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## Vietnam - The Beautiful

### Part 3: Time for the Underprivileged in Vietnam

**Delwyn G. Fredlund**

As the plane landed at Ho Bai airport in Hanoi, Vietnam in May, 1993, it was possible to look out the window and still see the craters left in the fields by the bombs that had been dropped during the war in Vietnam. The plane taxied to the tarmac and a bus took us from the plane to the terminal building for our Customs check. I picked up my luggage and went to the money changer. I handed the lady a \$100 U.S. bill and she immediately handed me a stack of bills about 1 ½ inches high. Many thoughts went through my mind; should I start to count the money to see if she had given me the right amount? (but that would certainly look stupid). I tried to act as if I had done this many times before. I removed about ¼ inch of bills and put them into my wallet, which now did not want to close. I put the rubber band around the remainder of the bills and threw them into my briefcase and walked away. Once at the hotel I took out the money and noticed that most of the bills were 10,000 dong denominations. As I counted the money I realized that the \$100 U.S. bill had made me a millionaire in Vietnamese money; the conversion was more than 10,000 to 1. At the end of one week I would still have more than ½ inch of money left and it was impossible to convert it back to Canadian, American or other funds. However, I found that there were people who had a solution for my dilemma!

The conversion of the money at the airport reinforced the fact that I had come from an extremely rich country and had just entered an extremely poor country. The U.S. imposed embargo was still in effect and the people of the country were struggling to meet the basic needs of life. Over the years I have been to many developing countries but my entry into Vietnam touched my con-

side. When I came to Vietnam in 1993, the average per capita earnings was \$150 U.S. per year. Today, the rural people still earn about \$150 U.S. per year. The land per capita is only about 1/3 that of other parts of the world. But Vietnam is rich in many ways. The country consists of a "rice bowl" in the north along the Red River and another "rice bowl" in the south along the Mekong River. These "rice bowls" are joined by a strip of land more than 3000 km in length. The interior is mountainous with hundreds of rivers running out to the sea. The annual potential hydroelectric power from the rivers is about 260 billion kWh. The mountain regions are rich in coal, bauxite, titanium, manganese, and numerous other minerals. Oil and gas reserves are 2 to 3 billion tones with an annual capacity of 20 million tones. And the Vietnamese people are industrious, intelligent and capable of staging an economic come-back against great odds.

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science and compelled me to do more than just observe and photograph the poor and the needy. I felt that with the right contacts in Vietnam, there were meaningful things that could be done.

More than ¾ of Vietnam's 75,000,000 people live in the country-

The needs of Vietnam are many. There have been many years of conflict and the rebuilding of a country takes time. It is also not a simple matter to enter a foreign country and attempt to have a meaningful impact even though there are many needs. First, a person must desire to expend his time and "means" to assist another person. Second, a person must find a trustworthy person who knows how to effectively take the

“means” and make a difference. It is not a simple task to make a meaningful, long-term difference in someone else’s life, in a foreign country, without first finding someone else with similar charitable desires.

To me, it was also important to avoid conflict between my responsibilities to my professional activities and any personal sense of responsibility that I felt towards visible needs. During the past nine years that I have been going to

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Vietnam, I have searched for simple ways in which a person can contribute to the well-being of others in society. I have long felt that it was important to have a charitable component, even within a person’s professional engineering practice.

Vietnam, to me, was NOT a war but rather a country filled with people who desire to have friends in other countries of the world. I have found many people in Vietnam who deeply care about others in need but I would like to focus on one person who helped me to see and understand the needs around me, and helped me do something about those needs; his name is John Pham.

Prior to my second trip to Vietnam, a friend in Canada asked me to telephone John Pham, a friend of his in Vietnam. John Pham had grown up in the north of Vietnam, but later moved to the south. At the end of the war he became a refugee and was eventually sponsored to come to Canada, along with his one young son. After working in Canada for several years, his heart was drawn to return to Vietnam to help the children in

the north of Vietnam.

