



A Village Called

# VERSAILLES

*A Film by S. Leo Chiang*

**Their Homes Destroyed. Their voice discovered.**

Welcome to Versailles, New Orleans – home to the densest ethnic Vietnamese population outside of Vietnam. For over 30 years, its residents lived a quiet existence on the edge of New Orleans. But then came Hurricane Katrina, the immense garbage piles and the shocking discovery of a toxic landfill planned in their neighborhood. Watch as they fight back, turning a devastating disaster into a catalyst for change and a chance to build a better future.



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## FROM THE FILMMAKER

Before Katrina, I had no idea that Vietnamese American communities existed along the Gulf Coast. Having lived in California most of my life, the very concept of Asian Americans in the South seemed totally incongruent with my perceptions (stereotypes?) of what the American South was like. When Hurricane Katrina hit, and the catastrophic flood followed, we hardly saw any Asian faces on mainstream news. It wasn't until a geographer friend, Dr. Wei Li from Arizona State University, began describing a community she encountered on her post-Katrina research work in New Orleans that I learned about Versailles, the New Orleans East neighborhood portrayed in *A Village Called Versailles*. Wei told me how the Vietnamese American residents from Versailles were among the first people to return, how they were rebuilding way faster than anyone had anticipated, and how, just when life in Versailles was returning to normal, the city government decided to open a landfill less than two miles away to accept one-third of all Katrina debris. The landfill was to open without any environmental impact studies, any input from residents nearby, not even a basic lining at its bottom to prevent it from polluting the ground water. The city was going to dig a huge hole in the ground, next to the body of water that flooded, and dump a mountain of potentially toxic trash in it.

In the same conversation, Wei also told me that the Vietnamese Americans in Versailles were passionately organizing – mostly around the Mary Queen of Vietnam Catholic Church under the leadership of its charismatic Pastor Vien The Nguyen – to fight against this landfill. The residents, especially the refugee elders who escaped to the U.S. after 1975, were not about to lose their home again.

An immigrant myself, I'd also experienced displacement (though not nearly as traumatic as the Vietnamese refugee experience), and I was incredibly moved by the Versailles people rising up to defend against what they perceived as a threat to their American homeland. I asked Wei if I could meet her in New Orleans on her subsequent trip; she introduced me to Father Vien, and I began to make the film.

It took two and a half years to capture this story. I am grateful that members of the Versailles community trusted me to tell their story. Before I made this film, the word “community” would come up in conversations from time to time, but making this film has taught me what “community” really means – a group of people, family or not, who always have each other's back. I want the audience to walk away from this film moved by this story as much as I have been and continue to be. I also want them to feel empowered, especially viewers who are a part of any underserved and/or underrepresented group. I want them to believe that, united with their friends and family, they, too, can make a difference. Idealistic? You bet.

While *A Village Called Versailles* specifically portrays the Vietnamese American community in New Orleans East, in many ways it is a retelling of that classic American story—of David defeating Goliath, of the just triumphing over the unjust, of a determined immigrant group overcoming the odds to claim their own unique piece of American identity. It's a story that we can all relate to ... and cheer for.

– S. Leo Chiang



## THE FILM

In August 2005, the storm surge created by Hurricane Katrina breached the levees of New Orleans and flooded 80 percent of the city. The lowest-lying areas were especially hard hit, with miles of devastation caused by wind and water. The Village de l'Est in East New Orleans, home to some 6,000 Vietnamese Americans, was one of the destroyed neighborhoods. Commonly known as Versailles (because of the Versailles Arms apartments, where the Vietnamese Americans settled when they arrived 30 years ago), this small area has perhaps the highest concentration of Vietnamese Americans in the U.S today. While the storm devastated the Versailles neighborhood, it ultimately had the opposite effect on its residents.

The Vietnamese Americans were a quiet community, barely noticed outside of East New Orleans. Self-sufficient and industrious, they tended lush garden plots, ran a weekly farmer's market, built homes, bought cars, and generally achieved the American dream. The center of their community was – and still is – Mary Queen of Vietnam Catholic Church, and its pastor and leader, Father Vien, who joined the congregation in 2003.

When Hurricane Katrina destroyed all that they had built, it was an emotionally wrenching time. When the flood waters covered their community and they were forced to evacuate, those who had once fled their country in boats now found themselves in boats again, looking for refuge. Although they were dispersed to several cities in Texas and to Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas (where many had originally come as refugees from Vietnam), the tight-knit network created by the church helped Father Vien to maintain communication with his flock. Six weeks after Hurricane Katrina, some residents of Versailles came back and started rebuilding.

