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Museum recreates a refugee's life

By [Ragan Robinson](#) | Hickory Daily Record

Faceless dolls and crudely carved wooden phones sit behind glass at the Hickory Museum of Art. They are pieces of displaced lives most of us can imagine only with the help of TV news footage or black-and-white photos from a newspaper's international section.

Refugees and the crowded camps that hold them, far from our shiny clean supermarkets and shopping malls, are like grim fairy tales we would rather not believe in.

The art museum's newest exhibit makes them real. Children's voices tell the stories. Real tents and bags of rice illustrate it. Images of our own neighbors bring the crisis home.

"Torn From Home: My Life as a Refugee" takes visitors through a mock camp, starting with life-size photos of young people forced to flee their homes, along with recordings of children explaining their plight. It walks visitors through a wall of photos of displaced children, by the registration desk with its pictures of the missing. It includes a water pump and the heavy blue containers camp residents carry to their shelters. It shows real toys and imitation cook fires, an outhouse and a clinic.

Memories wrapped in barbed wire

Khue Khang, a Hickory man born in Laos, lived in two refugee camps in Thailand. He says the exhibit rings true. The faux barbed wire is familiar to him. When he was 14, separated from his mother, father and brother, it ringed the camp he and 20,000 others called home.

He remembers passing through a gate like the one that greets exhibit visitors, its striped arm lowered to stop unauthorized people from coming in or leaving.

He remembers the registration station, where refugees signed up to get their limited food.

He remembers the pots and pans sitting on rocks that encircled an open fire.

'This is to hear their voices'

Marion Love, the project coordinator for the exhibit, also has seen refugee camps and displaced people in her travels.

"You're absolutely overwhelmed by the enormity of the situation," she said. "There's not enough money. Bill Gates doesn't have enough money, but you feel obliged to do something."

That's part of why she jumped at the chance to help bring "Torn From Home" to Hickory. It is a traveling exhibit stopping at 10 sites in the United States.

Love also knows the Hickory area is home to many people who have relocated from all over the world. She calls Hickory a true all-American city.

"People need to know that there are still refugees and immigrants in this community, but are somewhat silent," she said. "This is to hear their voices."

It's closer to home than we think

On the outer walls of the simulated refugee camp is a full-scale picture of a little boy, his foot propped on a grimy yellow soccer ball. The image stops Khang.

"I think he's a little Hmong boy," he said.

Khang sees a little of himself in the picture.

He was once a young boy with no home, who first escaped the Vietnam War and then fled from persecution by a regime that killed many of his fellow Hmong. But he was still a boy, and he still ran through the camp kicking a dirty soccer ball.

He had felt too much fright and sadness for a 14-year-old, but he had a child's heart and little boy's eagerness for life.

He was just like the kids who played with faceless dolls and wooden cell phones.

He was just like the ones who will look and listen to the "Torn From Home" exhibit in coming months.