I found John Pham to be a person who was filled with compassion. He was also a person who seemed to have an endless vision for all the exciting things that could be done for the children of Vietnam if he only had a little financial support. It was necessary for me to build a relationship of trust with him and observe the things that he had accomplished in the lives of children in Hanoi.

One of the first initiatives that John Pham introduced me to involved the blind children who begged on the streets of Hanoi. He had been involved with the establishment of a school for the blind where they could learn brail and other communication skills. He discovered that although the children were blind they had a keen desire to learn to sing and play musical instruments. John loved music and proceeded to find some old authentic Vietnamese musical instruments as well as guitars and keyboards for the children. He also persuaded a member of the Hanoi symphony to give lessons to the children.

The music program with the blind children was well underway by the time I returned to Hanoi. During one of my visits, John insisted that I come to hear the music program that the children had prepared. On the way to the concert I was asked if I would say a few words at

the close of the performance. I went to the evening concert not knowing what to expect. I certainly was not prepared for the musical treat the children had prepared. The blind children were led in one by one and placed behind various musical instruments. They sat there almost motionless until the conductor spoke a word in Vietnamese. In response to the conductor’s command, the room became filled with beautiful music. But the music did not seem to be that of amateur musicians. The children played with deep feeling that brought tears to my eyes. In my few words at the end of an hour long concert, I commented on how beautifully they played and asked them, “If you had a wish-list, I wonder what you would put on the list?” I explained that I could promise nothing but I would like to hear what was most important to them. Following the concert, they told John Pham that they wished that they had newer instruments. They would like to have guitars that did not have rusty strings and keyboards where all the keys played. But they also said that someday they wished they could make a CD of their music. I told some of my Canadian friends about my unusual experience at the concert with the blind children and asked if they wanted to be a part of the “musical instrument and CD” project. I would later have the privilege of bringing 6 gradu-



*Blind girls’ trio sings in three part harmony*

ate students to Vietnam and watch as the music of the children brought tears to their eyes. I told John Pham to proceed with the production of a CD. On my next trip to Hanoi I would be given a special gift, the first copy of their CD. These children have now gone on to perform for foreign dignitaries who visit government officials in Vietnam. Five of these blind musicians had all expenses paid to tour France and perform in 2000. Through this experience, I have learned that the things we might consider to be a liability can be turned into a great asset. Each time I have visited Vietnam, I try to find time to visit the blind children; to go to their school and listen to their music. And each time, the visit to the blind children becomes a "reality check" on the important things in life.

Before I leave the blind children, I want to mention a moving event that I had the privilege to experience. An ophthalmologist from Canada visited the blind children while on vacation in Vietnam and suggested that several of the children might receive their eyesight if they were able to have laser surgery. John Pham set out to make this a reality. An airline donated the plane fares for six children to come to Canada; doctors and nurses donated their time. On the morning of their surgery I flew to Vancouver and talked with the children.

They were so excited but the thought that went through my mind was, "what if none of them can see after the surgery?" Later that afternoon of the same day I would once again talk to the children. They had all received more than 50% of their vision. One little girl said to me, "I cannot wait to go back to Hanoi to try and find my mother and show her that I can see! Maybe she will want me now!" Needless to say, the emotion of such an experience is overwhelming, to be blind in the morning and to see by nightfall. And this happened because someone cared enough for a few blind children to give the necessary time and money so they could see.

A special shop has been set up in Hanoi where the blind girls are taught to weave beautiful baskets and other ornaments. The straws of different colors are placed on the floor and the girls proceed to weave the strands of straw into beautiful objects that their hands can feel but their eyes will never see. Without eyes to see, they can do what I cannot do with my eyesight. I ask the girls how much money they want for the ornaments they have made and feel that I am stealing from them for the price is so modest.

