

# Friendship News



PROJECT **11** INSTALLMENT 2 OF 4

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My first few hours in Vietnam were unforgettable ones in terms of a sad welcome but I am happy to say since then I have only been surprised at the generosity and hospitality of the people. On my first day there I had just come out of the plane without my wallet and mobile phone which I had left in the seat pocket of the plane.



## Hospitality of Vietnam

By Lalindra

**Y**es, I don't recommend that to anyone. Point 1: Never put any personal items in the seat pocket of a plane. Anyhow it didn't help that I had all my cards and most of my money totaling US \$1200 in there. The people at the lost and found at the airport were as helpful as asking a piece of wood for information. Anyhow being told my wallet and mobile were gone in a matter of two minutes did not comfort me on their hospitality due to the fact they hadn't even asked what seat number I was on!

Anyway out of the airport building I was thinking what the hell I was supposed to do with very little cash and getting a minor heart attack I was escorted by some man asking me if I wanted to have a taxi and a mob of smiling people came around me. I began to feel better as I was loved but alas when I was asked if I was a Brazilian soccer player, I should have said yes. Anyway I finally got into this taxi. The guy who escorted me out asked for US\$10 for showing me the taxi, I only had one answer to that and it was colorful.

The taxi driver was such a nice man it did lift my spirits. I told him I had just lost my wallet and mobile phone to which he replied "Very good" with a big smile. I guess he didn't know English but he showed me how people in Vietnam with even a language barrier try to make you feel at home.

Once arriving at the Ben Nghe hotel in Ho Chi Minh City I came across the reception attendant and I explained to her who I was. She didn't look very hospitable and neither did I come to think of it. Well I had my reasons and so did she I suppose. Anyway after getting a room and getting a letter from Gia Hoa my spirits were lifted. She wrote a letter explaining what was going to happen. At the end of the letter she said "we miss you" and that made me feel like I was not alone.

My bag at the reception was around 37kgs and my backpack was around 13kgs and it wasn't light by any means, but the guy at the door carried my bag upstairs and I still don't know how. I am about 2 times as big and I couldn't do it. I know it's his job but he didn't even want my help when I asked, now that's service and he gave me a big smile when I said "You very strong. Thank you," and smiled at him.

When I got to my room I remembered that a smile is all you need and this is what I tried on the lady at the reception and it worked. She and the other staff made me feel

at home until Kwah came to pick me up. He and the driver drove me to Gia Hoa's hometown and he explained to me about Vietnam and made me feel better about being there. With their big smiles and positive attitude it made me feel very welcome. Once I arrived in Gia Hoa's hometown, Gia Hoa's mum made me some noodles and they all gave me my space to relax.

In the afternoon we had Christmas Eve party. I could go on how people made me feel comfortable while I was there, Gia Hoa, Joe, Gia Hoa's family, the bus driver, the bus conductor, Gia Hoa's brother in law, the group of ALT's, the people we met at the schools, the people at the market, people at our hotels, the waiters at our restaurants, the boat operators and countless number of people whom I met while I was on this path to friendship.

**If Vietnam doesn't offer you anything else, then it is the hospitality and kindness of the people that you will take back with you.** It will also rub off on you as well and when we all left that hospitality and kindness had all rubbed off on us. I finally got my wallet back with all my money in it and it was found in Los Angeles, but that's another story. Vietnam would have been the only country I could have lived in without going insane after losing my belongings. The hospitality and kindness is more valuable than US\$1,200 and a mobile phone.

**Thank you Vietnam.** ■

## A Day Together With Vietnamese Students

Stephanie Arndt



One day, Joseph and Gia Hoa surprised us with a bunch of special guests, students from **Saigon University**, with whom we had the opportunity to spend a whole day. That day turned out to be very interesting in a couple of ways.

