

Former refugee thanks governor who welcomed him in 1975

By Melissa Santos
The News Tribune

TACOMA, Wash. — Vuong Nguyen has spent the past 40 years feeling indebted to former Washington governor Dan Evans.

This year, the former Vietnamese refugee finally found a way to express his thanks: by giving the former Republican governor a bonsai tree landscape.

Nguyen was one of the first Vietnamese refugees that Evans welcomed to the state in 1975. After Saigon fell that year, some Americans — including California governor Jerry Brown and protesters at Fort Chaffee in Arkansas — said they didn't want Vietnamese refugees coming to their states.

Not Evans. He sent his staff to California to tell hundreds of Vietnamese hunkered down at Camp Pendleton that they would be welcome in Washington.

Among those refugees was Nguyen, then 35 years old. After settling in Washington, Nguyen became a translator, and later an auditor and consultant for the state Department of Social and Health Services.

Nguyen is also a skilled bonsai artist and maintains about 40 of

the plants at his home in Olympia. He said the 40th anniversary of the Vietnamese refugee resettlement program got him thinking about a way to thank the former governor.

"I told my wife, 'We are very lucky, because they opened up their arms to help us,'" Nguyen, 75, said of coming to Washington 40 years ago.

Evans, however, wasn't sure he could care adequately for a bonsai tree. Bonsai require careful pruning and watering; maintaining the miniature trees and landscapes is an art that the Japanese perfected over centuries.

Versions of the art are also practiced in China and Vietnam.

So the former governor, who is 90, suggested an alternative plan: that he and Nguyen together donate the long-lasting specimen to the Pacific Bonsai Museum in Federal Way, where it can grow and thrive for years to come.

The two men met with museum officials to hand over the Penjing-style bonsai in a ceremony.

"I want just to express my gratitude to Dan, and I want my children to thank people who help them in their life," Nguyen said. "Without him, who knows where I might have ended up?"



Evans, who also served in the U.S. Senate, said he has been thanked before by former Vietnamese refugees who found new lives in Washington state — but never with a bonsai.

He said he viewed the Vietnamese refugees in 1975 as no different from other generations of Americans who immigrated to the U.S. in the past.

"That's how we grew over the centuries, was through immigrants," Evans said. "Virtually all of us except Native Americans are immigrants."

While current Washington governor Jay Inslee has compared the plight of Syrian refugees with the Vietnamese that Evans welcomed 40 years ago, Evans said he sees some differences — mainly, the modern threat of terrorism that he said didn't exist in 1975.

Evans said that while he thinks U.S. states should welcome Syrian refugees, he also thinks more thorough screenings are needed today than were used when resettling the Vietnamese 40 years ago.

COMPASSION COMMENDED. Vuong Nguyen, left, a former Vietnamese refugee, found a way to express his thanks to former Washington governor Dan Evans, right, by giving the former governor a bonsai tree landscape. Nguyen was one of the first Vietnamese refugees that Evans welcomed to the state in 1975. (Photo courtesy of the Pacific Bonsai Museum)

"But I think that can be done, and when it is done we ought to welcome the people in the same way we did during the Vietnamese crisis," Evans said.

Nguyen said the bonsai he gave Evans — in which plants grow out of a landscape made of volcanic rock — is a symbol of longevity.

"That's what we wish him: a long and healthy life," Nguyen said.

Evans said he hopes the bonsai will serve as a testament to the partnership formed between Washington state and its now-thriving Vietnamese community.

"I can't think of anything that would be more gratifying, as far as I'm concerned, than a living gift of that nature, which will live for centuries if it's well taken care of," Evans said. "It has a permanence — and because it will be housed at the museum, it is one that will be enjoyed for many centuries to come."

Governor Haley and speaker Ryan offer new GOP answer to Trump

By Erica Werner
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Two fresh faces in the Republican Party — speaker of the House of Representatives Paul Ryan and South Carolina governor Nikki Haley — are offering messages of diversity and openness to immigrants that could answer the GOP establishment's increasingly desperate search for an antidote to the loud pronouncements of presidential frontrunner Donald Trump.

