



**WELCOME TO RALEIGH, Y'ALL** is a campaign by the new Raleigh nonprofit Come Out & Show Them. Using yard signs, stickers, and large-scale murals that welcome visitors and residents alike to Raleigh using seventeen languages and our favorite all-inclusive contraction, Come Out & Show Them hopes to spark conversations about the impact of immigration and ideas of sanctuary in our communities while allowing folks to express their regional warmth and hospitality. Come Out & Show Them has distributed approximately two thousand such signs and stickers in the Triangle in the last month, with many more to come. To get your own, go to [welcometoraleighyall.com](http://welcometoraleighyall.com). Proceeds go to Uniting NC and the local chapter of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, as well as to support the sustainability of Come Out & Show Them.

# THE MOUNTAIN PEOPLE

*How chance, weather, and war brought twenty thousand persecuted Vietnamese Christians to North Carolina*

BY ERICA HELLERSTEIN

**A**s Glun Siu walks around Raleigh's St. Paul's Christian Church, he appears perfectly at ease. Petite, with a head of silver-streaked black hair, he strides confidently, jangling his keys. But he wasn't always so comfortable here. When the forty-eight-year-old arrived in North Carolina in 2002, he didn't speak any English and knew nothing about the state save for its landscape. Someone back in Vietnam had told him the trees were abundant here, lush and fantastic. Siu struggled in his new home. He missed his family and friends, all back in the tiny village of Plei Grak, tucked away in the central highlands of Vietnam. He yearned for the familiar faces of the mountainous, agricultural region he knew so well. At night, insomnia crept into his bed.

Over time, things got better. He put down roots, found work, made friends, even brought the rest of his immediate family over. But Siu still thinks often about those who weren't so fortunate—his relatives and friends who are still back in Plei Grak, still suffering.

"When I call my village, they're always upset and crying," he says. "They always say, 'The Vietnamese don't care about our village.' They cry and cry. They always ask me, 'Help us.' They say, 'You must come back.' I say, 'I'm scared to come back.'"

Siu is part of a little-known refugee community in North Carolina, one of an estimated twenty thousand who fled religious and political persecution in Vietnam and found a new home in the Old North State. An indigenous community comprising about thirty tribal groups, they're often referred

to as the Montagnards, a term imposed by French colonizers meaning "mountain people." Siu identifies as Jarai, which is his native tongue and one of the numerous tribal groups under the Montagnard umbrella.

Today, North Carolina is home to the largest Montagnard community outside of Vietnam. How they wound up here is a slice of history worth excavating, an exodus rooted in chance, weather, and, true to the good old American tradition, war.

It's also a story whose telling seems to have new urgency in this political moment. As nativist fears grip the nation's highest office, making their way into policy and resurfacing in bombastic xenophobic statements, tens of thousands of Montagnards have been settling into life on a new continent, with a new language, with new friends.

Among those who have embraced the Montagnards are the congregants of St. Paul's, who have quietly been working with them since the early 2000s, when they were asked to help resettle four Montagnard men, all newly arrived from a Cambodian refugee camp. But that was not the first group of refugees they greeted: in the 1970s, the church also worked with Vietnamese and Polish refugee families.

Their work is guided by a moral framework articulated by the Reverend Diane Faires: "If we claim to be a country that stands up for humanitarian values and compassion, we have to think about that and practice our values by providing hospitality for people that have been through such difficult circumstances."

The Montagnards, including many of those who ended up in North Carolina,

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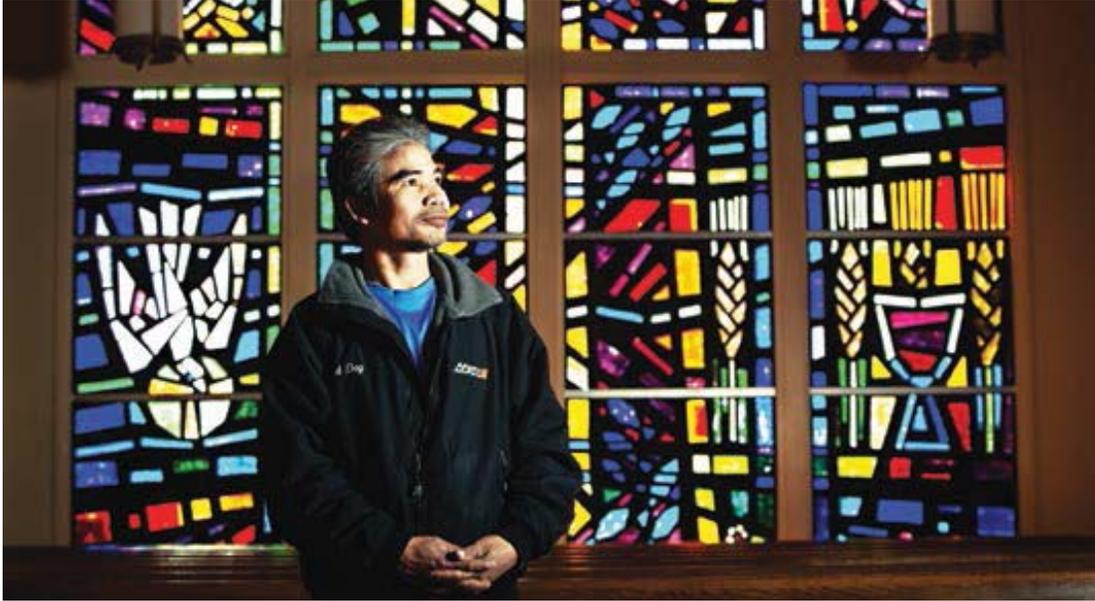
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**Glun Siu** PHOTO BY BEN MCKEOWN

have long faced oppression in Vietnam. The reasons are multifaceted but rooted in the group's political, ethnic, and religious history. Although the Montagnards traditionally practiced an animistic religion, some began converting to Christianity in the fifties and sixties; in the nineties, many more joined unofficial churches. Their religious activity has become a point of tension with the Vietnamese government, which, according to a 2011 Human Rights Watch report, alleged that the Montagnards' churches were being used as a front for political-independence activism. That persecution is ongoing, monitors say. Since 2001, thousands have fled to nearby Cambodia to escape harsh government repression.

