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HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION

“WE BELIEVE IN NEW ORLEANS”

VOLUME VIII

VIETNAMESE COMMUNITIES

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2007

6:45 P.M.



CO-CHAIRS

MICHAEL COWAN and FR. VIEN NGUYEN

INTERPRETED BY:

ANH JOSEPH CAO

REPORTED BY:

DARCEE MICHELE CACIBAUDA, CCR
Certified Court Reporter

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MR. COWEN:

Ladies and Gentlemen, I want to say good evening and welcome. My name is Michael Cowen. I'm the chair of the Human Relations Commission of the City of New Orleans. And I'd like to ask the other commissioners, Human Relations Commissioners that are here, if they would, please, stand up and introduce themselves. Jane, why don't you start.

MS. PARKER:

Jane Parker.

MS. SAFAH:

Ana Safah.

MS. BISSELL:

Michie Bissell.

FR. VIEN:

Fr. Vien Nguyen. My people know me, so.

MR. PERRY:

I'm Andre' Perry.

MR. GUTIEREZ:

Martin Gutierrez, the Hispanic Apostolate, Catholic Charities.

MR. STEWART:

Craig Stewart.

MR. SALAAM:

Aqeel Salaam.

MR. BAGNERIS:

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Larry Bagneris, executive director.

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MR. COWAN:

Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm going to just make a brief description of what it is we're doing here tonight. And the one word I would say is "listening." We are here to listen. The Human Relations Commission is spending this year listening to the concerns and the experiences of the different groups that make up the City of New Orleans.

And there are two things in particular that we hope that you will speak to us about this evening. The first is, how do members of the Vietnamese community in New Orleans feel included or not included in the life of the city. And then secondly, how do members of the Vietnamese Community feel respected or not respected as members of our community. And we are going to take the time to do translation tonight because we don't want anybody to be excluded on the basis of language.

So we will begin as we have each of these sessions by hearing a brief presentation about the contribution that your community has made to the city. And I believe, Fr. Vien, you are going to say a few words about that and then we'll open the floor to your comments. Thank you.

FR. VIEN:

Out of the generosity of the people, you, as well as Louisiana and New Orleans, the Vietnamese refugees from 1975 came here first to be settled here in New Orleans after the original exodus and also, really, of the Catholic Church because Archbishop Hannan himself, then Archbishop of

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1 New Orleans, went to at least one refugee camp where I was -- I don't know⁴
2 about the other refugee camp -- to invite us to New Orleans. And also, in the
3 years after the meeting, the boat people, the exodus of the boat people
4 continuing until 1990. And I don't know if you knew this, but Archbishop
5 Hannan was one, a member of the delegation from the U.S. government in the
6 '80s to negotiate the reunification of families. That's how we have the families
7 being sponsored over from Vietnam to reunite with their loved ones here. Part
8 of it was because of Archbishop Hannan's work. And when we arrived, at first,
9 and I just recently, looking back at some of the days in the '80s, because
10 somehow my image of those days were dark and rainy. And I think it reflects
11 our first experience when we arrived, not knowing any of the language, not
12 knowing any of the culture. And we were just thrown out into this society. And
13 I'm not saying that in a bad way. We were thrown out, and so we were looking
14 bewildered, looking around to see where we would fit. "What's all this about?"
15 So quickly, we relied upon our strength. And a large number our people, the
16 Vietnamese-Americans here were fishermen, shrimpers. So immediately we
17 branched out into that type of work really at the beginning. So the seafood
18 industry in terms of the boats, to the extent that at one time, at the height of it,
19 in the gulf states, we probably had up to 70 percent of all the boats, some
20 more than 2000 of them. That's the work of the parents. Most of the older
21 people here you see working that way. Their children, though,
22 embarked on the academic journey, something that our parents did not have the
23 opportunity to take when they were young. Those of you who know anything
24 about the fishing or shrimping industry know that it's a backbreaking business.
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1 There's no set hours. You work when there's shrimp, when there's fish,⁵ and
2 then you're catching that whenever you can.

