FoVO

Friends of Vietnam Orphanages Inc.

Helping disadvantaged communities in Vietnam

Report to Donors

2011 Financial Year

REGISTERED CHARITY · acnc.gov.au/charityregister

REPORT TO DONORS 2011

Introduction

The 2011 financial year records the beginnings of what became Friends of Hướng Phương Orphanage Inc and, later, Friends of Vietnam Orphanages Inc (FoVO).

The work began before there was a charity.

During visits to Hướng Phương village in Quảng Bình Province, Central Vietnam, practical assistance was provided using personal savings and donations from family and friends in Australia. The assistance grew out of volunteer work with the small orphanage and the community of Catholic sisters who operated it.

The early projects were simple and practical. They included washing machines to reduce the workload of the sisters, bicycles for people travelling to school and church, computers and internet access, medical assistance, improved garbage disposal and equipment for the convent and orphanage. Other assistance included a rice harvesting machine, expansion of the orphanage chicken farm and small assistance to people in the village.

The approach was still experimental. We asked people what they needed, bought things locally where possible and tried to see for ourselves whether the assistance was useful. There was no office or paid staff in Australia or Vietnam.

A simple form of donor accountability was also beginning to develop. Individual donors were told what their money had purchased, often with the Vietnamese cost and photographs of the completed assistance.

FORMATION OF THE ASSOCIATION

Towards the end of the financial year, on **2 June 2011, Friends of Hướng Phương Orphanage Inc** was registered as an incorporated association in the ACT, registration number A05147.

The first committee had seven members, four of whom were Australian-Vietnamese.

The original objective was:
“Raise funds and send funds to support the orphanage at Huong Phuong. Provide funding for tertiary education of women from the monastic community that runs the orphanage.”

That narrow objective lasted only a few weeks.

At the first General Meeting on 30 July 2011, the objective was broadened beyond the orphanage and monastic community to include Hướng Phương village and surrounding villages:
“Create and run assistance programs; raise funds and send funds to Vietnam, to help the orphanage, monastic order, village community of Huong Phuong and surrounding villages.”

This meeting also marked the first use of the simple “Friends of Huong Phuong Orphanage” letterhead.

The change reflected what was already happening on the ground. The work had begun with the orphanage, but practical needs and opportunities for assistance were also being encountered among the sisters, village residents and surrounding communities.

Project Expenditure

Contemporary records identify $4,500 of assistance provided during this formative period. Other projects were funded directly by Peter and individual donors before the association had developed a single system of financial recording. Where the project and expenditure can be established with reasonable confidence from the surviving records and recollections, these have also been included in this reconstructed report.

Total assistance recorded in this report is $8,650.

Every dollar donated for these projects went to assistance in Vietnam. Personal travel and administration expenses were paid separately.

This stayed the guarantee to donors over the next 15 years.

We thank the family members, friends, volunteers and other donors who helped this small charity get started.

Peter Kabaila
Friends of Hướng Phương Orphanage

REPORT TO DONORS 2011

Project Summary

How Your $8,650 Was Spent

NO.	PROJECT	AUD	MILLION VND
1	Computers and Internet Access	**$2,100**	41.4
2	Washing Machines for the Sisters	**$400**	7.9
3	Six Bicycles for the Orphanage	**$450**	8.9
4	Garbage Collection at the Orphanage	**$275**	5.4
5	Eye Examinations and Treatment	**$50**	1.0
6	Mary of La Vang Carved Wooden Statues	**$685**	13.5
7	Digital Camera for Sister Huong	**$540**	10.6
8	Rice Cutting Machine	**$1,100**	21.7
9	Orphanage Chicken Farm	**$400**	7.9
10	Equipment for Duyen's Village Café	**$200**	3.9
11	Construction Safety Equipment and Student Volunteer Program	**$600**	11.8
12	Second-hand Laptops for University Students	**$1,500**	29.6
13	Yamaha Keyboard	**$300**	5.9
14	Convent Kitchen Lighting	**$50**	1.0
	TOTAL	**$8,650**	**170.5**

VND converted at the Reserve Bank of Australia average rate for the financial year, approximately 1.97 million VND = AUD $100.

