NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Susan Boyle and a family from Vietnam

Joe Ferullo | Jun. 2, 2009 NCR Today

It?s a uniquely Western story: Susan Boyle, an obscure, homely but endearing women, is skyrocketed to fame and just as quickly torn down by the very forces that raised her up.

Uniquely Western -- because her story reminds me of a Vietnamese family I tried to draw into the media whirlwind several years ago.

Boyle became an overnight sensation when she appeared on ?Britain?s Got Talent.? Her rendition of ?The Dream I Dreamed? from the musical ?Les Miserable,? stunned the audience and the show?s judges. But more than that, it sparked a Great Re-Examination of How We Judge People.

For days, newspapers and blogs were filled with ruminations about the way the judges and studio audience first scorned Boyle for her matronly manner and humble appearance ? only to have their prejudices torn apart by a heartfelt performance that revealed a real artist within. That feeling crossed the Atlantic: Boyle became a huge star in the U.S. as well, thanks to You Tube ? where millions of people **streamed the video[1]** of her televised star turn.When my daughters watched it with me on my laptop, they teared up. So did I.

But the nature of Western media being what it is these days, this era of good feelings did not last long. Almost immediately, the British press began to rummage through Boyle?s personal life, exposing her to further ridicule. Then this weekend, Boyle lost out in the talent show?s final round to a dance group called ?Diversity.? By Monday, London **newspapers reported [2]**that she had been hospitalized for exhaustion.

Now it is very easy to blame the media in all of this ? and the media, of course, **deserves its share of the blame [3]**. But remember: Susan Boyle actually went out and auditioned for a national television program. She sought her fame, setting off the chain of events outlined above. She did interviews, talked at length about herself in minute detail, and seemed quite anxious to shed decades of obscurity.

That is a very Western malady. And this is where my Vietnamese family comes in: a few years ago, I produced for a network news program, and was assigned to contact a family of recent immigrants to Southern California from Vietnam -- a woman and her two grown daughters. They made headlines locally because they had moved here to seek out an American soldier who ? during the war a long time ago ? was the woman?s lover and father of the two girls. When they found him, it turned out he was broke, nearly homeless and wanted nothing to do with them.

I connected with the family; my bosses and I fully expected them to sit down with our cameras, get wired for sound, and confess in stirring detail the dashed hopes and crumbled dreams they had experienced since arriving on our shores.

But they refused. ?Mister,? the mother said in broken English she had learned from the war, ?why would I do that?? Stunned, I called my senior producer in New York. He sent me back in to talk to them again. Then again. Three days in a row, I drove down to their small apartment in Orange County and tried to cajole them into going

on-air, talking to the nation, making themselves very, very known.

Now, the American in the this story ? the broken and busted Vietnam vet who lived in a one-room walk-up covered end-to-end with faded photos of Southeast Asia, the ex-soldier who turned away from a woman he once loved and two children he had fathered ? that man was more than anxious to go on-camera and confess his story, to lay out all his mistakes and the reasons he made them.

But the others - they saw no value in it. Instead, they prized their privacy. They wanted to quietly remake themselves in their new land, tending gently to their dreams and disappointments the way families do: with cameras and microphones far, far away.

I was finally able to back away from the story by telling my supervisors these immigrants simply did not share the American desire to see themselves on television. Not yet. Give them time. They?ll come around. Everyone understood that.

That family?s choice has become even more rare. Now, it seems, no one turns down a chance to be on camera, no matter the reason, or the potential for humiliation. To be sure, the media can often be terrible about this stuff ? people and their stories are used up and tossed away when the next day?s news comes along.

But everyone has that choice ? anyone can just say no.

Source URL (retrieved on *05/05/2015 - 10:03*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/susan-boyle-and-family-vietnam

Links:
[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxPZh4AnWyk
[2] http://www.mirror.co.uk/celebs/news/2009/06/02/susan-boyle-collapsed-before-being-rushed-to-priory-115875-21407618/
[3] http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/susan-boyle-broken-by-the-fame-game-1694528.html