

October 9, 2005

Dear Friends,

We hope this letter finds you and your loved ones in good health. The horrendous hurricanes Katrina and Rita brought much destruction to the Gulf Coast and uprooted hundreds of thousands of families from their homes. Our hearts are with the families. We have witnessed amazing responses to assist those affected by these calamities and many of us have done what we can to alleviate the suffering and loss of our people. At the same time, these catastrophes have exposed the agonizing poverty that exists in this country. We returned from Viet Nam shortly before Katrina hit the coast with such ferocious force and found ourselves still floating between times: Faces of Viet Nam swirled in spiral with faces of Louisiana and shot like an arrow straight to our hearts. There is so much to do here at home, and elsewhere in the world.

Every year we come to Viet Nam with the convictions of “peace makers,” as one Vietnamese teacher observed at the end of this year’s training. We come with the desire to rekindle human kindness by helping children and families of lesser fortune. We come as educators who long to connect and to share our experiences with teachers in Viet Nam and to immerse ourselves in the culture of Viet Nam. In addition to participating in Traversing Borders: Viet Nam Teacher Training Program, team members also visited CHEER projects including a clean water system, and presented 80 scholarships and 102 study-corners to new students, as well as no-interest revolving loans to 20 families.

Every year we come with joy and return with new possibilities!



Ha Noi

We spent half a day at Thanh Xuan Peace Village with 100 children affected by the deadly Agent Orange. We saw a few new faces but most of the children have been there for years, and in some cases for over a decade. The medical equipment is getting better: a new physical therapy machine has been added and new ultrasound equipment has eased the diagnostic work for the doctors.

Children in the physical therapy room are individually cared for by a trained therapist...one child at a time, one step at a time. In a classroom upstairs more than 30 boys and girls ages five to ten greeted us with laughter and songs. The classroom was adorned with children’s drawings. A poster newspaper records their individual writings and poems. Many of the children eagerly sang along as we taught them a new song with hand gestures; some simply cuddled in our embraces. Across the hall is a larger classroom for vocational training. Boys patiently braided colorful friendship bands with intricate designs. Girls quietly passed needles through a white piece of cloth stretched on a circular frame to embroider pink camellias. At the other end of the classroom, a teacher moved from one desk to the other to check on the students. Some read out loud, others meticulously copied from a book. A few were daydreaming.



Dr. Nguyen Thi Thanh Phuong, the Village's director, presented CHEER with a Certificate of Appreciation and reminded us how important it is for the people of the U.S. to understand and know about these children of Agent Orange, a legacy of war lingering now in the third generation. To acknowledge the violent imprints of the scars of war on these innocent children is as important as to witness their optimism. For them there is no choice but to live as if life is a gift. We were profoundly touched by their spirit and dignity.



The CHEER team arrived in Hue on August 6 and was warmly greeted by representatives of the Learning Resource Center, and facilitators from VTTP 2004 and 2005. Our team included: Amanda Steiman, Randy Grant, Yeu-Wei Yee, Dr. Lillian Utsumi, Dr. Brock Klein, Minh-Tam Doan Nguyen, Viet An Doan Nguyen and myself.



2005 VTTP was CHEER's greatest success.

Hue is a city of quiet charm with the limpid Huong River meandering along the banks of green hills and among ancient palaces. We were greeted with 102-degree heat, intense tropical humidity and the warmth of our 2003 and 2004 teachers. We stayed at the same hotel on the right riverbank, five minutes from Hue University Learning Resource Center (LRC). Hotel staff greeted us like family members. The cyclo pedalists were happy to see us, as were the members of the cooking staff who fed us delicious Hue cuisine every day.

Dr. Huynh Dinh Chien, LRC's director, welcomed 67 teacher participants and the 11-member American and Vietnamese teaching team at the opening ceremony. He acknowledged CHEER's valuable contribution to the professional development of Hue University and Hue High School teachers of English who are in need of training and support. He pledged to facilitate CHEER's projects in the future and expressed the hope that CHEER will continue its partnership with Hue University and his Center. Thua Thien-Hue Television covered the event and reported it on the evening news.

The Viet Nam Teacher Training Program (VTTP) 2005 was a two-tiered model based on the needs of the Vietnamese teachers of English language. The program provided both Vietnamese and American teachers a unique opportunity to interact professionally, to develop new ways to collaborate and experience learning, and to deepen their appreciation and understanding of both cultures.