REPORT TO DONORS 2011

Assistance to the Orphanage and Convent During Easter 2011

The question of how to improve life on the ground at the orphanage is not a simple one. Sponsorship is scattered across many sources and there is no transparency about these. I am not very religious, but took the approach that practical aspects of physical comfort and health are inextricably linked with the spiritual life of the convent and orphanage.

Some people at the orphanage can attend school and have a sunny disposition. Others are severely brain-damaged and depressing to see. The orphanage is not always a happy place. Some people have to be hand fed, hand washed, bedded and taken to the toilet. This is thankless, challenging and unseen work. Several nuns who have taken their final vows are permanent staff at the orphanage. Other young sisters from the convent are rotated in approximately 3-month shifts for this challenging work.



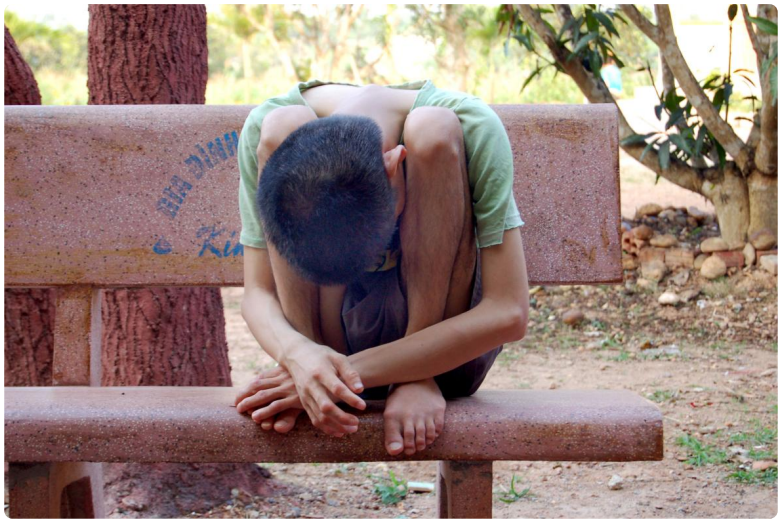
Thuong being fed by Sister Loi.



Sister Loi feeds a small child.



Sister Loi is young and bright. She has been posted to work a three month rotation at the orphanage.



The orphanage is not always a happy place. Working with the poor at the orphanage demands personal sacrifice.



Sister Lan cools a new baby with a fan.



Left to right: Mother Superior Sister Hoa, Na, --, Phi, Hue.

REPORT TO DONORS 2011

1. Computers and Internet Access

Orphanage and convent computer facilities — $2,100

Description

Computer and internet facilities were upgraded at both Hướng Phương Orphanage and the adjoining convent.

At the orphanage, the existing computer was old and had no internet connection. A new computer, printer, speaker system, webcam and USB internet connection were installed. Fluorescent lighting was also installed in the computer room.

The facilities were intended for four school students living at the orphanage, two young men in wheelchairs who were largely self-educated, and three deaf women who had not been taught conventional sign language.

At the convent, younger sisters had little or no access to the existing computer facilities. Two internet-connected computers with webcams and speakers and a printer were installed for their use. New power points, wall-mounted fans and fluorescent lighting were also installed. Basic computer training was arranged.

Project expenditure

- Orphanage computer room and internet facilities — $700
- Convent computer room and associated improvements — $1,400

Total: $2,100

Observation

The internet immediately provided the school students and other residents with access to information that had previously been unavailable.

One of the deaf women saw sign language on the internet for the first time. Her face lit up with recognition and she immediately began copying the signs she could see on the screen.

At the convent, the new facilities gave the younger sisters access to computers, email and the internet for study and communication.

Reflection

This was one of the largest areas of assistance during the year. Computers were becoming ordinary educational tools in Australia but access remained limited at Hướng Phương.

The most memorable result was also one that had not been anticipated when the equipment was purchased: internet access opened up the possibility for the deaf women to learn Vietnamese sign language.

The story of that first encounter with sign language is included in Stories from the Year.



Vietnam post delivering the new computers and printers to the convent.



Left to right: Sang, Huong, Danh, Hang, Oanh, Tram. Dang is wheelchair bound and self-educated in reading, writing and computer use.



Left to right: Nam, Na, Oanh. These two deaf and dumb women have never been taught a conventional sign language. For the first time, they will be able to learn Vietnamese sign language via the internet.