There are many boys and girls on the street, particularly in the slum areas along the Red River. They must pick up paper, do errands, polish shoes and beg in order to get sufficient food for them

and their family. (By the way, I have gained a new respect for shoe shine boys!). The children must have a uniform in order to go to school. If the government officials give them a uniform, the parents will often sell the uniform in order to get money to buy food. Hence, the children can no longer go to the regular government schools. And so, special one room schools have been set up where these children can learn to at least read and write, and where the children

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can attend without a uniform. High school kids that hope to later train to be a teacher are usually hired to teach the children. These teachers are paid the equivalent of about 50 cents for ½ day of teaching. The children are also taught how to weave and make things of value for selling. I have come to enjoy visiting the Costco store before leaving Canada and stocking up on small chocolate bars and little gifts for the children. And so the schools in the slums become another place that I long to visit on each trip. I long to see the smiles on their faces and the excitement they experience because someone has acknowledged them.

Street shelters have also been set up as a place for the boys to go at night. They get one serving of rice each day and have a safe place to put their shoe shine box while they sleep. Many of the boys have learned the art of a stone carving in a small school that has been established specifically for this purpose. The girls have similarly been brought into sewing schools where they take a one year course on sewing. The creation of meaningful jobs for both boys and girls



*This street boy has now mastered the art of stone carving*



*This blind girl uses her toes and hands to weave a mat*



*Del Fredlund, John Pham, Vietnamese Street Boy In-training to run a restaurant and Wong Kai Sin (NTU, Singapore)*

is important in dealing with problems such as drugs and prostitution.

I have always marveled at the uniqueness of the solutions that have been undertaken for the needy children. Once again, these solutions make me realize that the Vietnamese people can solve their own problems. But they have been placed in a very difficult situation with few financial resources upon which to draw. If we who are "rich" do not personally see a child in the midst of his or her need, we feel little responsibility to help. But my trips to Vietnam mean that I have seen the needs and so, I have a responsibility. But it is a wonderful responsibility; one which I desire my family and friends to experience.

One of the recent unique solutions that John Pham has organized has involved the training of street boys in the restaurant trade. These boys are given a one-year training course on all aspects of running a restaurant; including cooking, serving tables and management. Recently some of these boys have joined John Pham in establishing a restaurant in the ethnic minority area of Sapa, northwest of Hanoi. The area is economically depressed even though it is a tourist area. The integration of the Vietnamese with the ethnic minorities becomes an important part of solving many of their problems.

I want to clarify that I have not been alone in reaching out to the children in

Vietnam. Several of my engineering friends and students, including members of my family, have had the opportunity to come to Vietnam and observe what is happening amongst the chil-

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dren. I have primarily worked with two charitable organizations in order to experience the joy of seeing the lives of children changed.

John Pham has his salary paid by the non-government organization, NGO, called Samaritan's Purse. I have been able to work closely with a person who understands the Vietnamese people and is able to suggest meaningful solutions to their problems. Samaritan's Purse has permission to work in the northern part of Vietnam. I have also worked closely with Canadian Food for the

Hungry, CFH, in Vietnam, then under the leadership of Elizabeth Daniels, and as well, I have had the privilege of serving on the board of directors of CFH for 8 years. CFH has permission to work in the southern part of Vietnam and their program has largely focused on the use of micro loans and teaching on the "Vision of a Community" in order to break the poverty cycle. Space does not permit me to explain the many programs that have been undertaken and found to be effective and sustainable in breaking the poverty cycle within a one to two year period.

This is not a paid political announcement but I invite you to consider becoming involved with a charity that has proven to be responsible, providing meaningful programs to alleviate the plight of the underprivileged, while operating with a modest overhead. I would like to give you the addresses of the two organizations with which I have worked; namely:

- i.) *Canadian Food for the Hungry International, Suite 201, 2580 Cedar Park Place, Abbotsford, B.C., V2T 3S5, Canada, and*
- ii.) *Samaritan's Purse, Box 20100, Calgary Place, Calgary, AB., Canada T2P 4J2*

The prophets of old said that the challenge of life is to reverence God and love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. The focus of our lives is so often directed towards ourselves. I conclude with a prayer, "Lord, you have shown me the distressed who cry out and the poor who plead, keep me from the sin of self-absorption that leaves me indifferent to what my eyes have beheld".

*I trust that many of you will some day visit Vietnam and observe for yourself that the country is indeed, "Vietnam - the Beautiful".*

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