

VIETNAM CHILDREN'S PROJECT

2016 Christmas Newsletter

Another year has almost closed and we hope your year has been one of growth and fulfilment. Our thanks go to everyone, who in small and big ways have contributed to the VCP's ongoing service to support orphaned children in Vietnam, and to provide for Vietnamese children in general a healing experience of the Waldorf-Steiner heart centred education which is currently expanding in Vietnam.



Our support base is worldwide and we especially thank our faithful sponsors in Australia, ably co-ordinated by Anne Bell, and in Europe through the Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiner e.V. in Germany and Internationaal Hulpfonds in the Netherlands. Sponsorship money provides everyday necessities and facilitates young children living in the Orphanage and others in poor circumstances to start their educational journey in a Steiner Kindergarten. Highlights for this year include the completion of a new kindergarten classroom in the Orphanage and a heightened interest in Steiner education in Vietnam resulting in the opening of at least five new kindergartens throughout the country. Tho Trang, one of our long standing kindergartens in Ho Chi Minh City has expanded into larger premises and changed its name to Tre Xanh (Green Bamboo). You'll find more details in the following reports.

Thank you to everyone who so generously responded to Son's special needs outlined in last year's Newsletter. As a result Son now has a new walking frame and his smile is even bigger! While sponsorship of orphans and kindergarten students provides a predictable income from which we can plan and support activities in Vietnam into the future, the one off or yearly donations we receive allow us to do extra things. This includes caring for the special needs of the residents at Dieu Giac Orphanage, helping Nhu Tri, the head nun, to pay annual school fees for the primary aged children as well as support new initiatives such as the founding of a kindergarten in Hanoi. So if you're reading this because you have a heart connection with our endeavour but financially find ongoing sponsorship beyond your means, please consider a Christmas donation. No matter how small every dollar helps.

Please keep reading for a more detailed account of life in the Orphanage in 2016, the myriad activities of the Waldorf-Steiner kindergartens and teacher training programmes in Vietnam.

Susanna Pearson

For the Management Committee

Wishing you a joyous Christmas time and a happy New Year.

VIETNAM REPORT – CHRISTMAS 2016

DIEU GIAC ORPHANAGE



Looking down into the Orphanage compound

The babies –A few babies joined Dieu Giac this year, two of them were so tiny and fragile when discovered at the temple gate that the nuns decided they must have just been born on that same day. Accordingly the day was recorded as their birthday. By the time I was there in December they were a few months old, but still very small and sickly so it was decided that the camera should not disturb them.

Van Thien Son – Son, the baby whose legs were paralysed and who has never developed speech since the time he was left at Dieu Giac, has turned 14 this year. Various children and Huyen in the office had told me excitedly when they saw me, “Son can talk now, you know!” And indeed he can. Slowly but fluently he talks just like any other normal person, answering the questions put to him and holding simple conversations with people. Everyday, weather permits, you can see him wheel his new walking frame about, chatting and laughing with the younger children. This has happened within the last 3 months. A true miracle.

New location for Kindergarten -

By March of this year a definite location was marked out for the Kindergarten, which was a different place from the picture we presented in our Newsletter of 2015. It was small, situated in a corner of the orphanage ground, wedged among the vegetarian restaurant, the dormitory for the young male residents and a rather cluttered courtyard. It sounds and is not at all ideal a location, but we felt grateful that at last the kindergarten children had somewhere to call their 'home'. Now that a beautiful and peaceful indoors has been established, the teachers and I have been working with Nun Nhu Tri to try to find a way of creating a patch of playground somewhere to complete this project. (See under Dieu Giac Kindergarten).

Dieu Giac children who return to work at the Orphanage – Over the years many ex-residents of Dieu Giac, after having grown up and received their respective educational qualifications, have chosen to return to work at the Orphanage while living nearby with their own young families. Mostly they function in their professional capacity and at the same time they wish to support Nhu Tri and look after the younger children who are like brothers and sisters to them. At present the orphanage office is manned by 2 women, one is a mother of 1 child and one of 3 children. The latest additions are the three teachers in charge of the new Kindergarten – Kim, the main teacher with Ngoc as her assistant, and Chi who cooks and gives extra help when it is needed. All three grew up in the orphanage, received their early childhood education qualifications at college and university and since Dieu Giac kindergarten works with Steiner education principles, Kim and Ngoc also attend the Steiner early childhood teacher training programme in Ho Chi Minh city. Kim has 2 small children of her own, Chi has one, and Ngoc will be expecting her first baby in May 2017. The three form a harmonious team and one can see the reassuring influence of their love and patience in the children's daily life.