After we had split up in groups, each containing three of us and one Vietnamese student “tour guide”, we left the hotel and started walking in the direction of the Saigon parliament. We didn’t go straight, but stopped here and there, to take pictures, to gaze at something that was going on in the street or just to buy some food off the street vendors. Our tour guides were certainly astonished about our curiosity and our picture-taking of things that are daily life to them, but that

were so new and surprising for us.

Like when one time, we discovered a Vietnamese sleeping in his carriage, all of us started taking his picture and posing next to him. Our Vietnamese student might be used to such a picture, but we weren’t. Or we could watch a woman for at least 10 minutes squeezing sugar cane juice out of a sugar cane stick. When our tour guide asked us whether we had tried that juice yet and we shook our head, he bought each of us a sugar cane drink. Mmm, how delicious! We were close to licking the glass after finishing the juice! This again must have caused some astonishment among the students, but well, we did not know when again we would have the opportunity to drink sugar cane juice!

During the whole day we spent together



with the students, we would never stop asking each other questions, and sometimes, we, the JETs, as well were the ones who were able to surprise the students. Not few of them seem to be very eager to go abroad after graduating from university and that is why they are studying English very hard. I was amazed anyway when I first heard them speaking English, because they did so well and the days before we had normally encountered endless language barriers, when trying to talk to some Vietnamese.

For us Westerners, it might sound very surprising that a student aged 21 has never been abroad, has maybe not even left his hometown yet and traveled throughout his native country. On the other hand, through our stay and work in Japan, most of us have probably already gotten used to that fact, because Japanese students, too, hardly go abroad, but rather spend their vacation within their “four walls”. Anyway, when the Vietnamese students learnt what different countries we had already been before going to Vietnam, and how much international experience most of us had, their faces looked stunned and amazed. My tour guide told me he wanted to go to Europe after graduation and when he learnt I was from Germany, he started asking me all different kinds of questions, historical, as well as political and geographical ones. I did my best to answer his questions, because I wanted to give him the chance to learn more about life outside of Vietnam. On the other hand, I too, never ceased asking him questions about his native country. Unfortunately, in reality, however, that student might never be able to leave Vietnam, because he simply will not have the means to do so. This fact made me feel sorry for him. In his country, he is probably already privileged for the fact that he can afford studying at university.

Still, this young man has a lot of dreams and a lot of goals, he would like to achieve. In my eyes, he is very strong and therefore, who knows, but his efforts and strength might eventually lead him to his aims in life. I was amazed by all the facts he knows about his country when we went to see the Museum of Saigon and the Vietnamese War Museum, and so, I never got tired of listening to him.

All in all, our encounter with the Vietnamese students and our Saigon Walking Tour was a unique experience. Through the exchange of thoughts and opinions of both sides – the Vietnamese and the JET side – the students as well as we were able to contribute to more international understanding and to obtain valuable knowledge about the other cultures and social lives. I really regret we could not spend more time with the students, but unfortunately, all of them were on the edge of passing a couple of important exams they needed to study for. Therefore, we have to be glad that we were at least able to spend one day with them, a day that will stay in my head as a vivid memory. ■



*Project Participants join local Foundation Staff in birthday celebration*

**D**espite the wide variety of nationalities and cultures represented in this years' volunteer group, there were several points common to all of our backgrounds. The most obvious is that we are almost all Assistant English Teachers in Japan. As such, we have seen a wide variety of English as a Second Language classes. Some of us teach in High Schools, others in Junior High and Elementary Schools. Some of us teach in very rural areas, others in the middle of major cities. But we have learned that the most important factor in determining a class's ability is not age, social class, or family background. Instead, it is the overall attitude of the class toward English, and that begins with the teaching environment and the primary English teacher. While we might find immense satisfaction from teaching a difficult class or increasing their enjoyment of English, most of us will admit that **there is nothing more satisfying than teaching an excited class whose desire to learn English is nurtured in the classroom. One such class was the class in Ho Chi Minh City.**

On our first full day in the city several of us were given the opportunity to go to this class to help with an informal English lesson. Jeni, Steffi, Arlene, and I traveled by cab and motorcycle to the home of Dr. Chien, where his wife runs an English school. From the moment we arrived, the warm friendly atmosphere of the room was obvious, as was the students' unintimidated approach to a difficult foreign language. These students had obviously not been reprimanded for mistakes or made to feel that they had failed when they were unable to speak as well as the teacher asked. Instead, they were happy to try new and challenging words and phrases, and were likewise unashamed to ask for help

when they needed it. Any success we had that day is due to this refreshingly warm environment and the work Mrs. Chien has done creating it.