3 Now, you do understand that we acclimate really quickly.
4 So we, the children of these older people, we prefer air-conditioned rooms.
5 And education was the venue through which we as the children rose up in
6 society to the extent that many of us have been quite successful through
7 education. You may recall that around the early '80s all the way to around the
8 year 2000, Vietnamese-American students did very well in school. Many of
9 them graduated valedictorian and whatever else, at least in high school, and
10 then went on to college. And so from this group of children of those, the older
11 people who are sitting here, we have numerous pharmacists, doctors, all in the
12 medical field. And we started out in the engineering field because that didn't
13 require too much English, and math is what is required. And they can do math
14 without knowing any of the language. But once that's over, we move on to the
15 next stage. That's the medical field. And when we look at it, really, that's -- I
16 don't know about the other races and people, but looking throughout the
17 country, the U.S., that's the pattern of all Vietnamese-American communities,
18 engineering and then the medical fields.

19 And we are also in some areas, more elsewhere than
20 here, embarking on all the other field, on the humanities. But basically, some
21 are dabbling at the legal field now. That's the new frontier.

22 By the time Katrina hit, other than the educational fields
23 and the engineering and whatever else, and companies, we also have a very
24 large number of small-business owners, grocery stores, gas stations. We don't
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1 have the exact number from our community in terms of business owners.⁶ We
2 probably have 300. I mean beyond the community throughout the city. And so
3 looking at the contribution from our community to the City of New Orleans, I
4 believe that in many ways other than the people who are in different fields of
5 work, I think since Katrina, we have seen another flavor of it and the foundation
6 being the older people. And these older people sitting here with you today,
7 they have migrated, actually two, they had two major migrations, one from north
8 to south in 1954, never to return there again, and another one from Vietnam,
9 South Vietnam to here in 1975. Many of them never to have returned again.

10 So for them, really, Katrina is not that severe because we
11 have the government taking care of us and the generosity of the American
12 people wherever we went. And so I think in that sense because they have
13 gone through, so many of the older people among us, so much of their life of
14 hardship, that for them it's a sense of giving, giving a certain sense of hope
15 knowing that this, too, shall pass and that all of the struggles that they
16 underwent because of Katrina, that, too, shall pass as they had experienced in
17 the previous migrations.

18 And so looking back at it now from Katrina, it's the quiet
19 resiliency that the older people from our community is contributing to New
20 Orleans, saying that despite all of the damages, a new brighter day is possible.

21 Also, looking back little bit further through our children we can see that, again,
22 we can serve as a reminder that we can rise above whatever holds us down by
23 way of education. Education is the way out. So in addition to the different
24 culture, in addition to the additional flavor of food that we bring to New Orleans,
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1 I think those would be two major points of contribution, one, in terms of ⁷
2 education, and the other in terms of the quiet resiliency that our people,
3 especially the older people, have shown in Katrina. Those are the contributions
4 I would like to highlight.

5 MR. COWAN:

6 So what we would like to do now is just go back to the
7 questions I had mentioned before, the questions about feeling included or not,
8 and the question about feeling respected or not. And then we would just like
9 anybody who has something to say on either one of those to do so. Also, if
10 you have any ideas about how we might improve the situation, we would very
11 much like to hear those. So the floor is open.

12 MR. CAO:

13 Well, just to break the ice, let me begin. I grew up, I
14 guess, more or less,
15 very much Americanized. I came over here when I was eight in 1975. And,
16 basically, I was educated here, and I spent the last 33 years of my life here.
17 So with respect to inclusiveness, I don't feel that alienated as I'm pretty sure the
18 older people here. However, there is always a certain uneasiness, for example.
19 I am not always absolutely comfortable in front of a group that might not be of
20 my same ethnicity, and especially in situations where we have to constantly
21 stand up and ask for our rights, ask for our benefits. In those instances, there
22 is a feeling of being exclusive. In other words, because we were not paid
23 attention to, that is why now we have to stand up and ask. That's on the issue
24 of exclusivity.
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1 released me. After they released me and I spoke with them, I felt that there⁹
2 was a certain level of misunderstanding, a certain level of miscommunication.
3 However, they still demanded that I stand outside so that they could examine
4 my shop. And the police came. They rampaged through my shop, and a lot of
5 the vehicles that belong to my clients were ranshacked. Because there were
6 two cars in my shop that the assistant district attorneys had asked me to repair,
7 and those two vehicles happened to belong to drug dealers, so the police
8 thought that those two cars were mine.

