As he and his wife work to adjust to their new life, they have only one goal: to reunite their family. Other immigrants and refugees have similar stories. They flee gunfire, corrupt governments, poverty. They seek safety, security and jobs. In the process, families are torn apart and beloved homelands are left behind. Those who embark on new lives in new countries are the lucky ones. But the transition is difficult, a bittersweet mix of challenge and opportunity.

About 1 million immigrants settled in the United States in 2002, as well as a smaller number of refugees (1.3 million between 1988 and 2001). At first, they speak little if any English. They have few belongings or resources. But families overseas are depending on them. Most find jobs, work hard, send money home. Many become U.S. citizens. But ties to their native land, the place they were born, remain strong. They stand firmly in two worlds.

“We assume you can have only one kind of identity, one kind of loyalty, but people don’t work that way,” says Nina Glick Schiller, UNH professor of anthropology, who together with Thad Guldbrandsen, a UNH research assistant professor, recently received a $100,000 John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation grant to study immigrant settlement and the phenomenon of transnationalism, which is essentially a simultaneous commitment to two countries.

Credited as one of the scholars who coined the term “transnationalism,” Glick Schiller has given anthropologists a new way of looking at the world. “She is a leading figure in this approach to thinking about relocation across the globe,” says Burt Feintuch, director of the UNH Center for the Humanities, which provided funding to Glick Schiller for a preliminary study.

The long-term results of their work, the UNH team believes, could help encourage public policies that support immigration and refugee resettlement. Even now, though, in the relatively early stages of their research, their theories have profound implications for the larger global community.

“Transnational networks are holding up the world,” says Glick Schiller, citing countries like Mexico, India, El Salvador and Haiti as dependent on remittances sent from families in the United States. Millions of people send money home to help feed and clothe families, provide medical care, build houses and schools, send children to college.

“If these networks of remittances were cut off, the level of human misery in the world would be drastically increased,” she says. And that could have a direct impact on a much larger problem: “The causes of terrorism are desperation and hopelessness. People feel they have nothing to lose. Remittances provide hope.”

In this post-9/11 landscape of fear and suspicion, the assertion that immigrants are good for global and national security is bold and thought-provoking. “We’re at a crossroads in American history,” says Guldbrandsen.

“We have the capacity to make the world a very difficult and very mean place. Or we have the opportunity to be a bit more enlightened and go a different route.” At the very least, he says, that route should be based on accurate information about how immigrants live their lives. Gathering this data can be a painstaking undertaking. But for scholars like Glick Schiller and Guldbrandsen, this work is more than an academic endeavor, it is a calling, an opportunity to give voice to people whose life stories might otherwise never be told.

In the home of Nhat Chi Anh, just above the dining room table, a worn cotton shirt is displayed on the wall. More than a piece of clothing, it is a piece of art and a statement. Across the front, carefully lettered, is a short poem in Vietnamese—rough translation: “Hate will send you to hell.” A cluster of silk flowers spills from the front pocket. The man who placed this shirt on the wall in his Manchester, N.H., home is not a collector of contemporary art. He is a Vietnamese immigrant. The shirt is his own. He wore it during his five years in a North Vietnamese prison camp following the Vietnam War. It was a bad time. He was often hungry and ill. More than once he was on the verge of death. Today the shirt he wore during his ordeal is a daily reminder that is both sobering and hopeful, a warning and a testament to the possibility of redemption.

The shirt, though, tells only part of Nhat’s story, which also includes a wife and two college-age children, extended family in Vietnam, a factory job, a love of fishing, and a passion for rare orchids, which he once grew with great care in Vietnam. Today, he has little opportunity for hobbies. Nearly all of his free time is devoted to accumulating overtime at work, so that he
can help to support his extended family in Vietnam.

“I’ve never met anyone with such a strong sense of ethics,” says Guldbrandsen. “He tells me, ‘I survived inhumane conditions. I escaped death in a prison camp. Why? So I can accumulate wealth and go shopping? No. So I can help people and be a good person.’”

To learn the details of Nhat’s life, Guldbrandsen has spent hours talking with him, asking questions and carefully listening. He has studied photo albums. He has been invited to family dinners and celebrations. “Lots of times what we do doesn’t look much like research,” admits Guldbrandsen, who carries a tiny pad in his back pocket on which he occasionally jots notes. For the most part, though, he observes and tries to be as unobtrusive as possible. When he gets back in his car to drive home, he turns on a digital recorder and recounts the details of his recent visit.

Just “being there,” notes Guldbrandsen, is a big part of the research process, which is necessarily slow and circuitous. While participants are aware of the project and have given their consent, people don’t just automatically share their life story. It takes patience, trust and time.

This approach to research, known as “participatory observation,” can have a profound impact on one’s personal life. Glick Schiller, for example, has countless friends who began as research subjects, people she got to know because she found ways to participate in their lives—taking them grocery shopping, dropping in to chat so they could practice their English with someone they trusted. “She’s always going off to events—parties, baptisms, funerals,” says Guldbrandsen.

For Guldbrandsen, the personal enrichment has extended even to his 4-year-old son, who sometimes accompanies him on visits. “Zander has a rich collection of