Boat People Get Home In Pickett Post

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PICKETT POST — Toan Uy Quan and his family always believed they would make it.
As they left their home for the last time, slipping through the dark streets of Hanoi and onto a sailboat packed with 70 frightened people, they thought about America.

It took weeks of silent preparation, stealthily selling everything they owned — except their house which the Vietnamese government had repossessed — to help pay the $1,500 fee the unknown boatman demanded. All the time, they dreamed of living in America.

Despite 60 days at sea, wedged into sitting positions, forced to trade clothes for food when the boat entered a harbor, they were safely carried along by the waves and the vision of a new life.

By Thursday morning, eight months after their flight from Vietnam, Toan Uy Quan, 42, his wife Ngo Thuy Vy, 34, and sons, Toan Dang Khu, 9, and Toan Dang Tru, 7, were sitting in Oconee County, drinking Coke and coffee, dialing a hotline to Columbia where volunteers spoke their language.

As Quan had predicted, they made it — largely with the help of about 35 concerned families from the Bethel Presbyterian Church in the tiny Pickett Post community.

Mostly blue-collar workers, the congregation has agreed to raise several hundred dollars a month so the Toan family can start afresh in their community.

“We’re just doing it with a lot of love,” Pastor Jack Stevenson said Thursday.

The Toans were shown their new home Wednesday night, the church parsonage, a neat white wooden house surrounded by forest, a million miles from the refugee camp in Hong Kong where their boat finally arrived last February.

As the two children slept away their confusion Thursday, Mr. and Mrs. Toan greeted the constant stream of well-wishers with coffee. Cans of food, taped over with Vietnamese labels, were stacked in the cupboards. A can of peaches was baffling — what are peaches?

Through an interpreter, Quan said he never gave up hope during the boat trip, and always believed he would end up in the United States.

Quan is a trained metal lathe worker. It was his work in Hanoi, till he fled the persecution against Chinese, and in Hong Kong where he was paid $200 a month.

Right now Quan is grateful to be here, but he needs a job, a car, a refrigerator and a washing machine.

The Bethel congregation will support the family as long as necessary. It can take up to a year for a family to get on own its feet.

Pastor Stevenson said he decided to help a refugee family after reading about their plight, talking it over with his congregation and taking a vote.

He notified the Church World Service about six weeks ago. The Toan family arrived in San Francisco from Hong Kong this week.

According to one Pickett Post resident, Dorothy McClain: “I’m willing to help anybody who needs help.”

A delegation met them at Greenville-Spartanburg Jetport Wednesday night and drove them to their new home.

Interpreter Suong Davis, who fled Vietnam a week before Saigon fell in 1975 and now lives with her husband in Walhalla, helped welcome the family.

Quan’s two sisters and brother also fled Vietnam but he does not know where they are.