In Tier 1, 21 college and 16 high school teachers formed a community of eager learners who generously cooperated, exchanged experiences, were open to new ideas and ready to apply innovative methodologies in teaching English. The team's enthusiasm was contagious and inspiring. Each team member brought his/her unique specialty to the course. In addition to teachers and assistants from the United States (Randy Grant, Amanda Steiman, Yeu-Wei Yee, Viet-An Nguyen and Minh-Tam Nguyen) the team welcomed the participation of Le Thi Ngoc Lan, Tran Pham Minh Duc and Tran Thi Ai Thanh as facilitators from Viet Nam.

"Before coming here, we didn't know what to expect. However, on this very last day, we can say that we have lived unforgettable moments. We have not only become teachers but also painters, photographers, cooks, signers, dancers, writers, lyric writers, playwrights and poets. Isn't it wonderful?"

“Our heart-felt thanks always go to you, our beloved trainers, who have exerted such great charm and enthusiasm, who have filled our hearts with touching stories, exciting adventures and brilliant ideas to share with our students at a later stage.”

Tier 2, based on the three-year evaluation of VTTP, offered returning participants an opportunity to improve their professional capacity, develop a higher-level repertoire of effective EFL strategies and practices and to organize a conference on EFL for Tier 1 participants. Drs. Lillian Utsumi, Brock Klein and Doan Thi Nam-Hau facilitated this project-based workshop attended by 26 returning teachers. The teachers organized a professional conference entitled “*Active Teaching, Active Learning: A Conference for EFL Instructors*” with thirteen workshops run concurrently in the morning and afternoon on the eighth day of the training. The conference was a success “beyond expectations!”

“At first we felt like we were crawling into a dark cave with no end...we were scared, unsure, skeptical. We asked ourselves, ‘What are they doing to us?’ As the days went by, it became clearer and yes, there was light at the end of the tunnel.”

“It is hard to believe that I have survived and am still full of energy right now after ten days tearing myself apart for Tier 2 activities and for family and teaching commitments. It was exhausting but also very rewarding. I think I have grown up quite quickly the last ten days, as an English teacher, a presenter and also a conference organizer. Too much for such a short time. How wonderful.”

Closing Ceremony. Professor Nguyen Vien Tho, President of Hue University, congratulated the teachers for their successful participation in the training and sent his deepest gratitude to the CHEER Board of Directors for having made this training available to his teachers. He said he hoped CHEER would continue to pay attention to Hue University and strengthen the partnership between the two organizations.

Each teacher received a Certificate of Achievement, a stipend and a T-shirt. Ten Tier 1 and five Tier 2 teachers received scholarship awards for their excellent participation in the training. All teachers anticipate CHEER’s return for another training in 2006. Tier 2 participants are ready to organize a regional conference for their colleagues from six provinces in central Viet Nam.

Hue University of Foreign Languages (HUFL)

Drs. Lillian Utsumi, Brock Klein and I met the new rector of Hue University of Foreign Languages (HUFL) to discuss the relationship between CHEER and HUFL. Professor Tran Van Phuoc, a graduate of Portland University, was selected to lead this university last year.

The university is housed in a temporary building while the new school is being built. According to Dr. Phuoc, one of the main problems of foreign assistance to his English department is the lack of continuity. “However,” Dr. Phuoc said, “CHEER has returned for the third time.” He acknowledged CHEER’s contribution to the training of his faculty and was open to signing a Memo of Understanding with CHEER as early as September 2005. He also agreed to allocate a site for CHEER’s Teacher Resource and Learning Center when the new university is finished in three years.



Duc Son Orphanage and Kindergarten

Despite the busy schedule, team members were able to visit CHEER's projects in Hue and in A Luoi Valley.

The team visited Duc Son Orphanage and Kindergarten on the outskirts of Hue City. We met Reverend Nun Thich Minh Tu and her staff. Almost 200 orphans are housed in this peaceful center, established 15 years ago. In addition to attending regular classes, older children are taught skills such as carpentry, furniture and toy making. The classes are taught either by volunteers or retired teachers who receive small stipends. They stay in a humble but clean and airy facility. Meals are modest but nutritious.

Dormitories are divided by gender and age. Their college students return during the summer and help the staff care for the younger children. Among the twenty orphans who have secured good jobs, ten have also married.

