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Project seeks to preserve history

Public asked to help raise \$80,000 for Vietnamese heritage exhibit.

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FOUNTAIN VALLEY – It's been more than three decades since the fall of Saigon, and UC Irvine researcher Vu Pham worries that younger Vietnamese-Americans are forgetting how their parents and grandparents arrived in the United States.

"They are not talking to their children about the war and their experiences," said Pham, who also works as the director of the Smithsonian Institution's Vietnamese American Heritage Project. "Our stories are not being told."

Pham and Smithsonian officials at a press conference Tuesday asked for the community's help in raising about \$80,000 by Oct. 1 for a traveling cultural and historical exhibit that documents the mass migration of Vietnamese refugees to the United States.

The proposed project, which could debut in late 2006, would become the Smithsonian's first national exhibit focusing on the Vietnamese-American community. The Smithsonian's Asian Pacific American Program, coordinating the effort, has raised \$120,000 since last year and will need a total of \$200,000 to pay for the exhibit. Plans include a traveling 2,500-square-foot exhibit showing photographs and artifacts of the community's presence from 1975 to 2005, an educational Web site, a curriculum for middle school students and sponsoring public programs around the country. Smithsonian officials also hope to establish a \$1 million endowment to make the exhibit a permanent fixture.

Pham said the project will give Vietnamese-Americans an opportunity to let people know that they are not just refugees of war but one of many immigrant communities ingrained in the fabric of America.

"It's been 30 years and we are losing so many people as the generations pass," said Pham, who took over the helm of the project in the spring.

"We are losing their voices and if we don't do it now who knows when it will happen."

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