Shortly thereafter, Father Vien began holding regular Sunday Mass, and as word got out more and more residents returned.

A turning point for the Vietnamese American community came in late 2005, when a report from the Bring New Orleans Back Commission indicated that East New Orleans was slated to be green space, not the former neighborhood it had been. The residents of Versailles, feeling the threat of losing their community, came up with a plan of their own for redeveloping the area, and began advocating for their proposals. In early 2006, under pressure to remove the tons of debris piled up on New Orleans' streets, Mayor Nagin signed an executive order to create a landfill less than two miles from Versailles. A visit from environmental lawyer Joel Waltzer informed Father Vien that the Chef Menteur landfill would be a dumping ground not just for benign construction debris, but for any and all household and building waste, including toxic materials. Versailles residents were outraged and staged demonstrations at City Hall and at the landfill site. When these actions failed to close the facility, the residents took their fight to the state legislature and the courts, and finally obtained a court order that shut down Chef Menteur.

The Vietnamese American community of Versailles made a remarkable comeback. Today, 90 percent of its residents have returned, and the Chef Menteur landfill remains closed. In 2008, one of their own scored an upset election victory, becoming the first Vietnamese American to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives. No longer the quiet community no one paid attention to, the Vietnamese American residents of East New Orleans have learned to use the tools of democracy; in reclaiming their home they found their American voice.



## INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN A VILLAGE CALLED VERSAILLES

**Father Vien Nguyen** – A pastor for Mary Queen of Vietnam Church

**Joel Waltzer** – A civil and environmental attorney

**Ngo Minh Khang** – An elderly Versailles resident

**Mimi Nguyen** – A former FEMA volunteer and legislative aide to Councilwoman Cynthia Lewis

**Cynthia Willard-Lewis** – A New Orleans councilwoman, 2000-2009

**Ray Nagin** – A former mayor of New Orleans

**Father Luke Nguyen** – A pastor for Mary Queen of Vietnam Church

**Minh Nguyen** – A youth leader

**Mary Tran** – A youth leader

**Trang Tu** – A community planner

### Other Versailles residents

Vo Tran

Nga Nguyen

Tuan Nguyen

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### Vietnamese refugees

About half of overseas Vietnamese live in the United States. Most of this community immigrated to the U.S. beginning in 1975, after the end of the Vietnam War. Although the New Orleans village of Versailles has the highest concentration of Vietnamese Americans in the U.S., the jurisdiction with the largest number of Vietnamese outside of Vietnam is Orange County, California, with over 135,000 Vietnamese Americans.

The first large wave of immigrants, numbering about 125,000, left Vietnam in 1975; they tended to be highly-skilled and educated, and many had ties to America or to the Republic of Vietnam (the South Vietnamese government at the time). They were airlifted by the U.S. government to bases in the Philippines and Guam, and then sent to refugee centers in the United States.

A second wave of refugees began leaving Vietnam in 1978, fleeing persecution by the Communist government. They were generally of a lower socioeconomic status, and escaped in small, crowded, and unsafe boats. About two million “boat people” fled Vietnam through the mid-1980s, seeking asylum in other Southeast Asian countries. In the 1980s, Congress passed several laws allowing children of American servicemen and political refugees to enter the United States. Between 1981 and 2000 the U. S. accepted over 500,000 Vietnamese political refugees and asylum-seekers.

### Boat people

The term “boat people” came into common use during the late 1970s, with the mass departure of Vietnamese refugees from Communist-controlled Vietnam, following the Vietnam War. Usually referring to illegal immigrants or asylum seekers who emigrate in boats that are often old, crude, and unseaworthy, “boat people” have set out from many other countries in search of a better life. People from Cuba, Haiti, and the

Dominican Republic have undertaken voyages in hopes of reaching safety in the U.S. Since 1995, the law has allowed Cubans who reach dry land in the U.S. to stay, while those intercepted at sea by the U.S. Coast Guard are returned to Cuba. More recently boat people have set out from points in North Africa toward Spain, Italy, and other European countries.

Getting into a rickety, overcrowded boat is a dangerous undertaking, an act of desperation by people trying to escape untenable conditions. In the process, many meet with other obstacles, including pirates and other exploitive individuals. And, if they survive the journey and reach their destinations, they may be turned away by unsympathetic governments and forced to return to their ports of origin.

