

Dare Association's 2014 Trip to Vietnam to Support Orphaned and Blind Children: Report to Friends of Vietnamese Disadvantaged Children

With two heavy suitcases packed with educational supplies and candies for children (\$177) the flight departed San Francisco for Hanoi at 5 minutes passed midnight on the night of 11 November, arriving in Hanoi 17 hours later. The next few days were spent in Hanoi seeing Vietnamese friends and shopping and adjusting to the time change. Because my suitcase was too heavy to move around a bus station, I engaged a private car to travel to Haiphong, located 60 miles from Hanoi. There I was met at the hotel by Mr. Bui Thanh Giang, (Head of PACCOM-Friendship Division under Haiphong Department of External Relations and member of Vietnam-American Friendship Organization of Haiphong city), and his staff member, Ms. Nguyen To Nhu. We reviewed and adjusted the schedule of planned activities they had prepared.

Over the next few days, we had meetings with several important governmental leaders to discuss the needs and priorities of the various agencies to which we were going to provide assistance.¹ The most important meeting was with Ms. Nguyen Thi Nghia, Permanent Vice Secretary of the Party Committee of Haiphong City and Head of the Delegation of National Assembly Deputies of Haiphong City. At this meeting, which was attended by many dignitaries and which was shown on the local TV news, I was awarded a "Certificate of Merit" for making "...a positive contribution in strengthening friendship and cooperation between the people of the Hai Phong City, Vietnam, with the American people." (See picture 7.) Discussion in these meetings concluded that three of the four organizations we assist receive some support from government grants, but that the organization helping grandparents raise the orphaned children of parents who died from AIDS receives no government assistance. We decided that this organization, HHCS, would be a focus of our assistance this year.

Our regular work began the next day with a visit to the School for Blind Children. In the past we had provided musical instruments and educational supplies. On this trip the school had requested two complete desktop computer systems and a washing machine. The visit started with an introduction to about 125 blind and visually impaired kids who provided a warm reception. We passed out "fun size" candies and M&Ms (their favorite) to all of the children, while a number of the kids entertained everyone with enthusiastic singing and playing musical instruments. (See picture 1.) At the computer store we discovered that school staff had budgeted only for Pentium computers, but since that technology was 5 years old, I wanted to purchase more modern equipment. We bought two Intel / 3 computers with 18" monitors and speaker systems (\$933). This equipment was delivered and installed in the computer learning room. The older kids were able to search the net and download files of interest to external drives, so we bought eight 8GB drives for them (\$45). We also bought and had installed a new clothes washing machine which was significantly larger than the old machine (\$507).

¹ These meetings included Mr. Hoang Xuan Son, Deputy Director of Hai Phong External Relations Department, Ms. Le Thi Minh Hai, General Secretary of the Haiphong Union of Friendship Organizations, and Dr. Hoang Van Ke, Chairman of the Hai Phong Union of Science and Technology Association.

The next day we visited the Red Flower Children's Village Orphanage, to which we had previously delivered a large amount of educational, sporting, and playground equipment and a variety of other goods as a result of a very generous grant from the Harvey Family Fund four years earlier. We were shown the room where seven of the most severely disabled children are cared for (of the 14 disabled children at the orphanage). It was heartbreaking to see how seriously disabled these children are. Staff requested a hot water heater for these kids so that they could be bathed in the cold winter (\$195). In addition, they wanted to establish a study/meeting room for all of the children to use, and they requested 10 desks, 20 folding chairs and a green-board for this new room (\$618). Later, staff mentioned that they really needed a combination air conditioner and heater for the severely disabled children's room, which was very cold in the winter and unbearably hot in the summer. I said that was not in the original request and we would have to examine the budget to see if that purchase was possible. (That night I asked myself how one could possibly leave the country without supplying that aircon/heater.) We bought and installed it the following day (\$642). Installations were a little problematic because there was no electricity or plumbing for the water heater and insufficient electricity for the aircon/heater. Luckily all these problems were solved quickly by hardworking plumbers and electricians who charged only about \$15 for several hours labor. We also bought a 14 Kg. clothes drier to facilitate the drying of washed clothes during the rainy season (\$507).

Thanh Xuan, the orphanage for HIV+ children, now has 23 residents. They all sleep on wooden plank beds, covered by thin grass mats. We were asked to supply 20 covered foam mattresses and sheets so the kids would be more comfortable and warm. We purchased these and they were delivered that afternoon (\$856). Five years ago, when first visiting this orphanage under construction, I was concerned that it was on the premises of women's correctional institution as this did not appear to be a harmonious environment for raising children. I had recommended that the government separate these institutions ASAP. The Government recently did separate the institutions and that left the orphanage with significantly more space. One 27' X 45' room was converted to a play area for the kids, but its ceramic tile floor was quite cold in the winter. Staff requested carpeting for it and we immediately went out and bought the carpet of the staff's choice (\$160). When it was delivered and laid, in part by the kids, they treated this room as a new playground! (See picture 2.)

HHSC, the institution supporting grandparents raising their orphaned grandchildren and also training HIV+ adolescents for future employment in offices, originally requested some blankets, jackets and a large quantity of food. Staff wanted each family to receive 10 kgs. of rice, a liter of cooking oil and a bottle of fish sauce which was expected to last each family one month. Despite my sympathy for hungry people, my concern was that recipients would all be left in the same condition as before after only one month. I indicated that it would be embarrassing to report to my donors a large portion of funds were spent on food. I suggested instead that we make contributions that would have a longer-term benefits. Staff asked if we could increase the number of blankets and jackets we would supply and this is what we agreed to. We went to the wholesale blanket store and bought 127 comforters with washable duvets (\$1,807). They were delivered to a central meeting place and HHSC was able to communicate with the grandparents and grandchildren to come that afternoon to receive their blanket. Amazingly all showed up! A group from 15 km distant with no public transport was supplied a bus by the local People's

Committee. The kids were called to the front of the room by geographical wards and names, and each was given a comforter in a nice plastic carrying bag. (See picture 3.) HHCSC's organization of this activity was extremely impressive!

