing me to seniors and Vietnamese leaders, explaining the exotic decorations, and keeping my plate of Vietnamese food full. The Kit Clark Tet, with about 100 attendees, is small by Boston standards; more than 4,000 are expected at a Tet gathering at the Bayside Expo Center in two weeks. But each celebration has a niche audience, and each teaches me something new about Boston's Vietnamese community, which has just celebrated a 30th anniversary as part of Boston's perpetually evolving immigrant culture.

Thu Truong, a small business counselor at the Vietnamese American Initiative for Development (Viet-AID), starts pounding a traditional Vietnamese drum to a beat that will become very familiar to me during the weeks ahead – ta-ta-tum ta-ta-ta-tum. The

lion crawls up the center aisle, pausing intermittently to bat a giant, feathery eyelash or wag his stubby yellow tail, to the delight of Vietnamese seniors, many dressed in traditional *Aodai* (“long dress” in Vietnamese), who are seated at card tables throughout the room. Buddha teases the dragon with his fan, sometimes bopping him across the nose and all the while drawing him to the center of the room. The lion genuflects before an ancestral altar flanked by the United States and South Vietnamese flags, then rears up onto his hind legs. To accomplish this, the dancer inhabiting the lion’s posterior lifts the forward dancer onto his shoulders. “In Vietnam, the lion might be twelve people long,” Pham tells me. “Then he would do many more tricks.”

As the lion returns to the ground, seniors begin to leave their seats and approach the beast. They crouch down and feed him a steady diet of small red envelopes. The envelopes contain money, and by ingesting their offerings, the lion blesses the giver with a year’s worth of good fortune and prosperity. Tradition states that the lion should spring to life on the backs of young adults, and in Dorchester the beast is powered by students of the Traditional Vietnamese Martial Arts class sponsored by Viet-AID, Fields Corner’s premier Vietnamese community organization. More than 20 teens gather three times a week at the Vietnamese Community Center on Charles Street with dreams of conquering the 18-level path to martial arts mastery. Thu Truong and Bith Than teach the class. Truong came to Boston in 1997 after waiting more than 20 years to leave Vietnam.

Two days after Kit Clark’s Tet, Thu was pounding out the same powerful drumbeat at the St. Ambrose Parish Center during a Tet celebration sponsored by the Vietnamese American Civic Association (VACA), a social service center founded in 1984 as the first few Vietnamese immigrants were trickling into Fields Corner. The

group is also set to perform at Viet-AID, UMass Boston, and the Bayside Expo Center for the Vietnamese Community of Massachusetts' premier Tet gathering.

That these young dancers, born and raised in America, are intimately connected to the traditions of their parents is encouraging to the older generation, and unusual among the children of Vietnamese immigrants. The struggle to preserve Vietnamese culture while integrating their community into the economic, political, and social life of Boston is trying for the Vietnamese. That struggle is aggravated by the failure of the city's elected officials, government services, media, and neighborhood groups to adapt to a growing Vietnamese community in their midst. The Vietnamese are only part of a larger "New Boston," and though the term is recycled and vague, the reality is that as Boston's minority population swells past 50 percent, existing institutions are being forced to rethink their identity, a process that has begun in fits and starts.

The fate of the Vietnamese is not entirely controlled by existing institutions; it will also be self-determined. The Vietnamese have revitalized Fields Corner through entrepreneurship and home ownership, and they have made impressive political gains, particularly over the last 15 years. Yet the poverty rate among Vietnamese residents still hovers close to 40 percent, and significant representation in professional positions, politics, the media, or law enforcement is minimal. Another big hurdle approaches as leadership will be transferred from refugees to their American-born children and the community must take stock of its goals and leadership.

In assessing the prospects of the Vietnamese in the new Boston, it is crucial to understand the separate but intertwined stories of Vietnamese refugees and the city they now inhabit, and the stories of the people who have defined the Vietnamese community

along the way. Mary Truong, Maureen Feeney, and Sam Yoon are three such people.

Mary Truong, a Vietnamese refugee, came to the United States as a teenager in 1975 and several years later arrived in Boston, where she has worked tirelessly for her fellow refugees. Among her accomplishments is a large role in the construction of the Vietnamese American Community Center. Only months ago Truong was elected president of the Dorchester Board of Trade, an optimistic sign of cooperation between the Vietnamese and existing civic organizations.

Sam Yoon was elected an at-large Boston city councilor in 2005, and the Vietnamese in Fields Corner, his home neighborhood, were crucial supporters. Though Yoon is Korean, his accomplishments as an Asian-American have been inspirational to many Vietnamese, and, some have suggested, may have paved the way for a Vietnamese candidate in the future.

Maureen Feeney has been District 3's city councilor for 13 years, and Vietnamese activists, including Truong, have always been a part of her constituency. A lifelong Dorchester resident, Feeney remembers a time when the neighborhood was almost entirely Irish. Rather than wallow in nostalgia, she has embraced her newly arrived constituents, advocating for them on a city-wide, and, on occasion, international scale.

Feeney is one of the dignitaries whom Tram Tran, Vietnamese Liaison to the Boston Police Department, recognizes before VACA's Tet ceremony at St. Ambrose. Tran also singles out Jane Matheson of the Fields Corner CDC, Cuong Nguyen, editor of the *Thang Long* newspaper, and a sheepish writer from the *Dorchester Reporter*.

After the introductions, Tram Tran asks the audience to rise, and a young man sings the national anthem. Parents and children stand attentively, hand to heart. Two

young sisters dressed in pink and purple *Aodai* bounce in time with the music, singing words they've learned in grammar school classrooms. After the end of the familiar saga of bombs bursting in air over the home of the brave, a tape of the anthem of the fallen Republic of South Vietnam is played. As the anthem picks up steam, older Vietnamese come alive, singing boldly along with the tape. The scene is repeated at each Tet celebration and a graphic example of the dualistic patriotism espoused by a people who lost their ancestral homeland fighting a tragically fated war fought alongside American servicemen and found refuge in their comrades' homeland, a nation built by immigrants and democracy thousands of miles away.

A folding table along the back of the stage has, for today, been converted into an altar, flanked by the American flag on the left and by the South Vietnamese "freedom flag" on the right. The second flag, yellow with three horizontal red stripes representing south, central, and north Vietnam, was the official flag of the Republic of Vietnam and remains a source of pride for Vietnamese who fled the dawn of country-wide communism when the Republic dissolved in 1975.

In between lies a cornucopia of fruits and baked goods, symbols of wealth and prosperity to come in the Year of the Dog. Ripe, round watermelons represent the fruitful earth. A box-shaped cake symbolizes humanity. Two bright burning candles represent the presence of Vietnamese ancestors, as does the ornate centerpiece that they guard. The two-foot altarpiece is an embodiment of *To*: literally, the word means grandparents. But *To* also encompasses the hundreds of generations of grandparents who have defined Vietnamese history.

“Wherever we go on the globe, we never forget our past,” says Tran as four *Aodai*-clad elders climb the stage and genuflect before the altar. “We never forget the 4,000 years of history our ancestors have made.”

## **A Story of Ancestors**

To understand the Vietnamese who shop in Fields Corner and jockey for parking spaces along Dorchester Avenue, one must understand their ancestors, who for thousands of years have made their homes on a narrow strip of land nestled against the South China Sea. Vietnam, like Boston, was created by refugees. But unlike Beantown, where 376 years of history are measured in mayoral terms and Red Sox seasons, time in Vietnam is measured in life spans, in the collective experience of ancestors spread across four millennia.

The first permanent inhabitants of Vietnam were migrant Mongolian nomads seeking refuge from persecution in China, as John Winthrop and the passengers of the *Arbella* would seek solace from English persecution on the Shawmut peninsula 3,000 years later. The first Vietnamese resisted conquerors from the North for a thousand years before the Common Era, producing a string of dynasties named Van Lang, Au Lac, and Nam Viet. The history of these kingdoms is preserved only in folklore; not until China’s Han dynasty subjugated the Nam Viet kingdom in 111 B.C. does a written history of the region appear in Chinese documents.

For the next thousand years, the Vietnamese bore the weight of Chinese occupation. China mined its Southeast Asian colony for natural resources, and Vietnam began to look more Chinese; children studied Confucianism and ambitious young adults took civil service exams. The majority of Vietnamese remained desperately poor, a

condition that fueled a rabid desire to protect their unique language and culture. That disposition persists today— As the Vietnamese defended the purity of their culture during external threats from the Chinese and later the Europeans, they also strive to preserve their individuality as immigrants in a new homeland. The challenge lies in balancing a commitment to cultural pride and individuality with a willingness to adopt the skills necessary to live amicably and succeed within a foreign culture.

Living peacefully with the Chinese was not a goal one millennia ago, and after a series of failed uprisings, the Vietnamese aristocracy managed to overthrow the Chinese in 939 C.E. The peasantry's pivotal role in that campaign was an important lesson to communist Ho Chi Minh's Viet Cong as they engineered their own revolution 1,000 years later.

The next 900 years were a time of fragile tranquility in an independent Vietnam, until China's Ming Dynasty re-subjugated the country in 1406. That loss rekindled the memory of 1,000 years of servitude to the Chinese, and they were driven out a decade later.

The first Europeans to visit Vietnam were Portuguese merchants and missionaries who landed in 1535. They pursued their respective goals unchallenged for a hundred years until small contingents of Dutch, English, and French journeymen followed them into North Vietnam. The ruling Trinh and Nguyen families' fierce distrust of foreigners held European presence to a fraction of that established in India and North America. By 1700, the Nguyens were so isolationist that even Portuguese traders had returned to Europe. But as the merchants vanished from the scene, the influence of Dutch and French

missionaries continued to grow. When the death of Vietnamese Emperor Tu Duc in 1883 incited a struggle for power, France came away with a new colony.

For a people who had resisted 15 Chinese invasions, forced servitude to French foreigners quickly provoked a passionate and violent response. Organized rebellion began in the 1920s with the founding of a nationalist, communist movement under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh. Minh was born Nguyen Sinh Cung in 1890 in Nam Dan province, a bucolic region with a long history of resistance to French and Chinese influence. The son of a Confucian scholar, Cung spent his childhood studying the Chinese classics, but he also became intensely patriotic, feelings that hardened into blatant xenophobia as he approached adulthood. After being rejected by the French Colonial School in 1911, Minh (the name Minh gave himself means “aspiring to light”) signed on to a freight ship, traveling the world’s oceans and soaking up what he could at ports in Africa and South America. His maritime adventure even brought him to Boston in 1912. He worked for a time as a pastry chef at the Parker House. Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai made a communist pilgrimage to that hotel 93 years later during his 2005 visit to the United States, a first by a major Vietnamese official since the end of the war that Minh helped to orchestrate.

With France’s attention diverted by World War II, Minh formed the Vietnam Independence League and on Sept. 2 1945 announced the creation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The French agreed to recognize the Viet Minh as the only native Vietnamese political entity, but the Viet Minh were not satisfied. The battle of Haiphong Harbor in November of 1946 became the first struggle of the French-Indochina war.

The eight-year conflict garnered international attention as a battle between communism and democracy and between nationalism and colonialism. With the favor of France and the U.S.A., moderate Vietnamese nationalists formed the Front of National Union under Nguyen Van Sam. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union and the Peoples Republic of China, the world's two communist powers, officially recognized Minh's North Vietnamese government in 1950.

In the United States, the complex French-Indochina conflict boiled down to one crucial issue: the validity of the domino theory, the Cold War-era doctrine that held that if a nation were to fall to communism, adjacent countries would soon follow. To keep the Indochina domino upright the United States poured aid into French-controlled South Vietnam, but defeat was imminent; the French withdrew in 1954. According to the terms of a post-war agreement signed in Geneva, France was to leave Vietnam divided along the 17th parallel: The Viet Minh would control the north while nationalist Ngo Dinh Diem would govern land south of the partition line. This division created nearly a million Vietnamese refugees within the borders of their own country as people fled from north to south. Mostly Catholic or with close ties to the French colonial government, these refugees feared persecution at the hands of the communists. The exodus spawned a vehement Catholic anti-communism that persists to this day. About 10 percent of Boston's Vietnamese are Catholic, and the majority attended St. William's parish in Dorchester until it was closed by the archdiocese in 2004 as parishes were consolidated in the wake of the church abuse scandal. Today, large numbers of Vietnamese Catholics attend St. Mark's on Dorchester Ave. and St. Ambrose in the heart of Fields Corner. Father Daniel Finn, pastor at St. Mark's and himself an immigrant from Ireland, has for

many years lent his support to the Vietnamese Law Community, a group that lobbies to improve conditions and religious freedom in Vietnam. Once a month about 20 middle-aged Vietnamese men meet at the parish center to discuss Vietnamese politics over home-cooked Vietnamese food. Father Finn admits the free dinner might be the group's most practical function.

“We’ve gone to visit Senator John Kerry many times to try to get him to release a bill to the floor of the United States Senate so when they’re discussing an issue of Vietnam and free trade they will put conditions on it that human rights and civil liberties should be a condition of the trade,” said Father Finn. “He wasn’t very cooperative with us. He said, ‘The war is over and you’re wrong, and this is the new deal. American foreign policy is mostly around free trade,’”

American foreign policy towards Vietnam has changed dramatically since the mid-1970s, when the United States recognized anti-communist South Vietnam as the land’s rightful rulers. But Southern credibility suffered under weak presidential leadership and the Viet Minh and their Southern allies, the Viet Cong, steadily escalated their campaign to take control of the entire peninsula. Intensified guerrilla warfare prompted a second major displacement, from the rural countryside to urban centers. In 1961, the population of Saigon was 300,000; by 1975 more than 3 million lived in the city or in the refugee camps that ringed it.