Sister Tuyen at the new convent computers.

REPORT TO DONORS 2011

2. Washing Machines for the Sisters

Two washing machines — $400

Description

Early donors provided two washing machines for the convent at Hướng Phương.

Around 30 to 40 sisters lived in the community and much of their clothing was being washed by hand.

The suggestion of buying a washing machine had initially met with resistance. Sister Hương explained that the sisters had taken a vow of poverty and therefore could not have a washing machine.

By the next visit, the idea had been reconsidered. Two machines were eventually purchased.

Project expenditure

- First washing machine — approximately 4M VND ($200)
- Second washing machine — approximately 4.2M VND ($200) Total: $400

Observation

The washing machines were a simple labour-saving measure for a community in which a great deal of work was still done manually.

The purchase itself became memorable. Sister Hương and Sister Tuyên spent about half a day comparing the washing machines available in the two shops at Ba Đồn before making their decision.

The machines then had to be transported back to Hướng Phương. Each boxed washing machine was carried on the back of a motorbike.

Reflection

At first, a washing machine seemed to the sisters to be an unnecessary luxury inconsistent with their vow of poverty. In practice, it reduced the time spent on repetitive manual work and was soon accepted as an ordinary and useful piece of equipment.

The story of the purchase is included in Stories from the Year.



Laundry machine perched on a motor scooter at the shop for delivery to the convent.

REPORT TO DONORS 2011

3. Six Bicycles for the Orphanage

Everyday transport — $450

Description

Six new bicycles were purchased for people at Hướng Phương Orphanage who needed transport to school, church and other activities.

When additional bicycles were first suggested, the response was that there were already enough and bicycles could be borrowed when necessary.

The number of regular bicycle users was then counted. There were 14.

Six additional bicycles were purchased from donated funds to complete the fleet.

Project expenditure

- Six bicycles — approximately 9.9M VND

Total: $450

Observation

The bicycles were ordinary Vietnamese road bicycles with baskets and were immediately available for everyday use.

The need only became apparent after the actual number of people regularly travelling by bicycle was counted. Contemporary photographs show the new bicycles lined up outside the orphanage with their users.

Reflection

This was a very simple early project. Rather than assuming either that more bicycles were needed or that the existing bicycles were sufficient, we counted the people who actually needed them.

Six more bicycles turned out to be the answer.



Left to right: Lieu, Huyen, Hoa, Mai, Linh, Oanh, Nam.



Left to right: Lieu, Huyen, Hoa, Mai, Linh, Oanh, Nam.



Left to right: Linh, Oanh, Nam.

REPORT TO DONORS 2011

4. Garbage Collection at the Orphanage

Steel garbage skip — $275

Description

A steel garbage skip was purchased for Hướng Phương Orphanage so that rubbish could be collected by the local garbage truck.

Before this, rubbish was being stored in piles within the orphanage grounds and then burned in an open fire.

The skip was funded by a donation from Vytas Kabaila.

Project expenditure

- Steel garbage skip — 6M VND ($275)

Total: $275

Observation

This was a straightforward improvement to everyday sanitation at the orphanage. It allowed rubbish to be stored in one place and removed by the local garbage service rather than accumulated and burned within the grounds.

Reflection

Some of the most useful early projects were ordinary pieces of infrastructure. The garbage skip was not an exciting purchase, but it solved a practical problem immediately.

REPORT TO DONORS 2011

5. Eye Examinations and Treatment

Assistance for Sisters Huyen and Hiep — $50

Description

Sisters Huyen and Hiep had both complained of painful eyes and were concerned that they might need glasses.

Eye examinations were arranged for both young women. Their eyesight was found to be generally good and the problem was inflammation, for which they were given medication.

Following the examinations, each sister was also given a blessed chain and crucifix from Thiên An Monastery at Huế.

Project expenditure

- Eye examinations, medication and blessed chains and crucifixes — approximately 1M VND Total: $50

Observation

Neither sister required glasses and medication was provided for the inflammation.

The assistance was funded from small donations made by early donors in Australia.

Reflection

This was a tiny project in financial terms, responding directly to a concern raised by the two young women.

The visit to the doctor and the subsequent trip to Thiên An Monastery are included in Stories from the Year.