We did not have a structured lesson plan to follow. Instead, we relied on our supply of English games from our classes in Japan, modifying things on the fly and playing off each others strengths as we felt the situation warranted. Four English teachers dealing with a class of no more than fifteen is a surplus few are able to enjoy and we used it to our full advantage. As the lesson ranged from self introductions, to "Head, Shoulder, Knees and Toes", to a Christmas lesson that covered a few songs as well as Christmas Vocabulary pictionary, we switched in and out of classroom leadership roles, giving the class a fun, free flowing feel. Although there was a wide range of ages and English experience at the school, we were able to modify activities to make them appealing to all. In the end, we stayed almost twenty minutes later than planned, letting dinner wait while we taught and played with the students.

The four of us who taught there owe a tremendous debt to the Chiens, both for giving us the opportunity to teach and for running such an excellent school. For me personally, the experience represented all the reasons I came to Asia. Not only were we teaching English, we were truly internationalizing by showing the students a broad range of cultures and countries and presenting a warm and smiling face for each of them. And we were learning as well: about Vietnam, about children, and about being better teachers. The image of those students will be one of my favorites from Vietnam, and the model of that class will influence my own teaching for a long time to come. ■

## Thirst for learning English Paul Kennedy



# Japanese Students vs. Vietnamese Students

Are They Really That Different?

By Arlene Elkins

**O**n my second day in Vietnam, Jeni, Paul, Steffi, and I went to a small English school ran out of someone's kitchen. There were about ten students of varying ages and English abilities and who were all ecstatic about seeing us. The lesson plan that Jenny and Kate had made earlier in the day was quickly thrown out the window and we haphazardly jumped from activity to the next desperately trying to keep their minds focused and entertained.

Later that night, the four of us marveled about how good the kids' English was. It initially made me think that the Vietnamese are much different than my Japanese students. They seemed much more eager. However, as the project went on, I began to see very little difference. Now that I'm back in Japan teaching my genki little shogakko kids, I wonder why I thought one set was so different than the other. The smiling faces that greeted us at every school might as well have been the same ones that greet me every time I walk into any of my schools in Japan.

Perhaps the real difference is that there is no JET Programme in Vietnam. At this point there are few places in Japan that have not been affected by the program. Even the most remote rural areas in Japan normally have ALTs. On the other hand, few places in Vietnam, outside of big cities, have ALTs. The places we visited during the project were about as remote as some areas of the village that I call home in Japan, but then I am the third ALT to have taught there. The students are completely used to the presence of a foreigner; many of them have never been to a school that didn't have a

foreign teacher. The Vietnamese students we encountered, however, have, most likely, never had an ALT. Some had never seen a foreign face before. I think this is why so many of the Vietnamese seemed to make more of an effort to speak to us. They were probably curious about us. They braved the language and culture barrier to talk to us because, well, who knows when another foreigner will come and visit them? It's not like in Japan where the students know that when their ALT leaves, a new one will come and take his or her place.

