Once Upon A Time In Cabramatta

The untold story of how the Vietnamese community overcame the odds and found their place in multicultural Australia.

3 x 1 Hour National Documentary Program

A STUDY GUIDE BY MARGUERITE O’HARA

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ONCE UPON A TIME IN
CABRAMATTA

The untold story of how the Vietnamese community overcame the odds and found their place in multicultural Australia
Once Upon A Time in Cabramatta is a three-part documentary program chronicling the largely untold and unknown story of the Vietnamese people in Australia. It shows how the Vietnamese community in Cabramatta overcame the odds and found their place in multicultural Australia.

The story begins with the 1979 landmark decision of Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser to open Australia’s doors to thousands of refugees fleeing Vietnam at the end of the war. It is a moment in history that finally buries the infamous White Australia Policy and transforms a nation.

The years that follow are as dramatic as they are turbulent. In this one small Sydney suburb, Cabramatta, the 1980s and 1990s see the emergence of street gangs, a heroin epidemic and the first political assassination in Australia’s history. The Vietnamese people are vilified and demonised. Cabramatta seems to represent all that is wrong with Asian immigration. The universal support for multiculturalism is a distant memory.

But as the century draws to a close there is a remarkable turnaround. The Vietnamese people finally find their voice and claim their rightful, democratic place in their adopted home. Cabramatta is a community transformed, Australia, a continent changed forever.
This documentary series would be suitable for students in secondary schools studying the impact of migration on Australian society and the complex process of re-settlement. At its heart is an examination of the reality of ‘multiculturalism’ as a lived experience. It would be a valuable resource in SOSE/HSIE and History for students studying contemporary society and migration to Australia.

Once Upon A Time in Cabramatta is an important series in presenting the historical and social roots of multiculturalism in Australia. It should help students understand the complexity of the Asian-Australian experience, to look beyond the many media stereotypes and listen to the voices and experiences of people who have come to Australia from a number of different cultures.

It would also be a valuable resource for students of English and/or Asian Studies who may already have some knowledge of growing up Asian in Australia through texts such as Alice Pung’s Unpolished Gem and Brian Caswell and David Phu An Chiem’s Only the Heart. Both these powerful texts, like this documentary series, explore the migrant experience from the perspectives of those on the inside. Every journey is different.

For students of Media and Film Studies, the series provides an excellent example of an approach to constructing history through personal narratives, archival film and the voices of many people, both Vietnamese and Australian, who lived through the often difficult period of life in Cabramatta from the late 1970s.

While Once Upon A Time in Cabramatta is about the Vietnamese experience of those who came to Australia after the Vietnam War from the late 1970s, it clearly has resonance today as new groups of people attempt to come to Australia to escape war-torn homelands. How people come and how they are assisted when they arrive are questions that are as important in the twenty-first century as they were for earlier migrants; immigration policy remains one of the most important and fraught issues in Australia. What did we get right and what did we get wrong in political, social, economic and humanitarian terms in the past? Are there lessons to be learned from the nature of the Vietnamese experience?

Some background to the Vietnam War and a map of the region is provided in this guide for students who may not be familiar with the details of this conflict and Australia’s involvement in that long-running war.

As Episode 1 sets up many of the situations and stories that are further explored in Episodes 2 and 3, an understanding of the issues raised in Episode 1 will make it easier for the students to understand the nature of the community and family tensions and their resolution as they are presented in episodes 2 and 3. The pre-viewing questions are better suited to middle school students or students in schools where there may be fewer students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Pre-viewing questions

1. How many students in your class group come from non-English speaking backgrounds?
2. How many people do you know in your social, sporting and work worlds whose parents were not born in Australia?
3. Have you eaten Vietnamese food?
4. Share your knowledge of the Vietnam War and Australian involvement in that war.
5. Have you visited Vietnam? Describe the country, the people and how they live.
6. What is the most practised religion in Vietnam?
7. Name any characters of Asian background appearing on Australian television dramas. (Don’t include racial stereotypes sometimes portrayed in comedies such as Jen in Angry Boys.)
8. Why do you think the parents of migrants tend to be especially ambitious for their children to achieve very high standards in education?
9. What would be some of the difficulties for you in having to move to settle in a non-English speaking country with few possessions and very little money?
10. How can being part of a harmonious multicultural community enrich our lives by encouraging us to expand our personal horizons?
The Filmmakers

Key Crew

Bringing recent history to visual life is a complex and rich field for documentary makers.

A documentary series such as *Once Upon a Time in Cabramatta* has a very large number of people working on it, from researchers to advisors to editors, graphic artists and time-lapse, aerial, still and many other technical image makers. The people listed in this crew list are just a fraction of those involved in the project.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Names</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive producers</td>
<td>SUE CLOTHIER and CRAIG GRAHAM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series writer and producer</td>
<td>JACOB HICKEY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series director</td>
<td>BERNADINE LIM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of photography</td>
<td>JUSTIN HANRAHAN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrator</td>
<td>TARA MORICE</td>
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A map of the region at the end of this guide shows the location and size of Vietnam in relation to Australia. It may give students some sense of the perilous journeys many people made, and still make, to reach Australia by boat. Sometimes they are at sea for up to three weeks with little food and water. A very brief account of the background to the conflict in Vietnam and Australian involvement in that war is provided below.

The Vietnam War arose out of more than a century of foreign occupation of Vietnam. It was a war for Vietnamese independence, but also a civil war between two competing philosophies. Vietnam has always been subject to threats and invasion from its large neighbours – particularly China. In the eighteenth century, a new threat emerged – the French invaded the area (called Annam at the time) and established control. They used the land as their colony, and created a strong French influence, though one which did not suppress Vietnamese desires for independence.

In the Second World War the Japanese invaded and Vietnamese nationalists fought beside French troops to defeat the Japanese. After the victory over the Japanese, the Vietnamese expected to gain their independence, but the French remained as colonial masters. Many Vietnamese troops now turned to fighting the French.

In 1954 the French were defeated in the north at Dien Bien Phu, but in the south, Vietnamese leaders did not want to be part of the pro-Communist system being set up by the north. The country was divided along the seventeenth parallel of latitude, with the south being supported by the United States, and the north by Russia and China. The north began to send troops into the south, supported by southerners sympathetic to their cause.

The main reason for the United States’ involvement was a fear that communism would spread throughout Asia. China had become communist in 1949, and the Korean War of the 1950s had seemed to show the spreading power and influence and threat of communism. The Australian government shared this view, and was ready to support the United States in South Vietnam.

The United States began sending more and more troops to South Vietnam and extending bombing raids into neighbouring Cambodia and Laos in an attempt to disrupt supply routes. Australian soldiers were in South Vietnam as advisers from 1962. In 1965 Prime Minister Menzies, in an attempt to tie the United States to defence of Australia against any threat from Indonesia, announced that Australia would send combat troops. This included conscripted soldiers, National Service-men, after 1966. These were chosen by a ballot of all twenty-year-old males, though only a small proportion of all eligible men were called up.

Most Australian Army operational units served in South Vietnam during the war. They served mainly in the Phuoc Tuy province of Vietnam – at the Nui Dat base and at the logistics base at Vung Tau. Many officers and warrant officers served with distinction in South Vietnamese Army units as part of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV). The normal tour of duty was one year with complete unit replacement where appropriate, otherwise the unit remained in situ and only the personnel changed. The Royal Australian Navy and the Royal Australian Air Force were also involved in the Vietnam War.

From mid 1966 the main task of the Australians was to secure Phuoc Tuy province in which they were based.
This involved fighting the North Vietnam Regular Army soldiers based there, as well as the local Viet Cong guerrillas, and denying them food, supplies and safe places. There was also a significant commitment to improving infrastructure in the province, with many Australian soldiers being employed on road and bridge construction, among other projects.