Mindful of the domino theory, the U.S. gradually increased its involvement, providing the South Vietnamese government with money, supplies, and military advisers. The Northern communists continued to funnel support to the Viet Cong, forcing the U.S. to match them with money, and later with men. Many in Boston’s Vietnamese

community, including Thu Truong, were South Vietnamese soldiers trained by the U.S. military. Beginning in 1972, Truong, 55, was part of the South Vietnamese Marine Corps trained by U.S. marines.

By 1966 the U.S. was engaged in open warfare in Vietnam. Afraid to provoke the direct involvement of Russia or China, the U.S. balked at the idea of invading North Vietnam. Instead, U.S. troops dug in for a war of attrition and by the mid-1970s, the war had claimed the lives of almost 57,000 American servicemen and between three and four million Vietnamese soldiers and civilians. Increasingly unpopular in the United States, the conflict seemed hopeless.

In the early months of 1975, the South Vietnamese army lost a string of battles in towns along the coast and was gradually pushed southward. After losing a crucial battle at Xuan-Loc in mid-April, President Thieu resigned. On April 30, 1975, Saigon fell to North Vietnamese troops and control was transferred to the Provisional Revolutionary Government. The United States quickly abandoned its embassy, airlifting all remaining personnel to aircraft carriers and destroyers offshore.

The swiftness with which the North Vietnamese overwhelmed Saigon shocked Vietnamese and American leaders alike. The sudden disintegration of the South Vietnamese government left those Vietnamese most in danger of persecution from the North little time to prepare for a new life outside their homeland, and left nations like the U.S. scrambling to prepare for the flood of immigrants who would soon establish new homes in cities like Boston.

Tens of thousands of South Vietnamese soldiers, politicians, and bureaucrats fought to leave the city, terrified by the threat of persecution. Many who left Vietnam in

1975 had also migrated from North to South after communism had taken root in 1954: Catholics, teachers, journalists, political aides, prominent businessmen, and landowners. Thousands more were made refugees simply because their homes and villages had been razed by 30 years of warfare.

While the South Vietnamese worried about persecution and jockeyed to leave the country, America was slow to respond to their plight. On April 10, 1975, President Gerald Ford said that the U.S. had a plan for evacuation, but if such a plan existed, it was never used. At a hearing of the Senate's Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Refugees and Escapees, the State Department recommended evacuating 3,839 American citizens and their dependents and 17,600 Vietnamese employed by the government. No mention was made of Vietnamese unofficially associated with the United States, or those who had earlier been placed on a State Department "bloodbath" list of those likely to be persecuted. Just four days before the fall of Saigon, there was confusion over the difference between employees and those who would be endangered by the fall of South Vietnam. Lower-level State and Defense Department officials and embassy employees circumvented the faltering bureaucracy to construct a network to transport to the Philippines those who wished to leave.

After the communists took Saigon, Thu Truong returned to his family and waited for the worst. Just weeks later, he learned that the Communists were requiring all South Vietnamese soldiers to report to "re-education classes" to cleanse them of their military training and re-program them with Communist ideals. The number of classes, Thu recalls, would supposedly depend on the rank one had achieved. Thu, a second lieutenant,

did not believe his re-education would be particularly lengthy. When he reported for class, he sensed immediately that something was terribly wrong.

“You go to those classes, you not coming back,” Thu said.

The “classes” were in fact a means of collecting ex-soldiers and officers before banishing them to prison camps. Thu spent five and a half years in a communist prison and, he says, some current Dorchester residents fared much worse. The one truth the communists told was that the higher a soldiers’ rank, the longer they would keep him.

After he was released, Thu’s stay in prison and “criminal” record made it nearly impossible for him to find work and support his wife and two young sons. He applied for permission to emigrate, but it would be 17 years before he was approved. He spent the 1980s earning money any way he could— garbage collector, day laborer, cook. In the mid-1990s, he founded a calendar company with several other ex-prisoners. The company printed custom-made desk and wall calendars. In 1997, a change in immigration policy helped Thu secure the clearance for which he had waited so long. He moved his family to Boston, where he knew friends and had heard the education was superb. He studied at UMass-Boston and took a job at Viet-AID, applying skills he had learned at the calendar company to a position as a small business counselor.

Though Mary Truong is several years younger than Thu, she came to America much earlier. The night Saigon fell to the communists, Mary Truong’s father told his nine children that they would have to leave for the United States. “Let’s pack up and leave for America,” she remembers her father saying. “What? Impossible, Dad!” Mary, just 15 at the time, said incredulously. “What about everything we own here? What about your family, relatives, the wealth, and my friends and dolls?”

“You are too young to understand,” her father replied. “When you’re older you will appreciate what I’m telling you know. It’s most important to have family together. It’s most important to live spiritually, not materialistically.”

Truong says she was too young to understand her father’s wisdom, but she trusted him, making only one request: “Okay Dad, but can I take my dolls and my American dictionary?”

That balance of style and practicality has stayed with Truong to this day, and the dolls she brought with her were more than children’s toys; they were a reminder of her mother. When Mary asked for a doll, her mother purchased two from the Sears Roebuck catalog: one black, one white.

When the package was delivered, Truong’s excitement turned from excitement to confusion as she peeled back the wrapping. “Mom, this is just a doll right?” Mary asked. “Because there’s no one that looks like this.” Her mother replied, “Child, this is exactly why I bought you this, so you would understand that there are diverse people in the world, that they look different from you, but we are all the same, with the same needs, just a different skin color.”

It was one of many lessons that Truong says she learned from her mother before she died in 1972, when Truong was 12 years old.

Truong’s father was a wealthy businessman in Tay Ninh, a city about 60 miles from Saigon. In the early 1970s, the Viet Cong started sending him death threats and asking for money. He laughed off the threats, and refused to be extorted.

One day Truong was driving home from a relative's house with her parents and six-year-old brother. As they sped past a movie theater, a communist sniper took aim at her father.

"If my father was not such a fast driver, the bullet would have hit him," Truong recalled. "We didn't see anything, and all of a sudden my brother cried, and we all looked. He was bleeding from the back. My father got out of the car and shouted, 'Who shot my baby?' But we didn't hear any word from my mother. She was already unconscious. The bullet had hit her, penetrating her rib cage from left to right, and landed in my brother's back. She saved his life."

Mary's mother was taken by helicopter to a nearby military hospital, where an American doctor performed emergency surgery to stop her internal bleeding. In his haste, the surgeon left an inch-long shard of scalpel lodged in her chest cavity. Over the next two years the piece migrated toward her esophagus, impairing her ability to eat, and eventually causing her death.

"My father felt that the American doctors had already been so kind," said Truong. "Vietnam is not about suing or blaming, but about accepting it happened, and just moving on. He told us if anyone asks you how mom died, just tell them cancer. Later on he told us the truth when we came to America, when we were older. He showed us the x-ray, the incision knife that was in her rib cage."

Truong believes that she owes her success in the United States to her mother's presence as a guardian angel.

Mary attended a Catholic high school in Pittsburgh, where her father settled after leaving Vietnam. She remembers being the only Asian student in her high school class as

a formative exercise in balancing acculturation with cultural pride. Her Vietnamese first name is Ngoc, which means pearl. She says her name prompted classmates to ridicule her with choruses of “knock knock” as she walked through the halls. The school’s principal pulled Truong into her office one day and recommended she take an English name to diffuse the situation. Truong agreed and chose Mary, in honor of her mother, a devout Catholic. The nickname stuck, and Mary learned to weave her Vietnamese and English names together with pride. When she met me for coffee at the Green Hills Bakery, she was wearing a large, gold brooch bearing the letter “M” on her blazer, and a string of pearls around her neck; a way to bear two names at all times. “You remember your roots,” she said. “No matter what, you remember what your name means.”

After high school Truong moved to Boston to study business at Northeastern University. She lived in Brighton, where much of the Vietnamese community was concentrated at that time, and began to organize Tet celebrations and cultural shows. After a year, she realized she enjoyed people more than numbers, and transferred to UMass-Boston to study sociology.

In the mid-1980s, ambitious Vietnamese patriarchs and hopeful entrepreneurs turned their eyes to the dilapidated storefronts and abandoned three-deckers of Dorchester’s Fields Corner neighborhood. Where many former residents saw a neighborhood torn apart by racial tensions and languishing commerce, enterprising Vietnamese saw an investment. They began to move into the neighborhood, and community activists like Mary started, slowly at first, to develop a network of social services that would address the needs of their new community.

At a community meeting in 1981, Truong met Nam Pham. Pham had also come from Vietnam in 1975, settling Minneapolis with his parents. He attended the University of Minnesota and came to Boston to get a masters degree from the Kennedy School of Government. When Pham and Truong married in 1987, they became an energetic power couple in their young community, connected to virtually every Vietnamese organization and to movers and shakers within the Vietnamese community and beyond. One of those longtime allies is Maureen Feeney.

“I can hardly think of a time when I didn’t know Mary,” said Feeney, who has represented District 3, which includes Fields Corner, on the Boston City Council since 1993. Equally gregarious and dedicated, they struck up a natural friendship soon after Feeney’s election.

In February of 2006, Mary Truong was elected President of the Dorchester Board of Trade, the first time a Vietnamese person has held that post. Feeney attends every Board of Trade Meeting, and had only positive things to say about Truong’s qualifications for the job.

“She’s such a high energy, positive person,” said Feeney. “She’s a doer and definitely makes things happen. I don’t know how she’s going to extend herself to manage this new role; I might have to take notes. But, you know what they say: If you want something done, ask a busy person.”

Feeney knows, because she is busy, too. If more than three people gather in District 3 to confront a rise in crime or bestow congratulations, Feeney is there. She was a conspicuous presence at every Tet celebration, sporting a mint green *Aodai* made from fabric hand-selected by Mary Truong when she went back to Vietnam in 2003. At the

VACA celebration, Feeney handed little red envelopes containing a penny to throngs of anxious youngsters. At Kit Clark, she pumped the hand of every senior in the room, whether Vietnamese, Haitian, or Irish. She has taken Tip O’Neill’s famous phrase “All politics is local” as absolute truth and has stuck with what works. Her political style is a throwback to the early 20th century, when people called the mayor for a job and local politicians walked the streets shaking hands. She says she owes her political instincts to her parents, who taught her to respect elected officials long before she considered becoming a candidate herself. The first wake Feeney ever attended was that of Boston’s legendary Mayor James Michael Curley in 1958. When Jack Kennedy was assassinated five years later, the Feeney family packed up their car in the middle of the night and drove to Washington D.C. to view the president’s casket as he lay in state in the Capitol Rotunda.

Feeney lives in Lower Mills, but Fields Corner is in the heart of her district, and she understands the changes that have taken place there over the last half century. “When the first waves of boat people came in with fists full of cash, they were buying all kinds of houses, and there was all kinds of crime,” recalled Feeney. “For many, it was horrifying. The next wave were great people, with great families. I sometimes wonder where Fields Corner would be if they hadn’t arrived.”

Tom Gannon wonders, too. Gannon, a lifelong Fields Corner resident, is the president of the Fields Corner Civic Association and works for the city’s Department of Neighborhood Development.

“I began to notice that people in my neighborhood looked different than me when I was eight, ten years old, but the neighborhood then was mostly monolithic: it was Irish,

Jewish, and Italian,” said Gannon. During the racial riots of the late 1960s and the busing crisis of the 1970s, Gannon watched many of his neighbors move to the suburbs. The humming residential neighborhood of his boyhood was transformed from a village dominated by working-class Irish and Italians into a decrepit corridor of abandoned homes, with predominantly African-American residents. While many of his childhood friends have followed the MBTA’s Red Line outbound to Quincy and Braintree, Gannon has stayed, and in 1990 he helped found the Fields Corner Civic Association. He has been “mayor of Dorchester” in the Dorchester Day Parade (a title bestowed on the person who raises the most money to support the parade), has lobbied against the poor quality of stores in the Fields Corner Mall, and has worked to encourage civic participation among the neighborhood’s ever-growing number of Vietnamese merchants.

In mid-December 2005, Gannon walked from his City Hall office across Congress Street to Faneuil Hall for a Ford Hall Forum lecture titled, “Finding a Voice in a New Homeland.” Nam Pham and Hiep Chu, who only days before had been named executive director of Viet-AID, were two of the panelists who discussed the past successes and future challenges facing Boston’s 30-year-old Vietnamese community. Moderator Peter Kiang of the Asian American Studies Institute at UMass Boston pointed out that the venue was fitting; many thousands of immigrants have become U.S. citizens in the historic building’s Great Hall, including hundreds of Vietnamese.

After Pham and Chu concluded their remarks, Kiang opened the forum to questions, and Gannon approached a microphone to ask what kind of outreach was needed to bring Vietnamese business owners into existing groups like the civic association. It was a heartfelt question from a man accustomed to change in his

neighborhood. Sprawled wooden bench before the program began, Gannon talked about how the Vietnamese have reshaped the neighborhood he loves.

