

# Lost in Translation

Gladstone secondary student and refugee Phe "Josh" Rahlan speaks halting English and is effectively illiterate. He and a flood of refugee students face uncertain futures as the school district struggles to meet their needs.

**Vancouver Courier, Friday June 06, 2008**

**Byline: Naoibh O'Connor**

Republished with permission from *Vancouver Courier*, © 2008.

Josh Rahlan watched his father walk away from their home in the Vietnamese mountains almost five years ago. Uncertain of his destination, Rahlan followed. "Don't come. If you come, you make noise and it's so far away," his father, a poor farmer, said when he spotted his son. Then 10 years old, Rahlan was warned to go back, but he refused, and father and son travelled to a secret location on foot to meet his pregnant mother, along with many other villagers, who joined them on a clandestine journey to Cambodia. Several of Rahlan's siblings were left behind with an uncle.

The group, called Montagnards, or mountain people, by Vietnam's former French colonial rulers, belonged to an ethnic minority in Vietnam called Jarai, most of whom live in the country's central highlands. They left their homes to flee persecution. "The government wanted to arrest my dad, so my family had to leave the country," Rahlan, now a 15-year-old Gladstone secondary student, says through Vietnamese translator Tuoi Nguyen, a settlement worker with the Vancouver School Board. "I don't know what happened but he was arrested two times and put in jail."

Walking non-stop for three days, the migrants' only source of sustenance was the incessant rain. There was no path or light to guide them, but the fear was constant--they could hear police searching for them. "It's at night. They shoot their guns," the teenager explains in halting English.

The group split apart once they reached Cambodia, and Rahlan's family hid in a small room in a Cambodian home. Some Jarai villagers were caught and sent back to Vietnam, but Rahlan and his parents surreptitiously crept to a road where a truck picked them up and transported them to a UN refugee camp. They stayed there for two years before being accepted into Canada.

Piecing together accurate details of Rahlan's story is difficult. The Grade 9 student's first language is Jarai, an obscure dialect for which the VSB has no translator. He picked up some Vietnamese at the refugee camp, but his English is weak. Even Nguyen, the Vietnamese translator, has trouble sorting through the facts. Questions are asked and re-asked for accuracy, but specifics such as a timeline, Rahlan's village's name, the route they took, why his father was jailed and how they avoided capture aren't clear despite his willingness to share.

On a mid-May morning, although Rahlan looks like the average Gladstone student, dressed in the standard teenage uniform of baggy jeans, navy hoodie and black runners, his future is far less certain. He didn't attend a proper school until he reached Vancouver. He's effectively illiterate in his own language, in Vietnamese, and in English, with only a couple of years left before graduation.

He's one of a growing number of refugee students from across the globe in similar situations who have flooded into Vancouver in recent years--195 registered with the District Reception and Placement

Centre between July 2, 2007 and April 30, 2008. The district struggles to meet their needs while lobbying the provincial and federal governments for more funding.

It's too early to say whether Rahlan will fall through the educational cracks, but today he has no complaints; he's just glad to be in Canada and in school. "I don't have anything I don't like. I like Gladstone. I like the teachers. I like to play soccer," he says. The permanent grin across his face is almost certainly at odds with the obstacles ahead.

Early one Wednesday morning, immigrants and refugees trickle into the Vancouver School Board's District Reception and Placement Centre, founded in 1989 to handle the influx of immigrants that started at least a decade earlier. The office, located in a low-lying building at 2530 East 43rd Ave., is where roughly 4,000 students annually, most of them newly arrived immigrants, register and are assessed before being placed at schools. Seventy-five to 80 per cent don't understand English. The majority of immigrants, on average representing 25 different language groups, come from Mainland China, Korea, the Philippines, India and Central and South America. Depending on the state of global affairs, the refugees pour in from 36 countries, collectively speaking about 30 languages, but many of those languages--such as Jarai, Bana, Chin, Karen, Burmese, Pushtu, Thai and Banna--are not well supported in Vancouver.

Difficulty communicating is one reason Rahlan's life is tough--he's forged only one friendship at school with another boy he met at the Cambodian refugee camp. He's afraid to get lost in case he can't find his way home. He attends ESL classes at Gladstone, but struggles with math and science and finds learning English difficult. "Very, very hard," he says.

