

# **vietnam children's project**

## **Christmas letter**

### Greetings



Thanks to everyone for your wonderful patronage over 2010. As we round off the year it's worthy to reflect on our collective efforts which saw 130 children in Dieu Giac Orphanage housed, fed three nourishing meals a day & schooled, and the associated kindergartens provide a Steiner inspired educational experience for 120 young students

This is also the time of year when our hearts go out in gratitude to our long standing patrons. Once again the VCP has experienced a year of support from the **Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiner e.V.** (Germany) and **Internationaal Hulpfonds** (IHF) (The Netherlands). This, together with the contribution and goodwill of all individual sponsors old and new, has enabled us to achieve our goals in 2010. For a detailed picture of life at the Orphanage & Kindergartens in 2010 please see Thanh's following report.

We are grateful that the increase in sponsorship fees instituted this year was embraced by our family of sponsors. An unexpected outcome of the recent global financial crisis has meant that the Australian dollar strengthened against the US dollar. On the one hand this has meant our financial contributions to Vietnam have increased in value as we transact in US dollars, but it also means that contributions in US dollars convert to less Australian dollars. We would appreciate where possible if sponsors donating in US dollars could take this into account when making their next contribution.

Operating on voluntary help we are always looking for ways to minimise administrative tasks. While we are still happy to send out newsletters by mail the increased use of email will further reduce time, postage costs & paper. So if you aren't reading this on a screen & would like to, please email us your details, & for everyone please remember to update email details as they change. Our contact details are P.O. Box 544, Mittagong NSW 2575, Ph: 02 48721431, or [susanna.pearson@googlemail.com](mailto:susanna.pearson@googlemail.com). Similarly if you no longer wish to receive correspondence from the VCP please let us know.

If you, or extended family & friends are searching for an alternative expression of the Christmas spirit this year, the orphanage carers & kindergarten teachers would be delighted to receive one off donations, no matter how small, to provide extra services for the children.

Yours sincerely  
Susanna Pearson  
*For the management committee*

## **CHRISTMAS REPORT 2010**

### **DIEU GIAC ORPHANAGE**

It was at the beginning of a freak November that I arrived in Ho Chi Minh city for the second time this year, the first was in March. It was supposed to be the dry season but the city was soaked everyday at unpredictable hours. I was staying at one of the kindergartens and was told each time I visited Dieu Giac that Nun Nhu Tri, the orphanage's director, was either busy bailing buckets in some part of the temple, or out in the countryside distributing food to flood victims. At least since the raising of the orphanage's foundation, funded by the Freunde der Erziehungskunst and Credit Suisse a few years ago, the children, staff and visitors at the orphanage area have been spared the indignity of wading, with trouser legs rolled up, through sewage water up to their knees. Nowadays it is only a playful splash. And so I dared venture there, rain and all.

**The children** – There seem to be quite a few new under-five children beside the ones at kindergarten. The babies are looked after by the housemothers, & toddlers are under the care of older 'siblings' during the time before siesta and afternoon classes. There is constant activity with the 2 small half covered vans transporting children of middle years to adolescence backwards & forwards to school. Each one in uniform and on returning to the Orphanage they never fail to line up in front of Nhu Tri's office to pay respect to their 'master' and her guests with the palms of their hands pressed together in front of their chest. It is such a heart-warming sight.

**Children with special needs** - Not all children are so fortunate to have normal health. My Ai is a spastic child who was picked up from the pavement as a baby and has now reached the age of eight. She is completely paralysed and has been in and out of hospital for the past year due to degenerative complications. She was discharged the week before because the hospital staff thought there was nothing else they could do for her. One day her breathing became critically laborious and she was brought to the temple for round-the-clock prayers and intensive care. Within forty eight hours, she stabilised again and was transferred back to the dormitory which she shares with 24 other girls.

Duyen is the baby with a hole in her heart. Thanks to support from the doctors, hospital, Vietnam Heart Foundation and private donors from Australia and other countries, she had an operation over a year ago. It was considered a success and Duyen is back at the orphanage with her health improved although she still needs to be hospitalised now and then when things relapse.