REPORT TO DONORS 2011

6. Mary of La Vang Carved Wooden Statues

Huong Phuong and Canberra — $685

Description

Two carved timber statues of Our Lady of La Vang were purchased during the year.

The first was made for the new chapel at Hướng Phương Orphanage. It was carved by a Vietnamese craftsperson and had a dedication at its base:
“PRAY FOR VIDA MIKAILA b 1928 KAUNAS LITHUANIA”
The statue was purchased as a family gift for Peter's mother's birthday, with the cost shared by Peter, his brother and sister.

A second carved statue of Our Lady of La Vang was obtained for St Vincent's Church at Aranda in Canberra. It was intended to help raise awareness and donations for the Hướng Phương orphanage.

Project expenditure

- Our Lady of La Vang statue for Hướng Phương Orphanage chapel — $365
- Our Lady of La Vang fundraising statue for St Vincent's Church, Aranda — $320

Total: $685

Observation

The Hướng Phương statue was purchased from the Thiên An Monastery shop at Huế and transported back to the village by taxi and bus.

The Canberra statue provided a physical connection between supporters in Australia and the orphanage in Vietnam. A donations box accompanied the statue at St Vincent's Church.

Reflection

These projects also show how the early work was being built through personal contacts and small-scale crowd funding.

The Hướng Phương statue began as a family gift, with Peter, his brother and sister sharing the cost. The second statue took the idea further by providing a visible focus for donations at St Vincent's Church in Canberra.

At this early stage, the association did not have a large donor base. Personal contributions, family members, friends and church contacts could be brought together to fund a project or encourage further donations. This became one way in which a small amount of individual support could be leveraged into something larger.

The journey of the first statue from Huế to Hướng Phương is included in Stories from the Year.



Dedication at base of the statue.



Wood carver Hoc stands next to the Mary statue.

REPORT TO DONORS 2011

7. Digital Camera for Sister Huong

Camera for project and orphanage records — $540

Description

A digital camera was provided to Sister Huong at Hướng Phương.

Photography was becoming an important way of recording activities at the orphanage and showing donors in Australia what their assistance had provided. Sister Huong was given some basic instruction in using the camera and managing photographs on a computer.

Project expenditure

- Digital camera — $540

Total: $540

Observation

The camera allowed the sisters themselves to photograph activities, people and completed assistance rather than relying entirely on photographs taken during visits from Australia.

It also provided a simple way of sending photographs electronically for donor reports and correspondence.

Reflection

The camera was not assistance to an individual in the same sense as medical treatment or a bicycle. It was a practical tool that helped the people at Hướng Phương make their own record of what was happening.

It also became part of the simple donor accountability that was developing during this first year: photographs could show donors what had actually been purchased or completed.

REPORT TO DONORS 2011

8. Rice Cutting Machine

Reducing the labour of cutting rice by hand — $1,100

Description

A rice cutting machine was purchased for the sisters at Hướng Phương after they identified cutting rice as one of their most arduous seasonal jobs.

Much of the agricultural work undertaken by the monastic community was still done by hand. During the rice harvest, sisters could be called back from their pastoral work to help cut rice manually.

Friends Clive and Eric contributed $500 towards the machine. Peter personally provided the remaining $600.

The machine became only the second rice cutting machine in Hướng Phương village.

Project expenditure

- Rice cutting machine — $1,100

Total: $1,100

Observation

The purchase involved travelling with Sister Tuyen, who was interpreting, and other local people to find and inspect a suitable machine.

A local mechanic assisted with the selection. The machine was assembled and tested before payment was finally handed over.

The intention was first to use it for the sisters' own rice crop. When it was not required by the convent, there was also the possibility of hiring it to other village farmers, with the income helping to pay for petrol and maintenance.

After the purchase and associated costs, a small amount of money remained. This was used to buy inexpensive bathroom towels for the 40 sisters at Hướng Phương.

Reflection

This was an early attempt to use a relatively small amount of money to reduce a large amount of repetitive manual labour.

It was also another example of combining contributions to make a larger purchase possible. A $500 contribution from friends was supplemented by $600 of personal funding.

The sisters had identified the problem themselves, local knowledge was used to select the machine, and it was tested before payment was made.

The eventful journey to purchase the rice cutting machine is included in Stories from the Year.



