

A Journey That Changed Lives

Thien's eyes misted before he quickly brushed his hand across his face and looked away. He leaned into me without looking up, embarrassed at his tears, as I pulled all five seventh graders in close for a group hug and said my goodbyes.

I first met Thien on the second day of my volunteer assignment at the Thuan An boarding school for the hearing impaired in Vietnam. The school yard was filled with the noise and energy of 300 excited children hard at work making art and flower baskets in anticipation of Teacher Appreciation Day.

Hands fluttered as the students communicated to each other in sign language. I was taking in the swarm of activity around me when I suddenly felt a tap on my elbow. "Chau Co", the greeting came with a smile from the clean-cut teenager with glasses standing next to me.

"My name is Thien," he wrote in perfectly scripted English on a pad of paper. When I responded with my own name, he flashed me a smile and excitedly began to write some questions. Word about our ability to communicate shot around as it only can on school playgrounds. Just as the winner of "American Idol" becomes a star overnight, I instantly became an A-list celebrity on campus.

Over the next few weeks, I spent a lot of time with the kids in the three English classes I taught and in stolen moments between class, after dinner, and during weekend activities. Students ranged from 5-20 years old, and came from diverse backgrounds and life situations, but the boarding school environment and the uniqueness of their disability bonded them into one large family.

They were as interested to learn about me as I was about them. We shared stories in a linguistic cross between written English, simple Vietnamese, and international sign language. The questions posed to me ran the gamut: from the mundane, "What do you eat for breakfast?" to the astute, "Did you vote for Obama?" to the reflective, "What animal do you want to be in your next life?" to my favorites, "Does snow taste like sugar?" and "How long does a boy have to wait to kiss a girl in America?"

I admired the passion and tenacity of the teachers to help these students in spite of meager resources, limited training, and outdated technology. The town where Thuan An is located is gritty and desolate, but hope and love are very much alive in this special place.

A lot of that has to do with Thuy, the executive director. She has devoted her life to the school ever since she arrived almost 20 years ago. Thuy has a quiet peace about her and the kindest eyes of anyone I have ever met.

Thuy and I had many deep conversations about the challenges facing deaf education in Vietnam and where help is needed. Bright, highly capable kids like Thien are fated to become field laborers or factory workers because the system does not provide the handicapped with an education beyond the seventh grade. Thuy and others are working to increase awareness about the issue and to change the perception that these kids are limited in their ability to learn and become productive members of society.

Thuy and I bonded on a personal level as well. She would call me into her office, close the door, and break out a bowl of peanuts or a large piece of fruit. For the next few hours, we would share stories about our lives while the rain that was as regular and as powerful as Old Faithful fell outside.

When I first learned about this volunteer assignment, I thought it would be a great opportunity to give back. This experience was better than any plan to simply visit Vietnam and its tourist attractions. I helped to make a difference at Thuan An, and left a changed person in the process.

As I stood in that farewell group hug with my seventh graders, I knew that the friendships and the connections I had made would last long after the photos were filed away and I resumed my everyday life. I left with an understanding about Vietnamese deaf education and with many ideas about how to help.

Find a cause that matters to you, take a volunteer trip, and you will likely return a better person for the experience.