His family, which was sponsored by the Vietnamese Alliance Church, is on income assistance and lives on the East Side on the main floor of a house. Both parents attend classes to learn English, but his father has health problems. Despite those burdens, Rahlan, who adopted an English first name for pronunciation sake in place of his given name Phe, only sees the advantages of his situation--going to school, having enough food to eat and living in a solid house. His home in the Vietnamese mountains was small, cold and leaky during the rainy season. His family, which is Christian, can also go to church without fear of persecution. Rahlan's not sure where the future will lead, but he has at least one goal: "I just want to work. I don't know what [doing]. I'd like to go to work to help my parents out."

Rahlan's life is one few Canadians can relate to, but Sylvia Helmer has an inkling. Helmer, manager of the District Reception and Placement Centre, immigrated to Canada from Germany with her mother in 1957. Helmer, then 10 and in Grade 4, couldn't speak English. "But of course I was in the situation all those years ago where it was English submersion," she recalls during an interview at the reception centre.

She attended one of two new-Canadian classes available in the district in those days, located at Van Horne elementary on Ontario Street. The small stand-alone building, the size of a portable, still stands.

"My first English words were, 'Transfer please,' because I had to take two buses to get there," Helmer remembers. The class focused on grammar, but once Helmer transferred to regular school, she had to adapt to a Canadian style of teaching. Multiplication and division, for example, were calculated differently, forcing her to relearn the steps.

She adapted, thanks to a solid educational foundation to build on. "I even remember for the first time walking to school one morning thinking in English and being shocked, 'Oh, I'm thinking in English.' It was four years later."

Helmer graduated from Killarney high school, went to university and became a physical education and French teacher. She fell into ESL education during a working holiday, later earning a Masters in cross-cultural education and a PhD in curriculum instruction.

She's worked as a teacher with the VSB, as its district ESL consultant, and as a part-time instructor at UBC. Last July, the 60-year-old landed the job as manager of the placement centre.

Her background as an immigrant helps Helmer empathize with ESL students such as Rahlan, but she's aware the difficulties facing immigrants are not the same as those endured by refugees. Many refugees suffered traumas, while others have had little or no schooling.

"First of all, they're coming with all kinds of baggage. Lord only knows what happened to them and what kinds of experiences they've had. They have a world of knowledge and lived experiences we can't begin to contemplate, [along with] all of that baggage they're carrying with them. And then they're being asked to pretend they're two and let's start over again and it's OK," she says.

"[Refugees are] coming here very often as teenagers with all that identity crisis going on, plus they're suddenly catapulted into a new language and some of them don't even know how to do this," she says, picking up a pink pencil and holding it to paper. "You have to teach them how to hold the pencil and that is quite astonishing for secondary teachers who are not trained to teach kids how to hold a pencil and how to turn the page and how to write. That's not part of their training."

Helmer says refugee students need instructors with specialized training to help them be willing to take those steps and risk making fools of themselves in order to learn English, which can mean studying English at the level of a five-year-old without being treated like a five-year-old. But providing support for refugees is time-consuming and costly. District officials insist more money is needed from both the provincial and federal governments.

Their lobbying has been somewhat successful. Provincial education funding is based largely on enrolment figures. The district receives base funding of just under \$8,000 for each student, plus top-up money for those with other needs, including an additional \$1,170 for each designated ESL student.

In past years, however, annual funding was based on enrolment figures as of September 30, even though many refugees register after that date. The VSB was forced to stretch its budget. This year, Helmer was relieved to learn funding changes are in store. The Ministry of Education announced it will hold a second enrolment count for refugee students starting next February and supply additional money as a result. If expected new rules were introduced this year, it would affect the 69 refugee students who registered with the district after September 30. "If they got half their funding, about \$3,000, that's \$207,000. That's a lot of money. We could do a lot of good with that," Helmer says.

New federal government funding was also made available for the first time this school year to pay for settlement workers in schools. Twenty-three workers are employed in the Vancouver school district, helping students and their families deal with issues from banking to housing. Another 24 full and part-time multicultural liaison workers act as a bridge between home and school.

But the needs and numbers of refugees aren't waning, according to Helmer. Canada is one of the top destinations in the world for immigrants, and Vancouver is the most popular destination for refugees and immigrants in Canada after Toronto. Crises in various parts of the world keep the supply coming. Aside from the wave of Jarai refugees, large numbers of Karen refugees—an ethnic minority from Burma—have arrived in Vancouver, although many wind up in Langley. Many other ethnic groups remain in this city.

"This is quite an explosion. Everyone is reeling a bit from the shock. We started a later-to-literacy class, a secondary literacy class, last school year," Helmer says, explaining it's aimed at Grade 8 to 12 students who have had interrupted, if any, schooling. "We wondered whether or not we'd fill it and of course it was filled almost before school started."

