Lutheran Family Services Elects First Refugee Board Member

CONOR MCCORMICK-CAVANAGH | JANUARY 22, 2019 | 6:44AM
One day last October, Nga Vuong-Sandoval met Jim Barclay for lunch at Racines Restaurant. Barclay, the president of Lutheran Family Services Rocky Mountains, had gotten to know Vuong-Sandoval through her immigrant and refugee advocacy work in Denver. But Barclay didn't come just to eat: He had an offer for her.

After listening to her talk about her family's history of coming to the United States as Vietnamese refugees in the late 1970s, Barclay made his pitch. He asked Vuong-Sandoval if she wanted to serve on the board of directors of Lutheran Family Services, one of Colorado's three resettlement agencies.

Vuong-Sandoval was excited at the proposition. "I was really grateful that he even asked me," she says.

But she became even more inclined to accept the offer when she found out something surprising about the Lutheran Family Services board: No refugee had ever before served on it.

With her acceptance of the offer and her unanimous election by the organization's board of directors in December 2018, Vuong-Sandoval has made history. "Who knows better what a refugee needs than one herself?" she says.

The organization opened its headquarters in Denver in 1948. In the beginning, Lutheran Family Services ran an adoption program. But events taking place an ocean away eventually led the group to add to its services.

As Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, fell to communists in 1975, scores of Vietnamese families fled the country. Many died at sea. The lucky ones who made it to Guam and other Pacific islands were eventually moved to makeshift refugee camps at military bases across the United States.

As Vietnamese refugees began entering the U.S., Lutheran Family Services took action, resettling families around Colorado.

In the late 1970s, the Vuong family, including three-year-old Nga, left Saigon and bounced from Guam all the way to a camp in Arkansas. It was in Arkansas that the family first came into contact with Lutherans. "The faith that welcomed us first were Lutherans, not Catholics, even though we're Catholic. If it wasn't for these people, my life and other people's lives would be significantly different," says Vuong-Sandoval.
A Lutheran church sponsored her family as it was resettled in Alabama. And in the early 1980s, the family moved to Colorado Springs.

When Barclay started with the organization in 2001, it was resettling approximately 250 refugees per year. Back then, Lutheran Family Services had only three offices.

In fiscal year 2017, the organization resettled 1,575 refugees across five offices, including one in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

However, despite its expansive work with refugees, Lutheran Family Services had never had a refugee serve on its board.

"It has long been my desire to have a refugee voice on the board of directors," Barclay says. "The challenge that I've had in the past has been being able to identify a refugee who had been here long enough to stabilize their livelihood."
Barclay says that's because refugees resettling in the U.S. are often in tenuous work situations and don't necessarily have the flexibility to take time off from their jobs for quarterly board meetings. Vuong-Sandoval works full-time as a compliance investigator at the Colorado Department of Law and is able to take time off from work for the meetings. The new position will add to her portfolio, which already includes public-speaking gigs on behalf of the Colorado Refugee Speakers Bureau.

"Our rooms are filled with passionate people. But Nga has personally experienced it," Barclay says. "So it's in her DNA, and she has a moral obligation and opportunity to open doors for other newcomers and people in need."

Vuong-Sandoval is ready to take on that responsibility.

"I feel like it's come full circle," she says. "The faith that helped my family, the organization that helped Vietnamese refugees – now I'm able to go in a direction that's very impactful for this community."

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