There were often times when I found the Vietnamese attitude toward English refreshing, but in the end one group of students is not better than the other. The circumstances between the two are vastly different. One thing that is drilled into us since the very beginning of our time on the JET Programme is that every situation is different. If this is true across Japan, then it is most certainly true across borders. The best thing to do is figure why they are different and try to learn from the differences. **For me, the children's excitement in Vietnam made me remember why I had wanted to be a teacher in the first place**, which in turn has helped me once I got back to Japan. I feel like a better teacher and hopefully this will inspire my students to not only learn, but enjoy English. My Japanese students may never understand how lucky they are to have the chance to learn English from a living, breathing native English speaker, but the stu-

dents I taught in Vietnam knew how fortunate they were to have one, even if it was only for an hour.





words  
laughter  
love  
guilt  
smiles  
touch  
sadness

emotion  
tears

## Kate Schnell

Looking back on my experience in Vietnam as a volunteer, I consider the most difficult and emotionally challenging part of the trip was the visit to the home for disabled people. As we neared the home I had a mixture of emotions racing through my body. I was unsure of what lay ahead.

In this article I want to write about the people; they are the reason we visited the home. During the four hour visit I touched, laughed with and spoke to many people. However there are two who stand out in my mind. Two people who I remember clearly- their faces, voices, and the interaction we shared.

The first of these two was a lady I noticed while chatting to another person in the room. This lady was sitting in the corner of the room watching the volunteers interact with her room-mates. I noticed her eyes were welling with tears. I already felt emotional from the morning's events and did not want to cry in front of the residents. I did not want them to know that I was crying because of their situation—the absence of family, love, care and emotion. I walked over to her bed and sat beside her. We held hands. I fought the urge to cry. I gazed out the window in the hope of escaping my thoughts from the present situation. We sat together for a few minutes. Her tears may have been tears of happiness but mine were brought on by a mixture of many emotions- sorrow, guilt, happiness, love...

The second person who made an impact on me that day was a blind lady. I sat next to her on her bed and we held hands. She raised my hands to her face and rubbed my hands against her weathered hardened skin. Her sense of touch had strengthened to compensate for her loss of vision. These people's lives were lacking many things but most importantly the human touch.

I left the home with a mixture of feelings, just the way I had arrived. Sitting in the bus after the visit I felt exhausted. I am sure the entire group did too. We had given to these people all we had to give- words, laughter, love, emotion, smiles, our touch, sadness and tears.





## Lessons learned by Jeni

**G**old earrings dangled from her earlobes. A necklace of the same color hugged her neck as if searching for warmth. Her pants made with the finest silk fabric from the central market shimmered an indigo purple in the light. Next to her wooden bed were all of her possessions: toothbrush in a plastic cup, box of tea and the foodstuffs we provided upon our arrival—two cans of condensed milk, two boxes of sugar and a bag of sugar cookies—among other small items. Resting on the foot of the wooden boards, which classified as a bed, table, chair and home, were two blankets. The light from the open window next to her created a shadow about her, but her smile was clear; it radiated upon my arrival. Like cranes who fly for miles to search out their home lake for the winter, I was mesmerized by her presence. As our smiles met, I was captivated by how welcoming she was. I slowly sat down on her home and reached out my hand. Wrinkled and arthritic due to years of work in the fields, both of her hands gripped mine like a drowning person reaching out for something to hold them up out of the water. We both muttered words in our own language. Our words meant nothing, our love was felt in our touch. I handed her a Christmas card made by one of my Japanese students. Without losing sight of my eyes, she held the card in one hand and my hand with her other. I insisted that she look at the card, that a child made it just for her, that it was a very special message of hope, love, peace... of course she just kept smiling without understanding any of my words. Soon the room was quiet. It had only been a few minutes, but it felt as if she shared her life stories simply with her touch and her smile. Her gifts were plentiful, little did I realize at that time. I rose to make a quiet exit; she clenched my hands harder and mumbled a desperate plea. Welling up in her dark eyes were tears.

Imagine walking along the river's edge on a crisp, clear morning. The sky is blue in what appears to be all directions; the sun is shining brightly. The trees rustle in the spring breeze. Suddenly, you feel a raindrop. Then another. Then another. You look up to see a sky of blue and you wonder

where on earth it's coming from. Baffled, another drop lands on your upper cheek and trickles down as if a real tear emerged from your eye. Upon your second look, you solve the mystery: morning dew has collected on the ends of the leaves creating the illusion of actual raindrops.