Shopping and discussion



Assembly for testing



Sisters proud of their new labour-saving rice-cutting machine

REPORT TO DONORS 2011

9. Orphanage Chicken Farm

Expansion of chicken raising — approximately $400

Description

Early donors provided approximately $400 to expand chicken raising at Hướng Phương Orphanage. The assistance came from Al and Vida in Canberra, Tom Smyth in Townsville, and an additional contribution to make up the amount required. The sisters chose the project themselves. The intention was to purchase about 500 chicks and extend the existing chicken sheds. The chickens would provide eggs and meat for the orphanage and convent, with the possibility that increased production could also provide some income.

Project expenditure

- Approximately 500 chicks and expansion of chicken sheds — approximately $400 Total: approximately $400

Observation

The Australian donors were concerned that the chickens should be raised humanely and asked about their living conditions. This caused some amusement at Hướng Phương. The sisters explained that the chickens had plenty of open space, were fed natural foods and were regularly allowed outside to roam.

Reflection

This was a small livelihood and food-production project rather than simply a donation of food. The sisters already knew how to raise chickens and had identified expansion of an existing activity as useful.

The exchange about Australian concern for the welfare of the chickens also became one of the more memorable conversations of the year. The story is included in Stories from the Year.



Visit to the existing orphanage chicken farm. Left to right: Amanda Gaunt, Sr Lua, Tom Smyth Sr Huong, Tien.

REPORT TO DONORS 2011

10. Equipment for Duyen's Village Café

Small business assistance — approximately $200

Description

Approximately $200 was provided to assist Duyen with her small café in Hướng Phương village. Duyen had lived with a disability since childhood following unsuccessful medical treatment. She operated the café while supporting her son and daughter. The café was also an important informal meeting place in the village. Rather than choosing the equipment for her, Duyen was given a budget and asked to decide what her business needed. With Sister Tuyen interpreting, she went shopping and selected and bargained for the items herself. Purchases included stainless-steel storage racks, tea cups, a water jug, serving trays, a small rubbish bin and other practical café equipment and improvements.

Project expenditure

- Café equipment and improvements — approximately $200 Total: approximately $200

Observation

Duyen knew exactly what she needed and negotiated the purchases herself. The equipment was then carried back to the café by motorbike. The project improved an existing small business rather than attempting to create a new livelihood for somebody from scratch.

Reflection

The important part of this project was not simply buying equipment. Duyen already operated the café and understood her customers and business. The assistance allowed her to choose improvements that she considered useful. The shopping expedition with Duyen is included in Stories from the Year.



Duyen seems happy with her new stainless steel storage shelves and café ware.

REPORT TO DONORS 2011

11. Construction Safety Equipment and Student Volunteer Program

Equipment, materials and improvements — $600

Description

Approximately $600 was spent on equipment, materials and small works associated with construction and visiting student volunteer activities at Hướng Phương.

Twenty-five sets of Vietnamese army-style work clothing were purchased mainly for the local construction crew. Twenty pairs of safety glasses and 25 hard hats were also provided for construction work, with visiting students able to borrow the protective equipment when needed.

Other expenditure included paint and brushes, hats and towels for the sisters, and repairs to the foundations of the Our Lady of La Vang shrine.

Project expenditure

- 25 sets of Vietnamese army -style work clothing, 20 pairs of safety glasses and 25 hard hats — $300
- Paint and brushes for statues — 2.2M VND
- 90 hats for the sisters — 2.25M VND
- 90 towels for the sisters — 3.6M VND
- Our Lady of La Vang shrine foundation repairs — 4M VND

Total: 12.05M VND ($600)

Observation

The army-style work clothing was appreciated and regularly used by the construction crew.

The safety equipment was less successful. Hard hats were available but were hardly ever worn. Safety glasses also tended to disappear. Even a pair secured by string to the steel-cutting bench saw was eventually souvenired.

The 90 hats and 90 towels supplemented 40 of each that had previously been personally provided, bringing the number available for the sisters to about 130.

The shrine work included materials, paid labour and assistance from village volunteers.

Reflection

This was an early lesson that providing equipment did not necessarily mean that it would be used in the way expected.

