



CINDY PINKSTON/Staff

Winners in the Mothers of the Year contest are (from left): Estelle McCadden, Betty Jo Lockard, Peggy Sue Mason, Ann McLaughlin, Marzetta Sinkler and Ngoc Cuc Thi Cao.

Marvelous moms

Dedication is the tie that binds winners in the annual Mother of the Year contest

By BETSY BIESENBACH
STAFF WRITER

Roanoke Valley residents seem to take the Fourth Commandment seriously, especially when it comes to their mothers.

Every year since the mid-'50s, the Credit Marketing and Management Association has invited residents to nominate the women in their lives for its Mothers of the Year contest. Six winners are chosen in the categories of Family Life, Community Affairs, Business and Professions, Education, Arts and Sciences, and Religious Activities.

This year, said Laura Ellis of the CMMA, there was a "tremendous response." The winners were chosen from several hundred entries, some of which were held over from the previous two years.

"Sometimes it's so close and there are so many that are so deserving. We like to give them a second chance," she said.

This year's winners have one important quality in common: an extraordinary dedication to their work

— whether at home or in school, whether paid or volunteer.

The children of Ngoc Cuc Thi Cao of Southeast Roanoke, Mother of the Year for Family Life, almost seem too good to be true.

All three — Lan, 11; Ngoc, 10; and Long, 9 — are honor students. They want to be a scientist, a doctor and an engineer, respectively. They are good at sports, all three play the piano and they help out around the house. Lan recently earned a full scholarship to North Cross School.

Cao's children's achievements are the result not of a privileged lifestyle, but of her hard work and determination.

Cao, 44, is a native of Vietnam. During the war, she worked for the American forces there. Because of her connections with the American government, Cao and her family were oppressed by the communist regime. An older brother, who also worked for the Americans, offered to get her out in 1975, but she refused, not wanting to leave her parents alone. Although she

thought of escape many times, wrote Andrews Oakey, who nominated her for the award, she was afraid she would be captured and killed. A younger brother was shot trying to escape.

But when her parents arranged a marriage for her and she became pregnant shortly afterward, she and her husband knew they had to go. They sold their wedding bands to pay a guide to lead them to safety, but only made it to Cambodia before they were captured. They later escaped, but they spent two years living in concentration and refugee camps.

Lan was born in a refugee camp in Thailand, and although the baby was sickly, Cao kept her alive.

By 1983, they found a sponsor and came to Roanoke. Within the year, Cao's husband, Than, died of cancer, leaving her with two babies and pregnant with a third.

Cao consoled herself by giving all of her time and attention to her babies,

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