

VSO Friends of Vinh Son Montagnard Orphanage

A Humanitarian Non-profit Organization Approved by IRS Code 501(c) 3 & California Section 23701D

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In This Issue

- “They’re Back!” Dave and Hank are home again, with stories to tell
- Clyde clears the path for higher education...his analysis

Board Member Hank Gonzales and I planned our 2 week visit to the 7 orphanages to coincide with the annual East Meets West Dental Outreach Clinic. Although this was certainly a highlight of our trip, there was much, much more.

Friends of Vinh Son Orphanage has worked for many years with EMW and their staff, Minh Huong, Director of Dental Operations and her assistant and our good friend Mel Potter, to bring dental care to the children. When we can, we like to attend these dental missions, as they are so uplifting. Dental care for the Montagnard people in the Central Highlands of Vietnam is mostly nonexistent.

This year the dentists and dental students were mostly from Team Semiahmoo, Canada and the International College of Dentists, Canadian Section. What a wonderful and talented group – all volunteers.

Special Thanks to our dental clinic benefactors

Dave & Claire Christensen - Bob & Carolyn Lee - Fr Thomas Relihan & his parish



Dave with Sister Marie Kham and Marie Tran, Children of Vinh Son



Hank Gonzales with Sister Khiet at Sao Mai orphanage

As mentioned, this trip became so much more. As the plans developed we were able to meet our partners from the Netherlands for the first time after working with them for many years. Diny Jansen-van der Linden and Evert van Welie of the Orphans of Kontum, the Netherlands. We have coordinated with OoK for years to avoid duplication and waste in our programs. OoK now is supplying funding for Government Schools, books, sport clothes and shoes and other school needs. This has let us free up more funding for Basic Needs.

We were also able to meet a new partner, Marie Tran, from the Boise, ID based non-profit, Children of Vinh Son Orphanage. Marie speaks fluent Vietnamese and was a tremendous help in our visits to the orphanages. Marie’s group purchases food which was distributed while she was able to supervise the project. We hope this was the beginning of a very long term relationship between our organizations.

Dave and Hank divided their time between the kids and the needs assessment

Also joining us for part of our visit was our Board Member Clyde Lewandowski from Minnesota, and 5 first time returning veterans. They had been touring the northern part of Vietnam and were able to join us for 3 days in Kontum. Traveling with them was our good friend and guide Tano.

Prior to our meeting with Clyde's group, Hank, Diny Evert, Marie and I, along with Sister Marie Kham traveled north east from Kontum on highway 24 to visit VS 3, 4 & 6. These are the most remote of the orphanages we support. We visited with the Sisters and played with the children, taking note of their current needs. Marie brought along cookies for the children which were a great hit.

The next day we spent with the dental clinic, what a wonderful program, providing dental care annually to the children at the 6 Vinh Son Orphanages. We should have a video soon of the dental mission, produced by EMW.

The children at Sao Mai in Pleiku are still seen by the Pleiku Dentist at a discounted rate. This program is administered by our good friend, Thien Nguyen, who also runs her family business, Pleiku Taxi.

That evening we joined Clyde's group for dinner and toured with them the following day, visiting VS 1, 2 and the sewing class. These are always fun visits, as the children entertain us with their songs.

Again, Marie provided the cookies. That night we attended a musical production put on by the children of VS 1, performing their traditional Montagnard dances.

Finally, we visited VS-5, which completed our schedule. A farewell dinner with East Meets West and the dental contingent climaxed a very productive mission to VS.



The East Meets West dental clinic was another huge success, but the children were probably happy after it was over

During our visit, we were able to fund immediate needs and bring back a list of projects that require funding or further investigation. Below is a partial list:

- **VS 1** – washing machine for girl's washroom (Sister Marie Kham will send cost)
- **VS 3** – funding for 5 children to attend cooking school (Marie Tran will help us with more information)
- **VS 3** – 1 high school grad to attend nursing school (Marie Tran will help us with more information)
- **VS 3** – request to pay the tractor driver that also helps at VS 3 - \$300 per month (they now pay him with food and would like our help)
- **VS 4** – shower facility for the boys - \$235
- **VS 4** – house for sewing - \$\$415
- **VS 4** – bicycle repair course and tools for 1 boy - \$200
- **VS 4** – Sisters motorbike needed repair (FVSO left \$75 & Marie Tran left \$25 = \$100)
- **VS 6** – repair dangerous wiring \$1,500 (we left \$500 to begin the work - \$1,000 left to fund)
- **VS 6** – three teachers for Vietnamese (we requested a work plan for a trial – Sister An will let us know)
- **VS 6** – two boys to technical school in Gia Lai– cost \$50 each per month for training & room/board (we need to know what school – Marie Tran will investigate for us)
- **VS 5** – requested \$500 for 5 bicycles for high school senior to attend distant school (funding left – bicycles purchased)
- **Convent** – Sister Michel Y Nget requested we buy 5 cameras for the 5 orphanages that did not have a camera so they may send us pictures of the children, projects& receipts – VS 1 has a camera (purchased 5 cameras - \$625)

As I wrote at the beginning, this was a great trip for many reasons and I look forward to returning with a larger group in February 2015.

Thank you to our many donors for helping to accomplish so much for these wonderful children.