“In the 1970s the number of business in Fields Corner being owned by African-Americans grew,” said Gannon. “We had a small influx of Cape Verdean people. Somewhere in the mid-1990s the Vietnamese community really picked up steam.”

Gannon emphasized that Vietnamese acculturation is just a new chapter in Boston’s continuing story. “It’s been happening since I was little, and the Vietnamese have been no different than many of the other groups moving into the city.”

### **In Search of the New Boston**

Boston is a city of immigrants. The cultural landscape of the city has evolved as drastically as the city’s shoreline, as bold urban visionaries have pushed back the Atlantic and industrious immigrants have found work and raised families on the newly created land. Some 400 years ago, the land where the Freedom Trail and Fenway Park now stand was little more than a swamp at the mouth of the Charles and Mystic Rivers.

European fishing vessels trolling the bountiful Grand Banks reached New England in the 16th century, but it wasn’t until the early 1600s that Europeans established a permanent settlement in New England with the foundation of the Plimoth Colony in 1620. The original new Boston began a decade later, when a group of Puritan aristocrats led by John Winthrop purchased the rights to a commercial land agreement called the “Charter of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay in New England” with the intention of creating a haven for Puritans. Puritans had been harshly persecuted in England since Elizabeth I had established the Anglican Church as the official religion of the country, as South Vietnamese would later be persecuted in communist Vietnam for their religious or

political beliefs. In 1630, almost 1,000 emigrants boarded 11 vessels bound for Massachusetts Bay.

Winthrop established a small colony in Charlestown, but brackish water and illness pestered the fledgling community. Reverend William Blackstone, who had built his home on the higher ground of the Shawmut Peninsula, persuaded Winthrop to move his settlement across the Charles. By autumn, Winthrop and 150 others had become Boston's first immigrants group, establishing their First Church and making their new town the capital of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Under Puritan leadership Boston became an industrious Atlantic seaport as the central gateway between New England farmers and fur traders and the English marketplace. As the city grew, so did its cosmopolitan sensibilities and reputation as the "Athens of America." Boston Latin became America's first public school in 1635, and Harvard, the first university, followed in 1636. This rich tradition has proved attractive to Vietnamese immigrants, who value the education of their children above almost all else and is one of the primary reasons Vietnamese immigrants chose to settle in Boston. More than one Vietnamese merchant with a store along Dorchester Avenue has said he chose Fields Corner because he knew that at the other end of the Red Line were MIT, Tufts, and Harvard.

In the next century, Boston became a flashpoint for the American Revolution. As the aftermath of that revolution turned a British colony into a commonwealth of the newly independent United States of America, immigrants kept coming. Boston's population, 18,000 in 1790, had reached 45,000 by the 1820s. Though these new arrivals

included a sprinkling of Irish Protestants, Sephardic Jews, and Germans, English descendants ruled Boston and Massachusetts until the middle of the 19th century.

The only other ethnic people with a significant presence in the city prior to the 1800s were African slaves. The first slaves reached New England in 1638, and although Boston's industrial economy never relied on slave labor as did the Southern plantations, they constituted a quiet presence. In a 1754 census, 900 slaves over the age of 16 were counted in Boston, 9 percent of the city's population. But their small numbers and relatively civil living conditions were overshadowed by activity on the docks; thousands of African hostages passed through the Boston Harbor on their way to Southern colonies and the West Indies. Boston's Puritan conscience afforded slaves who stayed within the city the right to buy and sell property and to trial by a jury. By 1784 Massachusetts had abolished slavery, and African-Americans began to form their own community around Copp's Hill in the North End. Their small ranks made them a benign intrusion to the city's dominant whites, and over time they obtained a position of prominence in city life. Two African-Americans were elected to the State Legislature and one to the city council in 1876, a presence African-Americans maintained in both governing bodies until the close of the 19th century. By then, displaced Southern African-Americans had started to swell that constituency, forever changing their relationship with Boston's whites.

Thomas H. O'Connor, the University Historian of Boston College, has spent a career unearthing his city's layered history, and several of his books are considered integral to the authoritative story of Boston. In November 2005, he discussed the concept of a new Boston and the role Vietnamese immigrants have played in its most recent incarnation. O'Connor believes that there are four distinct "new Boston" epochs in the

city's history. The first began in the 1820s, when 30,000 Irish Catholics made their way to Massachusetts. By 1830, the presence of 8,000 Irish within Boston's city limits had incited serious anti-Catholic sentiment among the city's Puritan old guard, and tensions occasionally boiled over into riots or rallies.

In the 1840s and 1850s, the steady stream of Irish arrivals became a deluge. Potato blight swept across the Ireland in 1847, destroying the only source of sustenance and livelihood for millions of farmers. The subsequent "Great Famine" prompted a mass exodus of desperately poor Irish to the New World, and many landed in Boston. By 1850, 35,000 Irish were living in Boston; in 1855 they numbered 50,000 in a city of 160,000 residents. Long before achieving acculturation and political power, said O'Connor, the Irish changed Boston with their sheer numbers. "The Irish had created, whether you thought it was good or bad, a new city," said O'Connor.

As the number of Irish spilling into the Hub swelled, so did nativist sentiments against them. Storefronts and newspaper ads carried the acronym N.I.N.A. (No Irish Need Apply), a harsh ostracism that has been immortalized in the anecdotes of successful third-and fourth-generation politicians and businessmen. That resentment made assimilation and socio-economic improvement difficult, but there were early successes.

"The Irish in Boston had been members of the Democratic Party since the days of Jefferson, but they never got anywhere until the end of the Civil War," said O'Connor. "The tide turned when a young man named Patrick Collins formed the Young Men's Democratic Club." Collins had left Ireland with his parents during the famine, settling first in Chelsea and finally in Boston. Collins joined the local Democratic Party in 1867 and was elected to the State Legislature. In 1868, the Young Men's Democratic Club—

lawyers, bankers, and other young Irishmen who had attained some prominence in the city— held its first meeting at the Parker House. From then on, the Parker House meetings provided a chance to talk politics and enter Irishmen in favorable elections.

The club was similar to the Vietnamese Election Committee founded in 2005 by Dai Nguyen and a group of established Vietnamese businessmen. Nguyen used the group to drum up support for Mayor Thomas M. Menino and City Council President Michael Flaherty in that year's municipal election. A 1995 graduate of Boston College, Dai understands the power of political alignment. He met Flaherty and Menino while working as a home inspector for the city of Boston, and while he has moved on to a position in Brookline, he maintains a reverence for the power brokers who reign over his Dorchester neighborhood. To staff the committee, Dai solicited the help of men whose previous political activities revolved around disconnected efforts to end to communism in Vietnam. But Dai is among a growing number of Vietnamese who understand the impact local politics has on his community, and potentially his career; Flaherty is considered a frontrunner in the 2009 mayoral race, and should he rise to higher office, he may reward Dai's efforts with a position in his administration.

Dai and the committee called every Vietnamese surname in the Boston phone book, asking residents to vote and urging them to consider the mayor and council president. Both Flaherty and Menino were reelected, and Dai has plans to turn the committee into a broader Vietnamese American Political Task Force, with the goal of electing a Vietnamese official. It's a deft strategic step for Dai and the community, and one that will require a good deal of patience. Only after 16 years of modest successes did

the efforts of Patrick Collins' Democratic Club pay off; Hugh O'Brien, the immigrant founder of the Shipping and Commercial List, became Boston's first Irish mayor in 1884.

"Collins realized that if the Irish were going to get anywhere, they had to be organized," said O'Connor. "He knew that like today, people weren't going to reach out and say 'you know, we should have an Irish person, or we should have a Vietnamese person, in office.' It needed to be planned."

By the dawn of the 20th century, the persistent Irish had become a political force. Their next conquest was the School Committee, which they ruled through two world wars and the busing crisis of the 1970s until the citizens of Boston voted in 1989 to shift the committee from a 13-member elected panel to a 7-member appointed body. According to that referendum, "the mayor shall strive to appoint individuals who reflect the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of the city." Today three African-Americans, three whites, and one Latino sit on the committee.

Irish immigration continued well into the 1900s at more modest levels. As the Irish found work, raised their families, and became a part of the political and economic life of the city, a second wave of new Bostonians was moving into the Hub. Southern European, Jewish, founded the second new Boston and Chinese immigrants, who arrived between 1880 and 1920 to further diversify a city that was once entirely Puritan. While successful Irish immigrants were moving out to 'streetcar suburbs' like Brighton, Dorchester, and West Roxbury, thousands of Italians made the North End over as a little Italy, and Jews from Eastern Europe populated the West End, the South End, Roxbury, and Mattapan.

The Chinese arrived in 1880 and quickly established a Chinatown similar to that in other major American cities, where they could preserve their distinct cultural and religious traditions. They were the first voluntary non-European immigrants to arrive in Boston in significant numbers, only one of the differences that separated these late 19th century arrivals from their Irish predecessors in the 1850s.

“There are at least two distinctive things about the Irish,” said O’Connor. “Most of them could or did speak English, and most of them did have some conventional idea of constitutional government, democratic government, the Magna Carta, whatever.” In comparison, O’Connor said, none of the new Jewish or Chinese arrivals were native English speakers, or had been exposed to democratic politics, making assimilation much more difficult. Jewish and Chinese immigrants were also the first non-Christians to weave their way into the fabric of Boston’s increasingly multi-ethnic identity. Similar roadblocks face the contemporary Vietnamese community. A daunting language barrier and experience living under a decidedly undemocratic government give the Vietnamese much more in common with these Chinese and Jewish immigrants than with the Irish who preceded them.

Jewish and Chinese immigrants, much like the Vietnamese, showed a quick affinity for studiousness, hard work, and entrepreneurship. They never embraced the bravado of politics as did the Irish and Italians. Still, there have been points at which the interests of the two groups intersected. In the 1980s, recalls City Councilor Sam Yoon, Taiwan donated a large Chinese gate to Boston’s Chinatown community, but the materials were banished to a warehouse and lost in the bureaucratic shuffle. It took Chinatown community activist Frank Chin, who worked as purchasing agent in the

administrations of four Boston mayors, to persuade Mayor Raymond Flynn, an Irish-American, to have the gate erected at the intersection of Beach Street and Surface Road.

“That was directly because of electoral pressure Frank Chin put on Ray Flynn. He said ‘how many votes do you want out of Chinatown? When are you going to build that gate?’” Yoon says with a laugh. “There are people in that community who understand how that works. And the Vietnamese community, I think, is going to get to that stage.”

Maureen Feeney thinks so, too. Over coffee at the Minot Mudhouse in late March 2005, she said that she’s even considered advocating for the construction of a physical symbol of the extensive and positive impact the Vietnamese have had in Fields Corner. “I would love to do something like we have in Chinatown, like a gateway,” Feeney said. “Some people might be annoyed with that, but it’s really the only truly ethnic part of Dorchester we have, because almost every single business there is Vietnamese.”

In a sense, such a monument already exists. In 2002, the Vietnamese American Community Center opened on Charles Street, the culmination of almost a decade of planning. After Viet-AID was formed in 1994, the construction of a community center to house the new non-profit organization and serve as a broader gathering place for the Fields corner community became a top priority.

“I was approached by a group of people involved in VACA and Viet-AID about building a Vietnamese Cultural Center,” Feeney recalls. “I will be honest with you: I was a disbeliever. I said, ‘well, even if we help you find the site, where are you going to find this money?’ They said, ‘If we find a site, we’ll get the money.’ I think in three years’ time, they had the money.”

With Feeney's help, the city of Boston did find space for the construction of a community center, a vacant Charles Street lot to the rear of the Fields Corner T station.

"At the time we were just grateful anyone would spend any time on Charles Street, because it was such a bad place," said Feeney.

In addition to Viet-AID, the center houses Close to Home, a domestic violence advocacy nonprofit, a daycare center, and a branch of Kit Clark Senior Services. A function room holds traditional Vietnamese martial arts classes, and, increasingly, plays host to events for the larger community. State Representative Marie St. Fleur, who entered the race for lieutenant governor in early 2005 then quickly withdrew in the wake of *Boston Globe* reports about her unpaid loans and taxes, held a meeting at the community center to apologize to her constituents. And in mid-March, Mayor Menino used the space to announce that Fields Corner Main Streets, the local branch of his business district improvement initiative, was receiving a grant from a new corporate "buddy." Academics have wondered aloud whether the center's symbolism is strong enough to persuade the Vietnamese to invest permanently in the neighborhood rather than move out to Quincy or more remote South Shore suburbs, as so many immigrants have done before them.

Some 75 years ago, Fields Corner emerged as a suburban Irish enclave, while Boston's downtown area swelled with Chinese, Italian, and Jewish immigrants. While the Chinese were building Chinatown and the Italians were opening spaghetti houses in the North End, a quieter new community began to grow in the South End. Boston's African-American population had always been small in comparison to that in cities of comparable size, but after the Civil War, emancipated southern slaves began migrating to northern

industrial centers. Modest numbers made their way as far as Boston, a city they associated with abolitionists and freedom. The new arrivals found little encouragement from the city's more established "Black Brahmins." The Brahmins moved to distant enclaves like Roxbury Dorchester, and the South End became the focal point of the new African-American community. Years later, those South End residents would, too, move to Roxbury and Dorchester neighborhoods like Fields Corner, only to be met in the 1980s by immigrants like the Vietnamese and Cape Verdeans.

