As 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,
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, 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 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.

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.”

Glun Siu PHOTO BY JEN MCKEOWN

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