

Bill S219 Hearing – Opening Statement

Thank you Chair, Dear committee members and guests, good afternoon.

My name is James Nguyen and I am the current President of the Vietnamese Association, Toronto (VAT), one of the oldest Vietnamese organizations in Canada. I am honoured to be before of you to provide my unwavering support for Bill S219 and to explain why this Act recognizing April 30 of every year is meaningful for the Vietnamese-Canadian community.

I left Vietnam like many of my fellow Vietnamese-Canadians in the events that followed the fall of Saigon on April 30 1975. My journey to freedom started in the fall of 1980 by boat with my oldest sister and 3 older brothers. We stayed in a Malaysian refugee camp Pulau Bidong for approximately 6 months before Canada generously accepted us in March of 1981. I remembered we first flew into Quebec for a few days before arriving in Edmonton, Alberta on a cold, wintry day. For those of you who know, Edmonton in March is still quite cold, and all I remember was facing this foreign freezing season with a blue jacket with white stripes on them (show picture with Santa Claus at Bonnie Doon Mall). For a 6 year-old kid who knew nothing about the circumstances of why I left Vietnam without my parents, you can imagine that it was a pretty daunting experience.

My escape from Vietnam is similar to many other Vietnamese-Canadians. My oldest sister, who was 20 at the time, had tried escaping by boat times by herself but every time she was caught and jailed briefly and then sent packing home. However, the one time that I escaped with her she was successful, thus I always consider myself to be her good luck charm. Our journey lasted about 5 days and 4 nights before we embarked upon Malaysia. On the boat journey, we encountered Thai pirates. For those of you who may not be aware of stories of Thai pirates, many times they embark on the refugees' boats to loot things or take the women away. There's a story that was told to me by a few people that were on my boat. Apparently, when they took all the women from my boat onto the pirates' boat, one of the refugee men whose wife and daughter had been abducted jumped overboard to commit suicide. This desperate refugee said that he'd rather die than live without his daughter and wife. When the pirates saw this they ordered all the women to get back onto the boat. Apparently, they feared that if this man had died, he would come back to haunt them for the rest of their lives. It's true of the old adage "honour amongst thieves."

My story is not unique, as there are many refugee stories similar to mine. The country I left behind is just a distant memory and all of my good memories are of Canada. I remembered playing street hockey in the cold months of

Edmonton and pretending I was Wayne Gretzky or Mark Messier and using a beer bottle wrapped in aluminum foil as the Stanley Cup. My love of the game of street hockey gave me a case of frost bite on my ears and to this day every time I go outside my ears get so sensitive that it becomes red after a couple of minutes of exposure.

The Vietnamese Canadian community now amounts to more than 300 thousand proud Vietnamese Canadians who contribute to the prosperity of this country. As a leader of the biggest Vietnamese community in Canada, I attend many events and whenever the conversation of this Bill comes up, there is overwhelming support for it. This Bill is important to me and those that I encounter in the community because it acknowledges our heritage. Let me state clearly that I DO NOT believe that this bill is anti-Vietnam or anti-Vietnamese government. I genuinely believe that the people of Vietnam are a beautiful people with so much culture and history. This Bill is a testimony of my journey as a refugee to Canada and the journey of others after April 30, 1975 to our newly-adopted homeland of Canada. I think remembering April 30 is extremely important because April 30 represents a day of commemoration. For many people in Canada, April 30 is a day for Vietnamese-Canadians to come together and express our gratitude to Canada for welcoming us with open arms. Thanks to the overwhelming generosity and support of Canadians,

entire refugee families were able to resettle here and build a new and peaceful life.

Recently, my organization hosted the Lunar New Year Festival in Mississauga whereby the Prime Minister of Canada attended. I was honoured not only to be the President of the organization that hosted the event, but also the co-chair of the event. I recall being in the backstage area with the Prime Minister as he was preparing to enter the hall and he said something very remarkable “You know what this will probably be the biggest event I will attend this year.” After hearing that, I paused for a second and said to myself “Wow, we really did something big here.” After the event, the security officers who had the counter devices told me we had over 11,000 walk through our event. Can you imagine that, refugees who came to Canada with nothing in their pockets were able to host the leader of the country at the biggest Vietnamese festival in Canada. At the event, I gave my speech in front of the audience and I would like to read a short except from my speech.

“The world knows the story of the Vietnamese boat refugees because they see the lasting images of desperate people out in dangerous waters in small boats. Unfortunately, many of these boat refugees perished on the open seas due to starvation, drownings and sickness, and for that we honour their souls and wish them eternal peace. Although we have

been away from our motherland for 40 years now, we have found a loving and caring new home that has been so hospitable to us. In Canada, we started with humble beginnings as dishwashers, janitors and general laborers. Well, we have strived to become doctors, lawyers, accountants, members of the armed forces, professors, teachers and business owners. I think we all can agree that every time Canada has asked the Vietnamese-Canadian community to contribute, we have stepped up and have given so much."

I truly believe that this Bill encompasses what I have just read to you. We as a community love this country and I for one will always speak highly of this great nation as a proud citizen. In Canada, we are provided with so many opportunities to succeed, and to even disagree with one another without fear of reprisals or retributions.

I would like to conclude my remarks by mentioning that this Bill is a timely one, as this year, the Vietnamese-Canadian Community will be honouring the 40th anniversary of the boat people refugee's journey to freedom and their resettlement to Canada on April 30, 2015.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to testify , merci beaucoup.