We spent the whole afternoon singing and dancing with the children. Just as last year, the children at Duc Son Orphanage left a profound impression with our team. We took turns visiting them almost daily. We taught them songs, English and arts.



Nghia Lo Kindergarten

The Association for the Handicapped and Orphans of Thua Thien-Hue arranged the trip to Nghia Lo village to dedicate the newly built kindergarten. We were disappointed that the building was not finished as we had expected. The head of the village apologized for the delay and promised completion in time for the new school year in the fall. The project is a joint effort between the villagers and CHEER, under the meticulous supervision of AHO's secretary, Mr. Nguyen Hong Thu. The two new classrooms will be equipped with a full bathroom and will welcome 60 children from the village. The following donors made this project possible: Dr. Ton That Chieu (\$2000), Tran Lam Vien (\$2000), Ton Huy Anh (\$1000) and Ann Tonnu (\$2000.)



Phu Mau 1
Elementary School

After the afternoon class on August 13th, the team joined the Association of Handicapped and Orphans of Thus Thien-Hue (AHO) Executive Board for the CHEER scholarship and study-corner award ceremony. One hundred and two Phu Mau 1 students waited patiently for their turn to receive the awards while the school principal, the teachers and village elders were arranging the ceremony. Seventy-two students received study-corners and 30 students were awarded scholarships, including notebooks, pens and pencils, a school uniform and 100,000 VND. The new school library and gate were being built and will be finished in time for the 2005 school year.



A Luoi Valley

Brock Klein, Yeu-Wei Yee, Viet-An Nguyen and I rode in the 16-seat van with the AHO Executive Board to A Luoi Valley. After two hours passing through breathtaking green mountains and rushing rivers, we were warmly greeted at A Luoi's main auditorium by Mr. Ho Van Vai and Ms. Nguyen Thi Phuong, President and Secretary of A Luoi AHO. The auditorium was packed with students, parents and new families participating in the loan program. Dignitaries of A Luoi Province were present to praise CHEER's contribution to the alleviation of poverty in the province and its effort to assist A Luoi students to excel in their studies. Sixty elementary students received scholarships and study-corners. Ten seniors and 10 college students received scholarships, while twenty new families received non-interest revolving loans.

We also visited the bead-weaving cooperative, the “hot spot” (the area designated by the government as highly contaminated with dioxin residue) in A Shau Valley, and a clean water system, and delivered gifts to ten families affected by Agent Orange. At the bead-weaving cooperative, Mrs. Mai Thi Hop, the head artisan of the co-op, reported that it has expanded to include 25 new artisans and has secured a workshop in Hue City.

The vast and beautiful A Shau Valley is still littered with bomb craters. Due to unexpected rain the road was impassable so the Ashau village head received the gifts on behalf of the ten participating families.



On behalf of the CHEER board I would like to once again express our gratitude for your continued support of and valuable contributions to CHEER’s many projects in Viet Nam. As you can see, 2005 has been another year filled with exciting challenges, which give us momentum to charge ahead. We have accomplished so much together, with so little! There is much more to do as our projects in Viet Nam expand. In order to support the ambitious initiatives we must increase our fundraising.

We are preparing for the 2005 Craft Sale. Mark your calendar: **Sunday, November 27, 2005, 10:00 am –4:00 pm in Santa Monica, California.** The location will be sent to you later.

Your support over the years has helped improve the lives of many families in Viet Nam and provided opportunities for hundreds of teachers and their young students to achieve success. We ask you to join us, once again, to plant another seed of peace.

Minh Phuong, a young Vietnamese teacher, wrote the following lyrics, modeled on John Lennon’s “Imagine,” as one of many creative activities we provided during the training:

Imagine
Imagine there’s no fighting
No more tears running down!
No more blood shed,
No more towns destroyed.
Imagine all the nations,
Living just for LOVE.
Imagine no nuclear power,
It is possible!
No more atomic bombs!
No more “Hiroshimas”
Imagine all the children,

Folding paper cranes
“You may say I’m a dreamer,
but I’m not the only one.”
I hope some day we’ll hold hands,
And cross our fingers for PEACE.
Imagine no terrorism,
I believe it’s so wrong.
No need for threats or vengeance.
An endless circle of laughter.
Imagine all the nations,
Sharing the same DREAMS.
M. Phuong , 2005

Peace and Love,

Nam-Hau for CHEER and our teaching team