

issues

Friends of Huong Phuong Orphanage

In January this year I spent time with the sisters and children at an orphanage based in the area of Huong Phuong, Vietnam.

Huong Phuong is situated in Dong Hoi, a remote area in the central northern end of Vietnam. Friends of Huong Phuong Orphanage Inc. is an Australian charity independently developed by my father, Dr Peter Kabaila, an architect and archaeologist. This charity works in partnership on a diverse number of community development projects in central Vietnam. It works with the local community on livelihood projects which enable the community to sustain an income, such as the rice harvester project and chicken farming project. It also facilitates adult education projects which enable carers to better meet the needs of disabled children. It is currently focusing on the establishment of a medical clinic which will focus on treating people with disabilities.

My role whilst visiting the orphanage was to identify ways in how to improve the health and wellbeing of the sisters and children at the orphanage, convent and surrounding areas. This was not an easy task. Many difficulties stand in the way of creating better health care for these people. The Vietnam Government provides no funding for the wellbeing of people in the orphanage. Power cuts mean people often have cold showers, whilst already sick with various illnesses in a cold climate. It is a society in which people work very hard, for long hours, do not sleep enough and are incredibly poor.

The main illnesses identified in Huong Phuong appear to be respiratory illnesses, gastrointestinal illnesses and chronic pain caused by hard labour. Without the technology of western hospitals, visual assessments are essential. Equipment such as pulse oximeters, hand sanitisers, hospital grade disinfectant, nebulisers, ventolin and saline, were unavailable.

Many of the children are disabled, cognitively and or physically, and yet are still so very bright, intelligent and loveable. My brother, Vytautas and I helped teach children



Friends of Huong Phuong Orphanage Inc.

and the sisters some dances and songs. Thuy pronounced 'Twee', a girl who is deaf mute was definitely one of the best dancers. From watching her learn so many complexities without speech or hearing I realised these children are capable of so much more enrichment in their lives, in particular education. As a western outsider, I can see Australians have the knowledge, resources and ability to enrich these children's lives. One step ahead in this direction is the development of a new library, particularly for those with disabilities.

I talked to the doctors, nurses and sisters about primary health care: hand hygiene, fluid intake, sleep and warmth. However, this is an entirely new culture of health for these people and yet it has the ability to work. It will become more effective when more people from western countries are able to spend time volunteering their time to help educate the sisters. I noticed many of the children with disabilities fed food while lying on their backs; a practice which a western health care professional would consider unsafe. They are now putting in place a training program for disability therapy, in particular for safe swallowing techniques.

The sisters and children at Huong Phuong Orphanage are beautiful; they have difficult circumstances in which to live. However they still smile, laugh and never complain. As I was told by many people in Vietnam: "If you can get money, you can eat, so everything is okay, that is the only thing to worry about."

These people have shown me hospitality, love, hard work, resilience, optimism and courage. It is hard to accept such bundles of joy are without family and are amongst such poverty. They have touched my heart and inspired me to continue charity work back in Australia. We, as a nation, can help.

hporphanage.asn.au/contact-us/

In October, 2011, Friends of Huong Phuong Orphanage Inc. received ATO (Australian Taxation Office) endorsement as a tax concession charity and is awaiting UN endorsement to enable tax deductible donations.

RASA KABAILA IS A REGISTERED NURSE IN THE ACT AND AN ANF MEMBER