

JERSEYANA

JERSEYANA; Educating Janet

By GEORGE JAMES
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CALL it the education of Janet Gardner, herself a former education reporter.

Ms. Gardner was working for The New Brunswick Home News in the mid-1980's when she began covering hearings about the effects of Agent Orange on Vietnam veterans and writing articles about post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Ms. Gardner, who lives in Rocky Hill, just north of Princeton, was so moved that she began learning more about Vietnam and Southeast Asia, an experience that in the last decade has produced three films about the country and one about Cambodia.

Her most recent, "Precious Cargo," which was broadcast last Sunday on Channel 13 and will have a screening at the Third World Center at Princeton University next Sunday, focuses on orphaned or abandoned children who were airlifted after the fall of Saigon in 1975 and adopted by American families.

Many of the children were the offspring of American fathers and Vietnamese mothers and were brought to the United States under an order issued by President Gerald Ford.

Ms. Gardner, who acted as producer and director and the co-producer, Pham Quoc Thai, focused on six of a dozen children, who are now in their 20's and 30's with few ties to their native country, who made a return visit.

Julie Salamon, in a review for The New York Times, called it a "beautifully filmed and sensitively reported documentary" that provides "an exquisite window into the aftermath of war and what happens to children when the soldiers stop fighting." The Philadelphia Inquirer called it "a keeper," and advised viewers, "Get out your handkerchiefs and warm up the VCR."

"I was interested in making a piece about international adoption," Ms. Gardner said in a telephone interview from the office of the Gardner Documentary Group on West 42nd Street in New York.

She had planned to focus on a Vietnam veteran who had adopted a Vietnamese girl, but her contact with him led her to Holt International Children's Services in Eugene, Ore., which had arranged for the trip to Vietnam on the 25th anniversary of the fall of Saigon.

"We stopped in orphanages and hospitals where these children had been born and many abandoned," she said. "Everybody had their own personal and often times moving stories how they were found and in many cases how the nuns in the Catholic orphanages nurtured them and gave them names."

The film shows how the young Vietnamese-Americans bonded when they first met, sharing experiences about how it is to grow up different, Ms. Gardner said, and is

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particularly moving as it shows a young man from Harleyville, Pa., and young woman from Virginia Beach falling in love.

Ms. Gardner's previous films include "Vietnam: Land of the Ascending Dragon" (1993), a look at the history and culture of the country, and "A World Beneath The War" (1996), a study of how villagers lived in tunnels in an area north of the demilitarized zone that took heavy bombardment.

The first won a CINE Golden Eagle Award from the Council on International Nontheatrical Events. The second won the Deadline Club Award from the Society of Professional Journalists for best feature reporting on television and was nominated for a national news Emmy for outstanding historical programming. Pham Quoc Thai collaborated with her on these films as well as "Precious Cargo."

Ms. Gardner started her film production unit in Rocky Hill, but later moved her office to New York City. She went on to produce and direct a film about the classical dancers of Cambodia who survived the Khmer Rouge, "Dancing Through Death: The Monkey, Magic and Madness of Cambodia" (1998), which also won a CINE Golden Eagle award.

Ms. Gardner, a native of Dayton, Ohio, received a bachelor's degree from Cooper Union in New York and a master's degree in film production from New York University.

She worked at a television station in Washington as an assistant film editor for the "Today Show" on NBC and the nightly news and as a freelance editor for WCBS-TV News.

She quit television news for newspapers and got a job reporting at the Cleveland Plain Dealer. After several years, she tried writing and editing for Glamour magazine in New York but after a year and a half decided to go back to newspapers.

"The fashion beauty atmosphere wasn't for me," she said.

She landed a job with The Home News and moved to New Jersey. The effects of the Vietnam War were coming home and she found herself covering Vietnam-related issues including hearings on Agent Orange, some of which were held in New Brunswick.

She was later hired by The Asbury Park Press, where she continued writing about Vietnam and began attending discussion groups and conferences in New York dealing with the strained relations between the United States and Vietnam. It was at one of these that she met Pham Quoc Thai, who had come to America from his home north of Hanoi to attend the State University of New York at Buffalo. She also made the first of several trips to Vietnam.

Planning for "Precious Cargo" began in 1999, with filming starting in April 2000. The project came to a stop for several months, but Independent Television Service came through with financing from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

At first, Ms. Gardner said she wasn't sure how felt about the children being relocated from Vietnam, which is still a sore spot with the Vietnamese, but has come to think it was a good thing because they were stigmatized for being biracial. And many needed medical help they could get more easily in the United States.

"After talking to the children who are now young adults and seeing how they feel and the kind of people they became and speaking to diplomats," she said, "I do think it was a kind of rescue."

Photo: In the last decade Janet Gardner of Rocky Hill -- a former newspaper and magazine reporter -- has produced three films about Vietnam and one about Cambodia. (James Estrin/The New York Times)