Greetings from the Orphanage Sponsorship Co-ordinator - Anne Bell



The Dieu Giac temple next door to the Orphanage

Dear VCP community

This year I am moved to do nothing, in this annual report, but express gratitude: Gratitude first (chronologically speaking) to Thanh Cherry and Sandi Forbes (original co-founders of the VCP), and the other members of the management committee, for trusting me with this role. It brings me into contact with the purest, most loving impulses of humanity.

And gratitude secondly to all our sponsors: My task would at first glance appear to be simple – send out reminder notices annually, and in due course post receipts, photos and letters to each sponsor. But how much more than that is involved! In addition to the many “exceptions” to this standard format – translations from Vietnamese; photos that do not arrive; sponsors with whom I lose contact; emergencies at Dieu Giac Orphanage to which individual sponsors respond, to name but a few – there is the joy of watching the community of sponsors grow and change over the years.

Some, for example, find that their own circumstances have made it possible for them to sponsor more than one child or to expand their donation so as to pay for tertiary education for their sponsored child, or to sponsor another child when their original child finishes their studies. Others, hearing of a special need such as little Son’s for a new walking apparatus, readily offer to provide it. I also watch young people in this country who were children when I began this role (in 2008) take up sponsorship in an effort to help those who would otherwise be unlikely to receive the educational benefits that they themselves had enjoyed. Many of these young people were educated in Steiner schools in Australia. It is also heart-warming when new people contact me to enquire about sponsoring a child because a current sponsor has talked to them about this work of the VCP. So thank you all sponsors!

And finally, our goal - to support the babies, children, teenagers and tertiary students at Dieu Giac Orphanage - is being realised. Amongst the adults who have grown up at DG there are now many graduates of tertiary institutions in Vietnam, many who have left school and now found jobs, many who have started families (for whom the orphanage, the nuns and housemothers are their extended family), and some who – not being able to live independently because of their personal circumstances – will always be cared for at the orphanage.



The Dieu Giac brothers and sisters

It is heart-warming, and I thank you all once again, and wish you all the very best for this Christmas and the coming year.

Anne Bell

Greetings from Jenni – VCP's Secretary and Kindergarten sponsorship Co-ordinator



It was a great adventure for me when I visited Vietnam for the first time in the middle of this year, accompanied by Jan Macnamara-Hammerton, friend and co-worker at the VCP. We were there to make acquaintance with the staff members and children at Dieu Giac orphanage, to meet the teachers, visit some of the kindergartens and help towards setting up the new Dieu Giac kindergarten. We were made very welcome by the folk at then named Tho Trang kindergarten where a teacher-training course was in progress. Besides meeting everyone and having many wonderful dining experiences, we were taken on a tour of the new premises that were proposed for the later expansion of this kindergarten.

We made a quick visit to Hanoi, met the teachers at the Hanoi Steiner-Inspired Kindergarten and saw their beautiful classrooms, (we also watched a magnificent professional water puppet performance, beside the lake) before spending the last part of our time on the task of preparing the new kindergarten at Dieu Giac orphanage in Ho Chi Minh City. As Jan said *"We were very deeply touched by the children we met at Dieu Giac; in particular, while massaging some of the little ones I had the opportunity to observe them playing and interacting happily with one another. They looked to be well cared for and well loved, especially by the Buddhist nuns who resided there."* We left after that second week with still lots to be done, which fell on Thanh's shoulders in the following days.

When one month later I saw the photos of the completely set up classroom with children playing happily in it, I was moved to tears with gratitude. I felt so glad that these little children had somewhere specifically for them in which they can play creatively and wholesomely. To have this kindergarten there is such a blessing for each of the children and it had been made possible by contributions from so many people!

To sum up again in Jan's words *"Jenni and I were very fortunate to meet many of the enthusiastic teachers, parents and children at the kindergartens we visited and from other associated Steiner initiatives. It left a warm feeling in our heart and made us feel very positive about the future of children and Steiner education in Vietnam."*

VCP Fundraiser – by Jan Macnamara-Hammerton

On October 22nd the annual VCP fundraising event was held for the first time in one of the classrooms of the new Bowral Steiner School and later in the old school hall. It was a wonderful occasion with a lovely Eurhythmy performance by Kimberley Hammerton and beautiful piano playing by Wolfgang Devine. After afternoon tea we had the pleasure of listening to the singing and music of Rapunzel's Party who have continued to be generous with their time for the VCP in recent years.