In 1967 the Australian commitment reached its peak at about 8,300 personnel in Vietnam at the one time. In 1970 withdrawals began, and by the end of 1972, the troops had virtually all been withdrawn, with security of the province being handed over to the South Vietnamese Army. In 1975, after the withdrawal of United States’ support, the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong guerrillas took Saigon, and ended the war with the reunification of Vietnam under Communist rule. About 57,000 Australians served at some time in Vietnam, with about 520 (different numbers are given by different authorities, depending on the criteria applied) dying as a result of the war.

As this series shows, when the war ended, with the North Vietnamese victorious, many Vietnamese began leaving their homeland, first by boat and later, arriving on planes chartered by the Australian government to offer a safer, more orderly exit and arrival process. As we see in this episode, many boats arrived in Malaysia and Bidong Island, a staging point for those fleeing Vietnam. Why did they make for Australia?

Reading some of the brief biographies (in this guide) of some of the Vietnamese people who came to Australia when the war ended, as well as listening to their stories, will provide some information about why they felt compelled to escape their country.

Hien Le says, ‘No-one wants to be a refugee … you are a person without knowing your destiny … you don’t have control of your life’. But, like many asylum seekers, family security and aspirations for their children are paramount. In Son Nguyen’s words, ‘We wanted our children to come here for a better life than in Vietnam’.

All over the world, it is not unusual for migrants from particular backgrounds to settle in areas where they are close to their fellow countrymen and friends and family. For instance, when one of the first waves of mostly European migrants came to Australia after World War Two, Italians and Greeks tended to settle in the inner Melbourne suburbs of Carlton and Fitzroy and a relatively large population of Lebanese Australians live in Lakemba in Sydney. These choices were often related to employment opportunities, as they still are for many people making choices about where to live. Equally, being close to friends and fellow countrymen who speak your language and understand your ideals and aspirations is an important factor in choosing where to live. There is today a large Chinese community in the Eastern suburbs of Melbourne, including Glen Waverley. For an excellent account of why immigrants settle where they do, you could read this paper about multiculturalism and settlement in Australia at <http://www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au/doc/hugo_1.pdf>.

So, why did so many Vietnamese people choose to live in Cabramatta and the surrounding suburbs of western Sydney?

Cabramatta is a south western suburb of Sydney, about thirty kilometres from the city centre. It is part of the local government area of the City of Fairfield. Vietnamese people also settled in surrounding suburbs including Canley Vale, Bankstown and Fairfield.

One of the reasons for the presence of large numbers of Vietnamese Australians in the Fairfield local government area is that most arrivals were initially housed in hostels in the area, the biggest of which was the Cabramatta Migrant Hostel. Cabramatta has a history as a migrant ‘transition zone’, and has hosted a succession of post-World War Two arrivals, including British, German, Greek, Italian and Yugoslav migrants. By 1989, 10,000 of Australia’s 100,000 Vietnamese-born lived in the Cabramatta area.

The Vietnamese, like their predecessors, were channelled into Cabramatta in the resettlement process. Many of those who had initially settled elsewhere in Australia, including some who had been placed with sponsors in regional areas, undertook a secondary migration to the Fairfield area to join the nascent community. In addition to the attraction of having Vietnamese neighbours, groceries and restaurants, the area was appealing in that land and houses were relatively cheap and it was close to work in western Sydney’s manufacturing sector, where most Vietnamese refugee and migrant arrivals found their first jobs.
Chau Hoang
(Episodes 1, 2 and 3)
1979 – Chau and her family escape Vietnam.
1980 – Chau and her family move to Australia.
1987 – The Hoang family moves to Canley Vale (next to Cabramatta).
Chau Tho Hoang is a Vietnamese refugee who escaped Vietnam with her husband and seven children in perilous circumstances in 1979. The freedom that Chau worked so hard to obtain for her family in Australia came at a high price: her family suffered from a cultural and generational discord and were exposed to dangerous drugs and criminality on the streets of Cabramatta. Regardless of this Chau does not regret becoming an Australian and, thirty years on, her family is repairing their relationships.

Thanh Hoang
(Episodes 1 and 3)
1980 – Thanh’s parents arrive in Australia.
1987 – Thanh’s family moves to Canley Vale (next to Cabramatta).
Thanh Hoang, daughter of Chau Hoang, was born 1981 in Bondi. Thanh took on the primary role of translator for the family as her parents did not speak English. Thanh witnessed Tony, her brother, rise in the drug world as he tried to earn money and respect. Thanh feels that even though her family struggled after settling in Australia, the opportunities they’ve had would never have been offered to them in Vietnam.

Tony Hoang
(Episodes 1, 2 and 3)
1980 – Tony’s parents arrive in Australia.
1982 – Tony is born in Bondi, Sydney.
1987 – The Hoang family moves to Canley Vale (next to Cabramatta).
1995 – Tony gets involved in gangs.
1996 – Tony is arrested.
1997 – Tony moves out of home.
2004 - Tony finds redemption and turns his life around.
Tony is the oldest son in the Hoang Family. Tony believes years of childhood domestic violence and an estranged relationship with his father led to his involvement in the gangs and addiction to heroin. Tony served jail time for crimes he committed during his teenage years. At his lowest point, Tony begged God for a sign and the next day was handed a flyer that read, ‘If you are looking for a sign from God, here it is’. From that moment on, Tony’s life turned around. He now has a wife and three children and spends most of his time giving back to the community.

Angie Hong
(Episode 1)
1971 – Angie arrives in Australia via the Colombo Plan.
1977 – Angie is a Vietnamese interpreter for the Department of Immigration.
1993 – Angie opens the Thanh Binh restaurant in Cabramatta.
AngieHong is a Vietnamese refugee and former restaurant owner. Angie came to Australia in 1971 under the Colombo Plan as a student (study scholarship) and was in Australia when Saigon fell. She worked as a Vietnamese interpreter for the Department of Immigration in the early 1990s. In 1993, Angie opened the Thanh Binh Vietnamese restaurant in Cabramatta and through her restaurant witnessed the highs and lows of Cabramatta and its people, from its darkest days as the heroin capital of Australia to its celebration as the food bowl of Sydney’s south-west.
Joe Le
(Episode 1)
1983 – Joe Le is born in a Malaysian Refugee camp.
1983 – Joe Le’s family arrives in Australia.
1992 – Joe’s family structure fractures.
1996 – Joe moves out of home and gets involved in drugs.
1999 – Joe gets arrested.
2004 – Joe is released from prison.
Joe was born in a Malaysian refugee camp in 1983 and came to Australia with his mother. Joe’s mother re-married during her resettlement. Joe’s family structure started to fall apart when he was nine years old and his two older stepbrothers moved out and became involved with the notorious 5T gang. Joe left home at age fifteen because of family violence and moved in with gang members. He tried selling drugs as a way to make money and developed a serious heroin smoking habit. In 1999, Joe was arrested and spent time in prison for armed robbery. In 2004 he turned his life around. Joe has been accepted at North Sydney TAFE where he will attend a sound design course.

David Giang
(Episode 1)
1980 – David arrives in Australia as a refugee with his father and two brothers.
1981 – The first issue of the Sunrise Daily is printed.
David Giang is the managing editor of Australia’s leading Vietnamese newspaper, the Sunrise Daily. He arrived in Australia in 1980 as a refugee with his father and two brothers. His father was a journalist in South Vietnam and when he arrived in Australia established the Sunrise Daily as a monthly newspaper. David later took over the paper. As a journalist and editor, David has met with and interviewed all of the leaders in the Cabramatta community, including John Newman and Phuong Ngo.