The army-style work clothes suited the construction crew and were readily adopted. Hard hats and safety glasses reflected Australian expectations about construction safety, but were much less readily adopted in practice.

The program also supported small practical jobs involving visiting students, the sisters and local workers. Restoration and care of the Our Lady of La Vang shrine continued after the students had left.

Sister Hanh's persistence in caring for the shrine is included in Stories from the Year.











Sister Hanh happy with the restoration progress.

REPORT TO DONORS 2011

12. Second-hand Laptops for University Students

Computers for tertiary study — approximately $1,500

Description

Several good second-hand laptop computers were purchased in Australia for young women from the Hướng Phương monastic community undertaking tertiary study.

The laptops were intended to provide students with basic computer access without the much greater cost of buying new equipment. The first was shared by two young women studying English-language teaching at Huế. Another was provided to a nursing student studying at Nha Trang.

The students came from relatively poor backgrounds and had limited financial support while undertaking their studies.

Project expenditure

- Second -hand laptop computers purchased in Australia — approximately $1,500

Total: approximately $1,500

Observation

Access to a computer was becoming increasingly important for tertiary study, but purchasing a new laptop represented a substantial expense.

Good second-hand computers available in Australia provided a practical alternative and could be taken to Vietnam for use by students.

Reflection

This was another early attempt to direct assistance towards education rather than buildings or short-term material support.

The computers were ordinary second-hand equipment in Australia but potentially valuable study tools for students with very limited resources.

REPORT TO DONORS 2011

13. Yamaha Keyboard

Portable music and choir equipment — approximately $300

Description

A Yamaha electronic keyboard was purchased locally in Vietnam for approximately $300.

The keyboard provided portable accompaniment for singing and choir activities associated with the sisters' work in Hướng Phương and surrounding communities.

Project expenditure

- Yamaha electronic keyboard — approximately $300

Total: approximately $300

Observation

Unlike a piano or other fixed instrument, the electronic keyboard could be moved and used for activities away from the convent.

It was a relatively inexpensive piece of equipment that could be used repeatedly.

Reflection

Not every early project addressed health, education or physical hardship directly. Music was also part of the community and pastoral work of the sisters.

The keyboard was a simple practical contribution to that work.

REPORT TO DONORS 2011

14. Convent Kitchen Lighting

Improved lighting for food preparation — approximately $50

Description

Additional fluorescent lighting was installed in the food preparation and washing-up areas of the Hướng Phương convent kitchen.

The sisters often began preparing food at about 3 am. This included chopping meat, cleaning fish and preparing chickens in poor light.

Approximately $50 was spent on lighting materials. The installation labour was provided without charge.

Project expenditure

- Fluorescent lights and associated electrical materials — approximately $50
- Installation labour — provided without charge

Total: approximately $50

Observation

The additional lighting initially seemed to be regarded as unnecessary. From an Australian workplace-safety perspective, however, using knives and preparing food before dawn in poor light seemed an obvious risk.

Once installed, the additional lighting quickly became part of the ordinary kitchen.

Reflection

This was one of the smallest projects of the year.

It required very little money and no paid labour, but made a frequently used working area safer and easier to use.

Sometimes a useful improvement was as simple as providing better light.

REPORT TO DONORS 2011

Stories from the Year

The Washing Machines and the Vow of Poverty

There were about 40 sisters living at Hướng Phương and a great deal of washing was still being done by hand. Buying a washing machine seemed an obvious way of saving time.

The first response was an emphatic “Không!” — No.

Sister Hương explained that the sisters had taken a vow of poverty. A washing machine was apparently inconsistent with that vow. I argued the point but got nowhere.

Three months later, something had changed. Sister Hương and Sister Tuyen came with me to Ba Đồn to buy washing machines. There were only two shops to compare, but this did not make the decision quick. The sisters spent about half a day examining the machines, comparing brands, specifications and prices and questioning the shopkeepers.

Eventually they chose two. Then came the problem of getting them home. Each boxed washing machine was carried back to Hướng Phương on the back of a motorbike.

Whatever theological difficulty had existed three months earlier had apparently been resolved. The washing machines became ordinary pieces of equipment.

Discovering Sign Language on the Internet

The orphanage had an old computer but no internet connection. A new computer, printer, speakers, webcam and USB internet connection were installed. Among the people who could use the new facilities were several deaf women living at Hướng Phương.