Despite such initiatives, many refugee students won't graduate with a standard Dogwood diploma at age 18. Landing jobs to help their families survive takes precedence. Skills in English remains a problem for many who want acceptance into the school district's pre-employment program, although exceptions are sometimes made.

Helmer cites one recent student who struggled with school. "He's sitting in a literacy class and even though physically he was 16, chronologically, if you looked into his eyes, he was a lot older than that. He's sitting in this class basically spinning his wheels trying to learn really basic stuff. Fortunately, his teacher was sensitive enough to see he was slumping into a depression because it was not what he had expected," she recalls.

The teacher secured him a job in the cafeteria and Helmer found him a spot in the pre-employment program, despite his weak English skills. "I said here's a kid who's motivated. He knows he's not going to graduate from high school. He wants to get a job. He wants to get skilled. He'll be OK. So they let him in [the program] and he's doing just fine," she says. "Because he had this new lease on life, he started working harder at learning."

Helmer maintains refugees' success is not measured by academics. Adjusting to Canada, finding work, and sending money home are top priorities. "That's how they define success. If, on top of that, you can add reasonable clothes and reasonable food and some friends, well, hey, that's wonderful."

NPA trustee Carol Gibson concedes not enough is being done to ensure refugees succeed, but blames the federal government for a large part of the problem.

Gibson, who sits on the Metropolitan ESL Consortium, argues refugees haven't been treated equally across the country. After the Lower Mainland won federal funding for settlement workers, the consortium learned the program had been available in Toronto for a decade. "That to me is a really critical issue," she says. "Because our refugee families frequently come into the large metropolitan areas and we need to have those kinds of programs consistently placed across the country."

She also faults the federal government for not providing basic survival-language programs, which many other countries require for immigrants. Lack of language skills isolate refugees, especially those who speak obscure dialects, according to Gibson.

She credits the provincial government for changing funding for refugees arriving after September, but points out schools have never been regarded, or funded properly, as settlement organizations even though that's what they've become. "Our schools are major players in the settlement of refugees," she

says. "It's meant that there have been significant services provided within schools that are not recognized by any level of government and therefore not funded."

School districts are starting to address the unique problems facing refugees, such as illiteracy, she adds. But Gibson concedes school districts aren't as successful as they could be with refugee students because they're just starting to understand their problems. "But we're responding to it," she says. "There are always both immigrants and refugees who come into the country for whom we are unable to provide, initially, all of the services. What is also true about those communities, however, is that they are amazingly strong, resilient communities... I would hope that there will be as few people falling through the cracks as we can possibly manage."

Schools such as Gladstone try to make sure that doesn't happen. It has a dozen refugee students, mainly from Vietnam and Burma, although in past years some have come from countries like Somalia. Judith Robson, department head of Gladstone's ESL department, says refugees must adjust to the school's formal setting. "They've probably spent the last few years in a very unstructured environment--some of them haven't been in any buildings at all, in any kind of school," she explains. "Others have. They do try to do some learning when they're in the camps, but of course it's a whole different system."

The ESL program helps ease the transition since students are with a small group of similar students each day and deal with only two or three teachers. But understanding complicated subjects such as math and science doesn't come easily for those with limited education. "Some don't understand the concept of numbers--anything over a dozen, or 10 or 20 is difficult," notes Robson. "Once they get up into huge numbers of thousands and millions, they can't perceive it."

Robson says refugee students have a very different idea of their future after high school compared to other students. Their parents want them to earn money to support their families, while banking on future generations to take advantage of post-secondary education. "We want to see them go off to college or university, but of course that's not going to happen. One good thing about our system is you can do that any time in your life—it's not something you have to do at 18," she adds. "We have to look at where they were before and where they will be now."

Back at the District Reception and Placement Centre, Helmer says refugees have a great deal to offer if they successfully adapt, and if teachers find ways to help them reach their intellectual potential. "These kids aren't stupid. They have skills and potential that we can't tap into because language is in the way and the way the system is set up is also in the way," she says.

But Gladstone student Josh Rahlan is likely oblivious to the debate surrounding the issue. He's just trying to survive, albeit somewhat isolated, in a city that's providing his family with a new, and hopefully, better life. He's convinced this new life is a vast improvement on his old one in Vietnam and the Cambodian refugee camp. His grateful attitude is one that Helmer encounters among many refugees. "One of the things I've heard refugees say is they want to pay Canada back for giving them a safe sanctuary. It's touching to hear them say things like that because they're struggling so hard," she says. "They come from the most incredibly bad circumstances and then come to this wonderful, humanitarian place where everyone is accepted. It would be nice if we did what little bit that we could to make sure they succeed."