### Catholicism in Vietnam

Although Catholics constitute a small minority in Vietnam, the history of that religion in the country goes back almost 400 years, starting with the arrival of Jesuit missionaries in 1615. Through the work of these missionaries, France gained influence in Vietnam, and the religion became entwined with the country’s politics. In the nineteenth century, Napoleon III used the persecution of Catholics by Confucian rulers as a pretext for invading Vietnam and claiming certain provinces as French colonies. At the end of World War II, in attempting to regain colonial territory lost during the war, France launched an anti-communist crusade, fighting the forces of the nationalist Viet Minh, based in North Vietnam. After the French suffered a major defeat in 1954, some 800,000 Catholics fled the Communist northern part of the country to relocate in the south, which was led by Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic. He relied heavily on Catholic support, alienating the Buddhist majority and creating opportunities for Communist North Vietnamese-supported insurgents. As the U.S became increasingly involved in Vietnam, it supported Diem’s anti-communist government. When the south fell to the North Vietnamese in April 1975, the south’s association with the French and subsequently the Americans did not bode well for its inhabitants. Hundreds of thousands left their country as refugees, and began life in the United States under the care of nine voluntary agencies, the largest of which was the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops.

### The “Smiths” of Vietnam

Seeing so many individuals in the film identified as Nguyen may make viewers wonder why so many Vietnamese have this name. Nguyen is the most common Vietnamese family name, held by as many as 40 percent of Vietnamese. The name derives from the Chinese surname Ruan, which itself was the name of a former Chinese kingdom. Nguyen (approximate English pronunciation: ‘win’) is the Vietnamese translation of Ruan. In Vietnamese history, as a succession of dynasties was overturned, descendents of the fallen rulers were forced to change their names to Nguyen to avoid retribution. In the nineteenth century, the Vietnamese Nguyen Dynasty awarded many people the surname Nguyen, and many criminals also changed their surname to Nguyen to avoid prosecution. As with all other common surnames, most people having this surname are not necessarily related.

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nguyen>



### Environmental Justice

The United States Environmental Protection Agency defines Environmental Justice as the “fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.”

Environmental Justice seeks to ensure that minority and low-income communities have access to public information relating to human health and environmental planning, regulations and enforcement.

Environmental Justice Advocates argue that low-income communities and people of color bear disproportionate environmental burdens in our society. They point to evidence that shows how these neighborhoods are repeatedly chosen as sites for polluting industrial facilities and landfills. This leads to higher rates of cancer, asthma and health problems due to pollutants and toxins in the water, soil and air in these communities.

Sources: <http://www.epa.gov/compliance/ej/>;  
<http://www.sierraclub.org/ej/>

### Asylum, Refugee Status, and U.S. Policy

Legally and qualitatively, there is no difference between asylum seekers and refugees. Both are adjudicated under the same legal standard, but differ in terms of where they are located. The potential asylee is in the United States or applying for admission at a port of entry, and the potential refugee is outside the United States.

To protect refugees, internally displaced persons, and conflict victims, the United States works with other governments and international and nongovernmental organizations, making sure that basic survival needs are met. U.S. refugee policy is embedded in the Refugee Act of 1980, and is in line with the preferences of the UN High Commission on Refugees. The first priority is the safe, voluntary return of refugees to their homelands. If this is not feasible, other durable solutions are sought, including resettlement in countries of asylum within the region, and in other regions. Finally, if the first two options are not

possible, resettlement in other countries, including the United States, is appropriate for refugees in urgent need of protection.

To be considered for admission to the United States as refugees, persons must be able to establish persecution – or a well-founded fear of persecution in their home country – on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program has moved away from its focus on admitting large numbers of refugees from Communist countries, and toward more diverse refugee groups that require protection for a variety of reasons, including religious belief.