This is how I felt in my attempts to leave the woman's bedside. Beauty and love encircled her entire being. Her goodness was contagious. Why was she there? She appeared able-bodied—what was her story? That was the initial confusion. The truth was simply that she didn't have anyone left in the world. Her husband had died and children died from the results of the war.

By whispering calming words, I was able to slide my hand away from hers. She continued to speak in words I could not understand and began waving frantically as one might when a loved one leaves for a long period of time. Hurriedly, I exited the room. Seeking quick solitude, I spotted a bench at the end of the walkway near the stairs. I sat and cried.

Several days later, a friend pointed out an interesting observation and framed it as a question. "Why did we cry?" We went to this foreign place with an understanding of what we would see and had goals of what we would do once we arrived. Then, "Why did we cry?" The answer may vary person to person, but she quietly answered her own question that makes sense to me..."because, that was us." We were just as disabled as they were, just not in the physical sense. We saw the reflection of ourselves in a blurred mirror. Now I finally understand why I chose this work. ■



**W**e were up bright and early on December 21st to help out at the health fair in rural Duc Hue, Long An province. When we arrived the area was already swarming with people waiting to be seen by the already-busy doctors.

The first hour was a bit confusing. First I went to help the doctors. They seemed busy but did not want help at the time. So I headed over to help prepare care packages, but the tiny room was full of all the food and helpers it could fit. Thus I went out for the ever-present task of socializing, games, and English-practice.

Most of them seemed a bit shy at first. But a few of the old women were far from timid. Some grabbed my offered hand tight and even pinched my cheeks and nose. All was done in good spirits, though, and accompanied by many smiles and laughter.

As the day wore on, though, the people really opened up- especially the children. The kids joined in on singing, origami-making, and impromptu games such as the don't-let-Paul-catch-you-or-he'll-spin-you-around-over-his-head game (I think many children purposely allowed themselves to get "captured," as evidenced by the giggles and yells of joy indicating a fun time).

There were a variety of people present with many different needs and backgrounds. The ten doctors saw over 500 patients within the course of just a few hours. According to Dr. Chien, there were some people who were quite sick, although most were doing alright but just weren't able to see a doctor much and lacked basic medical and health information. He said the doctors could provide that and give them some basic medications for common problems.

Even if people have access to a doctor, the cost can be prohibitive. I asked one of the women who came to the fair about her experience. Her name was Hong Sinh, and she'd traveled by scooter with her two children to the fair. She said she was thirty-five years old, and her family could only see a doctor when the health fairs were in town.

Most people had dispersed by about early afternoon, and we also climbed back onto the bus to leave. We'd only been there for about four hours, but most of us felt as if we'd been working for a whole day. I think all would agree, though, that it was an interesting and rewarding experience for everyone involved.

## The **Health** Fair

By Laura Carrion







Adrienne Henck

## Lasting memories

“Hello, my name is Pha. What’s your name?” she said with a beautiful, white-toothed smile. While the other volunteers busily distributed food at the rural health fair, I mingled with the locals who were waiting in the crowded courtyard to see a doctor. Though I met many people—adorable children gripping newly-acquired pencils, young men on motorbikes covered in dust, and white-coated doctors from the city—two women stood out among the rest.

Pha, an unusually tall 17 year-old girl with a confident gait and sassy speech, approached me first. As she questioned me, she slightly nudged back the brim of her black baseball cap. I responded with my own name, and more questions followed. “Where did you come from? How old are you? Do you like my country? Though she seemed to just repeat the same over-memorized sentences (“Your country is beautiful; I want to visit your country,” I heard her say later to Americans, Australians, and Brits), her English was comprehensible. Nevertheless, my attempts to ask questions about her resulted in a slight scrunching up of her face as incomprehension took hold. I decided to leave the questioning to her, when she asked for my address. I agreed on an exchange and handed my notepad and pencil to her. When she finished, I was taken aback at the sight of not a street address scribbled on the page as I had expected, but an email address.

