

The Inspiration

Helping Link, brainchild of Minh Duc Nguyen, was created in response to the overwhelming need for some form of support for the rapidly-growing Vietnamese community. A refugee herself, it was a trip back to Vietnam—where Minh Duc came across a Vietnamese woman who, despite her dire situation, was able to live a dignified and meaningful life—that motivated her to create Helping Link. As she said in an interview with NW Asian Weekly, “I came back to Seattle with a burning vision to help all the new members of our community recapture their dignity, initiative and ability to support themselves as Vietnamese Americans.”

While Minh Duc is the face—and provides the majority of the manpower—of Helping Link, she would be displeased if the names of those who helped her start up the organization were omitted. The following people saw promise in the young University of Washington graduate and her vision and got behind her to create an organization that would lead as a shining example of how a community can serve itself: Nam Bach, Hung Nguyen, Chi Hong, John (Dung Tri) Le, Tien Mai, Hung Nguyen, Loc Nguyen, Duy Nguyen, Thien Ha Nguyen, Thien Nga Nguyen, Thuy Phuong Nguyen, Quang Quoi Tran and Kim Thoa Vu.

It was in 1993 that Helping Link held its first English as a Second Language (ESL) course to assist the Vietnamese refugee immigrant population of greater Seattle, better assimilate to their new country and city. Based in Seattle’s international district, Helping Link is powered by its volunteers. Volunteers who, for the most part, come from a country and society where altruism is not commonplace and the concept of helping the community is foreign. In Vietnam, people contribute to their families, jobs and temples but participation in an organization like Helping Link, which targets such a wide and diverse audience, goes against many of the conventions of Vietnamese life. Another barrier that many older Vietnamese refugee and immigrants face when dealing with Helping Link is the negative association that they make with ‘governmental’-type agencies and the communist regime of Vietnam’s past.

Helping Link added to, and moved beyond, its initial focus of teaching English as a second language to providing ‘Technology as a Second Language’ classes. While learning the ‘native’ tongue is essential to close the gap between refugee, immigrants and Americans, teaching computer skills closes the gap between the generations of refugee immigrants. While people of all ages make their way from Vietnam to America, the younger immigrants, due to greater peer interaction and assimilation through school, tend to improve their language and technological skills, leaving their parents and grandparents behind. This process not only means that the older Vietnamese are isolated from the greater population, but are they very quickly become isolated from their own children.

In an attempt to give Seattle parents insight into the progress of their schoolchildren, the Seattle Public School system instituted an online program called The Source, providing parental access to attendance, grades and homework. The Source is an invaluable tool, not only getting parents involved in their children's homework, but in their children's lives. An invaluable tool that, without basic computer skills, keeps refugee and immigrant parents in the digital-dark. To address this problem, Helping Link, with the help of its team of volunteers, created a computer textbook with English and Vietnamese instructions side-by-side, so that the textbook can be used by multiple generations, side-by-side. "Technology really divided the generations," said Minh Duc. "Were using computers to make a bridge back." Not only are computers connecting children and parents but they are also decreasing the extreme isolation that faces many as they live in a new land. By mastering basic computer skills, many immigrants are able to reconnect with distant friends and family.

The incredible success that Helping Link's textbook has had in helping parents and children communicate more efficiently has drawn the attention and praise of the City of Seattle; "It certainly is critical for every resident to have technology skills for education, for employment, for civic engagement and staying in touch with family," said David Keyes, community technology program manager for the City of Seattle. "Helping Link and this manual, we're excited about it because it helps community organizations here and potentially around the world assist people with that training."

While Minh Duc and has received praise and award nominations for her inspired work with Helping Link, the greatest testament to Helping Link's success is the fact that so many of its program's graduates come back to become volunteers. Volunteers that will help tomorrow's refugee and immigrants feel at home at both Helping Link and in America.

- Daniel Senyard