

# Around the World

## News from Vietnam

— Louise deForest

*In 2013 WECAN conferences collected \$2,194 to support teacher training in Vietnam. Louise deForest has provided this very informative description of Waldorf early childhood work in a faraway land of which anyone who lived through the 1960s is still painfully aware. We apologize for any inadvertent misspellings of names of people or places.*

For many of you, Vietnam is a name on a map of a country somewhere in Asia, as well as a name that crops up in our history books. For my generation, however, Vietnam forms part of the personal history of my peers and the Vietnam War, in part, had a defining effect on my whole generation. Just as we were coming of age in our middle to late teens and early twenties, the escalation of the war had an impact on every single person I knew. Very early in our lives we found ourselves having to make decisions of conscience and developing the strength to stand behind those decisions. For some, this meant enlisting voluntarily in the military, risking life and limb in the hot jungles of Vietnam and sometimes meeting disdain upon returning to the United States. For others it often meant leaving family and loved ones and becoming an expatriate, thereby avoiding the draft. For all of us, we spent our twenties either living with or in the war (and many of us mourning our lost friends), avoiding it, or protesting against it. So for me, so much later in life, it fills my heart with joy that we can support something in Vietnam that promotes well-being, life, and the possibility of a brighter future.

There are three Steiner early childhood programs in Vietnam, serving 130 children; as yet there is no primary school. One of these early childhood programs is connected to the Dieu Giac orphanage in Ho Chi Minh City (with a population of seven million people), and is where all the youngest orphans spend their first years in school, along with many street children (about thirty in all). Presently, this kindergarten is on the grounds of the orphanage as a home school program while teachers and volunteers renovate the school's building to meet new building codes and some teachers update their teaching qualifications. It is expected that the kindergarten will be able

to resume its function as a registered kindergarten and move back into its building in 2014. Tuitions are funded, for the most part, by sponsors. Currently there are about fifty sponsors, some having pledged to support a child or two throughout their school years (and some, now that the sponsored child has left the orphanage, are sponsoring a new child for the rest of their education); others have made a more short-term commitment. Four children from the orphanage were accepted into universities this year and one of them, Tran Thi Mo, 18, was invited to join a prestigious medical school. Another, Van Thien Loc, who has been sponsored since first grade by the Glenaeon Rudolf Steiner School (Australia), has been accepted to a university in Texas on a full scholarship, to study architecture. Dieu Giac struggles to continue the support of these bright young students and there is one young student who could not go onto higher education because the orphanage ran out of funds to support him or her.

Thanh Lan K, in Cu Chi, has an early childhood program for approximately 85 children, from two to six years of age. This program also relies on sponsorships to support maintenance of the buildings, meals, clothing and medical supplies, as well as regular mentors. It is hot and dusty in Cu Chi and the days are very long. Yet the teachers are dedicated to continuing their education, spending the children's rest time studying together and, after the children have left for the day, getting together for more practical work, such as making toys. There is a local law that says all the materials the children use must be periodically washed in strong disinfectants; that, coupled with the warm weather, means that toys, mostly made of natural fibers, need to be replaced each year.

The third early childhood program is named Tho Treng Childcare Centre and it serves twenty-two chil-

dren in two classes ranging in age from nine months to five years. Their days are also very long: 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday to Friday and also include three Saturdays a month, as do most of the early childhood programs.

The life of a Waldorf teacher in Vietnam is not easy and requires enormous commitment. In one school, the founder and director of the school has at least three children who live with her while their parents work in distant towns. As in many countries, teachers first need to be certified by the state, which supports a purely academic approach to learning—formal academic learning starts at three years of age! Becoming a Waldorf teacher involves taking one week-end seminar a month—not easy when most teachers work on Saturdays—and have only two weeks of vacation a year, including national holidays. With a well-organized mentoring system in place for the duration of their training, after three years they receive a certificate of completion. The enrollment in the teacher training is between fourteen and twenty people; this past training program had fourteen students, all of whom were working in a Steiner early childhood class.

One of the biggest challenges for the teacher training, some of which we are supporting thanks to your generous donations, is finding and affording experienced teachers and mentors. While almost all of the mentors and teacher training teachers offer their services for free, the airfare (sometimes shared with China), room and board, and materials for the course work all add up and it is a yearly challenge to find the funds to support this activity. In 2012, teacher trainers came from Australia, New Zealand and the UK.

However, there are positive developments in support of Waldorf education in Vietnam from many parts of the world. In Australia, supporters of Waldorf education in Vietnam have recently started the Vietnam Children's Project, which raises funds, looks for potential sponsors and publishes a newsletter, all on a volunteer basis. As the founders say, "Our aim is to provide practical, life-changing support to orphans and other young children, in a country still experiencing the after-effects of the Vietnam War." And not long ago the Vietnam Steiner/Waldorf Education Foundation was founded, with help from the Providez Founda-

tion (a Swiss bank) which allowed them to rent an office and a meeting space and another room which can serve as accommodations for two people, when needed, as well as a small store/library. The aims of this foundation are to introduce Anthroposophy and Waldorf education to the people of Vietnam, to organize workshops, talks, courses, performances, exhibitions, social activities, and study groups, and to translate Rudolf Steiner's books into Vietnamese. And soon the Camphill Village, founded by Lisi and Tho Ha Vinh in 2011, hopes to open a kindergarten and, together with the existing teacher training, to broaden, deepen, and expand the teacher training.

As Thanh Cherry (the organizer for the teacher training in Vietnam and an ongoing mentor for all the early childhood work there and in China) said, "Similar to what happened in China, our old culture with its rich spiritual traditions has been virtually lost in the push for modernization. The general culture is now geared towards a materialistic life style. Parents are confused, children are confused, teachers are confused. The Steiner trained teachers will be the only hope for our culture, however small." ♦

**Louise deForest** is a WECAN board member and regional representative for Mexico, and is one of two North American representatives to the IASWECE council.



*The Dieu Giac Kindergarten*