

This piece was written for a local newspaper, *The Olympian* while serving as a member of the Diversity Panel from 2007 through 2008.

## **Xenophobia rooted in fear and greed is never acceptable**

By David Whitfield | The Olympian's Diversity Panel • Published August 31, 2007

While serving in Da Nang, South Vietnam, in 1968, a Vietnamese woman with the "Free World Forces," approached me, tears streaming, saying she'd lost her mother, her, husband, grandfather and two of her siblings as a result of a mortar attack. She asked me to help her find wood to repair her house. The woman had two small children.

There was a supply depot near our tent city where piles of plywood were stacked — rotting in the 120-degree heat. I knew I wouldn't get permission yet I wanted to help her. I waited until she got the plywood and repairs were under way before saying anything to my boss.

Before I finished telling him what I had done, he was in my face, pointing his finger up at me, screaming, threatening me with court martial, non-judicial punishment, letter of reprimand and more.

He let me know in very clear, expletive-laden, xenophobic language what he thought about the Vietnamese. I tried explaining that she had two small children and that the plywood had not moved since my arrival six months earlier.

"Captain, I don't give a (expletive) if it's been there since the French left Dien Bien Phu ...!" he said. His screaming was interrupted by the counter-mortar siren, followed by the thumping sound of mortar rounds landing at a distance. "I'm not finished with you!" he yelled, as we ran in different directions to the bunkers.

Now you're wondering what this 1968 story has to do with xenophobia in 2007.

First, we fear and dislike "strangers" from other places in the world because they are different, unfamiliar to us — like the case involving my boss.

Second, xenophobia and greed have become pervasive in this country and throughout the world — "they're taking our jobs." Xenophobia, racism and anti-Semitism have become so pervasive that the Asia-Europe Foundation commissioned a study on xenophobia for a recent conference. It has 39 members and the United States is not represented.

Third, those who express xenophobia need a target. My boss' target was the Vietnamese. Today, unfortunately, immigrants are the target — legal or illegal.

Fourth, it is never OK to deprive, abuse or mistreat others just because they look different or originate from a different country.

If xenophobia is about fear of strangers here to work, make a living, and feed their families, then something sinister lurks among us.

What are we afraid of? And what if the more than 100 countries where we have troops stationed treated us the same way?

Mind you, "over there" we are the stranger. Yet we often view ourselves as the paragon of human rights and democracy. Our history tells us however, that what we have for the most part was taken by force, deprivation and extermination.

In Howard Zinn's, "A People's History of the United States," he discusses "The cruel policy initiated by Columbus and pursued by his successors resulted in complete genocide."

An example, among many, is the peaceful Arawak Indians who are no longer with us because Columbus viewed them as different — strangers — less than.

And each year, we celebrate Columbus' genocidal, xenophobic crimes.

How do we reconcile that with our ethnocentric, xenophobic behavior in the 21st century?