"Before the 1960s, African Americans were becoming a force in Boston, and that becomes evident for the first time in the election of Kevin White [in 1967]," said O'Connor. "Never before had any consideration been given to race as a political factor." In fact, White's outreach to the African-American community, in retrospect a modest effort, earned him the title "Mayor Black."

The third new Boston, perhaps the most familiar to historians and urban connoisseurs, was brewing years before Kevin White, then Massachusetts' Secretary of State, announced his mayoral candidacy. The only definition of "new Boston" that does not refer to the arrival of a new ethnic group denotes the complete overhaul of the city's physical image that took place in the mid 20th century. In his book "Building a New Boston," O'Connor chronicles the city's transformation from a "hopeless backwater," to quote one of his chapter headings, to a sparkling new metropolis. By 1950, Boston was suffering from acute urban decay. By the end of World War II, much of the city's industry-based economy had moved elsewhere and the intense socio-political rivalry between Boston's Irish and Yankee factions had immobilized both parties' agendas.

“I measure new Boston as beginning the year after John Hynes beat James Curley,” said O’Connor, referring to the 1949 mayoral election in which Hynes edged out Curley’s notorious political machine. “Hynes was willing to collaborate with the Yankees. The Yankees had the money, and the Irish had the power. If you were going to improve the city, you were going to pull those groups together.”

The contemporary Vietnamese community has made a similar compromise. Unapologetically conservative Vietnamese community leaders have thrown their support behind liberal Boston mayors and city councilors because they recognize that achieving their goals at a neighborhood level does not necessarily necessitate sacrificing their larger ideology.

Twenty years and two mayors later, Boston had undergone a major physical transformation. Downtown and the Back Bay had been revitalized by the creation of new structures such as the Prudential Center, the John Hancock building, and an architecturally controversial City Hall. Suburbanites began returning to the city center for shopping and entertainment.

But this renewal came at a high price. The West End, with a multi-ethnic history as varied as that of the city itself, was destroyed by redevelopment. Residents of the largely African-American South End felt marginalized by the alteration of their neighborhood and threatened by the first signs of gentrification. The dissatisfaction of these groups and the arrival of yet another group of immigrants within the city set the stage for another, labored, rebirth.

The 1960s brought a storm of cultural upheaval and civil rights struggle to the United States, and in Boston, much of that tension spilled over into the busing crisis of

the 1970s. The issue came to a head in 1971 with the construction of Dorchester's Joseph E. Lee Elementary School. In an effort to ensure that the school contained a balanced student body, it had been built near the border of Dorchester's traditional black and white neighborhoods on the edge of Franklin Park. But a well-meaning and ill-planned busing dispersal program called B-BURG had drastically shifted that invisible boundary (whites were fleeing the district in droves), and the school was set to open in an overwhelmingly black community. African-American parents at the Lee school, seeing only black faces in most classrooms, joined forces with the NAACP to sue the school committee for maintaining a segregated system. In 1972, *Morgan v. Hennigan* entered Federal District Court in Boston.

Two years later, Judge Arthur W. Garrity ruled in favor of the plaintiffs: Boston had been "unconstitutionally segregated" by the school committee. A state-prepared desegregation plan would begin in the fall of 1974. The next three years were tumultuous. The working-class Irish residents of Charlestown and South Boston fought a bitter anti-busing battle against Judge Garrity's court order, and African Americans from Roxbury and the South End often responded vehemently. Protests, marches, and seething encounters escalated to outright violence as Boston's children were bused from one end of the city to another, exposing broader racial tensions for the world to see.

In the midst of this cultural and racial upheaval, the end of a conflict thousands of miles away brought a new wave of immigrants to a city in crisis. The South Vietnamese capital of Saigon fell to North Vietnamese forces on April 30 1975, signaling the end of American involvement in that tainted conflict and the beginning of a long journey for displaced South Vietnamese soldiers, government officials, and professionals, a handful

of whom found their way to Boston's Chinatown through state and local resettlement agencies.

As the government stumbled into preparations for refugees from South Vietnam, a Harris poll conducted a month after the fall of Saigon found that only 36 percent of Americans thought the United States should accept Southeast Asian refugees; 54 percent said they should be excluded from the country. U.S. congressman Burt Talcott of California, where the largest number of Vietnamese in America now live said, "Damn it, we have too many Orientals."

The reception in Boston was also less than welcoming. The busing crisis dominated local political, media, and legal energy. "If those beautiful Vietnamese children came to Boston, for example, they would receive the same racist treatment given to most people of color in our city," Shephard Bliss, a professor at Radcliffe College, wrote in an April 28, 1975 piece in the *Globe*. He was referring to a controversial U.S. plan to airlift 2,000 Vietnamese orphaned by the war to the United States for adoption by American families. Thousands of babies were left behind, and there was suspicion that some had been given up to ease their parents' flight from Vietnam. "The differences, cultural and otherwise, are so great between our two countries," Bliss wrote. "Leave them alone!"

For a while, it appeared that Bliss might get his way. The 1980 census counted only 3,172 Vietnamese in all of Massachusetts. Nevertheless, white flight in the face of gentrification and racial turmoil were corroding neighborhoods like Fields Corner in a way that set the stage for yet another major change.

“As all of this was going on, you had the beginnings of a new ‘New Boston,’” said O’Connor.

### **Media and the “New” New Boston**

As Tram Tran recites the names of local dignitaries who have turned out for VACA’s Tet celebration at St. Ambrose, one would be hard pressed to identify Cuong Nguyen, CEO of the Vietnamese language *Thang Long* newspaper. Maureen Feeney and Jane Matheson stand and wave to the crowd, but as Cuong’s name is called he continues fumbling with the snarl of cameras dangling from his neck, trying to snap pictures of the other guests before they return to their seats. As the festival moves on, Cuong snaps photo after photo of singers, sword twirlers, speakers, and revelers. He’ll repeat that routine at the Expo Center and a handful of other celebrations, capturing images to pad the pages of his thickest issue of the year. The Tet season is his busiest, when *Thang Long*’s circulation doubles from 10,000 to 20,000 copies. That means twice as much work for Cuong, who is the paper’s lone reporter, photographer, editor, and publisher.

Cuong studied literature at a Vietnamese university in the late 1970s, then fled the country for fear of persecution by the communists. He arrived in Florida in 1983 and moved to Boston several years later. His background in language arts and passionate anti-communism drove him to found *Thang Long* in 1989. “There are two goals made me decide to found the paper,” Cuong said in an e-mail interview. “Make a living and second, criticism of Communists.”

Cuong says the Fields Corner community wasn’t large enough to support a paper in 1989, and it quickly folded. He revived it in 1992, and circulation has grown as the Vietnamese population has increased. *Thang Long*, which means “flying dragon,” was

the ancient capital of Vietnam. Today, Thang Long has been re-named Hanoi and become the capital of communist Vietnam.

Cuong writes most of the paper's articles himself, and he also trades stories with Vietnamese papers in California and Texas. He says that no more than a third of the paper's content deals with local issues, and that the focus is instead on heavy advocacy for an end to communism in Vietnam. As a result, Cuong's audience is comprised almost entirely of mature Vietnamese with painful memories of life under communism. Month after month, Cuong editorializes the evils of a communist Vietnam to readers converted long ago. Meanwhile, he says, younger Vietnamese have trouble accessing the paper's one-track ideology and relating it to their culturally complicated lives.

"The younger audience, many of them do not speak Vietnamese! Only older generation reads Vietnamese," wrote Cuong. "Most younger, growing up here, they are mainstream, mostly read American papers to get news. The older do not read English, they turn to my paper to find out when the Communists are dead!"

But if the younger generation is turning to English-language news outlets, Cuong does not feel that local media have responded with attentive coverage or staff positions.

"Have you been read Boston Globe lately? They don't even have news of the Chinese New Year!"

"New Bostonians embrace an old rite of passage," read a headline in the November 9, 2005 edition of *The Boston Globe*. The night before, minority voters had made a strong showing at polling places across the city to exercise their civic duty in Boston's mayoral and at-large city council races. Yvonne Abraham, who covers immigrants for the *Globe*, interviewed newly registered voters at the Vietnamese

American Community Center for the article, concluding that the election was a triumph for “new Boston” voters.

A perennial and ambiguous term, “new Boston” was invoked time and again during the campaign season by political candidates and journalists in a race that saw the election of Boston’s first Asian-American politician, at-large City Councilor Sam Yoon.

This most recent incarnation of the term can be traced to 2000, when the U.S. Census reported that the majority of Boston residents were nonwhite. That statistical milestone is part of a demographic that has been shifting since the 1960s and 70s, when racial and economic turmoil sent many of the city’s increasingly established white immigrant groups to the suburbs, leaving the heart of the city to hold-outs and an increasing percentage of African Americans and Puerto Ricans.

The city’s burgeoning nonwhite contingent was amplified by an infusion of Haitian, Cape Verdean, and Vietnamese that began in the 1970s. As the Vietnamese community has grown and its tenure in Boston crosses the 30-year mark, the city’s media establishment, and in particular the *Globe*, have begun to take notice. Their coverage of the Vietnamese may not be exhaustive, a problem aggravated by the lack of a Vietnamese speaker on staff and a generally overextended newsroom. But the paper’s heart respects the struggle of these newest Bostonians.

Today, Boston’s paper of record is a cornerstone of the city establishment, but it, too, was once a newcomer. At the time of its creation, the *Globe* survived as a voice for immigrants. Founded in 1872 as a platform for “intelligent and dignified discussion of political and social ethics,” Publisher Charles H. Taylor knew that many Yankees turned to the well-established *Evening Transcript* for their daily dose of intellectualism. So, to

stay afloat, Taylor, himself a Republican, aimed the paper at the new Boston: Irish, Catholic, and Democratic. It's a lesson many astute Republican Vietnamese leaders, like Mary Truong and Nam Pham, have learned today. To survive in Boston, you have to play ball with Irish, Catholic, Democratic politicians.

Taylor's *Globe* refused to print ads with N.I.N.A. stipulations and editorialized in favor of allowing priests in Boston's hospitals to administer last rights. The paper limped into the 20th century just out of the red in a market with 13 morning and evening papers. Some, like the *Transcript*, died with their stilted Yankee readers. Others, like the Republican *Herald*, emerged with the growth of suburbs. The *Globe* preserved a tentative balance between two worlds: While the majority of the top editors and managers remained Yankees, Irish, and occasionally Jewish or Italian, reporters found their way into the newsroom. A similar dichotomy exists today. While the paper boasts a healthy percentage of minority employees, only a handful of top editors are minorities, and no Vietnamese-speaking person is on staff.

By the 1960s, a steady deflation in Yankee readership and the increasing support of suburban readership had effectively limited competition for daily readers to the *Globe* and *Herald*. By 1957 the *Globe* had the largest in-city circulation in a city that was older, poorer, and increasingly minority. In 1965 Thomas Winship was named editor-in-chief and charged with the task of challenging the *Herald*'s impressive suburban readership. Under Winship's aggressive direction, the paper became Boston's flagship news source and a nationally recognized institution. *Globe* reporters were involved in exposing the Pentagon Papers and uncovering the Watergate scandal, and the paper editorialized against the Vietnam War as early as 1967. The day before Saigon fell to the communists

on April 30 1975, the *Globe* criticized the structure of a federal bill that would provide over \$300 million in humanitarian for refugees and war victims in an editorial titled “Help all the Vietnamese:”

“It is a poor bill which could make matters worse instead of better and might be too late to be effective anyway... We simply continue to deal with the people of Vietnam as though some are enemies and some are friends... We dragged down foe as well as ally in that futile conflict. Now it is time to stop worrying about saving face and to help all the victims.”

Winship had revived Taylor’s advocacy for the underprivileged, a commitment that drew passionate criticism during the busing crisis of the 1970s. In 1967 *The Globe* broke a 72-year ban on political endorsements to back Kevin White over Louise Day Hicks for mayor, and editorials supporting court-ordered busing literally drew gunfire at the *Globe* newsroom along Morrissey Boulevard. The *Globe* had shed its century-old allegiance to Irish immigrants and their descendents to advocate for a non-white contingent that would increasingly redefine the city.

Some of the *Globe*’s legacy began to erode in 1993 when the paper was bought by the New York Times Company, one of the earliest changes in an industry already feeling the effects of a rapidly evolving media climate. In recent years, declining circulation has prompted major cutbacks at the paper, including a series of large-scale buyout initiatives that have stripped the newsroom of many editors and writers with vital institutional memory. Today, there are few *Globe* journalists who were working at the paper during the busing crisis or the initial arrival of Vietnamese immigrants in the Hub.

But changes in staffing and ownership have not eroded the paper's commitment to immigrants and minorities. When City Councilor Dapper O'Neil was caught on camera during the 1992 Dorchester Day Parade remarking with disgust that Fields Corner was beginning to look like "Saigon, for Crissakes," the *Globe* ran a series of articles chronicling the event and subsequent Vietnamese protests at City Hall, where O'Neil refused to apologize for his remarks. On June 26, 1992 the paper ran a lengthy article by Irene Sege that pinpointed the significance of the councilor's callousness:

"To outside observers and activists within the Vietnamese community, this month's events mark a turning point," wrote Sege. "A community of relative newcomers reacted swiftly to an event concerning their lives here rather than the homeland they left. They staged a series of meetings and, less than a week after O'Neil's comments were made public, sponsored a downtown rally that included speakers from other ethnic groups."

