

For Our Friends of Vietnamese Children

October 2013 Visit to Hai Phong

I'm sitting in the Hanoi airport awaiting my flight to Bangkok en route to Dhaka, and I want to record the wonderful experiences of this visit to Hai Phong.

I was met on arrival at the Level Hotel in Hai Phong by Mr. Bui Thanh Giang, Director of PACCOM and Vietnam-American Friendship Association, and Mr. Thu, an employee of Save the Children, who had volunteered to assist me after being contacted by Mr. Giang. Our driver was Mr. Trung who talked more than I do (in Vietnamese). He had visited the US and wanted to exclaim about the Golden Gate Bridge, San Quentin, and "unclothed ladies dancing," all translated with much laughter.

Our first appointment was at 8 AM the next morning. We were meeting Dr. Hoang Van Ke who was the Chairman of the Hai Phong People's Committee on my first visit 4 years ago. He is now the director of a Science and Technology Coordinating Agency and wanted to tell me about their activities which included programs for HIV care, support services, and prevention.

We then went to the School for Blind Children and were very well received. They had requested a TV and wireless microphones. We were shown the empty room which was to become the TV room. Kids were following us and they wanted to know when the TV would arrive. We thought, "Let's go get it," and invited the Director and Deputy Director to join us in making the purchase.

We went to a big electronics store and faced an immediate decision: should we get a larger TV or a smaller set and an accompanying sound system? The budget would allow either. (I had recently bought a new TV and found the sound from the built in speakers was not acceptable, and I thought the sound would be important for blind and low-sighted children.) Together we decided to get a 40" Samsung smart TV and an accompanying 7 speaker system which sounded like a movie hall.

Mr. Thu explained to the electronics store manager that this was their opportunity to demonstrate "social responsibility" toward the blind children, and we were given a significant discount and a keyboard thrown in free (the smart TV also can surf the web). It was going to be delivered and set up at 2 PM that day.

Then we went to the Red Flower orphanage which had requested furniture and bookcases. They had already made arrangements with a furniture company across the street, and I was shown a desk/book case combination. They wanted seven of these, one for each house on the Red Flower campus. It seemed a little expensive, but I was reluctant to make an issue for this institution because of our long personal association, and we made the purchase.

Then we went to Thanh Xuan, the HIV+ orphanage, and discussed their needs further. I was so happy to see on arrival that the desks and chairs we had bought last year for the study room were occupied by five kids who looked like they were actually working. This year they requested clothing and blankets for the children.

I explained that I would not be able to get the correct sizes from the measurements of the height of each child in meters, so they decided to send one staff and two young girls (about 10-12 years old) who knew each of the children's sizes and tastes. We took everyone to a huge open air market, and the girls selected jeans for the older children and warm jackets for all of the children. The orphanage also wanted insulating floor tiles to cover the cold tile floor in the playroom, and we bought 36 sq. meters of that soft, insulated flooring, all with Disney characters. Then we bought 10 warm blankets, and moved toward the shoe store where the girls took about an hour to select a pair for each child – 11 pairs.

At the conclusion of my day, which had started at around 4AM, I was becoming exhausted and I did not want to make a decision about a microphone for amplifying a violin which had been requested by Thanh Xuan. No one could explain how the violin microphone would enhance the happiness or living conditions of the kids, so I did not buy it.

After breakfast of local Pho with Mr. Trung, we visited the Orphan's and Vulnerable Children organization affiliated with Dr. Hoang Van Ke's organization which he had told me about. All of the staff except the director, Dr. Thuy, were HIV positive. Ms. Pham Thi Hue, a staff member, listened to me explain what we are doing and then said she would like to tell her story.

After the death of her husband from AIDS, Ms. Hue learned she was HIV positive, and experienced so much stigma and discrimination (even from her family) that she attempted suicide by drinking poison. But she said she found meaning and a reason to live by helping the children who were also infected. (I learned later that Ms. Hue is famous in Vietnam for being so open about her story.)