9
10 My story here is quite long, but to make it short, through
11 that experience, I went and filed a complaint with the Department of Internal
12 Affairs. And for three months I did not hear anything from them. So I keep on
13 returning to the internal affairs office, the office of police corruption, and I kept
14 on demanding to see the supervisors, and they constantly gave excuses about
15 them not being there. However, I did tell them that if the police were to return
16 to my shop and basically are able to do the illegal stuff that they did, then I
17 have my own ways to resolve the problem.

18 Afterwards, they did send investigators out to my shop and
19 they investigated the situation for several months, and they found that I was
20 absolutely innocent in that matter. And from that day onward, those
21 investigators have become my close friends.

22 Recently, several investigators did return to my shop and
23 they were, I guess, investigating my shop again. And those investigator friends
24 of mine who I befriended before, they came and defended me. And for one
25 reason or another, those that defended me were either released or fired from

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their job or they did not return to their work.

During the times when I had to go to City Hall to testify to the Department of Internal Affairs and to file a complaint against the police, at those instances is when I felt the most exclusive, the most alone, because I feel that I've been abandoned and no one is out there to help me. And after my ordeal in filing complaints and going through the procedural process to get compensated, rather than be compensated by the city, by the police department, I basically had to take the money out from my own pocket to pay for the damages to my clients that were caused by the police department. In the situations where, in those corrupt situations, is when I felt most prejudiced by the members of leadership. However, out of that ordeal, I was able to make some friends who were able to help me. Thank you.

MR. VIEN TRAN:

I'm glad he brought up the profile issue, and now, I'd like to jump right into the improvement, city improvement and planning. Sometimes I wonder if we, New Orleans East, is part of New Orleans. If I had to answer that question before Katrina, I would answer, 100 percent no for the reason the improvement and the beautification of New Orleans East stop by I-10. And we have we have no palm tree to beautify New Orleans East. For some reason, Father and the majority of all of us here live in the Michoud area where there's no improvement at all. We don't see any improvement and any thing changes.

And also, we've been living here for 33 years now. We have to deal with Bourbon Street. We watched the news and we saw a man

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1 go throughout the city. I'm going to invite some of those guys to go out¹¹ to New
2 Orleans East and drive for a day and learn exactly how we feel for 33 years.
3 And with that, I will conclude that any major development or improvement by
4 the city and planning, please incorporate us and make sure we are part of it.

5 FR. LUKE:

6 My comment, just a little bit -- My comment, I think the
7 City of New Orleans we strive our best to make it better, make it greater New
8 Orleans because of after Katrina. And I think the efforts, I think, to allow, to try
9 to, everybody to try to make it a greater New Orleans. We in our community,
10 we try to make it best in our region. For example, some of our developments
11 that we want to improve is trying to attract tourists to come to New Orleans
12 East, try to have good restaurants. And that's why one of the things that we
13 want to participate and contribute to New Orleans, to bring to New Orleans is to
14 have tourists to come out to New Orleans East, not just only the French
15 Quarter. And my comment is, in the city governments,
16 whether it's police, whether it's internal affair, whether it's whatever departments
17 it is, I would like to ask just because of our older Vietnamese people here
18 contribute very small number of the greater New Orleans. Even though that we
19 are small, but my suggestion is that we could have any kind of, in each of the
20 departments, each of the branches of department, that we have one of our
21 people working with that department so that it easily for us, easily for us to hear
22 the news and to transfer the news to the people. And it's something, I think,
23 that we working together. And that's my comment. Thank you.

24 MR. VIEN TRAN:
25

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1 One more comment. Improvement also. Language¹²
2 accessibility. We are a leisure player in New Orleans now. And as you can
3 see, we do come to City Hall. And I would like to see translation, Vietnamese
4 translation somewhere posted outside in department-wise, safety and permit,
5 things like that. And the elderly can go there and just look at it, read it, and
6 then know what's going on.

7 MS. LE:

8 Hi. My name is Lang Le. I am a member of the
9 American-Vietnam church, and have been living in New Orleans East since
10 1975. I grew up in Eastern New Orleans, left for college and came back.
11 When I was -- As I was growing up, back to the question of, "Are we feeling
12 included," I can say that, in a sense, no.