Just two weeks after the incident, the *Globe* had already noticed changes taking place in the Vietnamese community centered only a mile from their newsroom.

Through the 1990s, the Vietnamese made intermittent appearances in the *Globe's* metro pages. In 1993, the Vietnamese community surfaced in an article regarding a rash of crimes targeted at Vietnamese-owned businesses. Vietnamese leaders pointed out that the crimes were most likely caused by other Vietnamese attempting to extort money from business owners, but the article suggests that the problem was compounded by a lack of representation within municipal institutions like the Boston Police Department.

"Leaders of the Vietnamese community say that relations with law enforcement authorities, while improving in recent months, are still marked by a lack of

communication,” said the *Globe*. “There are no Vietnamese-Americans in the Boston police or fire departments. No Boston police officers or firefighters speak Vietnamese.”

But there were also no Vietnamese writers on the *Globe* staff, and there are none today. In fact, while the paper continues to espouse advocacy for the city’s increasing minority population, the percentage of reporters and editors who are non-white or have useful language skills beyond English remains a concern. A handful of reporters speak Spanish, one speaks Chinese, and only recently was a reporter who speaks Portuguese hired to cover the region’s large Portuguese and Brazilian populations.

Martin Baron, who has occupied the *Globe*’s corner office since the summer of 2001, says that race is of paramount importance in the story the paper wants to tell to its readers. In July of 2005, Baron was a guest speaker at a luncheon sponsored by the Commonwealth Legislative Seminar, a six-week politics and policy training program designed to familiarize minority and immigrant leaders with the legislative process. Baron first addressed the demographics of his newsroom. He boasted that 20 percent of *Globe* writers and editors were minorities, higher than the paper’s circulation area, where 17 percent are minority. He also cited his energetic minority recruitment efforts, particularly among African-American and Latino communities. But while Baron can brag that he has traveled to Texas to fish for talent at minority journalists’ conferences, attempting to hire ethnic reporters with direct ties to Boston’s minority and immigrant communities is not a priority for the paper, an oversight indicative of an editor who himself has no formal connection to the region. Baron, a native of Florida, was the top editor of the *Miami Herald* before coming to Boston.

In an interview in his office in January 2005, Baron constantly broadened questions about Boston's immigrant communities to a national scale. "This happened in pretty much every other major urban center in the U.S., certainly where I've worked: Miami, Los Angeles, New York," said Baron. "The changing demographics of the city ultimately have an impact on the political structure."

Baron's perspective reflects the health of a paper whose local roots and institutional memory have atrophied alarmingly in the last decade. "We're just not well enough equipped to cover the diversity that is defining the new Boston," Baron said in his speech. "The Boston area is now composed of major Cambodian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Haitian, Cape Verdean, and Latino communities... the greatest challenge for us is penetrating lower income immigrant groups. Do we have enough Spanish-speaking staff members? No. Do we have any Vietnamese-speaking staff members? No. How about Portuguese? Not that I know of. Mandarin? A couple. With that sobering assessment, I will say that I believe we have done a reasonable, even though imperfect, job of bringing immigrant groups and diverse communities into our pages."

Sam Yoon was in the seminar audience that afternoon, and was impressed by what he heard. In the midst of an at-large city council campaign, Yoon had no reason to complain about the *Globe*. Its extensive coverage of his candidacy helped push him to victory and, Yoon recalls, incited some serious jealousy among his opponents.

"Yoon's surprisingly strong showing in September is now being seen as a sign that political power is shifting in this city," wrote the *Globe* three weeks before election day, "from the older Irish and Italian constituencies toward newer voters, generally coming from minority groups."

Later, the paper endorsed Yoon along with John Connolly and incumbents Felix Arroyo and Michael Flaherty. And hardly a month after Yoon's somewhat surprising victory, columnist Sam Allis challenged him to stand up for the "movement" he represented:

"The promiscuous use of "the New Boston" to describe almost anything reduces its meaning to almost nothing," wrote Allis. "But if one were to put a look to the new ethnicity in this city – a rich confection that has long since subsumed the insipid Brahmin-Irish mixture – it might as well be the soft, seamless smile of Sam Yoon."

But Yoon isn't ready to give the *Globe* perfect marks. On October 16, 2005 the *Globe's* City Weekly section printed the results of a Q/A survey that had been submitted to each of the eight candidates who had survived September's at-large city council primary. The questions, written by City Weekly reporter Ric Kahn, were meant to address the concerns of the city's immigrant voters. Amidst queries about how best to combat discrimination against Haitian nursing home employees and Cape Verdean grammar school children was the question: "How would you help create different jobs for the Vietnamese population so that people have more options than working in nail salons and the hardwood-floor business?"

Many of the candidates highlighted the Vietnamese' strong work ethic and solid economic contributions to the city. Some suggested an increase in after-school or bilingual programming, while others envisioned improved linkage between City Hall and Vietnamese small business owners. Yoon was the soul respondent to challenge the question's inherent assumptions

“As a resident of Fields Corner, Dorchester, which contains a significant Vietnamese population, I can attest that this characterization of the Vietnamese workforce is a shallow stereotype,” wrote Yoon. “Vietnamese workers own restaurants, mortgage businesses, contractor services; they pay taxes, provide employment, and participate in the American dream – despite linguistic and cultural obstacles.”

Recalling the incident, Yoon said the slip was not surprising. It speaks to the kind of overextended workplace in which editors and reporters believe in producing a progressive, balanced product, but leave their desks too infrequently to do so.

“This is the logical fallacy,” Yoon said as he pulled a napkin out from under his cup of coffee at Bickford’s restaurant on an early Wednesday morning and began sketching a Venn diagram. “This is the whole of the world of floor sanders. This is the whole world of nail salons. Yeah, a lot of them are Vietnamese; but here’s a big Vietnamese community. Just because all floor sanders happen to be Vietnamese doesn’t mean that all Vietnamese are floor sanders. There are banks, restaurants, there are lawyers, dime shops, accountants that are Vietnamese.” Yoon said the same type of typecasting is placed on his own Korean community, where many entrepreneurs are dry cleaners.

“I don’t want to complain about the *Globe*. I even hear people at the *Herald* complain that ‘the *Globe* is all about race, race, race.’ But that’s what they think from a historical perspective is the most important thing that’s going on in Boston right now. That doesn’t mean they always get it right. I thought that particular City Weekly thing was- there’s a danger of spreading yourself so thin you skim the surface of every topic without being able to see the underlying complexity.”

Several weeks prior to Martin Baron's appearance before the Commonwealth Legislative seminar, *Globe* coverage of Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai's historic visit to the United States sent a mixed message to the local community. When Khai met with Bush in Washington on June 21, the *New York Times* ran an article with the headline "Protests Mark Visit, a First, By a Leader of Vietnam." But the *Globe*, under the decidedly more positive banner "Bush Hosts, Praises Vietnamese Leader; Accepts Invitation to Visit Next Year," did not mention the presence of anticommunist Vietnamese protestors until the sixth paragraph, and waited until the twelfth to reveal that 88 Vietnamese protestors had traveled from Dorchester to picket the White House.

Several days later, the paper chronicled the tumult surrounding Khai's trip to Boston. The *Globe* noted that while Senator Edward M. Kennedy and Governor Mitt Romney had lunch with Khai, city politicians including councilor Flaherty and Mayor Menino declined to meet with the prime minister, and a crowd of Vietnamese protested in Copley Square. Then, just a week later, a July 2 editorial praised Khai's U.S. visit as the beginnings of a welcome friendship.

"A policy of enlightened cooperation with Vietnam may be therapeutic for an administration that badly needs to recover from a debilitating bout of superpower arrogance. So there is reason to cheer the recent historic visit to the United States of senior Vietnamese officials, led by Vietnam's Prime Minister Phan Van Khai."

Nam Pham said the editorial did not provoke protest from Boston's Vietnamese because while it advocated a stronger relationship with Vietnam, it also established improved human rights regulations in Vietnam as a contingent of that relationship. The *Globe's* willingness to diverge from the Vietnamese community's interests where local

politicians have sided with the Vietnamese exposes the challenge faced by an organization that must balance the interest of local readers with a larger cosmopolitan responsibility. The question, as cutbacks ravage a newsroom where one reporter is responsible for the metro's entire immigrant community and none speaks Vietnamese, is whether the *Globe* can accomplish either with any great success.

Baron concluded his seminar speech with this reflection on the definition of community, a word that appears in this thesis hundreds of times:

“We often speak of minority communities or immigrant communities. But the word ‘community’ is used so often these days that it has become almost devalued. The very phrase masks the reality that within each community is enormous diversity: in incomes, education levels, professional achievement, family history, national heritage, and even race and religion.

“Our aim is to cover communities in all their manifestations, in all their diversity. Some of those we cover will be scholars, executives, and politicians of achievement. Others will be immigrants struggling to make it... Our job is to illuminate everyone: those who have achieved great things, and those whose great achievement is just to put food on the table. We think we're doing better in that regard. Not perfectly, but better. And our goal is to keep improving.”

### **Making Politics Local**

“I'm starting to get the hang of this,” Sam Yoon says as he works the room at Kit Clark's Tet celebration. Yoon is approaching the learning curve gradually. He arrived halfway through the program and zipped through the room, shaking an occasional hand and flashing his characteristically boyish smile, before tucking himself away in a

window-filled alcove beside the stage to watch sword-twirling dancers and Vietnamese folk singers. As the dragon finishes blessing seniors with good luck and crawls to the back of the room, Yoon follows the creature path back toward the door, shaking hands along the way.

“I’ll tell you, he makes me nervous,” says Jack Kowalski, who ran media relations for Yoon’s campaign and has recently assumed a position in the freshman councilor’s office. “He’s got to get out there, to meet people. Look at Maureen!”

Councilor Maureen Feeney hasn’t sat down for more than 30 seconds since breezing through the door. She has pumped seemingly every hand in the room, listened compassionately to 20 stories, and traded snippets of conversation with anyone who cares to listen.

Yoon is the first to admit that he’s new to the game, “I’m starting to feel more comfortable,” he says. “The shift from candidate to elected official is interesting, it’s got a whole new strategy to it, and I’m still learning how to get comfortable at these things.”

He understands how important the Tet celebration is to Vietnamese culture, because the Lunar New Year is also a part of his Korean heritage. As Boston’s first Asian city councilor, using Tet to publicize his new position is an obvious move.

“This is the first of many of these celebrations I’ll be going to, and I know how important they are to the community,” says Yoon. “I myself was born in the year of the dog.” Said Yoon. “I’m 36 this year, and it goes on a 12-year cycle, so this should be a good year for me.”

Last year was a good one for Sam Yoon. In late spring, he launched a campaign for the at-large city council seat vacated by Maura Hennigan when she decided to

challenge Mayor Menino's fourth bid for reelection. Yoon, the son of Korean immigrants, grew up in rural Lebanon, Pennsylvania. His parents pushed him to succeed, and Yoon's hard work earned him admission to Princeton University. He went on to pursue a master's degree at the Kennedy School of Government. After graduating, he decided to pursue community development, and became the director of housing at Chinatown's Asian Community Development Corporation. When he was elected in November, he had been living in Boston for just two years.

Yoon's short tenure as a Bostonian was just one of the reasons many seasoned Boston pundits gave him long odds in a field crowded with candidates eager to grab the vacant at-large seat. But after an impressive fifth-place finish in the September primary, his candidacy picked up steam. The conservative Vietnamese community tends to take safe bets with their political support, and they noticed his strong showing in the primary. Community leaders, particularly the staff of Viet-AID, where Yoon is a board member, recognized the advantage of having an Asian-American and Fields Corner resident on the council. They moved quickly to advocate for Yoon's election among their constituents. Yoon developed more low-profile allies, too, like Lanchi Pham at Kit Clark Senior Services.

The essential prerequisite for work at Fields Corner's Kit Clark Senior Center is the ability to appear volcanically energetic at all times. As she bustles about the Tet celebration in a deep blue *Aodai*, Pham oscillates between English and Vietnamese as easily as she balances candid discussion with tactful coercion. On top of her duties planning social events for seniors and guiding them through daily life, she has helped

hundreds of Vietnamese seniors, many of whom speak limited or no English, become American citizens.

In the fall of 2005, Lanchi Pham was busy organizing practice voting sessions for seniors who had no experience with the democratic process. “My seniors lived in the South of Vietnam, not the North,” Pham explains. “And the system in Vietnam, the government was not really good about voting; like, they do something fishy inside. And if somebody wants to become president, they have to manage some ways. Publication, or pay money. That’s one of the not really good things about learning how to vote. When they come here, they know nothing. We have to show them, but the seniors are forgetful. Long before the election, we train them, and they say, ‘I give up, Lanchi.’”

Pham never gives up. But she found herself spending so much time teaching seniors how to mark their ballots that she realized she herself knew little about the candidates. She asked Kit Clark Executive Director Sandra Albright for help. “Lanchi came and said, ‘Give me the list of who to vote for,’” recalled Albright. “I’d be more than happy to oblige, but I said no, let’s talk about the issues. I’ve been here a long time, so I know all the candidates. Michael Flaherty has come to Kit Clark, and Sam Yoon lives in the neighborhood. If people come here, it really makes a difference.”