Hien Le
(Episodes 1, 2 and 3)
1980 – Hien Le arrives in Australia as a refugee.
Hien Le arrived in Australia as a refugee from Vietnam in 1980. Prior to his escape from Vietnam he served in the South Vietnamese government as a police officer and was injured during the Vietnam War. Following the fall of Saigon in 1975, he spent five years in a Communist re-education camp. Hien has observed the many events that have shaped Cabramatta and the way the Vietnamese community has evolved and how it has been perceived by wider Australia. Hien’s long term goal is to help build a vibrant, cohesive and resourceful Vietnamese community within Australia’s multicultural society. Currently, Hien is the Vice-President (Planning) of the Vietnamese Community Association in Australia – NSW Chapter (VCA/NSW). Hien is also a Senior Investigation/Conciliation Officer for the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

Andrew Nguyen
(Episode 1)
1975 – Andrew is arrested and sent to jail by the communist regime.
1978 – Andrew and his family escape to a Malaysian Refugee camp.
1979 – Andrew and his family arrive in Australia.
1981 – Andrew is the victim of a violent home invasion.
1991 – Andrew runs for Fairfield council as an independent.
1995 – Andrew joins the Liberal Party.
In 1975, Andrew was captured by the communist regime and spent three years in prison. After his release, he and his family escaped to Malaysia. They arrived in Australia in 1979. Andrew Nguyen was a local councillor for Cabramatta from 1991 to 1995 and from 2004 to 2008. He was also the Board Director of the South Western Sydney Area Health Board and Chairman of the Multicultural Health Committee from 1990 to 1996, and the Board Director of the Community Health and Tuberculosis Association from 1992 to 1996.
Andrew Jakubowicz (Episodes 1, 2 and 3)
Dr Andrew Jakubowicz is Professor of Sociology at the University of Technology, Sydney. He has an Honours degree in Government from Sydney University and a PhD from the University of NSW. Since the early 1970s, he has been involved in Asian research and race relations and the development of materialist theories of cultural diversity. As an academic at the top of his field, Andrew has unique insights into the context of the arrival and settlement of the Vietnamese in Australia.

Scott Cook (Episode 1)
Detective Superintendent Scott Cook is Commander of the Asian Crime Squad, NSW Police Force. Scott began his career in Cabramatta in 1989 at the age of nineteen. Scott experienced first-hand the difficulties of policing a traumatised migrant community. In 1994, Scott was transferred to Task Force Oak, which was responsible for investigating Asian Organised Crime. As the violence in Cabramatta escalated, Scott was asked to complete a risk assessment of crime in southwest Sydney. His report became known as the Cook Report and was one of the catalysts for positive change in Cabramatta, along with Strike Force Portville— the investigation credited with stopping the escalating violence.

Alan Leek (Episodes 1 and 2)
1991–1994 Alan Leek serves as Commander of Cabramatta LAC.
2000 – Alan retires from the police force.
2001 – Alan makes a submission to the Inquiry into Police Resources.

Alan Leek was Commander of Cabramatta LAC from 1991 to 1994. During his time in Cabramatta, Alan would make a point of engaging with the community as much as possible. He never wore a gun and believes that there is no such thing as Asian Crime; rather, crime is crime that belongs to no race or religion. In 1994, Alan’s term as Commander of Cabramatta LAC ended. He returned in 2001 to give critical evidence at the Parliamentary Inquiry into Police Resources.
Synopsis

As thousands of refugees pour into the Sydney suburb of Cabramatta, the first Vietnamese community in Australia is born. But it’s not long before problems arise. The family structure, so important in Vietnamese culture, has been obliterated by the war. The security of this life gone, young refugees find a sense of belonging through criminal gangs. A lost generation is born onto the streets of Cabramatta.

Australia is simply not ready to cope with this huge influx of refugees and the problems that arrive with them. And as the cracks begin to show on the streets there is a fracturing of political support for multiculturalism at a national level. The future of Cabramatta and the Vietnamese community in Australia appears precarious.

This viewing log (Table 2) could be downloaded and printed for students. Different points and even episodes could be allocated to groups or individuals.

As you watch this series, make notes on the style and approach of the filmmakers to telling the story of each episode using the pointers in the left-hand column.
Note: not all the viewing note questions on this sheet will be equally relevant to each of the three episodes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EPISODE NUMBER ____ (1, 2 OR 3)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What are some of the images shown and questions posed in the opening pre-title sequences of this documentary?</strong> How do they set up the story?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How do the filmmakers utilise the medium of film to tell this story?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What are some of the ways stories such as this one about people in contemporary society can be effectively told on film rather than entirely through words? How do faces matter, particularly as they change and mature over time?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Identify the major focus of the episode.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The use of interview subjects (both Vietnamese Australians and others) who describe and account for their experiences.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The range of images and layering of stills used to convey something of the period and place.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Images, accounts and/or observations you found most striking.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information that was new or surprising.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The timeframe, e.g. year or years referred to in the episode.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Significant events and dates.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Important contributors to bringing the story to life.</strong></td>
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**Understanding the refugee experience**

There are four sets of questions broadly following the narrative development of the episode. Teachers may like to allocate a set of questions to different groups of students who can then share their responses in discussion.
SET 1
1978–1983

Coming to a new country

Part of me wants to let this out so we can tell this story. But at the same time these stories, they’re water under the bridge. So for me to bring this up again it’s like, right, what are you doing?  
– Tony Hoang

• List some of the reasons Vietnamese people left their homeland in such numbers when the war ended in 1975 and North and South Vietnam were united under a communist government?

• What roles would at least some of these people fleeing their homeland have played during the war between the south and the north?

• What are some of the things people feared and often experienced that caused them to take such extreme action; e.g. what were re-education camps in post war Vietnam?

• What were the strongest common aspirations of the adults in settling in Australia?

• What were they leaving behind?

• In what ways was Prime Minister Fraser’s 1979 decision to open Australia’s doors to Vietnamese people fleeing their homeland such an important, bold and even revolutionary decision?

• Why did the government decide to set up an orderly departures program and fly refugees into Australia?

• In what ways and why was the Australian community quite unprepared for such large numbers of Vietnamese arriving in Australia?

SET 2
1983–1989

Families under pressure

My parents were never around – Joe Le

• How does the arrival of thousands of Vietnamese radically re-write the previously understood notion of ‘multiculturalism’?

• How well prepared and resourced were state governments to put in place effective programs to help these new arrivals to cope in such a different society?

• What were some of the factors that Tony and Thanh Hoang and Joe Le describe that led to some children of the first wave of Vietnamese migrants joining what were described as ‘criminal gangs’?

• How did parental aspirations for their children to have a good education conflict with the realities of family life experienced by their children?

• Explain the difference in the values of family life for children of Vietnamese refugees and families who had been here for generations?

• How did the adults and the children respond to these differing values and expectations about what it means to be part of a ‘family’?

• How do the activities of some members of minority groups, such as refugees, lead to the whole group becoming ‘demonised’ in society? Provide some other多功能学 {noun} – the preservation of different cultures or cultural identities within a unified society

The announcement was made but there was never any sort of consequential commentary like – ‘and therefore the following things are likely to happen in your neighbourhood. And therefore we expect you to reach out to them. And it’s going to be a bit difficult because you won’t understand what they’re saying’. None of these conversations took place.

– Andrew Jakubowicz, sociologist
examples of groups who have become stereotyped and vilified as a result of the behaviour of some members.

• Explain how the widely publicised views of Queensland politician Pauline Hanson, of historian Geoffrey Blainey and of John Newman, the state Labor member for Fairfield were taken up by some people in the community?

• In what ways do economic recessions and tight employment conditions make life tougher for many people, but especially for recent arrivals?

• Why would it have been so difficult for Vietnamese families to access support services available to people undergoing family difficulties, alcohol and drug problems? What skills do government organisations and individuals such as lawyers, social workers and interpreters need to be able to provide services to Vietnamese and other recent arrivals to Australia?

• What does Andrew Jakubowicz, the sociologist from the University of Technology in Sydney, suggest is important in ‘socially engineering’ multiculturalism so that the arrival of numbers of different people into a society is better managed?

