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## Le Ha finds her way in Minnesota, many small steps at a time

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When Le Ha, IS electronic commerce, was 24 years old, she, her new husband and mother-in-law left their family, home, careers and everything they had to flee communist South Vietnam.

"I had only \$50 in my pocket," said Ha. "I was one of the last of the 'boat people' to arrive at a refugee camp on an Indonesian island. There were 13,000 of us on one beach. My husband Hung Truong went from being very wealthy in his home country to chopping wood all day and hauling water for his mother and me to take showers." But his attitude was as positive as Ha's. "Look at this beautiful island," he said. "Just pretend we're on our honeymoon."

But it wasn't a honeymoon, and it was a long wait before they were able to come to the United States. "My mother-in-law had dementia, and no country wanted to take us," she said. Ha had been a nurse in Vietnam and volunteered at the refugee camp hospital. "One day a Red Cross worker slipped me a note that said she was going to take us to California. Eighteen months after we arrived at the camp, we were able to leave."

### Being new in Minnesota

Ha's family came to Minnesota because they had one relative here, much the same as today's immigrants and refugees who come to join family or because of work opportunities. Besides the relative, Ha and her husband had very few connections to help them adjust in their new country. They spoke very little English and were completely unfamiliar with Minnesota's systems, including transportation. "We got jobs right away that were on a bus line, but we didn't know that our bus didn't run on Saturday nights," Ha said. After waiting an hour for a bus that never came the first Saturday they worked, they walked the eight miles home on a cold winter night.

Ha persevered, went to school, learned English, had two daughters and has now worked at Blue Cross for five years. "I have a positive attitude and took it many small steps at a time," she said.

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### **Blue Cross grants promote good health among new Americans**

At about the same time Ha was creating her new life in Minnesota, an organization was forming in Rochester. Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association (IMAA) was established in 1984 to assist refugees and immigrant individuals, families and communities from all parts of the world with meeting their basic needs. Mutual assistance associations are often immigrant-led organizations that refugees and immigrants turn to when creating life in a new community.

“Our purpose is to help newcomers reduce barriers to self-sufficiency through employment, language access, outreach and education,” said Avni Patel, education and outreach program coordinator. “Currently, 13 of our 16 full-time staff are first-generation immigrants. We have the capacity to speak 12 languages at any time.”

IMAA is a recent grantee through the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation’s Healthy Together: Creating Community with New Americans initiative. “This is the first time we’ve received foundation funding,” said Patel.

IMAA’s grant will help build the organization’s community health worker (CHW) program by increasing access to health care and decreasing health disparities for immigrants and refugees in Olmsted County. Minnesota’s CHW program, which the Blue Cross Foundation helped develop, now includes a formal curriculum with certification. CHW’s are vital links to increasing a community’s capacity to meet the health needs of residents. “Our CHWs are going through the training, and in just two weeks, I can see a big difference — they’re new people, in terms of how they view their work and the services they can provide,” said Patel.

### **Making a difference by finding common threads**

Patel is pleased to be working with Blue Cross and to be a Healthy Together grantee. “The direction that the Blue Cross Foundation and corporation are going is making a positive difference for our clients. By valuing community capacity and project sustainability, Blue Cross is making a real impact on the lives of immigrant and refugee families.”

Of the work she does, “I learn more from our clients than they do from me,” she said. “Each culture is so unique, but we have more in common than we have differences.”

### **Healthy Together: Creating Community with New Americans**

Healthy Together: Creating Community with New Americans, launched in 2005, is a new grantmaking initiative of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation designed to reduce health disparities for immigrants and improve the health of the entire community. To date, the Foundation has awarded \$1.5 million to 33 organizations throughout Minnesota for projects that address social adjustment and mental health, strengthen the capacity of immigrant-led organizations and their attention to health, and foster exchanges between newcomers and the receiving community.

For more information on Healthy Together or any of the Foundation’s initiatives, visit the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation Web site.

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