13 I remember growing up back in the early '80s. My father
14 worked for the City of New Orleans, Parkway and Park Commission. And back
15 then, there, I would say about close to 20 people in the same group that's
16 working for Parkway and Park Commission, too. But even though they're
17 working for the city, in terms of language back then, there were none. And for
18 us growing up, you know, were very limited to learning. But knowing that the
19 City of New Orleans doesn't provide any translation for them, because I know
20 growing up in high school, I had to attend one of the workshops that the
21 Parkway and City of New Orleans offered in terms of incentive, and raise, and
22 vacation. So I'm interpreting for my father. And the company doesn't provide
23 any of that, and here we have a group of minority working for the City of New
24 Orleans and Parkway and Park Commission.

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1 be a part of this recovery process and do whatever, little voice, little effort, I can¹⁴
2 because there was an incident last year -- Well, I have it in my journal. But I
3 have to find out exactly what month -- an incident where my brother-in-law has
4 a business. And because after the storm he wasn't there much of the time to
5 see what was going on. So I asked him who was digging out behind the
6 building. I mean, "Do you know anything about that?" He said, "Yeah, I do.
7 That's the new owner." I said, "Well, do they have a license or permit or, you
8 know, at least worked with the city to see, making sure that they're doing the
9 right thing?" So he said, "Well, how can I do that?" So I instructed him to go
10 down to City Hall to see, immediately towards Councilwoman Cynthia Willard to
11 direct him to where to go.

12 (There was an interruption).

13 Well, anyway, I'll translate that.

14 Well, he did do that. He went down there and put in a request.
15 They put it in, they said, well, you need to put in a complaint. So he did. I
16 think a couple of days later, I received a call. I was at work. I received a call.
17 And he said, "There is an inspector came out here with a Vietnamese
18 gentleman threatening me." I said, "What do you mean threatening you?
19 Maybe you misunderstand what he was trying to say." He said, "No, because
20 another gentleman that owns the furniture store was there with him." I said,
21 "Can I talk to him?" He put him on the phone, so I asked him, what did the
22 permit gentleman say?" And then -- I mean, "What did you get out of it,
23 either?" He said, "Well, he told him to either leave them alone, otherwise, he's
24 going to be on him." So I said, "Well, what do you mean by that?" He said,
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1 "Well, it's more like a threat there." Okay. So I'm, like, "Okay. Did you¹⁵get
2 his name and business card?" He said, "Yeah, I have it."
3

4 Well, anyway, couple of hours later, the Vietnamese that
5 went with the inspector called me because I knew, I knew the guy, too. So we
6 talked and he said -- [To the interpreter] I need to stop going back and forth.
7 I'm confusing myself with it. Where was I? Okay. Yeah, he called. So when
8 I spoke with him, I told him he doesn't know what the situation is, so just leave
9 it as it is. But I did get a hold of the inspector. I did call the inspector. I
10 spoke with him. I said, "Why are you coming out there threatening them like
11 that because I was the one that told him to go down and find out what was
12 going on because you can't dig and not knowing, you know, what's to dig out
13 there, especially if you don't have a permit from the city to start digging." My
14 conversation with the inspector was, "You shouldn't have done that because
15 that's just not right." And then we went into conversation and he started, "You
16 don't know I've been out here for the last 15, 20 years." And that was just
17 like, boiled my blood. It's like, you think that for the last 15, 20 years you have
18 done great things for the Vietnamese community out there? Have you drive
19 around the area to see the results out there? There are trash cans, you know,
20 right in front of business complex. I mean, you drive around the city here. Do
21 you see any other business complex that have trash cans in front of their
22 businesses? And then, we started to talking and he was, like, well, you know,
23 if I'm going to start to cite one business, I'm going to cite the whole area
24 because, you know, families that have made additions to it. I said, "Well, you
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1 know what, that is not our fault because you allowed this to happen all these 16
2 years.” Because if we put a patio up, we have to go down to City Hall, get
3 permission from this neighbor, this neighbor, this neighbor to let them know that
4 this is what we’re doing and get their signature and to put it into file. So I
5 don’t know how you, you know, all these business got away, or these families
6 even got away with all of this.