Recession, racism, the traumas of the past and the isolation of the present are all taking their toll. The head of the family, in particular, is struggling to find his place in a completely alien culture.

– Narrator of Once Upon A Time In Cabramatta

Australian family life and Vietnamese family life are really very different. Vietnamese children listen to their parents and do as they are told. Vietnamese children live in Australia for a while, they begin to adapt to the Australian way.

– Chau Hoang

left home and joined street gangs?

• More than ten years on from Liberal prime minister, Malcolm Fraser’s decision to scrap the ‘White Australia Policy’, what did 1988 opposition leader John Howard say about ‘multiculturalism’ as a government policy?

• ‘Forming ghettos and taking Australian jobs’. Why are the statements of politicians likely to be so influential and inflammatory in debates about society that focus on racial differences?

• Why was the election of Phuong Ngo as a local government councillor seen as so important to the Vietnamese in the Fairfield area?

• Why is police officer Scott Cook’s description of his work in Cabramatta an important element in telling the story of life on the streets in the 1990s?

• Alan Leek, who was Commander of Cabramatta Local Area Command from 1991–1994, does not believe there is any such thing as specifically Asian crime. Why does he think the Vietnamese were so fearful of police and mistrusted them?

SET 4
The 1990s and early 2000s

Crime and Politics

• What was state member and Labor politician John Newman’s background?

What can you be shot for?

(Question put to police by Vietnamese)
What did he say about members of the Vietnamese gangs he believed posed a threat to Australian society and particularly to the stability of communities such as Cabramatta?

- How do Joe Le and Tony Hoang’s stories put a human face on this problem of young Vietnamese boys becoming part of the ‘gang-drug culture’ that was part of their life in Cabramatta at this time?

- How does the beating to death of a high school student in a restaurant illustrate the disturbing nexus between drugs, gangs, violence and a wall of community silence?

- What sort of call-outs did experienced paramedic John Ellems regularly attend in Cabramatta? Are these typical of many ambulance call-outs in large cities or were they statistically more common in the Fairfield region?

- What difficulties would police and paramedics have faced in policing the streets of Cabramatta in the early 1990s?

- What violent events and simmering social problems flagged in Episode 1 are likely to be central to the exploration of Cabramatta and its people in Episode 2 of this series?

Neither Chau Hoang nor her husband could speak English and their son Tony could not speak Vietnamese … the relationship was lost in translation.

– Narrator

For an interactive timeline of the Cabramatta story and many online extras go to: sbs.com.au/onceuponatime and click on various dates to provide an understanding of the Vietnamese experience both in Australia and in Vietnam.
Map of South East Asia and part of surrounding region

http://www.world-maps.co.uk/continent-map-of-south-east-asia.htm

- Identify Vietnam and the surrounding countries that were damaged in the Vietnam War, especially by massive American bombing raids.
- Note the position of Vietnam in the region and its distance from Australia.
- Identify Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean.
- Why might Malaysia have become a staging point for asylum seekers hoping to get to Australia?
- What does this map reveal about the difficulties for Australian Customs and naval boats in patrolling and intercepting boats carrying asylum seekers?
- What does the map reveal about the inherent dangers of attempting journeys across the sea in small wooden boats?

Endnotes
1 http://www.anzacday.org.au/history/vietnam/overview.html
2 http://www.dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/vietnamese
Synopsis

The first political assassination in the history of Australia leaves the Vietnamese people of Cabramatta demonised and vilified – the community and the ideals of multiculturalism itself are in tatters.

At 9.30pm on Monday, 4 September 1994, police are called to a house in Cabramatta following reports of gunshots. They discover the body of John Newman, the state MP for Cabramatta, lying in the driveway of his home. He has been shot dead. The Vietnamese, already vilified for propping up a criminal culture, are now deemed guilty of committing Australia’s first political assassination.

Newman’s killing plays into a wider concern that is brewing in Australia, particularly in conservative politics, that Asians are a threat to the social cohesion of a nation. The police hit back with highly orchestrated campaigns to rid Cabramatta’s streets of drugs and crime. There is limited success. The only real hope is that the community, so vilified and fractured, will somehow find its own way to overcome its problems.
Deputy Commissioner Nick Kaldas has spent thirty years with the NSW Police Force. His distinguished career includes time in the armed robbery, drugs, counter-terrorism and undercover divisions, as well as being commander of the Homicide Squad and later the Gangs Squad. Nick led the investigation into the assassination of NSW politician John Newman in 1994 and subsequent conviction of Phuong Ngo for that murder. He was deployed to Iraq in 2004 by the Australian Federal Government as the Deputy Chief Police Advisor helping to rebuild the Iraqi police. In late 2007, Nick was appointed Deputy Commissioner, Specialist Operations, before taking a one-year leave of absence in 2009 to lead the investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri for the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon. In August 2011 Nick was appointed Deputy Commissioner, Field Operations, responsible for more than 13,000 police officers across NSW.

Deborah Wallace
(Episodes 2 and 3)
Detective Superintendent Deborah Wallace is Commander of the Middle Eastern Organised Crime Squad, NSW Police Force. Deb joined the Cabramatta Local Area Command as a Detective in 1991. Deb’s job was to engage newly arrived Vietnamese migrants and break down the walls of silence that existed within the community. Deb left Cabramatta in 1997 and returned in 2000 as a consultant to deal with the escalating drug crisis, before being appointed Crime Manager in April 2001. It was while in this position that Deb became a participant in The Cabramatta Project, a coordinating body responsible for the implementation of the NSW Government’s response to the 2001 Parliamentary Inquiry into Policing in Cabramatta. Deb helped implement the drug house legislation and have drug legislation passed.

Lisa Maher
(Episode 2)
Prof. Lisa Maher is Program Head of the Faculty of Medicine and Senior Research Fellow, National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research at the University of NSW. Lisa has worked in Cabramatta since 1995 and during that time she has run data and video studies on heroin use documenting the trends and patterns of drug use in the area.

Son Nguyen
(Episodes 2 and 3)
1995 – Son Nguyen’s family arrives in Australia and settles in Cabramatta.
1996 – Son’s son Lam begins experimenting with drugs.
Prior to his escape from Vietnam, Son was an officer in the South Vietnamese army, a musician, a writer and a poet. After the fall of Saigon, he was imprisoned for six years in a communist re-education camp. In search of a better life, Son’s family escaped Vietnam by boat and spent five years in refugee camps in Thailand before arriving in Australia in 1995. Son and his family settled in Cabramatta and for the next ten years struggled with language barriers, post-traumatic stress, poverty and a generational culture clash. When his only son Lam became involved with drugs and gangs, Son’s dream of a better life became a nightmare. Son struggled for eleven years to keep his family together and now works to raise awareness of drug addiction in the community.

Lam Nguyen
(Episodes 2 and 3)
1996 – Lam begins experimenting with drugs in school.
Between the ages of twelve and seventeen, Lam Nguyen grew up with his family in a Thai refugee camp. Life in the refugee camps was harsh, and Lam learned how to survive through the trading of small goods with other refugees. At the age of thirteen Lam was caught and put in community prison. In 1995, Lam’s family migrated to Australia. In 1996 Lam became involved in heavy heroin use. Lam was charged with possession of drugs and spent a year in prison. Lam struggled to beat his heroin addiction through home detoxification. With the help of his parents, Lam has turned his life around. He is married with children and is currently working in the family business.
How did it all go so badly wrong?

There are four sets of questions broadly following the narrative development of the episode. Teachers may like to allocate a set of questions to different groups of students who can then share their responses in discussion.