Many visitors are familiar with Thien Son, a bright happy little boy with partial brain damage. When he was younger Son could not see, walk, talk or move at all. But his joyful smile was his trademark from the beginning. With a lot of love and patience from everyone around, not least from treatments with professional kinaesiologists from Australia, working within the VCP's Health and Wellbeing project, Son has made a big leap in his development. He is now 7, his clear bright and humorous eyes moving freely, sometimes looking directly at you briefly, his typical smile lighting up his whole face. He can almost speak and understands everything.

**Sue Harris** - On the day that I visited, Son was particularly happy because his special therapist, Sue, was with him. Sue had been to Dieu Giac three times before to work with Son as part of the kinesiologist group led by Anita Robertson and Lyn Francis from Bowral.



As I watched, Sue massaged his legs, exercised different parts of his body and, holding his 2 hands, assisted him to get up on his feet. Son was beaming with happiness, trying to take a step. 'The next thing,' Sue said, 'is to get his special shoes'. So we talked to Nhu Tri, called his doctor for advice and instructions as to where such shoes could be ordered. Yesterday I received an email from an ecstatic Sue, '...And Thien Son has got his shoes. He loves them; he loves 'walking' (with help) in them. And he does not want to take them off, even when he goes to sleep! He will walk one day.' Sue has been there 6 months.

Tuyet Nhung is yet another child who has benefitted from Sue's care. She is 13, tall and beautiful in appearance but with the mental capacity of a 5-year-old. With regular exercises and practice, it is hoped that she will be able to read and write basic sentences one day.

Sue is planning, if possible, to stay in Vietnam indefinitely to work with 'her' children at Dieu Giac. The plan, initiated by Leonie Raffan some years ago, to

establish a Medical Fund is still in an embryonic stage & we continue to hope for donations to make this possible. The fund would cover emergency costs such as hospitalisation, & support children under Sue's care by purchasing special reading books, orthopaedic shoes, prams, wheel chairs etc.

***The Tertiary Project*** – Due to personal circumstances, Leonie Raffan has had to extend her leave from the Tertiary project. Others in the VCP, Susanna in particular, has taken it on and done what she can with it.

The most recent successful case is Nguyen Phuc Phung. Phung has been sponsored by a family in Bowral since she was a young child. The same sponsors followed through with her four year university study in Hospitality and Tourism. She graduated this August and now works at one of the large tourist offices in Ho Chi Minh. She is particularly pleased to be able to learn English so that she can now write to her sponsoring family and occasionally telephone them, even though she invariably gets the time wrong and wakes them up in the middle of the night!

Hien Hoa is in her 3<sup>rd</sup> year of an Achitectural design course. She and her sponsor, also from Bowral, have recently begun emailing each other in English. Three current year-12 students have already been promised a scholarship to attend university – Hoai Thanh plans to study Accountancy; Loc is determined to gain a place in the prestigious Architecture course; Lien wants to enrol in Industrial Designs.

There are about 10 students ready to go to university in September 2012. Through pursuing tertiary & vocational study these young people hope to fulfil their dream of being financially independent on leaving the orphanage. If you feel inspired to help them through sponsorship or donation please contact Susanna at [susanna.pearson@googlemail.com](mailto:susanna.pearson@googlemail.com)

## ***KINDERGARTEN PROJECT***

***Dieu Giac Kindergarten*** is at its best at present. The building isn't spacious, with no expensive technological equipment, or parents in stylish clothes with fashionable cars, which is the conventional way to judge the quality of a school in Vietnam. But at very few other places can you meet little children who are so happy, self confident, creative and self sufficient in many ways. They play contentedly by themselves, listen spellbound to a story told by their teacher, enthusiastically eat at the table while chatting softly and sociably & finish by washing & drying their own dishes. Seldom is a dish broken & no fighting or foul play occurs. Many visitors have expressed incredulity at these behaviours and the peaceful atmosphere of the class. The three teachers from the orphanage work together harmoniously. Lam, one of the assistants who got married last year is expecting a baby by the end of the year. According to the government's rules she will be allowed to stay home with the baby for 8 weeks before returning to teaching. Asked if she would like to stay away longer, Lam replies, "But I will miss the children at the kindergarten too much..." Besides, there are always grandmothers, aunts and relatives at home longing to care for the baby. That is how it is in this culture.



