

Thuyen Vu brings smiles to Vietnamese orphans

by Thalia Hambides

Thuyen Vu, CTC's IT project officer, devoted his vacation this year to exploring the remote areas of Vietnam as a dental assistant. He spent \$2,500 on flights, food and accommodation to journey through his country of birth, helping set up and run dental clinics for orphaned children.



Thuyen (right) as Assistant Dentist

Thuyen found that spending time with the children was the highest motivator for this trek. A lot is accomplished in one day and a strong sense of satisfaction is achieved. "When there are 300 kids, we stay for two or three days. We really get to know the kids that way. We get to hug and play with them and they love that."

"I should have done these things when I was younger. You can learn from experience and it will build you up, but if you learn it earlier, it could lead you to different places."

Young, naive women who migrate to the city for work or study, may find themselves pregnant and unable to support their babies. Orphanages run by the Catholics, Buddhists or the government provide pre and post natal care for these women. It is a demanding vocation for the carers who manage to feed the children, and encourage them to study. The ratio of carer to child does not leave much room for nurturing or affection and looking after their teeth is a low priority. When the orphans reach 18 years old, they must leave to look for work or study further.

[VN Smiles](#) charity group aims to get smiles from all the children, maintaining the teeth of the carers and staff as well. They keep in contact with the communities and send money when it is needed. They also offer scholarships to universities.



Children and team members at a Vietnamese orphanage

One dentist asked a teenage girl why she was there. Her response moved Thuyen very much. "The girl become really sad. She said, 'my parents left me.' It had hit her hard. I was sad that day, but you can only make so much of a difference."

A typical day for this team begins by leaving the hotel for the location in a truck. The setup is complex and one hour is spent unpacking another truckload of equipment which then takes 45 minutes to assemble. There are two generators, five dental chairs with their cables, four suction units, and four dental machines with drills and lights.



Thuyen (right) helps setup the equipment

A production line is then formed. One dentist does the checking and applies the anaesthetic. Those that need fillings form one line and extractions form another. Once that stage is complete, the children move to post operation for maintenance advice and medication. There are not enough resources for more complex anaesthesia or overnight clinics.

Thuyen found that it was easy for him to be useful. Out of a team of 22, only 5 were dentists. The operation team members would refill the water, work on the air suction and hand the equipment to the dentists.

Thuyen also used his skills to set up a computer network for a group of deaf children.

At the end of the day, everything is packed back into the trucks, ready for the next day's location.

The team were made up of a colourful and cultural mix, ranging from teenagers to 50 year olds. They came from Malaysia, Korea, China, and Australia. "We had a lot of Caucasians in the group. They couldn't speak Vietnamese and most of the kids have never seen a blonde person before. The children were really excited and wanted to have photos of them."



A volunteer with a child at the orphanage

Some orphanages pose a few challenges. Thuyen's first visit was to a home for Down syndrome children, most of whom had rotten teeth.



Volunteer and children at Down Syndrome orphanage

"They get really scared. Sometimes there are five or six guys holding them down because they are really strong. But after their treatment they are happy and it doesn't hurt."

The children need a lot of dental work. "They keep drilling and drilling until the hole in the tooth is completely cleared but a huge gap is left behind. One 16 year old had all his teeth removed in one go. All of them were rotten."



Thuyen (right) assisting a dentist

"It's really different when you see it on TV. It's interesting to actually go on a charity run because it's different to experiencing it personally."

Thuyen plans to spend his next holiday building houses for the remote communities of Vietnam or Cambodia.



The VN Smiles' 2013 team -Thuyen is in the front row, 6th from left