A huge thankyou to so many who assisted in bringing the afternoon together and in particular to Annabelle Brown who beautifully hosted the afternoon.



THE KINDERGARTENS

Dieu Giac Kindergarten - Thanh Cherry, Dieu Giac kindergarten's mentor

2016 is a significant milestone in the history of Dieu Giac Kindergarten. After being closed down by the authorities for various reasons in 2014, the 'class' which consisted of 9 children who lived in Dieu Giac orphanage, continued unofficially with their teacher every morning, often on the balcony of the second floor dormitory, singing songs, doing morning circles and having story time. Then this year, a proper kindergarten space was created resulting from Nun Nhu Tri's ingenuity and her understanding of its importance.

The physical work started in July and finished by the end of August. The ceiling was painted pink (the tile walls and floor are still bare and cold, awaiting rugs, decoration cloths and pictures). Curtains were made, little tables, chairs and shelves were bought, cupboards and doll house brought in. Thousands of little details needed to be prepared before the 3 teachers – main teacher, assistant teacher and cook – could settle down to an intensive one week training by Thanh.

And so, on 6 September, the kindergarten opened its doors to welcome the first 6 children from the orphanage. More came the next day, and the day after... all from poor families in the neighbourhood. By October, the class had 12 children with 8 more younger ones waiting to join after the new year to fill up the room's capacity for 20 children. Dieu Giac can be called a completely free kindergarten. The children from the orphanage pay nothing; the parents from outside pay US\$22 per month for teachers' petty cash fund.



Meal-time at the new Dieu Giac Kindergarten

I came back in November for a visit and for more teacher training. The classroom was warm and vibrant with children's happy voices and laughter; the teachers carrying out their daily work with gentleness, perhaps a little tentativeness, and joy. Like Jenni, I was moved to tears, and astonished by the smooth beginnings. However, sadness followed me when I left to go home – the children had no playground to speak of, no



sandpit, no space for swing or slide, no tree or climbing frame, no garden, no place to move around and run. Instead, to enter their classroom they had to walk through piles of rubble and bulky broken household objects, which had gathered over the years. It was a dilemma, a project that we would need to take on in the days to come. Now, for outside time, the teachers lead the children on a walk around the small orphanage/temple ground, looking at plants in big pots, watching gold fish in the pond and trying to get out of the way of house painters and repairmen.

But there is much to be grateful for: A protective inside environment and a space to play in. All of this would not be possible without the support of many people – Nun Nhu Tri, the VCP members, the sponsors... Especially I would like to thank all the students and teachers that I work with in China. On hearing of the Dieu Giac kindergarten project, they had collected money, toys, materials and play equipment to send with me to Dieu Giac kindergarten. Among these are students and teachers from the Beijing teacher-training course, the Chengdu training course, the Guangzhou training course, the Beijing Deepening course, the Chengdu kindergarten with their teachers and parents, the Tianfu Forest kindergarten, and the Huapopo kindergarten... There are more but it would be too long a list to name them all-On behalf of the Dieu Giac teachers and children, thank you everyone.

Thanh Lan Kindergarten- Shirley Bell, VCP kindergarten mentor to Vietnam



The kindergarten is situated in Cu Chi on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City, a semi-rural area of Vietnam surrounded by rubber plantations and rice fields. It boasts small thriving home-based businesses, dairies and rice paper production. Co Lan is the director of Thanh Lan which has 3 teachers, Co Le, Co Tuyen and Co Ngan who lead the 2 kindergartens and 1 nursery class. This Steiner Inspired kindergarten has 50 children aged 18 months to 5 years old and is open all year to support the parents who can spend the day working in the factories and small businesses in the area while knowing their children are well cared for.

This year the sponsorship program has made it possible to pay the teachers a better wage and to make improvements to the buildings and outside play areas such as moving the office to a bigger space, painting walls and repairing walk ways. I visited the school in August this year and enjoyed seeing the children in their traditional dances of South Vietnam. There is a vegetable garden where the children help grow and pick the greens for breakfast and lunch at the school, served outside the classroom in the breezy walk way.

Thanh Lan has a wish list for the new year. Co Lan, the founding teacher, although past retirement age, has worked tirelessly for the children of Cu Chi and now feels she needs to find office staff to keep up with the many demands of running a kindergarten. There are plans to put up an awning to keep the front rooms protected from the heat and humidity of the area and the classrooms need to be painted afresh each year.