The teachers however predict there may be less children entering the next school year in September 2011 because the economic situation in the country has greatly changed. It's no longer as easy to find a job in the city and so the poor farmers from the countryside will not be migrating as much to the big industrial centres. But one never knows; as ever the streets seem teeming with homeless destitute children wandering about.

***Tho Trang Childcare Centre*** – The centre has been open over a year at its new location but still hasn't found its feet yet in the big city. The main problem is competition with a multitude of other early childhood establishments in the area, and the difficulty of recruiting suitable teachers. In the middle of this year, Tho Trang lost 4 of its teachers to other government-subsidised private kindergartens which are the new rage. As a result, half of the children were taken out by their parents and the other half remained rather shaken and bewildered. It took a long time for new teachers to be sufficiently trained to carry out the task of educating children in the humane way befitting a Steiner kindergarten but by the end of November, the atmosphere has regained its calm and joy and the children relaxed into a happy rhythm again. The teachers have now begun preparations for the popular nativity puppet show and the children are once again looking forward to the joyful festivities of Christmas.

There still seems a long way before Tho Trang can settle down to its old stature of 5 years ago but the 4 current teachers – 2 old and 2 new – are determined to try. They are an exceptionally positive and competent group and the children have been divided into 2 age-appropriate classes, from 2 to 3 year-old and from 4 to 5 year old.

***Thanh Lan kindergarten*** – Thanh Lan continues to grow from strength to strength. The teachers have made a sensible decision to keep class numbers low, at 20 to 25 in each, so life is much calmer and enjoyable for the children and teachers. By the New Year, Thanh Lan will open a second nursery class, making each group even smaller for the very young – 10 to 15 each. For the moment the efforts seem to concentrate on training 2 teachers for this new group alongside other teachers who have just joined the school. It is a perpetual problem in Asia – very few kindergarten teachers stay for long. It seems a pattern related to the traditional and cultural attitude in all Asian societies: the aim is to try to get on in life, in the teaching profession it means leaving a private school for a government school, getting promoted from kindergarten to primary to secondary teacher, school manager, then principal or school owner etc. This leads to the constant issue of finding and training

new teachers. The hope lies in teacher training – the hope that one day the teacher trainees will come to understand the importance of getting better and better at the task and how this would benefit the children in their care.

Thanh Lan parents are, however, very appreciative. Teacher Lan reports that this year only a handful of 5-year-olds will leave to go to a government primary school. This degree of loyalty and commitment is quite unheard of.

Most of the teachers at Thanh Lan are Catholic and Christmas celebrations will be more elaborate here than at other places, despite the fact that 80% of the families are non-Christian. The children will act out a Nativity circle play with dressed up characters, to be presented to parents and visitors as well as sing Christmas carols. They are special Vietnamese ones except for translated universal songs such as Silent Night and Jingle Bells.

### ***TEACHER TRAINING PROJECT –***

This project has been receiving more attention than normal during 2010. Thanks to a grant from the International Movement for Waldorf Early Childhood Education, two experienced foreign teachers were invited to Ho Chi Minh City to mentor the teachers, & especially to train the new ones. One of the trainers came in July/August from England and the other is from Australia and will be arriving at the end of December. Thanh Cherry also came twice this year to visit Dieu Giac orphanage and oversees the 5 kindergarten classes. The teachers have certainly felt a new surge of energy and enthusiasm from all this attention.

Hang, the first teacher at Dieu Giac kindergarten, who has been studying at the Melbourne R. Steiner Teacher Training Seminar for the last 2 years is due to return home in December. She's had a wonderful 2 years in Australia and is looking forward to applying her new skills & knowledge in helping the children in Vietnam. We would like to express our special thanks to the Melbourne Seminar for their generosity and hospitality toward Hang, and wish Hang a propitious beginning to her new journey.

2010 has been a good year at the Vietnam Children's Project. We owe our achievements to all of our loyal and generous sponsors and donors throughout the years, past and present.

From the team we wish you a joyful Christmas & inspired New Year. Please remember if you're looking for an alternative expression of the Christmas spirit, one off donations will help provide little extras for the children in 2011.

Thanh Cherry  
Chairperson  
Mittagong Dec 2010