



Home in America

CSUF hosts Smithsonian exhibit “Exit Saigon, Enter Little Saigon”

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When the U.S. resettlement program began in 1975 at the end of the Vietnam War, Vietnamese refugees faced starting over in a foreign land with a mixture of survivors’ guilt and overwhelming relief. That was then.

Today, thanks to the sponsorship of Cal State Fullerton, “Exit Saigon, Enter Little Saigon,” a Smithsonian exhibition chronicling the growth of “Vietnamese America Since 1975” is on display at the Viet Art Center in Garden Grove through Dec. 2.

The Smithsonian’s first effort to explore the Vietnamese American experience, the exhibit depicts the challenges, changes and choices which these strangers in a strange land encountered as they adapted to life in the U.S., forming communities whose shops, restaurants and entertainment recreated some of the richness of Vietnamese culture.

One such community is known as “Little Saigon,” located in the cities of Garden Grove and Westminster, a major commercial center of Vietnamese customs and more than 3,500 Vietnamese American businesses. Now nearly 1.5 million in number, Vietnamese Americans constitute a vibrant and diverse ethnic community.

Divided into six sections showcasing challenges, contributions and change, the exhibit explores civic and political issues as well as the intergenerational tensions families experience negotiating new lives in a new country.

In 90 panels of text and photographs, supplemented by accompanying videos, “Exit Saigon, Enter Little Saigon” documents the considerable lengths to which Vietnamese Americans have gone to maintain their linguistic, cultural and religious

traditions.

The exhibit was created by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program and organized for travel by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling and Exhibition Services. Underwritten with support from Farmers Insurance, the national tour expands the reach of this historic exhibit only nine months after its debut in January at the S. Dillon Ripley Center Concourse on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

The exhibit’s two-month run at the Center will be supplemented by special programs with Vietnamese American authors and filmmakers. After its run at the Viet Art Center, “Exit Saigon, Enter Little Saigon” will continue on a 12-city tour through 2010.

The people of Little Saigon also figure prominently in a secondary exhibition of 40 photos gathered by CSUF communications professors Jeffrey Brody and David DeVries. The photos document how Vietnamese Americans retained their culture while adapting to American life.

On Oct. 9, cultural, political and business leaders of the Vietnamese American community will converge on the Viet Art Center for a public reception celebrating the first stop on the Smithsonian exhibit’s national tour. Vu Pham, curator of the exhibit and a Vietnamese American scholar, will lead a walkthrough of the exhibit as part of the opening reception, which will begin at 8 p.m.

The Viet Art Center is located at 12965 Main St. in Garden Grove. Hours are Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Saturday 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Admission to the exhibit and public reception is free. More information can be found at www.fullerton.edu/smithsonian. 