7
8 Well, that’s where it brings me back to the question of, you
9 know, to the process of New Orleans East being part of the 17th area for
10 development. This is great, but, I mean -- I’ll probably open a box of pandora
11 here, anyway -- but things need to change. And I think, individually within the
12 Vietnamese community, we have to change ourselves to get the respect from,
13 you know, other communities, from city officials to let them know that we are
14 serious. Because for the past years, seeing the community development group
15 working with businesses and it seems like telling them that we have all these
16 wonderful things happening, it’s like they’re not even excited about it. It seems
17 like the one that’s putting the plan together got excited, but the business owner
18 is not even excited about it. So I don’t know where the thrill comes in here.

19
20 Back to the communication process that Vien was talking
21 about earlier in New Orleans East, the village or area as part of the city or not,
22 I would definitely have to say that no, because before the storm, I was very
23 active -- well, not active in a way, but very knowledge of what's going on
24 because at the time Bishop Dominic was active, involved within the American
25 community, but he did it on the side because businesses would not respond to

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1 the call to be involved outside the community. We're just within a circle¹⁷
2 ourselves. And that's kind of, you know, put things where we are. I have to
3 say that, I have to admit that because we put ourselves where we are or were.
4 But as being a part of -- There was a New Orleans East Economic
5 Development, which, of which I was a member of that group and attend monthly
6 meetings and find out and knowing that there's also a renaissance plan. I don't
7 know if you've heard of their plan, the New Orleans East Economic
8 Development, but it definitely, New Orleans East, past I-10, it's nowhere on that
9 plan. If you want to show me that. I would have to look at the plan. But as
10 far as talking about what's going on out there, nothing in relates to the
11 Vietnamese community out there at all. And I think after the storm, because of
12 our community coming back, we're putting out a voice ourselves that we will be
13 on that map, because I just noticed that map. Henry Street, you know, all
14 those old neighborhoods, Versailles, and all that I've not seen in any of the
15 maps. So I want a copy of that map.

16 I want to share a short one. I know it's in the box there, but for
17 some reason, the American community and, if not more, the African community
18 think that we as Vietnamese do not pay taxes. And I don't know where they
19 get this information from. I know that. And just confirming also, the last voting
20 where I was working with one of my neighbors and we were talking about tax
21 credits and things like that. And the subject brought up again. And she said,
22 "Oh, I know you guys are paying taxes, but I also thought that you guys are
23 getting some type of tax credit." I said, "No. The only tax credit is that we
24 have our children to get the earned income credit. Other than that, I'm paying
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1 as much taxes as you are.” So, I mean, I don’t know if that’s something¹⁸ that’s
2 believed to be out there.

3 BY MR. SU NGUYEN:

4 Hi. My name is Su Nguyen, and I am a member of the
5 American-Vietnam community. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you
6 for providing us an opportunity for us to convey our wish and wants and to
7 listen to us here tonight. I hope that the city, after hearing our requests,
8 hearing our hopes and wishes, would consider the Vietnamese community as
9 part of the larger community as a whole.

10 First of all, I agree with Ms. Lang, the previous speaker,
11 that there is an impression in the Vietnamese community, even though it’s a
12 false impression, that we don’t pay taxes. However, each member of our
13 community, each working member of our community, we do pay taxes and that
14 we move and we live and we contribute to this community as a whole. I am an
15 employee of a large corporation. And like each employee of that corporation, I
16 have to pay my share of taxes just like everyone else.

17 And before Katrina, as well as after Katrina, I feel that our
18 Vietnamese community in New Orleans East was not considered part of the
19 larger community. I feel very saddened and very exclusive in situations where
20 our community, when our community was, I guess, hurt by violence, especially
21 crime, murders, killings, and I would call the police and inform them of what had
22 happened and it would take them over an hour to get to our community. And
23 in those instances where the community has been devastated by crime and
24 violence and when we request for police protection and when the city did not
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1 listen to us is when I feel our community has been very much excluded.¹⁹ And I
2 hope that after our session tonight that the city will pay more attention to the
3 needs of our community, especially in the area of protection against crime,
4 against violence.

5 MR. NHAT TRAN:

6 I would like to give the priests and all the other people
7 who are here tonight my greetings and salutations. And I would like to thank
8 you for giving us the opportunity to express our views and to express our needs
9 and desires even though our view may be an ignored view. And I would like to
10 thank you, the members of my community, who have taken the time from their
11 busy schedule to come here tonight to participate.