I learned more about what the institution was doing. They are teaching young kids to operate old computers (donated by international organizations) and photocopy machines, with the hope that they will be able to get a job when they are older. They feed them a good lunch once a week. They organize programs for grandparents who often end up as the caretakers. They teach old people about government programs of assistance and follow up on cases. These old grandparents are usually not in good shape as they receive a pension of only \$9 per month.

In the middle of the story, I said I was sorry that I did not know to include them in my budget, but nevertheless I wanted to buy the next lunch for kids, and took out a new \$100 bill. After hearing of all the fine things they were doing, I told them I was not comfortable with my small donation and took out another \$100. Then we were served a lovely lunch which we ate with all the HIV+ kids.

On Friday I invited all the volunteers and their spouses and Mr. Giang to a seafood dinner. We went to a large, well-known restaurant by the river where the seafood is still alive when ordered. I was asked what seafood I like to eat. Remembering the Dungeness variety that I had eaten often in Vietnam, I said I liked crab. However, what I was served were some large sand crabs of the type I used for bait on California beaches. These were 3-4 inches and very crunchy. Maybe I was not supposed to eat the legs. I was told these were a very special treat, but I ate only one. We had many other delicious fish dishes and wonderful speeches.

On Saturday morning we started the day at the blind school. The TV and sound system were installed beautifully, and it was so powerful it sounded like a theater. The kids were wildly enthusiastic. Some of them could see, and all could hear. There was also a CD player hooked up, and I could easily see the educational value of these tools. The faculty explained that the TV also would help teach about the outside world.

We were then treated to a duet by the music teacher on the organ we bought last year (which 5 children have learned to play) and the student who learned to play the electric guitar (also purchased last year). The beauty of the song and its full context still brings tears to my eyes as I recall my feelings at that moment.

As usual, I handed out a ton of candy to the kids and had a suitcase of educational supplies and toys. I asked the director to take anything he thought he could use. Before leaving I toured their computer room where blind children were learning to operate computers with the help of audio keyboards which I had not seen before.

Next we went to Thanh Xuan (HIV+ orphans). We distributed the jackets, shoes, and jeans and watched the children examine them and discuss comparisons. We distributed candy and left the rest of the toys and educational supplies. The director took us all to lunch. As we left she said, "The emotions and appreciation of your generosity are so overwhelming, we cannot find the words to express it."

Then we went to Red Flower where I was delighted to find that the desks which had been delivered were about twice as big as the ones I had been shown earlier. I was told that they did not have these bigger desks assembled when we visited the shop, so they had shown us a smaller version at that time. I was greatly relieved as it was clear to all that these big desks, which could seat 3-4 children, were worth the price. The misunderstanding was discussed openly and everyone expressed relief.

Looking back at the entire experience, I feel we have created a strong team to do excellent work. First, we have all of us in the US making this good work possible with our donations through the Dare Association. Then we have a team of volunteers in Hai Phong making everything in Vietnam so easy. They worked out the schedule, made sure a car was available as needed, negotiated to receive a discount from every seller, telephoned all the institutions to make arrangements for the visits, translated all the discussions, and many other things. This was so easy compared to my first and second visits when I did almost everything with the help of only Ms. Ha Quyen (who continues to help with translation on every trip).

The innovation of having the local administrators participate in the selection and purchase of goods seemed to work very well--making them more of a stakeholder in the entire experience rather than a mere recipient and ensuring better decision-making than I could make on my own. I look forward to returning next year and expanding our efforts to include the HIV coordinating organization.

These last few days have been some of the happiest of my life, and I express my deep appreciation to you all for making this possible. I feel the happiness I experience and wish to share with you is priceless.

I have photos of everything I mentioned and even a short video of the duet at the blind school. These must await assistance from tech saavy younger folks on my return. My next communication will provide an accounting of all expenditures from our budget of \$3,850. The photos will follow.

With much love and deep appreciation,

Bob