

How LI Welcomed a Montagnard Child in '67

• By Hank Boerner

The heroic efforts by Americans to bring Vietnamese children to the United States for adoption brought back memories of a year-long struggle by Long Islanders eight years ago to bring just one Montagnard youngster to the United States.

Ha Kin Lieng was (in 1967) a bright 13-year-old who had never left the little village of Da Me in the Central Highlands where he was born. As a Montagnard—roughly the equivalent of a disenfranchised, neglected American Indian from the Southwest—Ha Kin had little chance for an education. The South Vietnamese government discouraged education beyond the fourth grade for the million or so Montagnards.

When James Turpin, an American physician working in Viet Nam for Project Concern, an independent relief organization, happened to meet Ha Kin and his family, he was impressed with the youngster's determination to get a college education—an unheard of prospect for a Montagnard. Back in the United States, Turpin made a fundraising appearance in Stony Brook and brought little Ha Kin Lieng to the attention of the Three Village Jaycees.

Immediately, the local Jaycees "adopted" Ha Kin and began an ambitious effort to bring the lad to Long Island. I became involved because I was a member of the Jaycees and an executive with American Airlines. With some fast foot-work, I got my boss to donate airline tickets from Los Angeles to New York. Next, we persuaded Pan American World Airways to provide transportation from Saigon to L.A. via Honolulu, and worked out the necessary legalities so that ads in the Jaycee magazines (from Pan Am) offset the nearly \$2,000 air fare. The Stony Brook School for Boys, through its headmaster, Donn Gaebelein, agreed to provide a four-year scholarship through high school for Ha Kin—a magnificent gesture by a private organization, now that I look back on it.

But all that was the easy part; getting this poor young man through the maze of South Vietnamese intrigue and corruption was an adventure I will never forget. Let me share some of the details with you. Remember, the people who ruled Saigon had little regard for the mountain people, the Montagnards.

Education of these folk was unheard of. Letting one "out" to come live in the United States was, I found out, unthinkable. First, our own State Department was reluctant to let a Montagnard enter the country—it might offend our South Vietnamese "allies": "The Department . . . appreciates . . . the proposal. . . but has concluded that this request is not among the very extraordinary cases . . . which might be justified." A call to Rep. Otis Pike brought no help, so I then called on an old friend, Rep. James Grover of Babylon, who was successful, in swinging the State Department around.

The next hurdle was Saigon. We got word to Project Concern in Vietnam that transportation was set and the U.S. permission was granted. When the paperwork began going through the government mills of Saigon, the reaction was instantly felt in New York—I received a telephone call from a South Vietnamese official at the United Nations. His message was simple: "Sorry, but we can't let you bring a Montagnard youth to America—you just want to show his napalm scars on American television and arouse the American population against the war!"

I begged, I explained; finally, I gave up and slammed down the phone. I called a friend in Sen. Robert Kennedy's office to beg for help, and the late senator himself came on the line to promise his assistance. Things began to happen. . .

Within a few days, the American military establishment in Vietnam was Working on Ha Kin's behalf, and the lad was helicoptered 150 miles from the Central Highlands to Saigon. As a face-saving gesture to the government, he had to spend several months in a missionary school "learning English" (even though he could speak fluently—his fatter worked for the Project Concern mission).

After six months, Ha Kin was cleared for departure and bundled aboard a Pah Am jet with his few belongings, including a tightly clutched homemade bow and arrows.

At Kennedy Airport he met his benefactors, the Jaycees, and his schoolmates from the Stony Brook School, for Boys. The Stony Brook Fire Department was on hand to provide an honor guard, and the local public school band was there to play "God Bless America." Everybody at that airline terminal had a good, old-fashioned cry.

There's more to the story: during the Tet offensive the following summer, war came to Ha Kin's village for the first time. The Viet Cong, I am told, went to the family's house, marched his brother, brother-in-law and cousin out back and put bullets in their heads. Ha Kin's presence in America may have had something to do with that. The simple fact is, he can no longer "go home"; the Vietnamese "liberators" burned his village to the ground.

Ha Kin Lieng graduated from the Stony Brook School in 1972 and is now a junior at Barrington (R.I.) College. Stony Brook's academic dean, Marvin Goldberg, says of his former student, "Ha Kin was an extraordinary person . . . who added so much to our school and achieved so much . . ."

I mentioned to Goldberg that I thought his institution's contribution to Ha Kin's life was most unselfish and extraordinary—providing five years of room, board and tuition is much more than a public relations gesture; to me it was noble and humanitarian. He replied, "Ha Kin added so much to our lives here at Stony Brook . . . We were happy to do what we could for him."

There's no end to this story, of course, for Ha Kin is still in America, attending college, preparing for a future which probably does not include his own family, his country, his village, his people, whom he wanted to go back and help once he was educated. But knowing of his spirit and dedication, I believe that he will make great contributions to his new people, his homeland—America.

If there's a message in this story, permit me this thought: Let every child who can escape from a homeland torn by war come to this great nation of ours. Ha Kin Lieng, an American now by choice, is the greatest example of how a similar effort eight years ago proved the point.

As I think back to the evening at the airport when a shy, frightened 13-year-old Montagnard youngster arrived at his new home, I think of the words of Emma Lazarus at another entry to the port of New York: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free . . . Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me; I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

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