

Multiculturalism profiles: Vietnam - Paul Nguyen



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OTTAWA — Paul Nguyen, 37, was born not long after his parents arrived in Canada from Vietnam, as part of the wave of so-called “boat people” who came as refugees after escaping war.

He knew little about that part of their history though, as his parents did not talk about it and he says he never thought to ask them.

“I was born here, grew up here, you’re just kind of used to it,” says Nguyen, a filmmaker in Toronto who runs a website for his community of Jane and Finch.

“You go tobogganing in the winter, you play street hockey, it’s kind of a Canadian thing. I never thought to think about my past until I was much older.”

A few years ago, he reached out to Robert Sargent, an older white man the family called Uncle Bob, who had played a big role in their immigration story.

Sargent had noticed a group of young, Vietnamese men hanging around outside a hotel while he was on a break for lunch and started to get to know them, knocking on the doors of rooms to say he had a car and would be willing to get them where they needed to go.

Nguyen says the volunteer helped his parents find an apartment, taught them how to use public transit and otherwise helped ease their integration into Canada.

He says he is glad he finally learned the story, as he wants to maintain his cultural heritage and worries it might disappear with the next generation.

“I think it’s important to know your history and try to maintain some of it and pass it along.”