12 My name is Nhat Tran. When I came to the United States
13 from Vietnam in 1975, I first lived in Pensacola, Florida, attended two years of
14 college. And then, after that, I moved to the New Orleans area. If you were to
15 ask me whether or not I feel that the community has been inclusive with respect
16 to the larger community as a whole, I have to answer, "no."

17 After Hurricane Katrina devastated this city and our area,
18 from October 5, 2005, our pastor, Fr. Vien, and a few of us gathered together.
19 And we have worked hard to come together, to work together to rebuild our
20 community. And the gift that the city has given us is the landfill right in our
21 backyard. And thanks to our pastor and some of the members of the
22 community and, also, to many members of the community, we were able to
23 speak out against the landfill and have the city hear with respect to our
24 objection to the landfill. I did consider that if the city did not resolve the issue
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1 with regards to the landfill of our community, I would recommend that we²⁰ recede
2 from the city and establish our own municipality in order for us to have our own
3 form of government.

4 After seeing how hard we worked to fight against the
5 landfill as a community, then the city began to realize that we are a united
6 community and that we are a force to be reckoned with. Even though, through
7 our concerted efforts we were able to close the landfill, however, the debris is
8 still there and it continues to contaminate our community. We had a hearing
9 this morning in which we requested that the debris that are still be addressed
10 and, hopefully, be removed. And I hope that through our efforts this morning
11 and through your efforts, that you will be able to help us to improve our way of
12 life, to improve the health and welfare of our community so that we will be
13 ample to establish a future for our children. Those are the views
14 that I'd like to express tonight, and I thank you for the opportunity to allow me
15 to speak.

16 MR. BAGNERIS:

17 My name is Larry Bagneris. I'm the executive director of
18 the city's Human Relations Commission. I'm here on behalf of the mayor. I'm
19 here on behalf of the city council, the entire city council. Pre-Katrina, most of
20 you saw a city that was painted in terms of black and white. After Katrina, you
21 saw a lot of destruction, but we also see an opportunity, lots of opportunity.
22 And one of those opportunities is a painting of a city that's inclusive of
23 Vietnamese, of Hispanics, of Whites, of Asians, of all people that make up this
24 wonderful city because that's the strength of the City of New Orleans.
25

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1 village, of bringing tourists to look at your food, to eat your food, to listen²² to your
2 music, to look at your wonderful architecture. And I can promise you that's
3 going to happen, but it's going to take time.

4 And in closing, I want to say thank you so much for the
5 experience you've given us tonight, as well as, I'd like the gentleman that's
6 going to be representing you on the commission to come up and introduce
7 himself. We're going to be doing the paperwork so that he can fill in that
8 position. Fr. Vien is so busy. He's been such a gracious person to serve on
9 the commission, but this way, we'll have two individuals that we can contact,
10 and you will as well. And there's no way in the world that we could've gotten
11 through this evening, because we have two major languages here, I want you to
12 give this gentleman a hand for doing an outstanding job.

13 MR. VIEN TRAN:

14 Wow, what big shoes to fill. Now they want to talk. They
15 remind me that, "fix the street." Thanks for the opportunity to serve. And I've
16 worked with Fr. Vien, side-by-side, and he worked me to death. But that's
17 okay. I'll do anything for enrichment of Vietnamese community. And also it's
18 an honor, it's an honor for me to serve on this committee. And I say that
19 acting as a middleman for the city and the Vietnamese people.

20 MR. BAGNERIS:

21 Will you let them know this is a new day in the
22 Vietnamese community and the City of New Orleans.

23 MR. VIEN TRAN:

24 (Complies).
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(Whereupon, the meeting concluded.)

C E R T I F I C A T E

I, DARCEE MICHELE CACIBAUDA, CERTIFIED COURT REPORTER FOR THE STATE OF LOUISIANA, HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THE FOREGOING PAGES ARE TRUE AND ACCURATE AND WERE TRANSCRIBED TO THE BEST OF MY ABILITY AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION MEETING WHICH WAS HELD ON THE 11TH DAY OF SEPTEMBER, 2007.

DARCEE MICHELE CACIBAUDA
Certified Court Reporter
Louisiana License #99084