Sources: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2001/5562.htm>;  
<http://www.ailec.com/publicaffairs/factsheets/asylum.htm>; and  
<http://www.immihelp.com/gc/asylum.html>

### TOPICS AND ISSUES RELEVANT TO A VILLAGE CALLED VERSAILLES

A screening of *A Village Called Versailles* can be used to spark interest in any of the following topics and inspire both individual and community action. In planning a screening, consider finding speakers, panelists, or discussion leaders who have expertise in one or more of the following areas:

- Refugees
- Immigration to the U.S.
- Vietnamese culture
- Political activism
- Community organizing
- Youth organizing and civic engagement
- Urban planning
- Environmental justice
- Religious identity
- Vietnam War
- Emergency/disaster management



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. What specific circumstances allowed the Vietnamese community in New Orleans East to rebuild so quickly after the flooding?
2. What effect do you think their earlier experiences as refugees played in the determination of the Vietnamese to return to Versailles?
3. Why is there often hostility toward new immigrants in this country? Is the feeling always based on economic or employment issues, as was the case with the Vietnamese fishermen in New Orleans? What are some other reasons for the hostility?
4. What lessons can be drawn from the way the Versailles community involved its youth in opposing the landfill?
5. Facilities such as landfills are often located near low-income areas or neighborhoods whose residents are marginalized. What does the placement of these facilities say about us as a society?
6. Much of the land that makes up New Orleans Lower Ninth Ward and East New Orleans is below sea level. How do you feel about building and development in an area where extraordinary measures are needed for protection against river and sea, even in normal times?



## SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. Are there activists or community organizers working to make improvements in your community? What are their causes? Find out how you can lend your expertise to help them organize, make their voices heard, and attract additional support.
2. Does your community have an emergency preparedness plan? Find out, so that you and your family will be safe in case of a major disaster. If there is no plan, contact community and civic leaders and offer to help create one.
3. Being prepared for emergencies is crucial at home, school, work and in your community. The American Red Cross offers courses to help prepare for emergencies. Visit <http://www.redcross.org/> to find your local chapter.
4. If your place of worship has a program to help new immigrants or refugees, find out how you can volunteer your services. If such a program does not exist, consider starting one. The Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service has resources that can be helpful in working with refugees, and the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants lists numerous ways you can extend a friendly hand to new immigrants. (See Resources.)
5. Form a community history committee to write the stories of the ethnic or racial groups in your area. This could also be an oral history project. An easy-to-follow oral history toolkit can be found at [http://dohistory.org/on\\_your\\_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html](http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html). Work with the local library to publicize and distribute the stories. Arrange a series of public events where representatives of the different groups can share their stories along with photos and artifacts brought from their native countries.
6. The Lunar New Year (often referred to as Chinese New Year) is a major holiday in some Asian cultures. The Vietnamese holiday is known as Tet. Organize a Lunar New Year festival and invite community participation. A good source for information and ideas specific to Tet can be found at <http://www.vietnamtravelblog.net/culture-tradition/225/tet-holiday-vietnam-lunar-new-year>

For additional outreach ideas, visit [www.communitycinema.org](http://www.communitycinema.org). For local information, check the web site of your PBS station.

## RESOURCES

<http://avillagecalledversailles.com> - Check out the website for the film, which offers a synopsis of the story, brief biographies of some of the individuals, and other background information.

### Vietnamese Americans

<http://www.vietnameaseamerican.org> - Explore the Vietnamese American Heritage Foundation, which is dedicated to the preservation, promotion, and celebration of Vietnamese American history and heritage.

<http://www.everyculture.com/multi/Sr-Z/Vietnamese-Americans.html> - Peruse this article by Carl L Bankston III, which provides a brief, but comprehensive history of Vietnam as well as information on Vietnamese culture.

### New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reconstruction\\_of\\_New\\_Orleans](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reconstruction_of_New_Orleans) - Read a description of the damage inflicted on New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina, and information about reconstruction efforts.

[http://www.aia.org/aiaucmp/groups/ek\\_public/documents/pdf/aiaip037572.pdf](http://www.aia.org/aiaucmp/groups/ek_public/documents/pdf/aiaip037572.pdf) - Peruse this two-page document from the American Institute of Architects, which not only summarizes the problems and successful aspects of the rebuilding plan for New Orleans, but can provide a guide for other communities in their rebuilding efforts.

### The Vietnam War

[www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/vietnam](http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/vietnam) - Explore this History Place site, which contains timelines that list events during four periods of the Vietnam conflict.

<http://vietnam.vassar.edu/index.html> - Check out this site from Vassar College, which offers an overview of the Vietnam wars, and examines some of the major questions relating to that conflict.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/reflect/chung.html> - Read reflections by writer and poet Nguyen Ba Chong, which provide a Vietnamese perspective on politics and war in Vietnam from the 1950s to the 1970s.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/reflect/index.html> - Read reflections on the Vietnam War from those who lived and fought in Vietnam.

