A home for Karey –others less lucky

By Jane Hoge

R. Court and Mickie Olson started the formal process of adopting a Vietnamese-American orphan in February 1973

One-and-one-half months later, the half-black, half-Vietnamese baby girl they were to adopt died.

They immediately wrote to the orphanage to request another child under 3 years old.

Last June the Olsons carried a 15-month-old half-Caucasian, half-Vietnamese girl off the airplane in Omaha. They named her Karey Nu.

Karey, who weighted 15 lb. and could barely sit up alone, was malnourished. Staph infections covered her head, and she was partially blind in her right eye because of a scarred cornea.

Now Karey is almost 23-months-old and her weight has nearly doubled. Her eye is improving. She can walk. The staph infections are gone.

"In six months, we have gone through all the stages of two years (with Karey)," Ms. Olson said.

Karey was adopted from the Tan Binh orphanage in Camranh, South Vietnam, the site of the largest naval base in Indochina.

The orphanage, staffed by 12 Vietnamese nuns, has about 180 children and was built by the U.S. Navy.

"That is fitting," Ms. Olson said, "because they (Navy men) fathered many of the children in it."

Tan Binh is a comparatively good orphanage, according to Ms. Olson. She said the Go Vap orphanage in Saigon has 1,200 children with a staff of 12.

At Tan Binh, medical care is limited to one doctor's monthly visits.

"It's ironic, but the orphanage is worse off now that the U.S. troops are gone," Ms. Olson said. The troops left South Vietnam a year ago.

"They played with the children and brought them clothing," Ms. Olson said.

The U.S. Armed Forces also provided medical care and treated children at base medical facilities, she said.

Such care is needed because the mortality rate is close to 80 per cent for orphans under 2.

Karey had never eaten solid food nor worn diapers.

Karey was one of about 25,000 racially-mixed babies in South Vietnam. According to *Newsweek* (May 28, 1973), the number could be as high as 100,000.

Including full-blooded Vietnamese, there are 250,000 homeless children in South Vietnam.

Vietnamese parents "have the mistaken idea that children are better off in orphanages," Ms. Olson said.

"Orphanages are having problems with the South Vietnamese government," said Olson, who is an assistant professor of construction management at UNL.

"The government does not favor a mass exit of orphans. It would look as if Vietnam cannot support her own children," he said.

Ms. Olson said Tan Binh got into trouble for letting eight orphans go last December. The usual number is four or five.

Vietnamese-American orphans may be adopted through an agency or independently through a lawyer in South Vietnam.

Waiting lists of two years exist at the four international adoption agencies recognized by South Vietnam's government, according to the Olsons.

An independent proxy adoption—the process the Olsons used—may require less time, but is no less difficult; communication was the biggest problem, they said.

The Olsons worked through an Omaha group of about 40 sets of adoptive parents. The group, which has no official name, helps support Tan Binh and also screens potential adoptive parents for the orphanage.

After the Olsons contacted Tan Binh and were accepted, a Saigon lawyer charged $200 to process adoption papers. Transportation costs of nearly $350 were the other major expense.

Unique problems for the Olsons included the death of the original child assigned them and a mix-up of papers in Omaha.

The Olsons were critical of the U.S. government's lack of concern for Vietnamese-American orphans. They said they met no "open resistance," but Ms. Olson emphasized that the U.S. government is "not doing anything."

Under the Foreign Assistance Act of 1973, the U.S. granted $5 million for the orphans of South Vietnam.

"If there are 250,000 homeless children, that means only $20 per child," she said.