Tre Xanh (ex-Tho Trang) Kindergarten The great change in the Vietnamese Steiner kindergarten



movement has its beginnings at Tho Trang. First of all, its name is no longer Tho Trang (White Rabbit). It has been changed to Tre Xanh (Green Bamboo) – the name for the Kindergarten and Primary school combined, although presently they are not located on the same premises due to certain government regulations. The same regulations also say they are not allowed to keep the name Tho Trang since there was already a kindergarten with this name in the area.

The outside of the new Tre Xanh Kindergarten showing the buildings and some of the grounds.

By the beginning of 2016 the old Tho Trang kindergarten was already full to capacity – 50 children

in 3 classes plus a long waiting list. The requests for places were so many that the management team decided to find a bigger place for the kindergarten, especially a place with a garden and spacious playground. An ideal site was found with room for 4 classes and a large garden. In October the whole Kindergarten relocated there; most of the parents either moved closer to the new school or sent the children on the school buses. The waiting list continued to grow longer and 4 new classrooms have since been erected at the end of the garden to accommodate the new children. The work is now concentrated on landscaping the garden and playground.

Tre Xanh is rapidly gaining reputation for being a model Steiner kindergarten in Vietnam. Some of the teachers have both government and Steiner qualifications, but due to the expansion, a number of the new teachers still lack both knowledge and experience in Steiner education. This proves to be the new challenge. However, the management is determined to send all their teachers to attend the training course, module 4 which will take place in March 2017.

Waldorf-Steiner Education in Vietnam

Growing out of Tre Xanh kindergarten, a primary school had started in 2015 with 5 children, which has become Class 2 in 2016. A new class 1 was added in September 2016, also a class 3 at the upper end. The classes are small, the school cannot yet get registration, but it is gaining popularity and the parents are happy. A class 4 is planned for 2017 and the school is thinking of finding land to build.



Outside play showing more of the grounds of Tre Xanh



Beds in the Warm Nest Kindergarten

Interest in Waldorf-Steiner education continues to grow in Vietnam. There are currently 8 Steiner- inspired kindergarten initiatives with about 23 class groups – 4 in Ho Chi Minh, 1 in Cu Chi, 1 in Danang and 2 in Hanoi; these can be said to be serious about applying Steiner principles, to greater or lesser degrees. There are some who want to open a Steiner school without knowing anything about Steiner principles; still others want to exploit the name Waldorf-Steiner to make money.

Many Facebook sites and Websites publish daily articles and exchanges about different aspects of Anthroposophy and Steiner education, some genuine, some totally off the mark. A few people even try to legally register their own Steiner Education Foundation. Meanwhile, a group of serious Steiner-inspired kindergartens have been working closely with Thanh Cherry with the wish to form a Foundation that hopes to connect with and work according to guidelines from the International Association for Steiner-Waldorf Early Childhood Education (IASWECE).



Warm Nest kindergarten children learn by imitation



Danang Sunflower Kindergarten outside play area

Teacher training Project –The Vietnam Waldorf-Steiner Early Childhood Teacher Training Course II (VWSECTT II) had its Module 1 in November 2015 in Ho Chi Minh City but from Module 2 on, the course separated into 2 courses, one in Ho Chi Minh and one in Hanoi. The 2 courses share the same tutors whose timetables dovetail one another in order to economise on human resources. The organising of this takes a lot of time and care but it has worked out well enough. The number of students in Ho Chi Minh is roughly 40 in general while the Hanoi course usually has about 20. Financially it has not been easy and tutors who mostly

Crafting at a teacher training session

travel to Vietnam from China, have been generous and

understanding by agreeing to work slightly longer time and for a moderate pay. This is a considerable step forward from the last training where all tutors received no teaching fee. We deeply thank all the tutors who have taught in Vietnam in 2016 and hope to see them again in the year to come.



These training courses are made possible by yearly support from IASWECE which helps with mentors' and tutors' airfares, accommodation, kindergarten teachers' training tuition and general subsidies where needed. IHF's occasional donation also helps lighten our task at these initial steps and the Freunde's support when there is a shortfall in airfare cost is always appreciated. For all these organisations we offer our deepest gratitude.

Our needs are constant and if you would like to help in any way please contact us by email at: <shirleyabell2@yahoo.com.au> or for donations contact <susanna.pearson@googlemail.com> or P O Box 544, Mittagong NSW 2575

Blessed Greetings for a Wonderful Christmas and a Happy New Year!

***Thanh Cherry
VCP Chairperson
Mittagong, December 2016***