She didn’t say anything. The old woman just stared at me through wrinkly

eyes as a vague suggestion of a smile displayed her seemingly blood stained teeth. Squatting in the dirt with a straw, conical hat shielding her from the Vietnamese sun, she looked more like a gnome. Though I knew my English was unintelligible to her, I tried to communicate my goodwill through a smile and pleasant tone of voice. My attempts were met with unbroken stares until she suddenly grabbed my arm. A brief examination of the skin was followed by a more thorough analysis. She gently squeezed it; then pinched it. As she drew my arm closer to her face I could think of nothing other than seemingly ill-fated Hansel and Gretel and that wretched witch. “Impossible!” I thought, “She wouldn’t!” I convinced myself that she was merely going to kiss my hand. Then something unexpected happened. She didn’t eat me, and she didn’t kiss me. With my arm right under her nose, she began sniffing all the way from my hand to elbow.

My encounters with Vietnamese people in that dusty courtyard were certainly varied. With some, familiar things like white-toothed smiles, baseball caps, and email addresses helped to dissolve my confusion. With others, however, the mysteries were so great that my confusion will probably always remain. But even from the most difficult to understand encounters, I left the health fair with a warm image of Vietnamese people. **In spite of language barriers, they were just as eager to meet me as I was to meet them, and in the end, I am confident we created lasting memories of each other.** ■

Upon making the decision to come to Vietnam, I had anticipated an incredible learning experience. By experiencing the country firsthand — its people, its landscape, its history and its present day customs— I was sure it would lead to a greater understanding of a country I knew very little about. Never did I imagine I'd learn so much about myself along the way. **By Jeni**

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Often living in a Western culture, so much is taken for granted. Here in Vietnam, I've been reminded that it's not about quantity, but quality that matters. This valuable lesson was clearly observed in many ways, school visits being the most noticeable for me.

Being that I was an elementary school teacher in America prior to my participation in JET, I was disturbed by my own students and their families there. The students were spoiled. All the video games, clothes, candy were easily attained by the students, so much so, that they didn't appreciate things given to them. "Thank you" was often forgotten, yet the desire for MORE was already becoming ingrained in their 9-year-old minds and actions.

In contrast, visiting the elementary school in the rural countryside of Vietnam was an entirely different experience. Every possession is cherished. They value what little they have. Here is an anecdote:

Crossing the dusty, gray schoolyard, I noticed no playground equipment, yet children were inventing their own games and laughing in the process. I was eager to meet the fourth grade students of this small, rural school. Upon entering the drab room, the colorless walls, somber and dark, reflected the seriousness of the learning environment. Immediately, a student leader rose from her seat and flashed a grand smile to us. She directed the students to also rise and in unison they all welcomed us. Not only was the room bare of any color, but the desks were wooden benches crammed together in order to have space for all of the students. I observed their text and notebooks on their desks. Although they had very few, they were clearly taken care of well. After a few games and songs, we handed out the school supplies. All of the students said "Thank you" as they received their gifts. More

importantly was the gratitude apparent in their smiles. Not only were they happy for our visit, but my conclusion was they were happy to go to school as well.

So, this lesson of quality over quantity I hope to apply to my life more fully. With the access to anything and everything a person needs in most western countries, appreciating the important things—**family, friends and education** among a few—are taken for granted. I know I am guilty of not giving enough time and effort to these three most valued things in my life and being in Vietnam has been a blatant reminder of that. Not only will I take this lesson with me, but I also hope to teach my future elementary students about the students in Vietnam and how they demonstrated true gratitude. Learning about myself was not my intention when I came to Vietnam, but through the loving eyes of the children, that is what has happened. I feel grateful for this. ■

## Quality time

