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Making All The Difference

In 1975, a family of nine Vietnamese refugees arrived in Omaha. All their possessions fit into three cartons.

This was the Van family. In April that year, they had escaped their country hours before the fall of Saigon. They became "boat people."

At one time, 1,500 had crowded onto an unsanitary boat designed for 500.

A family in Omaha agreed to sponsor the Vans, who arrived in August. Speaking no English except for the few words known by daughter Ailien, 16, the Vans came to a house in the Field Club neighborhood.

That's when they met the Kroghs - **Oakley**, Lottie and their five children.

Somehow the families overcame language and culture and communicated. After two weeks, the Vans moved out of the **Krogh** home and into a house near 50th and Pratt Streets.

The father, Dai, is a minister. He and other Vietnamese families held services in the Kroghs' church, the Omaha Gospel Tabernacle, forerunner of today's Christ Community Church.

The mother, Khuyen, went to work in a Laundromat. Lottie **Krogh** drove the Van children to school each day.

The families saw each other often. But in 1978, the Vans moved to the Los Angeles area, where Dai ministered to other Vietnamese families.

Each year at Thanksgiving and Christmas, the Kroghs have received cards of thanks from the Vans. About 13 years ago, on the way to Hawaii, "Oak" and Lottie briefly visited.

The Vans became great successes. Dai's congregation now numbers about 600. The seven children, ages 7 to 16 when they came to Omaha, have excelled almost beyond dreams.

Their occupations are pediatric physician, molecular biologist, Yale professor, pharmacist (two), photographer and operator of a computer business.

Last Christmas, Pastor Van and his wife invited **Oakley** and Lottie for a weeklong visit in California, all expenses paid. They went in late March.

"The way they treated us like royalty," Lottie said, "you would have thought we were a king and queen."

Oakley's health hadn't been the best. Eleven years ago he had heart - bypass surgery. He and Lottie used to ride their neighborhood on a bicycle built for two, but in recent years he had problems with a heart valve.

Knowing there were risks, **Oakley** had surgery again Sept. 29. The former general manager of Alford Tire Co., who was semiretired and had worked two days earlier, died on the operating table. He was 76.

Pastor Van and his wife came to Omaha for the funeral. Son Trach Van came from Utah, daughter Ailien Nguyen from Delaware.

They paid their respects to a man and his family who had welcomed them when they had nothing.

"To us," said Ailien, a molecular biologist with the DuPont Corp., "Mr. and Mrs. **Krogh** were parent figures. We were so touched. Regardless of race or color or language, they came to us with love and compassion - the love of God in their hearts to share with others. We lived in their home for two weeks, and they took care of everything."

Now married and the mother of three, Ailien recalled staying in a California refugee camp. When she learned of sponsorship by a family in Omaha, she had to find the city on a map.

Not speaking the language, having lost everything, the Vans felt they had no control over their lives.

But there stood the Kroghs.

"We just trusted in God," Ailien said, "and relied on our sponsors."

Ailien worked in a McDonald's in Omaha and survived an armed holdup. Years later, she received a Ph.D. from Cambridge University in England.

She took time off from work last March to meet with the Kroghs in California. She learned about **Oakley's** service as a B - 17 navigator late in World War II and much more.

"I loved him," she said, "like my own father."

The Kroghs' kindness years ago to a much different family from halfway around the world had, in the end, made all the difference in the world.