They had not been taught conventional sign language.

One of the women sat at the computer while sign language was found on the internet. She immediately understood what she was seeing. Her face lit up and she began copying the signs on the screen with her hands.

I had expected the internet connection to be useful for school work, communication and general information. I had not expected this.

At the time I wrote that I had to hold back tears.

The Trip to Buy a Rice Cutting Machine

Friends Clive and Eric had provided $500 towards a rice cutting machine and I personally provided another $600. The sisters had identified cutting rice by hand as one of their most back-breaking jobs.

I was told surprisingly little about exactly how we were going to buy the machine. Sister Tuyen was interpreting for me. We set off with other sisters and the village mechanic on motor scooters.

Somewhere along the way everybody suddenly turned into a machinery business.

I followed.

Instead of buying anything, we were ushered into the hospitality area at the back of the shop, where there were handsome timber chairs and a table laid out for green tea. A local priest appeared. Then the builder from the orphanage project appeared. There was conversation, tea and socialising.

Eventually we left and continued towards the place where the rice cutting machine was to be inspected.

The journey then took a frightening turn. A half-naked man who appeared severely unwell and disoriented walked into the searing heat in the middle of the main road and stopped. Trucks were passing him in both directions, sometimes by what seemed like centimetres, with horns blaring. He began slowly moving his arms and legs in apparently random directions.

I was convinced that I was about to watch him die.

I ran into the road and tried to get him to the side. He resisted me. For the next few minutes I was fairly certain that both of us might end up underneath a truck.

Eventually I managed to get him across the road. Someone rushed over and gave him a bottle of soft drink.

I went back to Sister Tuyen. She was white-faced.

“I thought you were going to die then,” she said.

I felt traumatised by then and sat down to rehydrate with a Trà Không Độ (“Zero Degree Green Tea”) bottled drink and watched them buying the rice cutting machine.

The machine arrived partly dismantled and had to be assembled. The mechanics spent about two hours putting it together while the sisters watched. Sister Hiền had the bundle of banknotes and she was not giving it to anybody until she had seen the machine work.

Petrol was fetched in a soft-drink bottle. The village mechanic assembled, checked, started and tested the machine. The sisters did the same. Only then did Sister Hiền hand over the money.

The machine became the first genuine rice cutting machine in Hướng Phương village.

The Chickens Had to Be “happy”

Donations were provided to expand the chicken farm at Hướng Phương. The sisters proposed buying about 500 chicks and extending the existing sheds. The chickens would provide food for the orphanage and convent and perhaps some additional income.

The Australian donors had another question. How would the chickens be treated? Would they be happy?

They wanted to be sure that the birds would have reasonable living conditions. The concern caused some amusement at Hướng Phương. The sisters explained that their chickens had open space, ate natural food and were regularly allowed to wander outside – on their way to the chopping block.

The donors were reassured.

The chickens, apparently, were already happy.

Duyen Goes Shopping

Duyen ran the little café near one of the principal entrances to Hướng Phương village. She had lived with a disability since childhood and supported her son and daughter through the café. It was not a large business, but it was an important village meeting place.

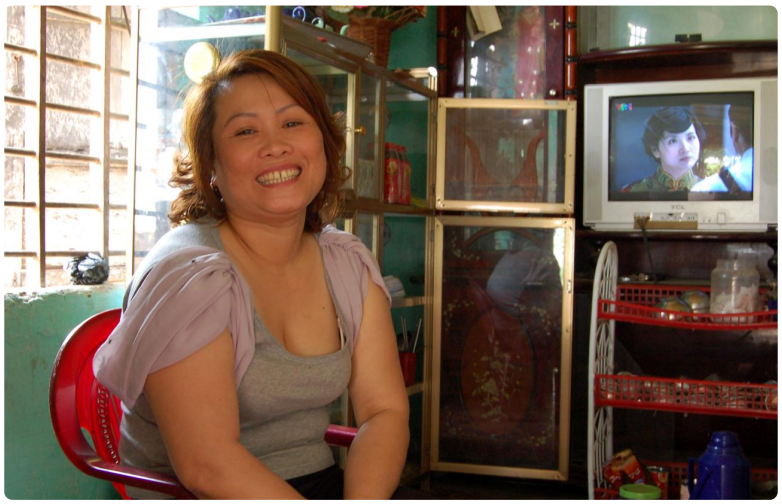
We offered to help her improve it. I did not choose what she needed.

