



# Family Living

## OPB program highlights Vietnam widows



From left to right: Xuan Ngoc Nguyen Portland, Oregon, Lula Bia Window Rock, Ariz., Barbara Sonneborn Berkley, Calif., Norma Banks Vallejo, Nguyen Thi My Hien, Hanoi, Vietnam.

War widows from the U.S. and Vietnam join forces for five city tour to mark 25th anniversary of the end of the war

CONTRIBUTOR STORY FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

"There were times," says Norma Banks of Vallejo, California, "when I wanted to give up and forget about it."

"It" was the painful experience of fighting the system for recognition and benefits owed to her late husband, Michael—a casualty of war in Vietnam. Unlike many soldiers who died in the trenches fighting that controversial war, Michael Banks died years later of a mysterious cancer now known to be caused by a chemical-based weapon called Agent Orange.

After years of having few people to tell her story to, Norma Banks agreed to participate in a documentary film created by Barbara Sonneborn, herself a widow of Vietnam War.

Sonneborn's film, titled REGRET TO INFORM—drawing on the first words of the official government notification of a death in the armed services ("We regret to inform you that..."), eventually was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Documentary. It reveals the headache and pain of the woman—both American and Vietnamese—who lost husbands and families to the war. REGRET TO INFORM will premiere on television as part of PBS's "P.V.O." series of independent non-fiction films on Monday, January 24, 2000 at 10:00 PM ET (check local station schedules to confirm date and time). The film is "so exquisitely filmed, edited, and scored," wrote Stephen Holden in the New York Times, "it is the documentary equivalent of a tragic epic poem. Every word and image quivers with an anguished resonance."

Norma met Michael Banks in 1970, two years after he got out of the Army. They were married five years later, and had a daughter, Michelle. Norma also had a daughter, Deanna—by a previous marriage—whom Michael helped raise. Beginning in 1980, Michael began to suspect something was wrong. He started breaking out with lesions, and suffered a constant itch on his back. After seven years of suffering, researchers at Stanford University—working in concert with the Veterans Administration—started what Michael had long feared: that he had cancer from Agent Orange. He began radiation therapy and also was treated with chemotherapy before his death. Michael died in 1989. There were no formal apologies and no

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