The incident reveals a great deal about the state of politics within the Vietnamese community. At the advanced edge of the learning curve, a select few have realized that politics are an avenue to power and have jumped behind candidates who might give them a voice. Others, like Pham, respect the power of voting, but have little time to dissect the platforms of 15 city council candidates. And the vast majority remains stuck behind a barrier of language and cultural differences, embarrassed by their lack of knowledge or

too busy to care. Among those who have taken the time to act, Yoon was a popular choice.

"I asked my seniors, 'What do you think about Sam Yoon?'" said Pham. "They say, 'He's great because he's young. He has plenty of time to do aggressive, hard work.' They see that he is Asian, and they want to give him a chance."

"I think it was my Asian identity first and foremost," said Yoon of the Vietnamese community's motivation for supporting his candidacy. "Let's say a Vietnamese restaurant applies for a liquor license and they don't get it, so the community is upset. I step in. Without an Asian city councilor who has direct ties, that may have been complicated, but now that I'm on the city council, they know, 'I can ask Sam Yoon.' And over time we develop an understanding of how government can help." Yoon added that the Vietnamese would remain a crucial part of his constituency. He has already had a Vietnamese intern work at his office, and sees that position as a premier opportunity for younger Vietnamese to gain insight into city hall's inner workings and, hopefully, to develop an interest in public service.

Yoon was not the only candidate to receive a boost from a Vietnamese voting block that has increased steadily over the last five years. Mayor Menino and City Council President Flaherty have also cultivated close ties to the Vietnamese, and the payoff is evident. A report released by the Asian American Legal Defense Fund shows that 92 percent of Vietnamese voters surveyed voted to reelect Menino, much higher than the 67.5 percent Menino received among the general electorate. The same poll found that 57 percent of Vietnamese voters cited experience as the number one factor in choosing a

candidate. That's over 20 percent higher than any other Asian group, and the strongest consensus on any question in the poll.

Flaherty and Menino are safe choices for the Vietnamese community because as a small, relatively low profile group, the Vietnamese recognize the advantage of sticking with past winners and supporting those in power. That may also have something to do with latent memories of life under communism, when to dissent from those in power was a dangerous act.

"They see him as a symbol of power," said Yoon of Flaherty's appeal. "To any new immigrant group that's come from a country torn by war, they have a kind of respect bordering on fear of power. Because Michael Flaherty has that kind of aura, they thought, 'We have to vote for him.' That's a very important community education piece about where the power really is. The power is in the vote."

That's not to say that Flaherty and Menino have won their favor through threats or coercion. Menino has founded an office of New Bostonians and staffed a Vietnamese Community Liaison, Diane Nguyen, for close to a decade. And Flaherty has an important political operative in Dai Nguyen, the housing inspector who met Flaherty while working for the city of Boston. These bridge builders are a recent, positive step in a process of political development that began in the early 1990s.

The first Vietnamese to arrive in Boston, well- educated and fiercely political, deeply resented the communist regime that had forced them from their homes. Veterans who had been held in prison and exiles forced to wait in refugee camps trickled into Boston through the 1990s, keeping alive the smoldering embers of opposition to communism. Since then, pockets of immigrants from communist North Vietnam have

begun to settle in places towns like Lynn and Revere, but the overwhelming majority of Boston's Vietnamese are anticommunist southern refugees and their children. As the community began to congregate in Fields Corner, the earliest attempts to organize were anticommunist demonstrations. The Vietnamese Law Community was founded at St. Mark's Church to work for an end to communism in Vietnam, and each April 30 community leaders organized protests at the State House and City Hall to mark the anniversary of the fall of Saigon. They also protested when musicians or lecturers from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam visited the Hub. But these demonstrators were driven by their moral conscience rather than a realistic pretense of effecting change, and little of that fervor spilled over into an interest in the civic life of the city around them. With their heads turned longingly towards Vietnam, they cared little about the potholes and trash at their feet.

Everything began to change in 1992, when that video camera captured Dapper O'Neil's disparaging comments at the annual Dorchester Day Parade.

Albert "Dapper" O'Neil was elected to the council in 1971 on a platform that echoed Louise Day Hicks' anti-busing rhetoric and found fervent support in neighborhoods like South Boston. He one-upped Hicks' tempered intolerance by publicly praising governor George Wallace of Alabama and defaming black leaders, like Reverend Ralph Abernathy, whom he called "a perverted degenerate" and Bayard Rustin, a "homosexual fag."

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, O'Neil was the top vote getter in every at-large city council election. Even as the demographics of Boston began to shift dramatically, his loyal Irish voters pushed him to the top of the ticket. In 1999 he lost his

at-large seat, replaced by fellow Irish-American Michael Flaherty. But Flaherty's moderate liberalism was worlds away from O'Neil's intolerance, a contrast prompted observers to lump Flaherty with the new Boston movement.

In 1992, O'Neil was named Grand Marshal of the Dorchester Day Parade, an event that draws thousands of Bostonians to the sidewalks of Dot. Ave. each June to watch a who's who of politicians and neighborhood dignitaries march the length of the Avenue. After proceeding through Fields Corner, O'Neil remarked to Boston's police superintendent, "I just passed up there. I thought I was in Saigon for Chrissakes... It makes you sick, for Chrissakes! I told them I'd come back with the checks tomorrow."

A bystander caught O'Neil's comments on video, and by evening the footage had found its way to the nightly news. A week later, 200 infuriated Vietnamese Bostonians staged a rally outside city hall, calling for racial equality and demanding a public apology from O'Neil, who appeared at the rally but refused to apologize. At the time, fewer than 100 Vietnamese were registered to vote in the city of Boston; nowhere near enough votes to ruffle a formidable at-large councilor.

The event and O'Neill's indignant response shocked the Vietnamese community into action. "In the past, whenever we were talking about politically empowering people, that it was necessary to become citizens and vote, people weren't too crazy about that," Hiep Chu told the *Globe* that week. At the time, Chu was director of the Vietnamese American Civic Association (VACA), where several meetings were held to debate a proper Vietnamese response to O'Neil's comments. "After this incident, we earned a lot of experience on how to deal politically and with politicians, how they react to the community and how they treat the community that votes. This is an historical event."

Since then, Chu has remained a prominent organizer within the Vietnamese community, and last fall he was named executive director of Viet-AID. He replaced Nhan Paul Ton That, a cerebral, soft spoken man who eschewed the spotlight and was “elated” to be relieved of his 18-month stint as interim director. In Chu, the board found a near opposite. Gregarious and witty, Chu loves to show his face at Dorchester’s calendar-clogging slate of neighborhood meetings, and he has figured out which ones to attend. When Marie St. Fleur announced her ill-fated candidacy for lieutenant governor, Chu was present. When the Fields Corner Civic Association organized a demonstration against the re-opening of a dilapidated grocery store in the Fields Corner Mall, Chu spoke at the rally. And when the mayor addressed the Dorchester Board of Trade in mid-March, Chu attended as the board’s newest member, listening to Menino talk about summer jobs, and chomping roast beef with some of Dorchester’s living Irish American institutions. He has embraced the Bostonian political machine, and he is also notably more at home in the liberal stratosphere than some of his counterparts. Maureen Feeney put him on a short list of Vietnamese that she considers viable candidates for public office, and Mary Truong and Nam Pham agree.

“I have considered it, and a lot of people have asked me to run for a citywide or district office,” said Chu during a phone interview. “But I say I’m too old. It’s a lot of sacrifice, family wise. I hope a younger person will run. At Viet-AID we have what we call youth leadership development in order to get somebody into City Hall, to get more higher-up elected or appointed positions.”

Chu was honing his political IQ long before O’Neil’s fateful comments. He has said that he had already discussed initiating a major voter registration drive, and after the

O'Neil incident, Chu and others also decided that part of the solution would be to form a new community organization. The group would move beyond the conservative, anticommunist ideology of the Vietnamese Community of Massachusetts and think more creatively than the handout/client model employed by VACA. In 1994, those dreams became reality with the founding of Viet-AID, a neighborhood-based community development corporation.

“Viet-AID was formed by community leaders who believed that a community-based development corporation could provide programs to reduce poverty, isolation, and alienation in the Vietnamese American community in Boston,” reads the Viet-AID website. “Viet-AID achieves these goals by: developing affordable housing and commercial space; providing high quality child care services; facilitating job and business development; and actively promoting civic engagement.”

Viet-AID's foundation signified a willingness to shed conservative advocacy for a Bostonian model of neighborhood-oriented social services. “It's sort of like a son going to his father and getting his blessing,” Long Nguyen, the first executive director of Viet-AID, told the *Globe* in 2002. “We didn't do that.”

Hiep Chu is popular among younger Vietnamese advocates, but more conservative Vietnamese have questioned his allegiances. In 2002, The Vietnamese Community of Massachusetts distributed fliers in Fields Corner that questioned Chu's anticommunist credentials. Conservative Vietnamese were curious why the South Vietnamese Flag was not flown at a 1997 ceremony transferring control of a Charles St. lot to Viet-AID, which planned to build the community center there. They wondered, too, why a design that included the red stripes of the South Vietnamese flag had been

abandoned. Why, when Chu worked at the Asian American Studies Institute at UMass-Boston (which remains an outspoken supporter of Viet-AID), did he invite two North Vietnamese scholars as guest lecturers, a decision that prompted protests and debates in the community?

The suspicion has calmed since 2002; today, the South Vietnamese “freedom” flag flies beside that of the United States in front of the community center. But the divide lingers in quiet ways. Dai Nguyen, a Flaherty supporter, suggests that the support Yoon found from the Vietnamese came overwhelmingly from Viet-AID efforts. Yoon is a Viet-AID board member, but Nam Pham sits on that board as well, and Pham remains a strident anticommunist.

The completion of the community center in 2002, largely a Viet-AID effort, went a long way toward calming the suspicions of the larger community. An embossed placard occupies most of a wall just inside the Vietnamese community center, commemorating the completion of the center and honoring those that made it possible. It reads:

“As Vietnamese Americans honor and embrace our place among other Americans, we are guided by our rich heritage and hopes for our future.

“Built of Bricks, Concrete, Steel, and Dreams, this center houses our history, community, and vision.

“The Vietnamese American Community Center was made possible by the contributions of those who dared to dream and those who supported this dream.”

On both sides of the inscription run lists of donors under the headings, “glass, concrete, or steel,” opaque references to the size of their donation. Listed among the contributors are Tom Gannon, the city of Boston, and Teresa Heinz. Heinz’s presence is ironic. The Vietnamese repaid her generosity by voting overwhelmingly for President

George Bush instead of her husband, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, in the 2004 presidential campaign. While Dorchester voters sided with Kerry by a 5-1 margin, 78 percent of Dorchester's Asian voters, the vast majority of whom are Vietnamese, voted for Bush. That dichotomy is just as clear statewide, where 79 percent of Vietnamese chose Bush. Meanwhile, just 30 percent of the state's collective Asian community chose Bush.

Their choice also seems odd given that Fields Corner's Vietnamese, many of whom are veterans, identify strongly with the efforts of the South Vietnamese and United States military. In 2004, a source told the *Dorchester Reporter* that the trend had nothing to do with Kerry's service in Vietnam, and everything to do with his action in the U.S. Senate. Kerry, the Bay State's junior senator since 1984, serves on the Foreign Relations Committee with Republican Senator — and fellow Vietnam veteran — John McCain. In 1993, they led a fact-finding mission that determined there were no American prisoners of war remaining in Vietnam. Their verdict eased Vietnamese-American tensions and paved the way for President Clinton to normalize diplomatic relations in 1995. In 2001, Kerry voted to block a Vietnamese Human Rights Bill that would re-impose sanctions on the country, saying it might encourage communist hardliners to create anti-American propaganda. While Kerry-McCain actions to foster diplomacy have been heralded as progressive moves for the global economy, they made fast political enemies of Kerry's erstwhile comrades in Dorchester, and Vietnamese communities nationwide.

The Vietnamese community, entrepreneurial and small business-minded, have been recognized nationally as a strong conservative force. In Dorchester, VACA and Viet-AID struggle to convince would-be business and home owners to pursue loans and

mortgages, rather than borrowing capital from friends or waiting till they have saved enough money on their own. While 40 percent of Vietnamese in Fields Corner live below the poverty line, the memory of communist persecution and unwavering social values keep many Vietnamese from seeking governmental assistance.

“The Vietnamese are almost all die-hard Republicans,” said Feeney. “Mary Truong is the biggest wheeler and dealer of them all. She’s the money person, she’s the political connector. She’s a big fundraiser for Mitt Romney and Kerry Healey.”

At the Green Hills bakery, Truong dodged questions about her own political persuasion, but her actions speak for themselves. Truong values personal achievement, and self-reliance. “In old Vietnamese culture, the women in many cases believe that you marry well, find someone will marry you,” Truong explained. “My father never taught us that. He had six boys and three girls and the same consistent message that male or female, you all have to pitch in and help.

“So we all put ourselves through college, work and study and part time, and I’m proud to say all nine of us are college graduates. Six have graduate degrees. That’s my father’s message: how important it is to make it on your own. If you can help other people, do so, but do not take. You have to give, not to take.”

