

March Newsletter 2021

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In This Issue

- Acknowledging 20 years of service
- Sao Mai and the Angel
- A Tuan, a success story

Pat McKee (left in white shirt) with Vinh Son supporters

FRIENDS OF VINH SON, 20 YEARS LATER

By Patrick McKee, FVSO V.P.

March 14, 2021, will mark the 20th anniversary of Friends of Vinh Son's (FVSO) commitment to the orphans and caregivers of the 6 Vinh Son orphanages in Kontum, Vietnam. Serving over 700 children, the Sisters of the Miraculous Medal have relied heavily on outside help to improve the lives of their charges. From newborns to teenagers, Vinh Son is a Montagnard (ethnic minority) community, where the Bahnar dialect is the language at the orphanage, Vietnamese at school, and English at the tutor classroom. As far as we know, Vinh Son is unique in Vietnam, a safety net for the neediest of the needy. They are a perfect fit for returning Vietnam veterans who want to see what peace looked like post-war and to re-connect with the people they never forgot.

A chance meeting in 2001 led to the formation of FVSO. Vietnam veteran, Dave Chaix, and I went on a tour of Vietnam, guided by Milspec Tours, who specializes in taking veterans to famous battle sites and other historic places in Vietnam. One of the unexpected stops was at the famous Old Wooden Church in Kontum, a beautiful Catholic church, built by the French during their occupation nearly 100 years ago. Because of its obvious appeal, it has become quite the tourist attraction. Soon, we would learn what was hidden behind this grand old relic, and that would forever alter the way I viewed life.

The church is very dramatic, with the stained glass windows and all wood construction. It is still used everyday and is filled to overflowing with the children and other Montagnards on Sundays. But, the life changing moment was when we were guided behind the church and set foot in the nursery of the Montagnard orphanage known as Vinh Son. Dave and I were overwhelmed with emotion at what we saw. There were 25-30 babies, infants and toddlers all in one small room that was immaculate. There was a half dozen caregivers herding the children toward some blankets on the floor. It happened to be nap time.

We were slowly meandering through the nursery, taking pictures and trying not to hit our heads on the low ceilings, when a toddler, about 3 years old, crept up to me and took my big little finger in his tiny fist. He looked up at me with the kindest, gentlest expression I have ever seen. At that moment, I knew I had to do something to make life better for him and the other orphans there. I reflect on that moment often, and still wonder what he was thinking and feeling on that March afternoon. Was he being polite? Was it a gesture of love? Was he trying to comfort me? I will never have the answers, but the memory of that moment remains crystal clear.

“Spreading the word” has always been our challenge and our goal

The Sisters who run the orphanage met with us after the tour and served some fruit, bread and homemade sweet wine that they sold to make a little money for food. Before that meeting was over, Dave and I emptied our pockets of all the cash we had and vowed that we would make every effort to collect more money for Vinh Son. Indeed, it was a chance encounter, but we promised to return. The children were like a magnetic tug on our soul.

The little boy is a man now, and I pray the years have been good to him. During his years at the orphanage, he had witnessed many changes provided by the 20 years of FVSO support. Each of the 6 orphanage locations, along with their resident Nuns, has created a safe and “happier” quality of life, despite a hostile environment. I never learned the boy’s name, and he would not know the impact of his simple act of kindness towards a stranger. He won my support and affection forever. In a way, he adopted me.

When we returned to Auburn, California, Dave and I immediately began to tell our friends and families about the meager conditions at Vinh Son. Our goal became raising support for these very special children. Despite the many miles separating each other, we “drafted” a small group of like-minded people, and eventually formed **Friends of Vinh Son Orphanages**. By 2005, FVSO was a legitimate humanitarian organization, with 501c3 charity designation. Our spiritual leader was a little woman named Sister Marie Dominique. She may have been small in stature, but her dedication to Vinh Son was unmatched. Her guidance steered the organization in the right direction, and made vital communication with the Nuns possible. Sister is no longer with us, but her spirit remains strong. In the photo on page 1, she is standing between Pat and Dave.

For 20 years, I have served on the FVSO Board of Directors, raising resources that provide a happier and more fulfilling quality of life for the children of Vinh Son. Luckily, we had help (see below). One doesn’t know what life-changing surprise looms around the next corner. For us, it was Vinh Son.

**We couldn’t have raised \$2.7 million dollars without the help of our partners in the USA & the world:
FVSO is the only humanitarian organization that supports all aspects of orphanage life**

- Phanxico Franciscan Charity
- PdV, Posiee de Vie, HCMC
- SHEP USA, Father Luke
- Vietnam Orphans Winchester
- Viet Dreams
- East Meets West
- Children of Vinh Son, Seattle, CoVS
- Australians Supporting Kids, ASK
- Orphans of Kontum, Netherlands



**The eyes will capture your heart
Just ask Pat or anyone else who
has visited Vinh Son Orphanage**

FVSO also supports Sao Mai with funds for basic needs



About The Community of Sao Mai Orphanage

The Sao Mai Orphanage Community is located in the city of Pleiku - Gia Lai, and we, the Sisters of St. Paul Thanh Chartres, are very happy to teach, care for and serve the orphans here. Know that this is not necessarily an easy job, though.