Duyen was given a tight budget and, with Sister Tuyen interpreting, we went with her to Ba Đồn market. The choice and bargaining were hers.

Duyen knew exactly what she wanted. She moved quickly through the market, selecting stainless-steel storage racks, tea cups, a water jug, serving trays, a small rubbish bin and other practical items. Then she bargained.

She was much better at it than I was.

The purchases were carried back by motorbike. The result was a modest improvement to a business that Duyen had already created and was already running for herself.



Duyen displaying her personal charms. After lunch, when the rest of the village is asleep, Duyen is usually found minding the café and glued to a romantic soapie on TV. The worn-out plastic coffee rack that Duyen needed to replace can be seen on the right.



At the market (Cho Ba Don) Sister Tuyen helps Duyen decide how to fit the equipment on a motorbike.

The Statue on the Bus

For my mother's birthday, my brother, sister and I shared the cost of a carved wooden statue of Our Lady of La Vang for the new chapel at Hướng Phương Orphanage.

The statue came from the Thiên An Monastery shop at Huế and carried a dedication to our mother:
PRAY FOR VIDA MIKAILA b 1928 KAUNAS LITHUANIA
Buying the statue was one thing. Getting it back to Hướng Phương was another.

Mary first travelled in the back seat of a taxi from the monastery shop to the hotel where I was staying, and then on to the bus station. On the bus she was given a prominent seat beside me. The bus operator treated the large wooden statue rather like another passenger and even charged an additional fare for her.

During the journey I received the usual “Where are you?” phone call from Sister Tuyen, who was one of the people interpreting for me at Hướng Phương.

“I’m coming in a bus with a carved wooden Mary statue as a passenger next to me,” I explained.

The driver eventually agreed to drop both of us directly outside the convent gates. I carried Mary off the bus and planted her in the dining room, to the delight of the sisters.

The statue was later installed in the new orphanage chapel.



Mary accompanied by Nam in a taxi from the Thiên An Monastery shop.



Mary travelling on the bus.



Dedication at base of the statue.

Eye Examination and Healing Gift for Sisters Huyen and Hiep

During an interval between my visits to Hướng Phương, young Sisters Huyen and Hiep had been emailing me for English practice. Both complained of pain in their eyes. Hiep in particular was worried that she might need glasses, which she thought would be “không đẹp” — not beautiful.

Fortunately for both sisters, an examination by an eye doctor established that their eyesight was generally good. The problem was inflammation, and they were given medication to treat it.

We then travelled by bicycle to Thiên An Monastery, on a pine-covered hilltop close to the centre of Huế. Thiên An was a sacred place and somewhere people might go to obtain devotional, healing or lucky objects.

A very kind old monk showed us around the monastery. Each sister was then given a chain and crucifix that had been blessed by a priest there.

So the visit to the doctor dealt with the medical problem, and the visit to Thiên An provided something of spiritual significance as well.

This completed the healing package.



Left to right: Sister Hiep, Sister Huyen and Sister Yen.

SISTER HANH'S DAY OF TRIUMPH

Sister Hanh was one of the older sisters at Hướng Phương. She took a particular interest in the small Our Lady of La Vang shrine.

Visiting students helped with some of the early work. The foundations were repaired and there was painting, tidying and gardening. But Sister Hanh kept going after the students had left. For months she tended the shrine, gardened around it and encouraged improvements.

What she really wanted was a Mass to be celebrated there.

She persisted.

Eventually the community's chaplain agreed to celebrate an outdoor Mass at the completed shrine. For Sister Hanh it was a day of triumph.

Afterwards she posed proudly beside the carved statue of Our Lady of La Vang with her friend Sister Phu, the retired Mother Superior.

The little shrine had become hers to care for.



Mass in the beautiful peaceful pastoral surroundings of La Vang.



Homily to retell the faith-story of Mary of La Vang to the community.



Freshly painted post and flowers by sister Hanh for the service.



Receiving the bread and wine at the altar.



Blessing of the communion bread and wine.



Sisters Phu and Hanh stand for a photo at their completed shrine.