SET 1
1990s

‘Cabramatta is a tattoo … a tattoo that I can’t get rid of and that’s it’. – Joe Le

• Negative and often angry comments about recent Asian arrivals to Australia are re-iterated in the early part of this episode. Allied with Liberal leader Howard’s expressed reservations about ‘multiculturalism’, how would such widely publicised comments have added fuel to the fire of simmering discontent and fear?
  • How can we accurately gauge the level of hostility within much of the Australian community to recently arrived immigrants?
  • What does Tony Hoang say was his main reason for becoming a drug dealer when he was only thirteen and still at school? What were some of his aspirations?
  • How does Vietnamese social worker Vincent Doan account for the numbers of young Vietnamese becoming part of the gang and drug culture on the streets of Cabramatta?
  • What do questions asked about MP John Newman’s assassination and responses from police and politicians suggest as the probable motive for this crime?
  • What was Newman’s openly

STUDENT ACTIVITY 1

Use the viewing log on page 12 of this guide to record responses to what you see and hear in Episode 2.

STUDENT ACTIVITY 2

Serious social problems had developed in the Cabramatta region in the 1980s and this episode documents those problems that included drug-dealing and drug-taking and the often violent behaviour that accompanies these activities. Many of the people involved in this sub-culture were young Vietnamese.

One of the most important aspects of the story shown in this episode is how Vietnamese-born and Australian-born people realised that only by working together as a community could they address the problems that were damaging the community in Cabramatta and destroying the ideal of multiculturalism – social harmony between different nationalities.

Episode 2

Look around you … all these little slanty-eyed people buzzing around.

– Man on the street

We are in danger of being swamped by Asians. They form ghettos and do not assimilate.

– MP Pauline Hanson in her maiden speech to the Federal Parliament in 1996. Hanson won the Queensland seat of Oxley in 1996, securing 54 per cent of the two-party preferred vote in what had been a traditional Labor stronghold.

There’s one thing that they do fear, deportation back to the jungles of Vietnam.

expressed stance against the violence and crime in Cabramatta?

• ‘The Asian population ... that's what gets focused on’. Is this response almost inevitable in the circumstances? Is it fair or justified?

• While the police have a suspect, why is it so difficult to bring a charge against this person?

• Describe Phuong Ngo’s role in the Cabramatta community.

• How does police officer Nick Kaldas describe the two sides of Ngo’s activities?

• Describe how Son Nguyen’s hopes for a new life in Australia are dashed.

• Why are so many of the visuals in this episode centred on the train station?

SET 2

‘We count the creation of this rich, pluralistic and peaceful society as one of the most successful multicultural societies in the world and one of our great national achievements.’

– Paul Keating, Prime Minister in 1994 at the Global Cultural Diversity conference

• How well does Keating’s rhetoric of national idealism fit with what is happening on the ground in places like Cabramatta?

• What are some of the consequences of ‘the code of silence’ on the streets of Cabramatta for the police enquiries into crime?

• Outline some of the main difficulties facing Son Nguyen and his family in starting a new life in Australia?

• How does Son’s Nguyen’s only son, Lam, respond to this new world in Cabramatta?

• What were Tony Hoang’s strongest memories of how he felt when he was arrested at the train station for selling heroin?

• What was distinctive about Tri Minh Tran’s code of conduct for members of the 5T gang?

• Who sold drugs and who used them under this code?

• Is this practice hypocritical on the part of people engaged in the drug trade or is it just common sense?

• How does Alan Leek, a police officer involved in policing the streets of Cabramatta, talk about the horror of twenty-four people dying annually on his patch from heroin overdoses?

• What could and should have been done by the authorities to better manage this situation? What would have been some of the constraints and limitations on the effectiveness of policing?

SET 3

‘The lack of services for those that need them most not only victimises a community but reduces the idea of multiculturalism to a distant dream.’

– Narrator

• How is Tri Minh Tran’s life seen as ‘a dark map of the first generation’? How old was he when he was murdered?

• Who delivered the eulogy at Tran’s funeral in 1995?

Cabramatta is not a good look. It’s riddled with economic problems, unemployment. There’s rampant crime. Levels of personal security are extremely poor and whatever multiculturalism is claiming, on the streets of Cabramatta at that time, for many people it’s a meaningless concept.

– Andrew Jakubowicz
Were the police getting any closer to making an arrest for the 1993 Newman assassination which happened more than two years before Tran’s murder? What continued to hamper their enquiries?

After Tran’s death, how did the 5T gang members start behaving differently, particularly in relation to drugs?

In what ways does the story told by Chau Hoang and her son Tony personalise the dimensions of the problem for families whose children were using drugs and almost inevitably becoming part of a criminal world?

Would the de-criminalising of drugs as well as the provision of safe injecting rooms, detox centres and other support programs have helped police, families and users deal with the drug and crime problems in Cabramatta differently? For instance, if selling heroin had not been a viable economic option for Tony Hoang and other young Vietnamese, would he have become involved in crime?

The law enforcements can’t help these people … can’t even stop them either. You could lock them up but you can’t lock them up forever. When they get out they’re going to do exactly the same if we will not do something for them. It should be something more comprehensive than that.

– Vincent Doan

What other networks for alternative activities need to be put in place in communities such as Cabramatta?

How did the election of new MP Reba Meagher raise expectations about a new and different approach to addressing the problems in Cabramatta?

Having escaped bombs and bullets in Vietnam, what are Chau Hoang and her family now facing in Australia?

SET 4

‘A generation of children brought here for a better life are being lost to the streets of a so-called multicultural country that doesn’t know how to help them’.

– Narrator

In 1996, a new Federal Government was elected under John Howard. What does Andrew Jakubowicz suggest about this government’s attitude to multiculturalism as a positive social model?

‘They have their own culture and religion and do not assimilate.’

– Pauline Hanson, 1996

How did the election of Pauline Hanson at this election tend to entrench such attitudes?

Why is that word ‘they’ so damaging as a way of characterising a whole race of people?

The law enforcements can’t help these people … can’t even stop them either. You could lock them up but you can’t lock them up forever. When they get out they’re going to do exactly the same if we will not do something for them. It should be something more comprehensive than that.

– Vincent Doan

What does the name of the police operation ‘Operation Hammer’ suggest about the nature of this operation to stop the dealing and crime at the source?

Describe two of the measures police put into action to gain some control over the criminal activities?

How effective were these measures in addressing the roots of the problem? What were the monthly arrest numbers for drug-related problems during ‘Operation Hammer’?

Carlton became a test case of what happens when a suburb and its people are ignored [by governments].

– Andrew Jakubowicz
**Assimilation** – integration into a new society. Benchmarks used by sociologists to assess the degree of assimilation of immigrants: socioeconomic status, geographical distribution, second language acquisition and intermarriage.

**If the community couldn’t fix the problem, what could we as individuals do?**

– Son Nguyen

- What does an expectation that new arrivals to Australia will ‘assimilate’ suggest they should be able to do? What does successful assimilation into a different culture and society require of both the host community and the recent arrivals?
- Today, what are the countries of origin of most migrants who come to Australia to re-settle?
- How many non-Asian background students in Australian schools learn an Asian language such as Vietnamese, Indonesian or Mandarin?
- Does the installation of CCTV cameras meet with community support in Cabramatta? How can this technology assist authorities?
- How difficult is it to be a parent and a role model to your children if you don’t speak the same language and need to work two jobs to pay for rent and food?
- Does Lisa Maher, who was studying patterns of drug use in the Cabramatta area, fully endorse the way resources are used by governments to deal with the problems epitomised by the ‘junkie express’, of the dealers and the users?
- How do the stories told by Son Nguyen and Lisa Maher about a lost generation suggest something of the magnitude and horror of what happened to many Vietnamese people who came to Australia?

This episode ends with Thang Ngo, who currently works for SBS television, offering his perspective on why many Vietnamese came to settle in Australia. Thang became a Fairfield councillor in 1999 and had great success in bringing Cabramatta’s social issues to the attention of the mainstream media.