Delivering the GOP rebuttal to President Barack Obama's State of the Union address, Haley, a daughter of Indian immigrants, called for welcoming legal immigrants to the country as long as they're properly vetted, and for resisting the temptation "to follow the siren call of the angriest voices."

She acknowledged a day after the speech

that her comments were partly aimed at Trump, telling NBC's "Today Show": "Mr. Trump has definitely contributed to what I think is just irresponsible talk."

Ryan, the Wisconsin Republican beginning his third month as speaker of the house, has been pledging to offer a bold agenda that will position the GOP as a positive alternative to Obama and the Democrats. He recently helped convene an anti-poverty summit with some of the GOP presidential candidates — Trump was absent — where he pressed for "a safety net that is designed to help get people out of poverty."

Such rhetoric from two young and charismatic officeholders cheers establishment Republicans who fear that the rise of Trump and of Texas senator Ted Cruz — with their frequent strong words on immigrants in the country illegally — could ruin the GOP for years, eliminating



REPUBLICAN RESPONSE. South Carolina governor Nikki Haley speaks to a crowd at the Kemp Forum in Columbia, South Carolina. Haley delivered the GOP rebuttal to President Barack Obama's State of the Union address. (AP Photo/Sean Rayford)

any chance of winning the White House if either is the nominee and turning off swing voters, minorities, and women.

"Speaker Ryan and governor Haley provide an important contrast, particularly with independent voters, to show what the Republican Party is really about, and it's not about Donald Trump," said Brian Walsh, a Republican strategist. "The key, though, is continuing to shine a light on leaders like the two of them, and that will depend in part on who we nominate."

Whether Haley or Ryan can do anything to sideline Trump or Cruz remains to be seen. That's not their explicit goal, and Haley, in particular, drew a backlash from some conservatives for her State of the Union rebuttal.

"Trump should deport Nikki Haley," conservative talk host Ann Coulter said over Twitter.

And at the capitol, Haley's comments on immigration were being interpreted by house conservatives including representative Steve King of Iowa, a Cruz supporter, as a call for unlimited legal immigration into the country, something they reject.

"I keep trying to remember when a principled conservative has been given the opportunity to provide that rebuttal," King told reporters, adding that Haley's comments would indicate she's not one.

"They are looking for someone who fits the profile that they want to be the face of the Republican Party and that's the rationale," King added later in an

interview, speaking of party leaders. Asked if he would want Haley as the face of the party, King said laughingly: "I think she's beautiful, so I'd be happy if she's the face of the party."

Trump himself criticized Haley in an interview on "Fox & Friends," calling her "very weak on illegal immigration."

Yet for a GOP establishment that has struggled with how to respond to Trump and Cruz, Haley and Ryan stand as a welcome rejoinder. Their messages are not too different from what has been heard from some of the mainstream presidential candidates, notably former Florida governor Jeb Bush. But Bush and other establishment Republicans have struggled to break through, while Ryan and Haley, as prominent elected officials in their own right, have their own platforms.

"What Paul Ryan is trying to do is put forward a substantive, thoughtful policy agenda for the country," said moderate representative Charlie Dent (R-Pennsylvania). "Every presidential candidate should be doing the same thing."

At the same time, party leaders are mindful that Trump and Cruz are channelling very real voter anger and a backlash against Washington, which is at least partly a creation of GOP leaders' failure to make good on repeated promises to effectively oppose Obama.

Conservatives warn that activists will not respond well if GOP party leaders start aligning themselves with Obama against Trump, as some interpreted Haley's remarks.

"Trump's response the next day will just be 'Well you heard President Obama and the Republican leadership response echo each other, they're on the same team.' That's his thesis," said conservative representative Dave Brat of Virginia. "And his thesis seems to be correct."

Haley's standing with conservatives was not likely to benefit from the White House

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