

A Journey That Changed Lives

The petite Vietnamese woman gracefully stepped outside of her office into the dust and humidity, her body language betraying anticipation as our van pulled up to the school gate. She greeted me as I entered the grounds, smiling with the warmest eyes that I have ever seen.

“Welcome to Thuan An. My name is Thuy,” she looked up at me with a polite, inquiring glance, interested to see how I would respond.

“It is so nice to finally meet you,” I replied as I shook her outreached hand with affection.

It was Day 14 of my travels in Southeast Asia, although I was not really keeping count as I was enjoying every minute of all my experiences in this wonderful, exotic land. I had just arrived in South Vietnam after spending the first part of my trip in the northern part of the country. My specially-assigned interpreter met me at the airport, introducing himself simply as “Nam”. This was the same name as the guide who had just dropped me off on the other end earlier in Hue. I inquired about the coincidence and learned that all the guides hired by this particular tour company assumed the name “Nam” with their English-speaking clients.

“It is easier for you to remember and pronounce,” he explained.

It was yet another example of a culture adjusting to accommodate the embarrassing reputation that westerners have for expecting comfort at every turn. I started to say, “Please do not change things simply to accommodate me,” but I checked my words and instead smiled at him in appreciation. There would be plenty of time to find out his real name later.

I gazed out the window from the back seat as we zipped along the two-lane highway en route to Ho Chi Minh City. Cars narrowly passed each other in the face of oncoming traffic, ignoring the central dividing line as if it were merely a decorative stripe intended to break up the monotony of the grey asphalt. Mopeds and bicycles hugged the shoulders with faceless drivers swathed in scarves and handkerchiefs to keep the dust out. We hit the city and instantly ground to a halt amid downtown's traffic gridlock.

Seven million people now call Ho Chi Minh City home, making it the most populous metropolis in Vietnam. Looming above this stalled pandemonium were the architectural relics of a bygone, less-crowded era. The facades of historical French buildings slouched under the weight of years of grime. The van driver and my interpreter sat in quiet resignation as we inched along, and I noticed the lack of honking horns in spite of the passive-aggressive fight between cars for space. The polite Buddhist culture that is so prevalent in Vietnamese everyday life seemed to extend to the rules of the road as well.

We arrived at the tour office to meet Lan, the coordinator for this segment of my trip. She hopped into the back seat of the van and enthusiastically introduced herself to me. With her perfect English, chic black glasses, and trendy jeans, she could easily have passed for a local on the streets of any American city. As we drove the 40 km to the Binh Dong province, the chaos of Ho Chi Minh slowly dissipated behind us; rivers and farmland replacing the concrete jungle as we drove along.

I was on my way to a volunteer assignment at the Thuan An Center, a school for hearing-impaired children in the country town of Lai Thieu. Lan briefed me about logistical details en

route to the school, and I wondered at her increasingly nervous state and careful selection of words as she described the upcoming experience.

As we entered Lai Thieu, I saw the place would be better described as a convenient rest stop for gas and a quick bite to eat than an actual town. Tired storefronts offering the same flavors of Xtra gum, bottles of La Vie water, and assortment of Asian snacks leaned against dilapidated restaurants serving pho and coffee.

Young children played in the gutters of the busy highway that sliced through Lai Thieu's center. Sandal-clad women with long black hair drawn back in ponytails held babies close to their chests in thin, taut arms shaped by manual labor as they fanned away the humid heat. Barefoot boys sat transfixed on video games inside an Internet cafe, oblivious to the lizards scurrying around its walls and floors. Old men with bony knees gathered on dirty stoops to share stories. Laundry strung from the balconies of tall, skinny apartment buildings reflected the bright sunlight. Further afield, a muddy river filled with decaying lily pads meandered slowly past a couple of scrawny water buffalo.

The streets were gritty, the dust constant, and yet I felt a strong sense of industry and community. This was a place unaffected by tourism. This was real, unpretentious, rural Vietnam. Lan was watching me take in the humble scene unfolding outside the van window. I turned and smiled at her anxious eyes, and assured her, "I cannot wait for this adventure to start."

Thuy lead us inside her office, simply decorated with a small conference table and an assortment of straight-backed chairs. Its walls were awash with an inviting, bright blue paint that

mirrored the tiled floor. A vase of plastic flowers sat next to a laptop computer on a desk. A quiet fan moved the thick air overhead and a round clock minded time on the wall alongside a large whiteboard.

After a brief introduction of her role as executive director and a profile of the school, Thuy asked me some questions about my own background. As I shared my story, she kept shaking her head, eyes wide in disbelief. When I finished my diatribe, she exclaimed, “I cannot believe you were born hearing-impaired. Your speech and listening skills are excellent. Are you sure you are profoundly hard of hearing? ”

I may have been a marvel to Thuy, but my ability to hear and speak effectively in spite of a profound hearing loss that requires me to wear hearing aids to register any semblance of sound is not that unusual in the United States. We are blessed in this country with advanced medical, technological, and educational resources in speech and hearing sciences.

Research has shown that a child's brain is programmed to learn foundational language skills during the first 6 years of life and the first 3 years are the most critical. After age 6, it is increasingly difficult for the human brain to acquire language and speech. So, the sooner a child born with hearing loss is amplified with hearing aids and receives early intervention services to address the effects of the impairment, the better able they are to develop auditory-verbal communication skills.

The United States has offered early intervention training for 30 years, enabling at least three generations of hearing-impaired children to maximize their language abilities and learn to

speak and hear effectively. Such communication skills are essential for living an independent, successful life in a hearing world.

Vietnam's government began supporting university education programs for teaching hearing-impaired children in 1995. As a result, it is just now realizing the importance of early intervention in language development. There are a limited number of teachers who have been trained in auditory-verbal methods. The rest have no college degrees and learned how to work with hearing-impaired children simply by observing their peers.

Thuy's program at Thuan An started educating its youngest children in auditory-verbal methods two years ago, and the children are slowly learning to use their ears and voices to listen and talk. Meanwhile, the older students have missed their window of opportunity to develop language. They rely heavily on sign language to communicate and cannot hear or speak well.

Vietnam is also challenged by the lack of quality hearing aids that adequately meet the needs of their children. There simply are not enough donated hearing aids to meet demand, and most donated aids are old and need frequent repairs. As a result, the children often go for extended periods without a hearing device, and valuable time for developing hearing and speech acumen is lost. Brand new hearing aids are cost-prohibitive at \$3,000 a pair, the equivalent of a typical Vietnamese family's annual salary.

When one combines insufficient numbers of high quality hearing technology with few teacher resources in auditory-verbal education, it is not surprising that life-long Vietnamese

educators such as Thuy had never met a hearing-impaired person who can speak and listen on par with her hearing peers.

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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. After a few minutes of exchange, I explained that I was hard of hearing myself and showed him my two hearing aids. His eyes widened in amazement and he ran to tell his friends. 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.

I was the first American volunteer to visit the school. As a result, 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, “Do all hearing-impaired Americans have college degrees?” to my favorites, “Does snow taste like sugar?” and “How long does a boy have to wait to kiss a girl in America?”

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I admired the passion and tenacity of the teachers to help these students in spite limited resources, training, and outdated technology. Hope and love are very much alive in this special place. A lot of that has to do with Thuy who has devoted her life to Thuan An ever since she arrived 30 years ago.

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.

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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.

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, I knew that the friendships and the connections I had made would last long after the photos were filed away and I resumed my regular 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, engage in the global community, and you will likely return a better person for the experience.