‘When we left our country, my family and I left, not for economic reasons, but because we were seeking a better future for our children … not for us because we were already old. We wanted a better future for our children than they’d have in Vietnam.

The biggest thing that every refugee says is, ‘I came to Australia in search of freedom.

If you want freedom and democracy you also have to express yourself, make yourself heard and be treated the same as everyone else. You didn’t come for freedom to be a second-class Australian. You came to be an Australian just like anybody else.’

Read the following responses from the makers of *Once Upon a Time in Cabramatta* about their intentions and hopes in making this series about the

‘**THEY [VIETNAMESE PARENTS] ARE ASHAMED OF THEMSELVES BECAUSE:**

1. As a parent they have the obligation to bring up their children and they have failed to do so.
2. They lose face to other people in the community, and
3. They feel bad because for all the Vietnamese people who came to Australia, we think that we have an obligation to do something for this community as well.’ – Vincent Doan

There were certainly members of the community who said to us that you will never get him [Phuong Ngo]. We think he’s done it [the murder of John Newman] but you will never get enough evidence or get enough people to come forward to supply you with the truth, with the information that would ultimately convict him. There was a feeling that if they did talk to us Phuong Ngo would know about it and there would be recriminations against them.

– Nick Kaldas, senior police officer
Vietnamese people in Cabramatta.

We knew Cabramatta had a rich and intriguing history – it was home to Australia’s only political assassination, it fostered the emergence of the culture of Vietnamese street gangs, the suburb had been labelled ‘the Smack Capital of Australia’, and then there was the independent parliamentary commission into police resourcing. Now it is the undisputed food bowl of Sydney’s south-west.

This string of high profile events and its evolution towards a multicultural epicentre begged the questions:

What was the real story behind the headlines? Why and how did this happen?

As we began to research and develop the series, Cabramatta came to light in an entirely unexpected way.

The documentary wasn’t about the headlines; rather, what emerged was a story about a group of war torn refugees who had risked everything to begin a new life in Australia. These otherwise ordinary people faced a series of challenging cultural and social events that would ultimately be the making or breaking of them as a people.

The more we researched the more we realised Cabramatta was much more than a suburb; it was a living treasure, a test-case of national importance. Its growth through migration coincided with the abolition of the white Australia Policy in 1973 and the dream of multiculturalism was born here. If we were ever going to put the ghosts of the white Australia Policy to bed and make multiculturalism meaningful, it would happen in Cabramatta.

The title ‘Once Upon A Time in Cabramatta’ reflects the depth and importance of Cabramatta to Australia’s migrant history - once upon a time, not so long ago,

Cabramatta was not the thriving food bowl it is today. It was not always a multi-cultural success story but a suburb on the verge of self-destruction.

Documentaries offer a rare and privileged opportunity to tell complex human stories to a wider public. They crystallise both the heart-warming and heart-breaking nature of life and it’s always a wonderful experience to be privy to a special part of someone’s life journey.

One of the biggest challenges of this documentary is ensuring a wider perspective and understanding of Cabramatta’s story than is generally understood.

The production team included key people who were descendants from refugee families and grew up in the area. We had both academics and local social commentators who actively took part in the research and background work for the film.

In the early decades from the late 1970s the Vietnamese people were often vilified and demonised. Cabramatta seemed to represent all that was wrong with Asian immigration. What’s more, the community exists against a political backdrop that was fractured, the universal support for multiculturalism a distant memory.

But as the century draws to a close there is a remarkable turnaround. The Vietnamese people find their voice – speaking up to claim their rightful, democratic place in their adopted home. Cabramatta is a community transformed; Australia, a continent changed forever.

Our hope is that the viewer will gain a greater understanding and appreciation of how and why the Vietnamese people finally were able to claim their rightful, democratic place in multicultural Australia. This is a story of hope and courage, told in the hope that the
lessons learned in Cabramatta can be applied to other communities trying to define their place in Australia today. We hope the audience will see this series as a touchstone for the wider multicultural conversation that is happening in Australia today.

• What light do you think this episode throws on how recent arrivals need to be assisted if they and their children are to integrate harmoniously into Australian society?

• Make a list of some of the things you think need to be done differently to prevent the problems experienced by the first wave of Vietnamese migrants being repeated with other new arrivals?

• What did you learn about the difficulties of leaving some of your past traumas and experiences behind when you flee your homeland to find sanctuary in another country?

• What did you learn about the social problems that invariably accompany the selling and using of illegal drugs such as heroin?

• What is shown to be valuable in Vietnamese society that we can learn from?

• How do you think the filmmakers were able to persuade so many Vietnamese people to talk so openly and honestly about painful and often shameful aspects of their lives?

• Why is the question — ‘What was it really like for you and your family?’ — so important to understanding this story as much more than a set of figures and failures?

For an interactive timeline of the Cabramatta story and many online extras go to: sbs.com.au/onceuponatime
and click on various dates to provide an understanding of the Vietnamese experience both in Australia and in Vietnam.
References and resources relevant to Episode 2

vietsnamese-path-to-cohesion-20120106-1polu.html

Text of 2007 ABC Four Corners program about crime and drugs in Cabramatta.

http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/s72739.htm

An article from the Australian newspaper by Sally Neighbour about the reality of so-called ‘ethnic crime’.


Watch a 7 minute YouTube video about the ‘Com for Unity’ programs in Blacktown, run by local police, designed to address the problems of boredom, alienation and fighting amongst a group of more recent young arrivals.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VlhQeDYt0
Episode 3

Synopsis

As a new millennium beckons, the streets of Cabramatta remain in the dark ages, infested by drugs and crime but slowly the Vietnamese community, so quiet for so long, finds its voice.

The 8.04 ‘junkie express’ pulls into Cabramatta train station. By lunchtime at least one thousand users will have arrived. It’s like this every day. 100 dealers, many teenagers, buzz around the streets—self made entrepreneurs in a local black market economy of drugs and gangland crime. The police struggle to keep control. It’s 1999 and Cabramatta’s never had it so bad.

Asians and crime are indelibly linked in the minds of many. Political support for multiculturalism is now a distant memory. The only hope is that the community itself, so vilified and fractured, will somehow finds its own way to overcome its problems. Slowly but surely they do. A Parliamentary Inquiry is finally forced and for the first time the problems and needs of Cabramatta are met head on. The Vietnamese, so quiet for so long, find their voice. Cabramatta becomes a community transformed. Australia, a continent changed forever.
People appearing in Episode 3

Many of the participants from Episodes 1 and 2 also appear in this episode. (See the earlier pages of this guide for their profiles). Additional individuals include the following:

**Thang Ngo**  
*Episode 3*  
1966 – Thang Ngo is born in Vietnam  
1977 – Thang and his family arrive in Australia as refugees  
1999 – Thang becomes a Fairfield City Councillor  

Thang was born in Vietnam in 1966 and arrived in Australia as a refugee in July 1977. He was raised in Epping and completed his HSC at Pennrith High School. Thang Ngo became a Fairfield councillor in 1999. Thang had great success in bringing Cabramatta’s social issues to the attention of the mainstream media. Thang was instrumental in bringing about the Parliamentary Inquiry into Police Resourcing in Cabramatta. Thang played a major role in the Parliamentary Inquiry into Police Resourcing in Cabramatta. Thang is currently ALC Strategy and Planning Manager at SBS.

**Tim Priest**  
*Episode 3*  
1986 – Joins NSW Police Drug Squad  
1996 – Detective at Cabramatta LAC (Drug Squad)  
2001 – Makes submissions to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Police Resourcing in Cabramatta. Tim worked in the drug squad of the NSW Police Force (based in Cabramatta) in 1986. He was part of the team that arrested one of the first Vietnamese drug dealers in the area. He returned as a detective to Cabramatta in 1995 and worked there until 2001. Tim played a major role in the Parliamentary Inquiry into Police Resourcing in Cabramatta.