Ironically, it was the promise of autonomy that, in part, drew the Montagnards into an alliance with the U.S. military during the Vietnam War, in which roughly forty thousand Montagnards fought alongside the U.S. Army Special Forces in the mountains of Vietnam. According to the North Carolina-based Montagnard Human Rights Organization, Montagnard leaders were told that the U.S. would "help the Montagnard people regain their autonomous state."

After the war, however, the Montagnards suffered greatly and were targeted by the communist regime for their alliance with the U.S. military. Thousands were executed or thrown in jail, according to the MHRO, and an estimated eight thousand who escaped the

carnage perished in the jungles of Vietnam.

The first group of Montagnard refugees arrived in North Carolina in 1986, and later waves in the early 1990s and 2000s followed. The Montagnards wound up in North Carolina for a host of reasons, including the state's mild climate, the work of local resettlement agencies, and the presence of the U.S. Special Forces, which has a base in Fort Bragg and veterans throughout the state.

Siu was part of the third wave. He came to North Carolina in 2002 after spending eight months in a Cambodian refugee camp. Like many others, Siu was fleeing religious persecution. In the late nineties, he began attending a church in his town. His parents weren't Christian, but he was drawn to the church's focus on living a pure life—no smoking, no drinking—activities in which Siu says many of his fellow townsmen heartily partook. Attracted to the healthier lifestyle espoused by the church, Siu looked at the congregation and thought, "I want to go! I was not a very good man. It was good for me."

Vietnamese law, however, requires all religious groups to register with the authorities; government officials, in turn, are allowed to approve or deny requests. Those considered a "threat" to the ruling party's authority are "sharply repressed on grounds that they pose a threat to national security and public order," according to HRW.

In Siu's case, authorities began harassing

him after he began his church visits. They picked him up and interrogated him, he says, and placed a gun on the table during the interrogations. In 2001, he got word from a friend that his name was among those on a list of people slated to go to jail the following month.

"I didn't want to go to jail because I didn't do anything wrong," he says. "If I did something wrong, it's OK I go to jail. Maybe I'll learn something. But I didn't do nothing wrong! I just went to church. I was very angry."

What Siu experienced is not uncommon in Vietnam, says MHRO executive director Ron Nay, who escaped to the jungle and spent seventeen years fighting the Vietnamese with the Montagnard Resistance Force.

"We have been under darkness for one hundred years," Nay says. "And the situation is bad. Nothing much has changed. The Montagnards no longer own the land, they have no rights to own anything. Police can come to their house without permission and arrest them without any reason."

Siu escaped to the lush jungle with ninety-nine other Montagnards who were also fleeing arrest. For twelve days they lived without food, subsisting only on the leaves scattered on the jungle floor. Siu, who left behind his wife and five small children, eventually made it to a Cambodian refugee camp, where he stayed for eight months. There, Siu says, he was vetted by United Nations workers, who even traveled back to his village of Plei Grak to question his

wife and family about his reasons for fleeing the country. When they concluded Siu's account was truthful and his application was approved, he was given the option of staying put, returning to Cambodia, or relocating to the United States.

Siu chose the latter, which is how he wound up in North Carolina in 2002.

His involvement with St. Paul's made the transition easier, and he began taking ESL classes at the church, a doubly difficult task considering he never learned to read or write in his native language. Nevertheless, Siu made headway in his studies, scored a job as a custodian at a local high school, began making friends, and even laid eyes on the ocean for the first time. He was stunned by the vastness of the water, the wind whipping around his face. He got another piece of good news three years later, when he learned his wife and five children would be joining him in North Carolina. In the days leading up to their flight, in 2005, Siu was so excited he couldn't sleep.

Siu's family joined a growing group of Montagnards embraced by St. Paul's. When Siu joined the church, he was the first of four Montagnard men the church helped resettle; today around forty Montagnards are in the congregation, Faires estimates. St. Paul's works with the families on practical issues: English classes, housing applications, citizenship test preparations, navigating doctor's visits (one church member helped deliver a Montagnard baby in the middle of the night, before the ambulance arrived). Some of the Montagnard families helped Faires when she moved to a new house, and she returned the favor.

"It's kind of sharing life together at this point," she says.

Twenty thousand Montagnards, who fled a country we once warred against, are now settling into life in North Carolina. For the politicians most fearful of the latest crop of refugees, those once again fleeing trauma and violence, sometimes under the regimes of our professed enemies, perhaps this would be a surprising or even an unimaginable outcome.

For Siu, however, it is simply the story of his family's move to North Carolina. He's a U.S. citizen now. So is the rest of his family. He feels safe here. His eldest daughter, married to an American-born North Carolinian, has a two-year-old son.

Sometimes, Siu says, people who don't know him are curt, or rude, or dismissive of his accent, but it's OK.

He smiles. "If they know me, maybe they'll be nice, too."

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