



VICTORIA NEWS

Refugee centre helping create new beginnings

By Rebecca Aldous - Victoria News

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Society hosting open house during Multicultural Week

It started with three refugees, a tiny office and a rented computer.

Sitting in the a room in the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society's new facility, which covers the third floor of a stout building at 637 Bay St., Viet Tran, one of the organization's founders, laughs at the memory.

"It was small," he says.

On June 1, 1985, Tran, his wife and two children escaped from Vietnam to Indonesia by boat. For two years the family lived at a refugee camp before being flown to Canada. Two years to the day later, the family arrived in Victoria.

A practicing lawyer in Vietnam, Tran found it difficult to get into his field in Canada. He fixed fences, did handyman jobs and adapted his skill set.

But a stint working at the Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria changed his life.

"(At the time) we were the only visible immigrants (working) there," Tran said of himself and fellow VIRCS co-founders Carlos Guete and Hereity Hodgu. In 1989, the trio created the immigrant and refugee centre, a home created by immigrants for immigrants, Tran said.

Today the society helps more than 3,000 people annually and a total of 18 different languages are spoken by its employees. It offers nine programs, from free youth camps for children new to Canada, to helping people acquire upgrades to continue working in the career field. Last year, the society helped 600 new Canadians find jobs.

A lot of the programs are run by immigrant volunteers who are former clients, said Christopher Geater, the centre's volunteer co-ordinator who oversees a group of around 200 people at any given time. They bring their own expertise and in turn start up programs in their field, he added.

On Wednesday, Feb. 18, during multicultural week, the society is holding an open house from 4 to 6 p.m. For more information on the society and its programs, please call 250-361-9433 or visit www.vircs.bc.ca.

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Mayuko Yamauchi works on a paper during an English as a second language class offered by the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society. The society offers a wide range of courses for immigrants and refugees.

Rebecca Aldous News staff

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