**Helen Sham-Ho**  
*Episode 3*  
1986 to 1988 – Helen works in Cabramatta as a Solicitor  
1988 to 1998 – Helen becomes a NSW Upper House Liberal member.  
1998 to 2003 – Helen becomes a NSW Upper House Independent member  
2001 – Helen chairs the 2001 Inquiry into Police Resourcing in Cabramatta. Helen Sham-Ho first worked in Cabramatta as a solicitor in 1986. She became a Liberal Party member in 1988 but resigned in 1998 when Prime Minister John Howard refused to denounce what she considered to be Pauline Hanson’s anti-Asian rhetoric. Helen subsequently became an Independent Member of the NSW Upper House. Her proudest achievement in politics was when she chaired the Standing Committee Number 3 which ran the 2001 Inquiry into Police Resourcing in Cabramatta. Helen retired from politics in 2003.

**Ross Treyvaud**  
*Episode 3*  
1978 – Ross works at the Stardust Hotel in Cabramatta  
1993 – Ross returns to Cabramatta to work at the Cabramatta Inn  
1998 – Ross starts ‘Cabramatta Against Crime’ with Thang Ngo  
2001 – Ross makes a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Police Resourcing in Cabramatta.

Ross worked at the Stardust Hotel in Cabramatta from 1978 to 1983 (as Manager from 1980). After spending the next 10 years in a pub in Sydney’s CBD he came back to work at the Cabramatta Inn in 1993. He worked closely with the community and the Chamber of Commerce and where possible the Cabramatta police and politicians of the area. He was a vocal member of the community agitating for change. He and Thang Ngo formed ‘Cabramatta against Crime’ and he played an important role in the Parliamentary Inquiry with his submission to the committee.
**STUDENT ACTIVITY 1**

Use the Viewing Log on page 12 of this guide to record responses to what you see and hear in Episode 3.

**STUDENT ACTIVITY 2**

‘It was absolutely unbelievable that crime could get to the level it did in this area and nobody seemed to care’. (Ross Treyvaud)

Serious social problems had developed in the Cabramatta region in the 1980s and beyond, manifested in drug use and drug dealing and the often violent behaviour that accompanies these activities. Many of the people involved in this sub-culture were young Vietnamese.

One of the most important aspects of the story shown in this final episode is how Vietnamese born and Australian born people from many walks of life realised that only by working together as a community with the help of police and politicians could they turn around the situation that had led to Cabramatta being dubbed as ‘the heroin capital of Australia’. The Vietnamese people needed to show a new and different face of what multiculturalism could be. As the new century began, changes were beginning and the image of Cabramatta began to change. This episode shows how some of those changes came about and the people behind them.

**Episode 2  A community finally finds its voice**

There are four sets of questions broadly following the narrative development of the episode. Teachers may like to allocate a set of questions to different groups of students who can then share their responses in discussion.

**SET 1**

**How bad could things get?**

‘The heroin capital of Australia...and Tony Hoang (after 6 months jail) goes back to making a living in a place that appears to have become an abandoned hell’. Narrator.

- What did the media and many people in the Australian community suggest that the charging of Phuong Ngo with John Newman’s murder signified about the Vietnamese community?
- Is it reasonable to generalise about a whole community based on the crimes of a few individuals? What is the term often used for such generalising, particularly about an ethnic group?
- How did the arrest of Phuong Ngo for the murder of John Newman entrench negative attitudes towards the whole Vietnamese community?
- Describe the conflicted feelings Tony Hoang’s mother felt about her son’s choices and way of life.
- What prompts publican and President of the Cabramatta Chamber of Commerce, Ross Treyvaud, into action to promote and effect change?
- How did the fact that Cabramatta was a safe Labor seat possibly delay the complex interventions that were required?

‘People labelled Cabramatta as a bad place from just the minority of the people that, like me, got on drugs and did bad things and gave Cabramatta and our community a bad rap.’

(Tony Hoang)

- Son Nguyen

‘Cabramatta became the epitome of all that might be wrong with Asian migration to Australia....that anyone from Cabramatta suddenly became a criminal, a murderer, a drug fiend, prostitute.’

Andrew Jakubowicz.
What was the result of the police crackdown on the streets of Operation Puccini on how the dealers, including young Tony Hoang, conducted their trade?

What does Tony Hoang’s story reveal about the insidious attractions of the illegal drug trade for young men like Tony?

How did the ‘drug houses’ create further problems for the community, the police and paramedics like John Ellems?

‘Thang was able to represent his community and give his community a voice and stand up to the authorities and say, ‘Listen...you can’t say all Vietnamese are silent because I’m not silent and I’m here to tell you exactly what’s going on’. (Ross Treyvaud)

What work experience and personal qualities made Thang Ngo a strong advocate and role model for young Vietnamese people who often felt powerless? How are the local roots of his political activities similar to those of Phuong Ngo, John Newman and Chris Bowen (currently Federal Minister for Immigration)? Check Thang’s profile in the early part of this Episode 3 guide.

How is his refusal to accept how bad things have become different to the fear of authority and silent passivity Thang saw in many others?

What is the contrast described by Thang Ngo between his life and that of many other young Vietnamese he encounters on the streets of Cabramatta?

How does the Nguyen family’s struggle with their son Lam’s drug addiction demonstrate the urgent need for a detox centre in Cabramatta? Outline the Nguyen family’s own desperate attempts to get Lam clean.

When 20 hospital beds are opened up to treat drug addicts, does this make a large dent in the problem? What is the problem with offering treatment programs that are not necessarily appropriate or adequate to meet the needs of the community? What are some of the problems Vincent Doan describes in relation to these programs being able to assist the Vietnamese?

What possible approach to helping Vietnamese kids get off drugs permanently does Vincent Doan think might be worth trying?

How does then Mayor of Fairfield, Chris Bowen, respond to the call for safe injecting rooms in the Cabramatta area?

What are some of the problems that can be better managed in safe injecting rooms in places where illegal drugs such as heroin are being used on the streets?

What are many people’s main objections to the setting up of such places?


What was being used as defacto shooting-up place in Cabramatta?

The Vietnamese people finally have a new leader willing to fight on their behalf and they also have an Aussie publican on their side — old and new Australia joining forces in the battle.’ (Narrator)

What is the reality of Prime Minister Howard’s call to ‘get tough on drugs’ in 1997?

Did this call and the visits of experts and politicians to the streets of Cabramatta cause any real changes in Tony Hoang’s life?

What are some of the crimes that are becoming increasingly common in Cabramatta?

‘The wall of silence...is a sign that the community don’t trust the wider political system’.

– Andrew Jakubowicz

‘It’s four and a half years since a detox centre was promised’.

– Narrator

‘All we’re doing is facilitating people injecting drugs and not doing anything to help rehabilitate them.’

– Thang Ngo describing the way people shoot up in the area

‘The wall of silence...is a sign that the community don’t trust the wider political system’.

– Andrew Jakubowicz

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‘All we’re doing is facilitating people injecting drugs and not doing anything to help rehabilitate them.’

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– Andrew Jakubowicz

‘It’s four and a half years since a detox centre was promised’.

– Narrator

‘All we’re doing is facilitating people injecting drugs and not doing anything to help rehabilitate them.’

– Thang Ngo describing the way people shoot up in the area
What is being measured by the new Police Database? Why is the result that shows Cabramatta to be relatively crime-free quite unbelievable to those who live and work there? What are some of the crimes excluded from this index?

What does Ross Treyvaud decide to do when he is offered drugs on the streets of Cabramatta?

How did the letter from the local primary school students about syringes in their playground galvanize Thang to enlist the help of Helen Sham-Ho, Member of the NSW Legislative Council?

What action did Helen Sham-Ho initiate at State Government level?

SET 4

The everyday people of Cabramatta are about to be given the chance to prove that in a true multicultural community, everyone has a voice.