Earlier in the day, HHCSC had requested 110 children to come to an outlet of a coat factory to select and receive the warm jacket of their choice. These kids came in groups over a few hours. (See pictures 4a & 4b.) Each child chose a jacket which was registered by staff on departure. I was a little concerned that we would not know the price until the calculation was finally made, with the larger and smaller jackets all at different prices. The store gave us a triple discount and, in the end, the jackets averaged only about \$12.50 each (\$1,379). (Interestingly, the store staff communicated that they enjoyed supplying the coats so much that they offered to donate many additional new clothes which were less stylish and therefore a little difficult to sell. HHCSC decided to send this clothing to their very poor families near the Chinese border.) HHCSC also wanted to supply desks to 11 children who were being cared for by a single, very poor grandparent so they would have a place to study, rather than lying on the floor. (See picture 5.) These kids were invited to a desk store so they could select the color and style of desk they wanted, and the desks were delivered to their homes that afternoon (\$602). We visited some of the HHCSC grandparents the following day to see their environments and, despite their extremely humble surroundings, we were very warmly received and provided tea. (See picture 6.)

This was our most successful trip and we accomplished an enormous amount. Therefore, it might be useful to review some possible factors underlying these accomplishments.

- **Know how to behave.** This is not the first year of providing technical assistance. Rather it is the 50th and lessons have emerged from working in many countries. We treat everyone with respect and support local customs, although we try to mix humor in when possible and are willing also to act as an agent of change. We spend the time necessary to meet and pay respects to community leaders. We graciously accept the delicious hosted lunches, and try to repay this generosity in various ways
- **Develop deep relationships.** Our relationships with the governmental and NGO leaders have deepened after years of sharing emails, personal visits and many happy and productive times while working together and sharing family visits. We have built trusting and friendly relationships over these many visits which are paying continuous dividends. For example, initially, we had one volunteer translator and we traveled by local taxi. Now we were assisted by 2-3 staff and additional volunteers recruited by local governmental staff, and we traveled by either a volunteer's auto or a van supplied by the city government. We are working with friends and they are confident of our assistance. We were invited to a staff member's family home (Ms. Nhu) who provided a marvelous and sumptuous seafood and hotpot lunch at Do Son Beach. In turn, we supplied to our volunteers and several staff a seafood dinner at the conclusion of our work (I have given up on appreciating the special Vietnamese specialty of large sand crabs which I used to use as bait!).

- **Utilize collaborative working arrangements:** We leave most of the definition of need to the staff of the institutions we are supporting rather than trying to impose our definitions of need (although some requests require open negotiation).
- **Involve recipients in making their own choices:** Wherever possible, we involve the recipient in the final selection of the style and color of their choice. Last year we experimented with this idea in bringing several children from Thanh Xuan to the clothes and shoe stores so they could select items in the size, style and color they thought appropriate for all of the children. This year, we introduced still greater involvement of recipients. Each child came to the store to select their own coat.
- **Utilize local knowledge:** The institutional staff have the task of selecting the best source for purchasing items. When this was left to me, I did not know the best source and went to various retail and convenient outlets or relied on one volunteer's recommendation. But everyone participating in the purchases on this trip felt that we were guided by staff to the best source of the needed items. All stores provided substantial discounts from the retail prices. We always emphasized that, considering the destination of these purchases, we were providing an opportunity for the outlets to demonstrate their social responsibility. All responded to this statement.
- **Capitalize on local organizational skills:** It seemed almost miraculous that HHSC could bring all 110 children to the jacket outlet, and the 127 children and grandparents to the blanket distribution site, and 11 children to the desk store all in the same day. It is unclear what communication techniques they used, but they were very successful.
- **Be transparent about economics and clearly demonstrate no possibility of corruption:** And finally, we pass payment in cash directly to sellers after heavy price negotiation in which all participate. Starting with a full money belt of 500,000 Dong notes (\$25 notes), volunteers check each payment. Colleagues see when it is empty. Everyone knows there is no corruption in our activities. (On return trips, we try to unobtrusively observe that previous purchases are still in place.)

Summary of Accounting:

Amount contributed from 12 "external donors" for assistance to institutions = \$8,900. Amount contributed by one "internal donor" for travel and local expenses = \$2,000.

Total amount spent on purchases for four institutions = \$8,304 leaving about \$596 for future assistance.

Total amount spent for travel and local expenses = \$1,923, leaving about \$77 for a future assistance trip.

A Few Selected Photos:



Picture 1. Kids at school for blind.



Picture 2. Carpeted play area became a new playground at Thanh Xuan.



Picture 3. Blanket distribution for HHCS grandparents and children.



Picture 4A. Each child chose the jacket he/she wanted.



Picture 4b. Ms. Thinh, HHSC staff member, posing with a special child in her new jacket.



Picture 5. A new place to study with a new desk.



Picture 6. Granny at home with her a new blanket.



Ms. Nguyen Thi Nghia, Permanent Vice Secretary of the Party Committee of HaiPhong City and Head of the Delegation of National Assembly Deputies of Haiphong City, Chairwomen of Haiphong Union of Friendship Organizations posing after awarding a “Certificate of Merit.”

Postscript: *I am planning to send a link to many more pictures from the trip when I figure out how to do it or obtain help!*