And Truong has given. In 1986 she founded the Vietnamese American Women’s League with her sister. Her husband jokes that she treats volunteering as a fulltime job. Since graduating from UMass-Boston, Truong has worked for a number of banks, most recently Bank of America, where she was laid off in 2005. Now she works as an independent consultant, giving her more time to devote to her newest role, president of the Dorchester Board of Trade. Pham is no slouch himself. He too works in banking, for

Asian American Bank in Chinatown. But he sits on the board of Viet-AID, and is one of the community's most important elder statesmen.

Pham and Truong say their penchant for service is unusual, and needed in the community. "I wish there were more of us doing this work to help others and to bridge the gap," said Truong. "We're so new in this country they want to make their ends meet, so they selfishly devote themselves to that. It's a constant challenge trying to tell people the benefit of getting involved. I have heard a lot of friends and colleagues say, 'Mary, where are the other Vietnamese? We need someone to lend a hand, to join on a board.' They approach me, because that's all they know, and there should be more people getting involved. The excuse that I've heard from Vietnamese friends is that they don't have the time. You make time."

Truong and Pham have reconciled their religious, cultural and ideological conservatism with selfless devotion to the betterment of their community. And like many of their Vietnamese counterparts, they've also realized that survival in Boston depends on siding with politicians who in the city of Kennedys and Dukakises are almost always Democrats.

78 percent of Vietnamese Bostonians voted to reelect an unabashedly conservative president and only two years later voted even more decidedly to reelect a Boston mayor known for his liberal social and moral policies. As politicians have learned that it is possible to advocate positions beyond their control if it means garnering votes, the Vietnamese are learning that it is possible to side with politicians with startlingly divergent political persuasions if it means bringing them fair and attentive representation. That complicated agreement could have fascinating implications on any Vietnamese

attempt to run for office. Truong says people have suggested she run, and Hiep Chu's name has also been mentioned. Were Chu to run, he would be likely to do so as a Democrat. Would Truong run as a Republican? If, as Truong, Pham, and many others have hoped, the candidate to run would be someone from the younger generation, would they hold on to the conservative ideals of their parents or adapt to the city's liberal culture?

It is likely that as time passes, the younger generation will lose touch with their parents' commitment to anti-communist foreign policy, as American politicians have already done. Though the Vietnamese avoided Kerry for his pro-Hanoi actions, it was President Bush who hosted the Vietnamese Prime Minister in 2005 and accepted an invitation to visit Vietnam. Bush's real motivation was likely the search for friends in the vicinity of China; a priority that supersedes any allegiance to Vietnamese refugees living in America.

If the election wasn't a success for Kerry, it was for voting rights activists. In 2004, 24 percent more Vietnamese pulled the lever than in 2000. The gain was most notable in Ward 15's Precincts 7 and 8, in the heart of Fields Corner. The gain was also an improvement on 2003, a year in which Viet-AID, which sits in Precinct 15-8, launched the 2003 Viet-Vote campaign. They partnered for the project with seven community groups including Viet-AID, VACA, the Massachusetts Vietnamese-American Women's League, and the Intercollegiate Vietnamese Student Association of New England. The Viet-Vote Campaign had a major goal: to build a permanent coalition of Vietnamese groups whose mission would be to foster Vietnamese power through civic engagement. They also set some lofty benchmarks. They aimed to increase Vietnamese

voter turnout in Wards 13, 15, and 16 by 33 percent in 2003, 50 percent in the 2004 national election, and an additional 20 percent for the 2005 mayoral and city council races. Viet-Vote volunteers descended on Fields Corner with fervor in the fall of 2003, going door-to-door to register voters and speaking at St. William's and the Uchoa, Fields Corner's Buddhist temple. They created a "civic participation curriculum" that was printed in *Thang Long* and aired on Vietnamese language radio. They also pioneered the concept of bilingual phone calling by targeting Vietnamese names in the phone book, a technique that Dai Nguyen used for Michael Flaherty's campaign with great success two years later.

On election day, voter turnout in wards 13, 15, and 16 increased from 14, 14, and 37 voters respectively in 1999 to 200, 133, and 279 in 2003; on average, a 941 percent increase. Survey data compiled after the election found that the average voter age was 55, suggesting that first generation immigrants turned out in much larger numbers than their children and younger refugees. Of Vietnamese voters interviewed by the AALDEF, 35 percent of voters identified themselves as Republicans—the only Asian ethnic group to climb above 10 percent in that category.

Those results pushed Viet-Vote volunteers, mostly students and young professionals, to push harder for civic engagement among young adults. They also hoped to fuse Vietnamese desire for voice and power on an international scale with an interest in local issues where their voice could be more relevant. The perfect transition point presented itself in August of 2003, when Maureen Feeney submitted a proposal to the city council to recognize the South Vietnamese flag as the official banner of Boston's Vietnamese.

“When Vietnamese first came to me about the freedom flag, it was sort of a touchy thing, because it’s really not a city issue per se,” Feeney said, “but because of the increased number of Vietnamese in Dorchester, I just felt it was important to take a look at because it meant so much to them.”

The flag— mustard yellow with three horizontal red stripes representing North, Central, and South Vietnam— served the Republic of Vietnam [South Vietnam] for its entire existence, from 1954 to 1975. An important symbol for the local community, it balanced the American flag at every Tet altar, and some fashionable men who prowled the floor of the Expo Center even sported ties sewn in its likeness. In August, the City Council voted unanimously to recognize “the Heritage and Freedom Flag as the official symbol of the Boston Vietnamese-American community.”

The move spurred protest from the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington D.C.

"A small minority of Vietnamese- Americans who claim themselves representatives of the Vietnamese-American community living in Boston aim at sowing division, rekindling the past hatred and painful pages of the history between our two nations and among the Vietnamese themselves, running counter to the aspirations and interests of the two peoples," Ngoc Chien, press attaché to the Embassy of Vietnam told the *Globe*. Officials from the Vietnamese Embassy even traveled to Boston, but only Maura Hennigan agreed to meet with them. Feeney refused to attend.

“For them, the flag of Vietnam now is a communist flag, and they fled that,” said Feeney. “The last thing they’re looking for is to see that flag flown in Boston. I had no idea what a national and international thing this was going to be.”

Months later, the *Globe* suggested that the voting gains of 2003 were buoyed by the City Council motion: “The Boston City Council's frequent forays into international issues may not be so silly after all. A flap last summer over a Vietnamese flag appears largely responsible for inspiring Vietnamese-Americans to come to the polls in unexpected numbers in this month’s City Council elections.”

“Michael Flaherty told me himself that when he was an outspoken proponent of the Vietnamese flag issue, and that’s all it takes for a lot of Vietnamese— for you to come out on one issue which is as strongly held as that,” said Sam Yoon.

Yoon then spoke of driving through Copley Square last summer on the day of Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai’s visit to Boston. As they passed the throng, an aide suggested he jump out and lend his support to the protest.

“They handed me the bullhorn, and I said something about human rights; stuff that I can say no matter where I am,” said Yoon. “But just that I was standing there with them, they said, ‘We won’t forget you, Sam.’ What am I going to do about communism on the City Council? It doesn’t matter at a certain level what people care about. That people vote for me is what, naturally, I care about.”

In June of 2005, the 71 year-old Khai visited the White House, where President Bush praised him for improving the economy, allowing greater religious freedom, and finding the remains of U.S. soldiers. Bush promised that the United States would support Vietnam’s bid to join the World Trade Organization and accepted an invitation to visit Vietnam in 2006. Hundreds of Vietnamese gathered outside the White House in protest.

On June 24, Khai arrived in Boston, hoping to drum up support for Vietnamese trade and to connect with Harvard and MIT to encourage student exchanges. He had

lunch with the universities' presidents, Governor Mitt Romney, and Senator Kennedy. They discussed increasing trade between the commonwealth and the Southeast Asian nation of 80 million, and about Khai's desire to create a world-class university in Vietnam.

Michael Flaherty and Mayor Menino were also invited to the luncheon, but declined, citing "scheduling" conflicts. In an article in the *Globe*, Flaherty said the visit put him in a tough spot because the CEO of Liberty Mutual, a major Boston employer trying to expand into Vietnam, was a close friend. But Flaherty appears to have calculated the impact of one CEO verses 11,000 Vietnamese Bostonians to his re-election effort and avoided the lunch. Though neither Flaherty nor Menino was in real danger of losing that election, the Vietnamese have slowly become key supporters and each recognizes the value of maintaining that link. In the corner of both politicians is an astute young Boston College graduate named Dai Nguyen.

"Everybody is for affordable housing, but for most [Vietnamese] people, they say, democracy is the key," Nguyen says over a steaming bowl of Beef noodle soup at Pho 2000 on Adams Street, one of the neighborhood's premier Vietnamese eateries. "They still really dislike Vietnam's communist government. They come here and they see that the government will support them, and they like that. I think that's more important to them than things like affordable housing."

After September's primary election Nguyen helped create a Vietnamese American Election Committee. He says the mission of the committee was three-fold: to encourage Vietnamese Americans to fulfill their civic duty by registering and voting, to support politicians who the committee feels are addressing the needs of the Vietnamese

community, and to raise their political profile.

"In this community, there is no leadership," Nguyen said. "We don't have a strong voice in politics, and that's what we were trying to create by establishing the group." Nguyen enlisted the help of four seasoned neighborhood activists to get the committee rolling, and started an aggressive campaign on behalf of Flaherty and Menino. The five committee members scoured Boston phone books for Vietnamese surnames, generating a list of nearly 5,000 registered Vietnamese voters. Twice weekly for a month and a half prior to the election the committee met to call each of those 5,000 Vietnamese voters with a Vietnamese-language message urging them to exercise their civic duty and cast a vote for Flaherty and Menino.

"It's the first time it's happened in that concerted way, by targeting voters with personal calls in their native language," said Steve Crawford, Flaherty's campaign manager. "The Vietnamese community is a constituency that Michael has always reached out to, and that has often been underrepresented."

Nguyen, who hopes to expand the election committee into a broader group called the "Vietnamese American Political Task Force," was equally optimistic. "To have leadership in our community, that's the first step," said Nguyen. "We need to encourage people to get out and vote. Then in the future if there is potentially a Vietnamese candidate, we can vote for them."

### **Investing in Fields Corner**

The lion devours envelope after envelope, and all the while Thu sets the pace on his drum. The money, Lanchi Pham tells me, will go to the dancers. Because the money

is symbolic, the youths are expected to do something purposeful with it. As the exchange between adult and lion brings the giver prosperity in the year ahead, so too is the money they have given meant to bless the dancers far in the future. Usually, says Pham, the money is saved, or invested in something profitable. “It is lucky money,” says Pham. “One dollar can become 10,000 dollars!”

The Vietnamese are an industrious and entrepreneurial people who honor hard work and self-reliance. In Vietnam, many worked as farmers or independent merchants. Ira Schlosser, president of the board of directors for Fields Corner Main Streets, a city-organized neighborhood development group, visited Hanoi several years ago. Based on his observations, Schlosser believes the Vietnamese tendency towards small business is a force of habit.

“If they’re not living in the rural areas where they’re farming, they have a little store, and they’re cooking out on the street or they have a cart,” said Schlosser. “You go to the markets, they’re not like here. Here we have a nice big old shopping mall. There, people are out on their own.”

They brought that independence with them to Boston, opening noodle shops and nail salons first in Allston-Brighton, then Fields Corner. By the mid-1980s, Fields Corner’s Irish past had slipped almost completely into memory, with the exception of a few dingy Irish pubs along the avenue and the conspicuous presence of a handful of neighborhood activists. Many homes and storefronts in the neighborhood had been abandoned, and African Americans dominated local demographics.

It was at this point that Vietnamese refugees began to take advantage of low rents and ample commercial space in the area. Originally scattered throughout Brighton and Cambridge, these community pioneers saw Fields Corner as an affordable, accessible place (the Red Line's Field Corner station is at the center of the neighborhood) to foster an immigrant community. In 1980, North Dorchester was 0 percent Asian, 58 percent white, and 39 percent combined black and Hispanic. At that time, the city differentiated between North and South Dorchester, a designation that has since been perceived as racist because it was created after 'North' Dorchester started to become a heavily African American neighborhood. The distinction has since been dropped. A decade later, whites were 56 percent of a combined Dorchester, while African Americans were 22.7 percent and Asians 6 percent. Today, 37 percent of Fields Corner residents are African-American and 12 percent are Asian.

In 1983, a sandwich shop and several offices with Vietnamese language signs were the only evidence of a concentrated Vietnamese presence along the avenue. VACA was founded in 1984, and vacant storefronts slowly reopened, with names like My Canh and Sao Dem instead of Murphy's and the Emerald Isle. There were about 35 new storefronts by the early 1990s, and the Vietnamese were described as having revitalized the Fields Corner neighborhood.

In 1991, the *Globe* noted that the Vietnamese continued to open businesses despite a "bone-crushing" national recession. At the time Cuong Nguyen joked, "Vietnamese people not reading paper. Don't know there's a recession." There is wisdom in Nguyen's comments. Isolated by culture and language, the Vietnamese started tiny

businesses with their own money or funds borrowed from friends, avoiding the weakness of the larger economy by separating themselves from it.

Today, more than 50 percent of businesses along Dorchester Avenue are Vietnamese owned, and in Fields Corner proper that percentage is much higher. It's an enormous accomplishment for a group of small, individual entrepreneurs that have been in the neighborhood for just 25 years.