How did the everyday people respond to the invitation of the Parliamentary inquiry to voice their concerns?

What were some of the immediate list of recommendations that were implemented even before the final report of the Parliamentary Enquiry was officially released?

How is the conviction of Phuong Ngo who is found guilty of the murder of John Newman seen as an important moment in drawing a line in the sands of history?

What do we see of Tony Hoang as he finally decides he’s had enough of his drug world life?

What happened to Lam Nguyen and his extraordinary parents?

The final on-screen texts at the end of this series mention, amongst other things, that a shortage of heroin in 2001 helped clean up Cabramatta. However, turning a community around is never the result of a single factor. What do you think were the most crucial initiatives in assisting the resurrection of Cabramatta and its Vietnamese population in effecting significant changes?

What lessons can be learned from this story about how we welcome and help integrate new arrivals into the Australian community? Create a list of ‘could do better’ ideas from members of your class.

Who should be responsible for ensuring that different ethnic groups are assisted in the process of re-settlement?

‘Somehow it (the Police Database) shows that Cabramatta is one of the safer suburbs in the entire state….of 80 patrols, Bankstown tops the list and Cabramatta is 51st.’

‘There are now something like 1500 addicts living in and around Cabramatta’.

‘It’s so wrong, so ridiculous that a suburb where people live and work and you have this war zone in your back yard. It’s just not right.’

Helen Sham-Ho

‘First time the Cabramatta community had the eye of State Parliament. An Upper House enquiry looking into the problems of the area and specifically looking into the problems of policing. Not into the people and where they went wrong. Looking into the police and what we can do to help them’.

(Thang Ngo)
Using historical sources

Once Upon a Time in Cabramatta raises questions about the nature of historical enquiry and the sources available to filmmakers telling a story about a place and people from our recent past. The medium of television certainly ensures a much broader audience than is likely with many written accounts but like any history it is a representation of a place and time in the recent past. Here are some questions to consider:

1. How can and do we know about what happened in the distant and more immediate past?
2. What constitutes historical evidence?
3. How can we represent what we discover, whether in writing or in visual terms?
4. In what ways does it matter that we understand what life was like for people in earlier times?
5. Who should be responsible for preserving written and visual materials that tell us about our past?

The period explored in these programs begins in the late 1970s when the war in Vietnam between the north and south ended and thousands of Vietnamese fled their homeland. The series incorporates a variety of resources to tell the story of the Vietnamese people in Australia, sometimes described as ‘the first boat people’, though most came by plane as do the majority of arrivals today.

- Many people from this turbulent period are able to describe what life was like for them when they left Vietnam and settled in Cabramatta. Such accounts are known as eyewitness accounts or sometimes anecdotal evidence.
- Make a list of the range of people appearing in this program to tell their stories about their family life, work and what happened to them.
- Statistical records about, for instance, crime figures. Official records such as those collected in a national census every 5 years by the Australian Bureau of Statistics can be very useful to historians, demographers and politicians.
- Public media records such as newspaper articles and photographs, television programs, films and newsreel footage. This material provides visual evidence that creates a vivid account of how people lived, what they valued and what the media considered important at the time.
- What are some of the newspaper, television and filmed records of what happened during the past 35 years in Cabramatta?
- How complete and accurate is the media representation?
- Personal records including photographs and home movies. Such records are important in conveying a
picture of attitudes and values and showing us details about aspects of people’s lives such as housing, dress and social life.

• Economic figures which tell us about the complex relationship between economic conditions such as recessions and/or booms and how people lived and worked.

• Changes in government policy and legislation e.g. the Government Enquiry into policing in Cabramatta in late 2000.

A range of evidence is essential for compiling a complex and detailed picture of the intersection between private and public life. This is important for showing what life was like for the everyday people, their political representatives at the local, state and national level and public authorities, represented in this series by police officers and paramedics.

Historians and documentary filmmakers always have to decide what material to include and what to leave out. Any representation of the past is based on available evidence, as records from the past are never complete and comprehensive. The representation is also likely to be framed within the historian’s own beliefs and experience. Filmmakers and historians alike must work with available materials to tell a story. We, as viewers, need to decide whether the ways the stories are told are a fair and reliable representation of the period and place depicted. How do we make such judgements? If you look at the extensive Crew List for Once Upon a Time in Cabramatta that appears later in this guide, you will get some sense of the range of researchers and expert advisors who worked on this series.

At the same time, filmmakers are always conscious of the need for their work to be not just informative, but entertaining. Facts and figures need to be melded with the stories of individuals in order to engage an audience. Individual stories need to be carefully developed over the series so that we don’t fully understand these very personal stories until the final chapter.

• Do the often conflicting public and personal stories encourage us to consider the degree of spin and ‘political correctness’ to which we are often subjected by politicians and the media?

• Why do the stories of everyday people matter in the construction of an historical account?

• Finally, do we want to keep people out of Australia, to treat them as interlopers, not ‘people like us’ or do we want to embrace their skills and cultures and ensure that immigrants have adequate opportunities to play their part in a democratic and open society?

Should recent arrivals continue to suffer as many Vietnamese did when they come to settle in Australia or should we be assisting recent arrivals to become productive and happy members of a multicultural Australia?
Vietnamese food

Many students may be familiar with Vietnamese food which is justly famous for its variety, flavours, freshness and value for money. Footscray, Springvale and Richmond in Melbourne are known for their Vietnamese restaurants. In Sydney you can head to Cabramatta or Marrickville or Surry Hills or Canley Vale and in other Australian cities you will find great restaurants wherever Vietnamese have settled. There are fine Vietnamese restaurants in Tasmania, Darwin, Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide. For a range of Vietnamese recipes see: http://www.taste.com.au/recipes/collections/vietnamese+recipes

Luke Nguyen is Australia’s best-known Vietnamese cook. You can catch his programs on SBS television and check out his books and recipes online.


Many Vietnamese Australians have established successful careers in Australia in many areas from medicine to art, film and television, the law, politics, science and engineering. Some of these people, apart from those appearing in Once Upon a Time in Cabramatta, include:

Anh Do - Comedian, actor, author of The Happiest Refugee and brother of Khoa Do

Khoa Do - Young Australian of the Year in 2005, writer, director and brother of Anh Do

Hieu Van Le - Lieutenant Governor of South Australia and Chairman of the South Australian Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs Commission (SAMEAC).

Hung Le - Comedian

Nam Le - author of The Boat, winner of the 2008 Dylan Thomas Prize

Tan Le - 1998 Young Australian of the Year

Luke Nguyen, owner chef of The Red Lantern restaurant in Sydney

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You may be able to add to this list any Vietnamese Australians you know of who have achieved public acclaim for

For an interactive timeline of the Cabramatta story and many online extras go to:
sbs.com.au/onceuponatime

and click on various dates to provide an understanding of the Vietnamese experience both in Australia and in Vietnam.

You can also contribute your opinion about the series to an online forum at this site.
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The Hoang, Le and Nguyen families
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Defence Housing Australia
Fairfield City Council
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Muriel Coucke
Marilyn Gallo
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Natalie Johnson
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Slingshot Attachment Program

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Once Upon a Time in Cabramatta official website

The Vietnamese Community in Australia, NSW chapter
http://www.vietnamese.org.au/

Fairfield City Council

Fairfield Library – The Way We Were project

The Refugee Council of Australia
http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/

Amnesty International – Refugees and human rights

Department of Immigration and Citizenship

Pulau Bidong – A Boat People Legacy
http://www.pulaubidong.org/

Cabramatta Community Centre
http://cabracc.org.au/

Open Family Australia
http://www.openfamily.com.au

A 2008 essay by Alice Pung, author of Unpolished Gem and Her Father’s Daughter, writing about starting her life as an Asian immigrant to Australia in 1980

Marguerite O’Hara
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