The Congregation is composed of 4 Sisters:

Sr Pierre Huynh Thi Quon
Sr Anne Ngo Thi My
Sr Marie Tran Thi Phuong Lan
Sr Marie Tran Thi Oanh

We each have a different job, but all are geared towards taking care, teaching, doing the laundry, as well as spiritual care for the children, with the desire to help them realize their potential. At Sao Mai, they also have a loving family who care for them like other children. The children of Sao Mai, both male and female, come with different life conditions, and there are children with disabilities who cannot go to school.

However, the children always live an optimistic and happy life, helping Sisters with housework, cooking, and taking care of children. Most of the children are in school age, from University, College, High School, Primary School, and Preschool. The community also has 3 little angels who are learning to eat and walk; 3 angels are always fun for everyone in the house, because the smallest angels are loved and cherished.

Children also show the joy of childhood when they have fun, entertaining, listening to music, watching movies. It is fun just listening to their innocent laughter. At play is also the time when children show themselves, as well as their own talents. An indispensable part of their daily life is prayer. The morning and evening prayers are when children show their gratitude to God. They offered their prayers and prayers to their benefactors and relatives, who supported them in one way or another.

Thank you, benefactors, for always opening your arms of kindness and love to the Sao Mai children. Hopefully, the Sao Mai Community will always be a fulcrum for many abandoned children, a joy for those who come. Sisters of the Sao Mai Orphanage would like to express our gratitude! May God bless you all the blessings!

Thanks to Sister Anna My, Superior at Sao Mai, for this report

“During the TET holiday, Sao Mai received a baby boy from the moment of his birth. He is the angel who was sent to us.”

This is our little baby care experience. The baby has just been born so small and I dare not hold it because it is too small. In the process of watching the baby, I also feel the hard work of the Sisters who raised us when we were young. At midnight when I slept with the baby and fell asleep, the crying baby woke me to get up, needing to change diapers and make milk. To think that in the past, the Sisters also raised me like this. The Sisters have diligently nurtured their children from when they were held in hand to adulthood, which is a great project. When I was older, the Sisters told me that when I was a child, I was very difficult to raise, but at that time I could not imagine how difficult it was until I saw this baby. I felt all of their love. The Sisters have stayed up many nights because there are times when their children are sick. The Sisters have raised their children so well. They always tell us that we must try to study and work hard to be an example for the younger orphans.

Nguyen Thi Ly, Student

The Face of an Angel



A Tuan continues to “pay it back” while FVSO VP Clyde and Secretary Nga are uplifted by the messages from our scholarship students

As part of the scholarship agreement, students send us messages every month. Some of the messages are short and some provide a good understanding of the lives of the students. This message is from A Tuan. He is majoring in psychology at a school in Quy Nhon and spends a lot of time volunteering with groups that help out at the poorer villages. He is very outgoing and always seems to be doing something to help others. Tuan is just starting his required internship and plans to graduate in June, assuming that the schedule does not change.

Clyde and Nga

Yes! According to the training program of Quy Nhon University, I will graduate at the end of June, but due to the epidemic, the schedule may change and the school has not notified the students yet. When there is notice from the school, I will report back to you. Four years in college have gone by so fast, I feel that I am more mature now, learning things or better things for myself. Thanks to the help of the benefactors of FVSO Association. I am always grateful to everyone and always pray for everyone in FVSO. Maybe after graduation, I will return to Vinh Son 4 and help the nuns take care of the younger children and guide them in life until September when I receive an official diploma.



FVSO Contact Information

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Legacy Fund Update

The goal is:

**\$2 million dollars
by March 2027**

Legacy Fund Balance

\$891,353



Words of Wisdom

Orphans are easier to ignore before you know their names. They are easier to ignore before you see their faces. It is easier to pretend they're not real before you hold them in your arms, but once you do, everything changes.

Orphanage Facts

About 775 Montagnard children live in 7 orphanage facilities in the Kontum/Pleiku areas of Vietnam.

\$12 per month provides each child one nutritious meal every day.

Orphanages are run by the Sisters of Miraculous Medal (Vinh Son) and St. Paul Chartres (Sao Mai).

Officers & Board Members

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Board Member

Donation Information

Checks should be payable to FVSO or Friends of Vinh Son.

FVSO is a humanitarian, non-profit organization approved by IRS code 501©(3). Donations are tax deductible.

Donations are accepted year round and are also available on-line.