

Asian American LEAD

Leadership Empowerment And Development for Youth and Family

Lan-Anh Phan

Anh is a brilliant, courageous, and resilient young leader. When she was fourteen, her family immigrated to the United States. Since then, she has learned English with very few special school services. Within a month of arriving, Anh realized that she had to use her own resourcefulness in order to learn English. She went to the local public library and found English language books to read on her own. With the help of a mentor and her determination, within a year, Anh became an honor student and won first place for her Science Fair Project.

A year later, at Woodrow Wilson Senior High School, Anh was selected as the Student of the Year in English. In addition to her academic achievement, Anh is also known for her extracurricular activities in school. She was the President of the Asian American Student Association, the Co-captain of the Girl Cross Country Team, the Coordinator of the National Honor Society. Recently, she got accepted to Princeton, Brown, University of Pennsylvania and she received a full scholarship to University of California at Berkeley and University of Virginia at Charlottesville.

Although Anh has overcome many obstacles to achieve academic success, she realizes that many Vietnamese American children are not as fortunate as she is. As a result, Anh has devoted a lot of time to find a way to help other refugee children in her neighborhood. For example, in the summer of 1997, she organized and taught a Vietnamese class to 20 elementary school children at the local public library for eight weeks. She taught them to read and write Vietnamese and take pride in their language, culture and traditions. In 1998, she became a founding board member of Asian American LEAD, and she has been working with parents, youth, staff, and other professionals to develop youth programs for the organization.

In 1998, Anh and four other young people founded the Youth Power Group (under the umbrella of Asian American LEAD) with the mission to engage youth in developing educational, cultural, and recreational programs for refugee youth. Since July 1998, Anh has testified in front of the City Council, coordinated cultural performances, raised \$1,000 for the Youth Group, and served as an advisory board member for the National Campaign to Prevent Teenage Pregnancy.

From her experiences as an immigrant, Anh knows that education is the key to success in this country. Anh hopes that she will become a leader in bringing resources to help Asian American young people obtain higher education and become educated members of this democratic society.

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FACT SHEET

Introduction

The District is home to 5,000 Vietnamese refugees and legal immigrants, including Amerasian children, farmers, rural villagers, and others who have resettled here pursuant to American and international law. Unlike those who arrived in the 1970s, these recent Vietnamese arrivals have little or no education, training, or employable skills. While many are desperate to learn English, they must take multiple low-skill, low-wage jobs in order to support their families. Without basic support infrastructures, adequate food and shelter, and an understanding of how societal institutions work, refugee and immigrant adults are unable to help themselves and their children to succeed.

In the Vietnamese community in the Mount Pleasant and Columbia Heights neighborhoods, there are more than 150 children under the age of 5, most of whom were born in this country. Because of economic necessity, most parents have to leave their children in an informal care setting, often in the overcrowded apartments of friends or neighbors, while they work. These children grow up in homes without a place to play or develop basic skills. In addition, because of crime and violence on the streets, parents tend to keep their children inside their apartments which decreases the opportunity for them to socialize with other children. By the time these children enter kindergarten, they speak only Vietnamese, have no knowledge of the English alphabet, and have difficulty interacting with other children.

In school, these children face even more challenges. Many students have been enrolled in District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) for five years and still cannot speak English, and many graduate from high school without being able to write a complete sentence.

Organizational History

Asian American LEAD was founded in April 1998, to build upon and extend the work of the Indochinese Community Center - Vietnamese Youth Leadership Project (YLP). Over the last four years, YLP staff worked with over 250 youth establishing trust with parents, young people, and community members, as well as members of the education, social services, and law enforcement communities.

What is the mission of the organization?

Asian American LEAD exists to nurture Asian American youth and families, develop leadership, and strengthen community building through a partnership between youth and adults. Asian American LEAD will accomplish this by:

1. providing concrete services to refugee and immigrant families as they adapt to American society;

2. bridging gaps between generations, within and across cultures, while promoting cultural identity;
3. enhancing educational achievement of Asian American youth and adults;
4. fostering a sense of responsibility, self-reliance, entrepreneurship, and community.

What is the governance structure of Asian American LEAD?

Asian American LEAD creates a community-based governance structure. The Board of Directors has mandated that its membership include four Asian American youth and two parents from the community. This governance structure encourages parents, youth, and community members to participate and take ownership of the organization in a meaningful way.

What programs and services will Asian American LEAD provide to refugee and immigrant youth and families?

Asian American LEAD provides after school educational enrichment program, mentoring, leadership training for high school students, and family support services. Our programs value and encourage the participation of youth, parents, and community leaders.

After School Program

Asian American LEAD has developed an after school program that meets specific needs of Vietnamese refugee students. Our approach takes into account the complexity of the lives of these young people as individuals. During the past year Asian American LEAD has provided daily ESL, academic enrichment, and tutoring to 35 students, aged 7 to 18 and weekly Saturday recreational and cultural activities to 15 students, including trips to museums, movies, and local park and recreation areas.

Youth Leadership Program

Another important area of community development is the training of youth leaders who serve as role models for children while developing their own talents and strengths as young adults. During the past year 15 high school students meet for two hours each Saturday to learn new skills and to develop and implement projects to help their community.

Mentoring

Asian American LEAD has 60 mentors who provide services to more than 70 children and young people in the Mount Pleasant and Columbia Heights neighborhoods. The Mentoring Program complements the after school and leadership training programs.

Family Support Services

In order to effectively work with children and youth, Asian American LEAD provides support and assistance in strengthening the students' families. This program provides educational, social, and parenting support services to improve parent-child relationship and to prevent neglect and child abuse.

Sandy Hoa Dang

Sandy Hoa Dang's work as the founder and Executive Director of Asian American LEAD is not just a job, it is her calling. She has dedicated her life to making the transition of a new life in a strange land easier for the thousands of overlooked immigrant Southeast Asian families living in the Columbia Heights and Mount Pleasant neighborhoods of Washington, D.C.

As an immigrant herself, Sandy Dang knows what it is like to have to rebuild one's social and economic infrastructure. After being forced to leave Vietnam, she and her family lived in a Hong Kong refugee camp for three years. When Dang was thirteen, her family immigrated to America, where she had to learn a new language without any special school service or support. She still remembers her first week in school where she stood outside the cafeteria crying because she didn't know English to ask for lunch tickets. As a testament to her resiliency and determination as well as caring individuals like her mentor Liz who reviewed her homework, Dang became a straight "A" student within a year. Dang's sense of empathy and service developed during this time, and now she gives others the skills and support she's received.

Dang started her work as the Director for the Youth Leadership Project at the Indochinese Community Center (ICC), where she created a full-service youth program that more than doubled in size in four years. She recently left ICC to found her own youth and family leadership and service organization, the Asian American LEAD (Leadership Empowerment And Development). Asian American LEAD provides a variety of services and support for Vietnamese and other Asian families and youth, including after school enrichment program, mentoring, leadership training, and family support services.

Dang's philosophy--involving the whole family--goes beyond the traditional youth and families development. She is creating a new generation of Asian American leaders through youth and parents leadership training programs which focus on critical awareness of self and others, community organizing, public speaking, and civic responsibility.

Recently, Ms. Dang was selected as one of 100 Washingtonians to Watch in the Millennium. She is the recipient of the Mayor's Neighborhood Action Award and the 1999 Linowes Leadership Award for Community Services. She received her BA from Duke University and her Masters in Social Work from Catholic University.