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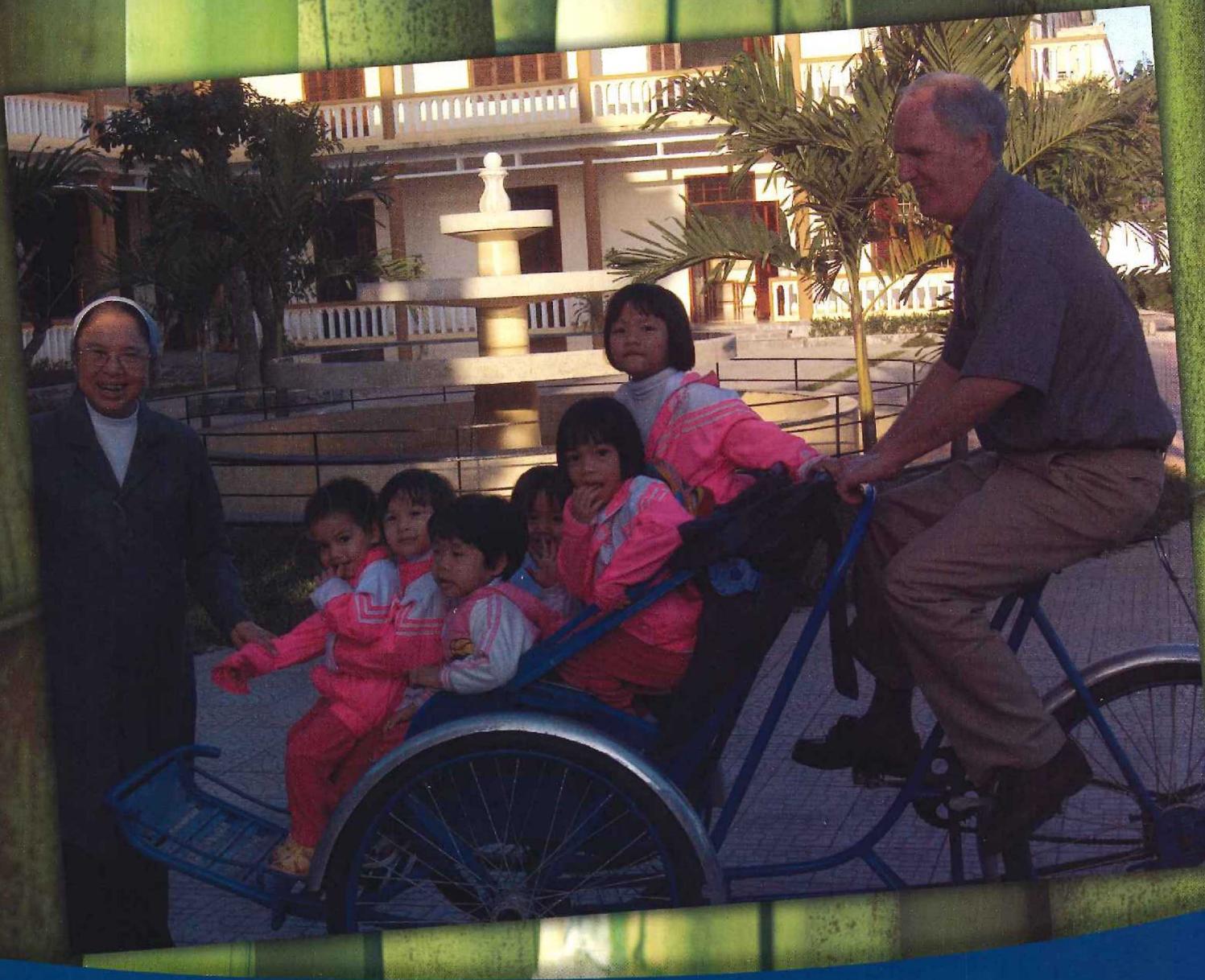
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Vet Returns to Vietnam

An Orphanage Visit Sparks Fond Memories

A Veteran Returns to Vietnam

An orphanage, where a vet made fond memories during wartime, is revisited.

by Bob Staranowicz
Community contributor

When I left Vietnam in 1970, I left behind many memories, some bad, some good. I put the experience of Vietnam in the back of my mind for a very long time. But, in 1992, when I started writing about my experiences, the memories of a very important place were resurrected.