### Refugees and Immigrants

<http://www.nnirr.org/about/index.php> - Examine the site for the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (NNIRR), an organization composed of local coalitions and immigrant, refugee, community, religious, civil rights and labor organizations and activists, working to promote a just immigration and refugee policy in the United States.

<http://new.gbgm-umc.org/UMCOR/work/immigration> - Explore the site for the United Methodist Committee on Refugees, a group that provides a variety of services to help uprooted people and to resettle



refugees in the U.S. and around the world.

<http://www.lirs.org/site/c.nhLPJ0PMKuG/b.5537769/k.BFCA/Home.htm> - Go to the site for the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, a group that works with churches and organizations across the country to create welcoming communities for new immigrants; helps newcomers become integrated and financially self-sufficient; and advocates for policies and legislation that uphold the rights and dignity of all immigrants.

<http://www.refugees.org> - Examine the site for the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants. This group addresses the needs and rights of persons in forced or voluntary migration worldwide by advancing fair and humane public policy; facilitating and providing direct professional services; and promoting the full participation of migrants in community life.

### Environmental Justice Organizations and Resources

<http://www.uchastings.edu/centers/public-law/environmental-justice.html> - *Environmental Justice for All: A Fifty State Survey of Legislations, Policies and Cases* represents an ongoing collaboration between UC Hastings College of the Law and the American Bar Association. The purpose of the report is to present community members, environmental law practitioners, industry leaders, regulators, academics and others with the breadth of regulatory and policy techniques that the fifty states and the District of Columbia have developed to pursue environmental justice.

<http://www.sierraclub.org/ej/> - The Sierra Club's Environmental Justice and Community Partnerships program seeks to discuss and explore the linkages between environmental quality and social justice, and to promote dialogue, increased understanding and appropriate action.

<http://www.chej.org/> - The Center for Health, Environment and Justice supports communities facing environmental health risks. From leaking landfills and polluted drinking water to incinerators and hazardous waste sites, The Center can help communities take action towards a healthier future.

<http://www.ienearth.org/> - The Indigenous Environmental Network is a network of Indigenous Peoples empowering Indigenous Nations and communities towards sustainable livelihoods, demanding environmental justice and maintaining sacred traditions.

### Environmental Justice Organizations Working With Youth

<http://www.vayla-no.org/> - The Vietnamese American Young Leaders Association of New Orleans (VAYLA-NO) is a youth-led, youth organizing and development, community-based organization in New Orleans dedicated to the empowerment of Vietnamese American and underrepresented youth through services, cultural enrichment, and positive social change.

<http://youthunited.net> - Youth United For Community Action (YUCA) is a grassroots community organization created by low-income youth of color to provide a safe space for young people to empower themselves and work on environmental and social justice issues to

establish positive systemic change.

<http://www.sneej.org/> - Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice comprises 60 grassroots community-based, Native-American, youth and student groups and organizations working for environmental and economic justice in the southwest and western U.S. and northern Mexico.

<http://www.ace-ej.org> - Alternatives for Community and Environment (ACE) builds the power of communities of color and lower income communities in New England to achieve environmental justice. ACE believes that everyone has the right to a healthy environment and to be decision-makers in issues affecting our communities.

### Service and Advocacy Organizations

<http://www.navasa.org/> - National Alliance of Vietnamese American Service Agencies is a national organization whose mission is to improve social and economic justice in the Vietnamese communities throughout the country.

<http://unavsa.org/> - The Union of North American Vietnamese Student Associations (uNAVSA) is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit, non-partisan, community-based organization grounded in the leadership and personal advancement of Vietnamese youth. uNAVSA is dedicated to the development of tomorrow's leaders in the Vietnamese community.

<http://www.searac.org/> - The Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC) is a national organization advancing the interests of Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese Americans through leadership development, capacity building, and community empowerment.

<http://www.aaldef.org/> - Founded in 1974, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) is a national organization that protects and promotes the civil rights of Asian Americans. By combining litigation, advocacy, education, and organizing, AALDEF works with Asian American communities across the country to secure human rights for all.

**A VILLAGE CALLED VERSAILLES WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* IN MAY 2010. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.**

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**ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS COMMUNITY works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit [www.pbs.org/independentlens/communitycinema](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/communitycinema).**

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