Dave Chaix, President, Friends of Vinh Son Orphanage



Clyde Lewandowski with Lylly and the road to a brighter future



Nothing like a friendship bracelet to make them smile



Lylly and Clyde re-connected



It was all smiles when the ice cream truck arrived at VS-1

Our goal for this year was to meet a friend at Vinh Son 2 and develop a plan that would allow her to attend the university.

I traveled with a group of veteran friends who, except for me, were returning to Vietnam for the first time. We planned a busy 16 day voyage that led us from Da Nang to the DMZ, then on to Khe Sanh, and south along the Ho Chi Minh trail to the A Shau Valley and Kontum. From there we traveled to Buon Me Thuot, Nha Trang, Cu Chi and Sai Gon. The agenda left very little time to visit the orphanages.

I was carrying a number of items for friends who had asked me to deliver them in Vietnam. Upon arrival at the Sai Gon airport, we met the parents of Linh Le and delivered a little girl's dress for her niece, a laptop computer for her brother who is a medical student, and also gave them a gift of Eagle Medicated Oil. The medicated oil was a hit gift with all the older people we met in Vietnam. We also left a package that was to be mailed to a friend's Mom in Hanoi.

My friend Lylly is a shy little girl with the most wonderful smile who we met on my first visit in 2007. In 2012, I asked Lylly what she planned to do when she completed high school but she really had not thought too much about it at that time. To provide a bit of a carrot to help her make a decision, with support from my wife Connie, we committed to provide some financial help if she decided to go on to the university. A year later, when Dennis Coyne and I visited the orphanages for an extended time in 2013, Lylly told us that she was thinking about becoming a teacher. Connie and I renewed our commitment and, in the eyes of Sister Jeanne and Lylly, we became her godparents.

When we arrived at Vinh Son 2 on April 24, we expected to find her waiting to meet us, but she did not seem to be around. As the younger kids sang their welcoming song, I noticed a young woman with a hat pulled down over her eyes who was sweeping the entryway. After a few minutes I walked over to say hello, and discovered it was our shy friend, Lylly. Marie Tran and I visited with her and gave her an iPad we had brought, as well as some money to be used to open a debit card account. We discovered that she volunteers her time to teach religious education for the younger kids. During the week of our visit, Lylly was busy taking and passing her senior year High School completion exams. She has registered for college entry exams at Qui Nhon University with a major in Primary School Education and at Dak Lak College in Buon Me Thuot city with an Art Education major. The exams are offered only once each year and those who do not successfully pass the exam must wait a full year before taking it again, which more or less prevents them from ever attending college if they don't pass on the first round. We are praying that she passes so she can go on to the university to become a successful teacher.

So, what have we learned about the education process in Vietnam?

- Education is power and may be the catalyst that improves the future for these kids. We hope that our work with a few children will develop a heartier work ethic at school and lead to advanced education and better jobs.
- The Montagnards have a long history of farming which does not provide a compelling reason to complete high school. Most kids drop out of school before their 11th grade.
- Students in Vietnam must pass a series of completion exams at the end of each school year before being admitted for the following year.
- Tutors are generally necessary for both the high school and the college entry exams.

Clyde will monitor this process and keep us informed

- In March or April, high school seniors who are interested in attending university must submit an application for the entry exams which are taken in mid-Summer.
- Students who are admitted to university pay approximately \$200 per year tuition.
- Depending on where they go to school, it costs approximately \$100 per month for tuition, books, supplies, food and a shared apartment. There may be months when additional expenses arise.
- Vietnamese banks offer debit card accounts with very low transaction fees although most Vietnamese neither trust the banks nor have bank accounts.
- When Lly passes her entry exam and enrolls in a college, we will send a monthly stipend to her account.
- There will need to be some sort of a progress reporting system in order to assure that funds are used properly. I believe that passing college grades would be adequate for the report.
- Although we have provided education funding for Sisters, this is our first post high school education test case and we hope to use what we learn to enable other children to go on to higher education.



Diny, Evert and Sr Marie Kham handing out cookies



Our travelers captured dozens of beautiful images, grateful children peering into a camera, saying “thank you” with their smiles. We'll publish more in future newsletters.

Organizations supporting FVSO

- 189th Assault Helicopter Company
- Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 535, Nevada County, CA
- Counterparts
- 4th Infantry Division Association (NY & NJ Chapter)
- 14th Combat Engineer Btn. Assoc.
- MilSpec Tours



MilSpec Tours
(800) 953-5812



Vinh Son & Sao Mai Orphanage Facts

- Population – approximately 830 Montagnard children in seven orphanage facilities
- Administered by the Sisters of the Miraculous Medal & St. Paul Chartres
- Location – Kontum/Pleiku, Vietnam
- \$12 feeds, shelters, and educates one child for one month

Officers

- President** - Dave Chaix
Secretary - Dennis Coyne
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Senior VP - Pat McKee
1st VP - Sr. Marie Dominique
2nd VP - Michael Little

Board

- Hank Gonzales
Rich Lahey
Clyde Lewandowski
Bart Ruud
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Donation Information

- Please make checks payable to FVSO or Friends of Vinh Son
Donations are gratefully accepted year round
100% of administrative costs are paid by the Board and Officers