But a substantial disconnect remains between the Vietnamese and existing city resources. Much to the chagrin of people like Ira Schlosser and Tom Gannon, only a tiny fraction of Vietnamese merchants belong to organizations like Main Streets and the Fields Corner Civic Association. Often, merchants say they are too busy to attend meetings. Some say the cultural barrier keeps them away.

“You need to understand the language and even some of the cultural aspects,” said Duy Pham, executive director of VACA. “Even though they have the Vietnamese liaison, how many have the Vietnamese liaison roll by the owner's door and really talk to the owner about the city plan? I don't think the city has an adequate system to pursue that. The civic group in Fields Corner has a few Vietnamese involved. The rest, nobody. If you walk down along Dorchester Avenue, 80 percent of the businesses are Vietnamese. But only mainstream people go to the meetings.”

Ira Schlosser wants to change that. Years ago, a handful of Vietnamese attempted to found a Vietnamese Merchants Association. Schlosser and Hiep Chu want to bring back the now defunct group and establish it as a satellite of the Main Streets program, an agreement that they hope would connect Vietnamese entrepreneurs to city dialogue and resources while allowing them to operate within familiar linguistic and cultural environs.

Some of the Vietnamese community's reticence is more complicated— and more astute— than cultural differences. Recently, the overarching Main Streets program launched an initiative to provide small business owners with grants to improve the appearance of their storefronts. Many Vietnamese merchants are wary of the program because they believe improving the appearance of their store will raise their rent, effectively pricing them out of their own business. Fields Corner Main Streets is working to quell such distrust with the help of VACA and Viet-AID. Early in 2006, they gained another crucial ally in that effort when Mary Truong was named president of the Dorchester Board of Trade. Truong, who already sits on five boards of directors, says she recognized immediately the importance of the opportunity personally and for her community. Truong is the first Vietnamese person to head the organization, and the first to head a major non-Vietnamese specific organization in Dorchester. Just a month into her four-year stint as president, Truong has developed a three-point agenda for progress. Her first goal is to recruit new members to the board, which currently includes more than 200 businesses. Truong boasts proudly that she's already recruited five new members, including Viet-AID.

"I think the check is still here," said Hiep Chu, referring to the organization's dues to the board. Chu said that until Truong raised the issue, no one had ever suggested Viet-AID join the board. Her second goal is to organize a directory of Dorchester businesses, categorized by industry, to attract would-be customers and help entrepreneurs network. Her third proposed initiative would be a survey sent to current Board members as well as other businesses in the neighborhood. The survey will ask business owners to rate the board's past effectiveness and ask for input on improving its services.

It is a significant step forward for a community that Professor Paul Watanabe of the Institute of Asian American Studies at UMass-Boston has suggested still faces some key economic obstacles and suggested that any success would have to involve partnership with the Vietnamese's African American neighbors.

“We have been careful to show that gains have been modest,” Watanabe said in January during a telephone interview. “They have brought customers to Fields Corner, there has been some expansion, some physical improvements to the neighborhood, modest increases in employment. To argue that's a success or that's the way it should continue is another story. My own view is we're far from that. Dorchester has a significant Vietnamese-American community, no doubt, but it has a much larger African-American community. Where does the dominant African-American community fit within this picture? That strikes me as the larger challenge. Until the African-American community can be more significantly represented in the business life and the economic life of this city, I wouldn't call it any great success.”

African Americans have had a presence in Boston nearly since the city was founded, and in the 20th century they were integral to every major change to wash over the city. Early in this new century, they remain a crucial part of the new Boston equation. The Vietnamese have markedly improved Fields Corner and contributed to development of the new Boston, but if their African American neighbors are not engaged as partners in progress, the Vietnamese may have reached a plateau.

At the *Globe*, Martin Barton cautioned against thinking that the success of the Vietnamese community was intimately connected to development of African-Americans,

and questioned whether the diverse agendas of ethnic groups even added up to a collective new Boston agenda at all.

“I suspect there are some substantial differences in the political element of these communities,” said Baron. The Vietnamese community, in other places, certainly in Orange County [California], was overwhelmingly conservative. I’d be surprised if that weren’t the case here. We can’t assume that their political agenda is the same as the political agenda of the African American community. Now obviously, there are entrepreneurs in every community. But whether across the spectrum would you come to the conclusion that they have the same political agenda? I’m not so sure you would.”

Baron’s point is an important one. Though 51 percent of Boston’s population is minorities, it is a contingent made from a myriad of smaller ethnic groups, each with individual histories, cultures, and goals. Part of the challenge in mobilizing the new Boston is creating a collective identity to those groups that stretches beyond a feeling of ostracism generated from living beneath a dominant white population.

In Fields Corner, there is potential for diverse and sustainable economic improvement. A large mall, rising property values, and diversity of, age, ethnicity, and use make it a neighborhood of optimism. The future of the neighborhood, and of the Vietnamese community, no longer lies in the hands of older business owners or community leaders, but in the decisions their children make. Through the hard work of their parents, those children are now attending Boston Latin, Boston College, and Harvard. Their experience living and learning with other American children will teach them whom to call at City Hall when a new restaurant wants a liquor license, and how to mobilize their community through public leadership.

“There’s still pushback when someone from code enforcement, who is doing a routine inspection of businesses on the Avenue, nothing to do with individual owners, comes around,” said Maureen Feeney. “A lot of people recoil, and those are the people we really try to reach out to and say look, you made a mistake just like everyone else. You’re not in trouble, no one is going to come in middle of night and take you away. But as people get further removed from those memories, there’s less and less of that.”

### **Bridging the Gap**

After the lion writhes back through the throng and settles in the rear of the room, the two dancers emerge from its belly and Buddha removes his head. Sweaty and hungry, sit down next to Thu Truong and Bith Tan and wait for Lanchi Pham to bring them steaming plates of fried rice, spring rolls, and fried chicken. As they shovel home-cooked Vietnamese food into their mouths, Lien-Thu Dao, Tan’s daughter and part-time lion tail, tells me her story. Lien, 23, lives at home and studies ophthalmology at Boston University. She says the Vietnamese Traditional Martial Arts Class, held three times a week at the Vietnamese American Community Center, is a way for kids to stay connected to their parents’ traditions. Dao has been learning martial arts from her father since she was old enough to feign a kick (four years old), and is now a teacher as much as a student. She says it has been easy for her to balance her education and experience as a Vietnamese-American with her parents’ wishes, but she knows many of her peers struggle.

“There are problems,” says Dao. “Sometimes parents don’t understand what the kids are doing or why they don’t care as much about Vietnam.” As the youths finish their food and the Tet celebration draws to a halt, Dao invites me to visit the class.

“Maybe it will be useful for your article,” she says.

A month later the Tet season has ended and the lion costumes have returned to storage, but training goes on for 20 youths lucky enough to survive the long waiting list and earn a spot in the Martial Arts class. Class begins at 4:00, and by 3:45, teenagers start to filter into the community center. As Tan stands with me in a corner of the modest-sized function room, they joke, in English, about boyfriends and girlfriends, and complain about homework.

“The class helps us keep our culture,” Tan explains as students file past him, acknowledging their teacher with a fleeting but reverent bow. “That’s why I want to have the class, so our children will know our traditions. And it leaves no time for TV. No time for trouble!”

A couple minutes after four, Tan and Lien walk to the front of the room and, in Vietnamese, order the 21 youths who have shown up today to get in line. Forty kids are in the program all together, but the room is only big enough to hold 25 at a time, so they stagger attendance. The kids spring to attention, and enthusiastically echo the Vietnamese commands as the sounds of the city stream through open windows — ambulances, squad cars, and Red Line rumbling into the Fields Corner station.

Lien leads the group through a couple of stretches, then passes command to Quoc Doan, a high schooler from Woburn who takes the train to Dorchester three times a week with his brother for the class. He says it has been worth it for both of them. “We’d just be sitting at home with nothing to do if we weren’t here,” says Doan. “We’ve both dropped a ton of weight since we started coming.” There are 18 levels in Vietnamese martial arts,

denoted with color-coded belts. Lien has made it to the 13th level. After just a year, of practice, Quoc is only a few behind her.

The group finishes stretching, then breaks in half. The younger group (the youngest student is eight, the oldest, after Lien, a fifty-year-old man) spars awkwardly while Tan takes them aside individually to finesse hand placement or stance. The ten or so students in their teens, all male except for Lien, take turns hammering punching bags with quick jabs and roundhouse kicks. The younger kids count in Vietnamese, while they berate each other in English slang after miffed kicks and weak punches. Lien moves quickly through the room, practicing her own moves, settling the older boys when they get out of line, and helping the 50 year old man through a form routine. I'm not the only observer. Dave, an 15 year-old African-American teenager who goes to school with some of the participants, is sitting next to me.

"I love martial arts," says Dave. "I do kung fu, some karate. But this stuff is really cool. They asked me to join the class, but I can't afford it right now."

Viet-AID has recently taken over administration of the class, and charges kids \$30 per month for use of the space and materials. They would like to expand, but the space is just too small. Tan is considering moving the class elsewhere, perhaps to a local middle school. Viet-AID leaders view the class as the kind of connector between American-born Vietnamese children and their refugee parents that is too rare in Dorchester. In the past, there have been problems between parents whose entire experience revolves around the memory of Vietnam, and children who have grown up immersed in the sights and sounds of the United States.

“A kid in eight grade, she comes to the teacher and she say that she feel like she commit suicide,” explained Duy Pham, Executive Director of VACA. “So they take her to the hospital to do some assessments. They realize that the parent is working around the clock, they only have one sister, and the sisters sometime not talking to each other. So there is no communication, lack of time, lack of understanding. Between the parents’ home and school there is a big gap right there, what we need right now is people to balance all those things.”

But for a middle-aged refugee, watching one’s kids integrate into American culture can be difficult. While parents revere the intellectual and economic power they associate with an American education, the social differences can be trying.

“The kids want to be Americans and their parents are still more traditional, from Vietnam,” says Ira Schlosser, who has overseen several student-parent forums at Dorchester House, a community health center. “So, they go home to one environment and to school in another environment. When it creates some tension for the parents is when the kids bring home that culture from school. They want to be that at home and the parents can’t stand it. They don’t want to see the kid dressing that way. They don’t want to talk about sex.”

In 1995, Schlosser founded a program for Vietnamese youth to discuss risky behaviors like drug abuse and the dangers of HIV infection. He hired a Vietnamese adult to spearhead the program and trained a group of teenagers as peer counselors.

“We were going to be talking about sex, we were going to be talking about drugs, we were going to be talking about AIDS — these are things that are an anathema to the traditional parent, even non-Vietnamese, but particularly to the Vietnamese it was really

difficult,” said Schlosser. “At one point we had a symposium here with the adults and the kids to talk about their issues. The dynamic that created the most tension was among a couple of the parents in the room. One father was saying we don’t want these kinds of behaviors from our kids, and the other was saying but we’re here, we have to let these kids be kids.”

Kids, like the peer counselors Schlosser has trained, are beginning to take an interest in their community. Many of those youths are students at UMass-Boston, where a thriving Asian-American Studies Institute has helped students confront their heritage academically.

“It’s important to recognize that Boston’s Vietnamese community is not simply a ‘newcomer’ community,” said Professor Peter Kiang, of the Asian American Studies Institute at UMass-Boston, in e-mail. “There is a generation of youth and young adults who were born and raised here in Boston. Soon, there will be a substantial number of third generation Vietnamese-Americans entering the Boston public schools. There are many different voices and perspectives to recognize in the Vietnamese community.”

Developing events that engage that younger generation is a challenge, but some attempts have been successful. The martial arts class, and Close to Home, an anti-violence group based in the community center are good examples. Kids who participate are in the minority— but they take what they learn back to their friends. And some non-Vietnamese, like Dave, become engaged as well.

Though Nam Pham and Mary Truong are at the forefront of their community now, they know that the Vietnamese community in 20 years will be led by Vietnamese who were born here — Vietnamese without a passion for, or inherent knowledge of, the

land of Vietnam. They will decide whether to preserve their cultural background, and whether to accept the mantle of a leadership.

“I sometimes wonder how long it will last,” said Maureen Feeney. “I wonder how long girls will be wearing their *Aodai* at the Tet celebrations.”

As long as Quac and Lien stay in the martial arts class, there will be someone to teach traditional martial arts, someone to perform the lion dance at Tet celebrations. And as long as students at UMass-Boston continue to study the implications of their Asian-American identity, there will be young leaders with the poise and intellectual skills necessary to lead their community with savvy. Whether that leadership will take the form of political candidacy, or of continued investment in Dorchester’s Fields Corner neighborhood, will be up to them.

Lien says she plans to stay involved with her family and community after completing her studies. She does not know if she will always live in Fields Corner. On Friday afternoon at the martial arts class, she is still drifting through the room, helping younger students pull their leg just a bit higher and occasionally taking a kick or two of her own. On her rounds through the room, one stop is by my side, to explain the class unfolding before me and the details of the lion dance I had watched Lien and her classmates perform half a dozen times during the Tet season. I ask what had happened to the money dancers raked in from the offerings older Vietnamese had made to the lion at each party. Vietnam, she says, the money would be divided among the dancers, and saved, as Lanchi Pham explained to me during the Tet celebration. This year, she and her fellow performers decided to use the money to help fund the martial arts club.

“We’ll use the money to buy more lion heads,” she says.

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