

Phuong „Dana“ Leová

“I am the Bridge between the Czechs and the Vietnamese”

Phuong „Dana“ Leová helps to make Vietnamese people feel like home in the Czech Republic. She works at the Centre for Foreigners, and she also works as a translator and interpreter at the elementary school in Slatina, which a lot of Vietnamese children attend. We talked about cultural and language differences between Vietnamese people and Czechs and about the generation abyss between the Vietnamese people and their children, who were born in the Czech Republic.

→ What do you like the most about your job?

I really clicked with our Centre and I wouldn't want to work anywhere else. I'm really happy that I got the opportunity to work with the Vietnamese community, to become a part of it and to help people.

→ What gives the Vietnamese people the most trouble in the Czech Republic?

The biggest problem for them is the language barrier. They want to learn the language but the problem is that because of their job they don't have time to go to language course. To add to that, Czech language is really different from Vietnamese; Vietnamese for example doesn't have declension.

→ In terms of culture, how are the Vietnamese different from the Czechs?

Vietnam is an Asian country and it has a completely different culture and traditions than the Czech Republic. Vietnam doesn't celebrate Christmas nor Easter. Buddhism is the dominant religion.

There is a tendency to lean towards Asian culture, the main celebration is the Lunar New Year, family and ancestors are worshipped. The Czech culture is really distant to the Vietnamese culture. The more modern families sometimes celebrate Christmas because of their children, but they do so only symbolically, not that they would be Christians.

→ Is it hard to get into the Vietnamese community?

Yes, even if a person knows how the integration of foreigners works, it's really hard to get close to them. It's a really closed community.

→ And how do Vietnamese people gain contacts here in the Czech Republic?

The Vietnamese community works on the basis of mediators. When moving to a different country the mediator will handle all the necessary documents. A lot of times they ask for a lot of money for it. A Vietnamese person first asks for help another Vietnamese, not a Czech person. That makes it really hard to get into the community. A lot of Vietnamese people in Brno work at the marketplace at Olomoucká, and the community there is closed off completely. If somebody doesn't know something, they ask at the marketplace, but it doesn't leave its premises.

→ And how did you get this job with integrating foreigners?

I worked as an interpreter in Zlín, where I moved with my mom from Vietnam when I was three years old. I was

interpreting and escorting Vietnamese to the dentist, doctor, to government offices and such. While studying at university I was working a lot on the integration process and the Vietnamese community. I processed a lot of studies and wrote my bachelor's and master's theses about it.

→ You came to the Czech Republic when you were young, did you go to a Czech kindergarten?

Yes, there they gave me the name Dana. Until today I don't know why, but the name stuck. I grew up like other Czech kids. Kids like me are called banana kids. Our skin might be yellow, but inside we're like Czechs, because we grew up in the Czech culture.

→ So basically you're the perfect connector of these two cultures.

I am a second-generation Vietnamese in the Czech republic, but about 90% of this generation don't know Vietnamese anymore. If my mom hadn't taught me how to read and write, I wouldn't know Vietnamese either. A majority of my peers can maybe communicate with their parents, and they know a few basic phrases, but they don't know how to read and write in Vietnamese. That's why there's only a few of us mediators between the Czechs and the Vietnamese and it's good to make use of it.

→ What do the Vietnamese ask for help the most at the Centre for Foreigners?

Most often they come to us with things dealing with

languages, when they need a translation or interpreting at the doctor or at a governmental office. For example, when they need to set up their trade license or go to the dentist's appointment. We offer all of our services free of charge, which sometimes causes doubt in the Vietnamese. For years they know that services that are free don't have the quality they would want. Of course, with us this isn't true.

→ Why do they think so?

Because you have to pay for everything in Vietnam – from healthcare, through entrance exams up to Maturita exams. Nothing is free there. The Vietnamese are used to pay for everything.

→ And what do you have to do as an interpreter at the school in Slatina?

14% of all kids in the school are Vietnamese, which is a lot. I help their parents with the language barrier, to schedule class meetings and such. The children are raised in the Czech Republic, they speak Czech. But when they begin to lose Vietnamese language and culture, since they go to Czech schools and they have Czech friends, a generation abyss is created between them and their parents. The children then oftentimes don't understand their parents.

→ Czechs oftentimes regard the Vietnamese as very diligent and hardworking, why is that?

There is no weekend in Vietnam. Who has a business in Vietnam has no day off, maybe one week per year during the New Year. They

work from morning to evening. It's common knowledge here that the Vietnamese grocery shops are always open. This is because they want to promote themselves more, they have a feeling that if all the other stores are closed and they are open, then they will have more customers who would like to come back to them.

Do you have weekends and free time? How do you relax?

Yeah, I relax the most in the mountains and in nature. I love to travel in our RV with my boyfriend and dog...and let the adventure begin.



Phuong „Dana“ Leová

Was born in Thanh Hóa in Vietnam in 1995, but she spent the majority of her life in Zlín. She now lives and works in Brno as an information worker for the Vietnamese community and an interpreter. She loves to learn new things, travelling and spending time in nature. She likes simplicity and subtle, delicate things.



Photo: Centre for foreigners JMK