Each Sunday while I was stationed in Vietnam, someone from my company — 501st Signal Battalion, 101st Airborne Division — would take laundry to an orphanage in Hue. On one of those Sundays, I was invited to go along. That experience, and the many return visits to the orphanage at Kim Long, left an indelible impression on me that has never disappeared. When I finally made contact with the orphanage in May of 2008, I knew I had to return.

My youngest daughter, Stacy and I arrived in Hue on a Sunday evening. Since it was already dark, there was nothing that I could see during the cab ride from Phu Bai that was remotely familiar.

The next afternoon, with gifts in hand, we hailed a cab and headed to Kim Long. As we exited the cab, we were greeted by a young Vietnamese girl, dressed in black. Her name was Nguyen Quynh Trang and she was the interpreter for the sisters. One of those sisters was Sister Xavier, who was also a member of the orphanage staff when I left it last in 1970. Sister Xavier was still very active at 91 years of age. Although, we didn't remember each other, it did not matter. She greeted us with the same cheer and smile that all of the nuns did during our tour of the facilities.

We came upon an assistant changing the diaper of a one-year-old girl. Lin had come to the orphanage when she was only one day old. When the diaper was on, she handed the girl to Stacy who walked the rest of the tour with her. Lin was expressionless, it was somewhat sad to see this beautiful child and no smile.

Sister Xavier had now joined us on the tour — laughing at each comment any of us would make — but as we continued, she lagged behind, and Trang and Sister Chantal Vu Thi Tho did not seem to feel obligated to wait for her.



Sister Chantal Vu Thi Tho distributes cookies to the children of the Kim Long orphanage, in a new section of the orphanage, known as Son Ca II. During snack time, Bob Staranowicz said there "was no chaos or ruckus" as each child received their treat.

Photo courtesy of Bob Staranowicz

We moved on to the newer section of the orphanage, known as Son Ca II. But before we left, I met two very special people.

On one of my visits to Kim Long in 1970, I took a random picture of two boys playing in the garden. I had sent this picture to Christian Philippe, the European liaison for the orphanage, who shared it with Sisters Chantal and Xavier. The day before we arrived at Kim Long, the orphanage started celebrating its 120th Anniversary. The two boys who were in that picture, who are now men, were at that celebration.

In terms of randomness and coincidence, who could have ever imagined that after 39 years, I would be, once again, meeting these two men. Tu and Lan and I spoke for a few minutes with the help of Trang. I had my picture taken with them and then they were gone.

We had to traverse small alleys and narrow streets to get to the orphanage's newer section. Some children, anxious to say hello to the two Westerners passing by, came out of the small homes and businesses that we passed. On the way, we met a friend of Sister Chantal who was tending to his garden.

He invited us in to show us the altars and tombs that he was preparing for Tet, the Vietnamese New Year. Preparations were being made all over the country for the celebration that was less than a week away.

The new orphanage's entrance is about a five-minute walk from Son Ca I, the original orphanage. The complex was actually built on the former cemetery of the orphanage. We arrived via a small street near the Perfume River. At Son Ca II, there was a courtyard with trees and fountains and several buildings. There were many classrooms, vegetable gardens and a kitchen and dining areas.

One of the classrooms we visited was for special needs students. The children had all types of disabilities. There was a 22-year-old woman with Down syndrome, who was very high functioning, another younger girl with Down syndrome, and a boy with Cornelia de Lange syndrome. There were several others who were also happy to see us. We talked, played a little and sat with them. They were all well behaved, but this had been true for all of the children we met.

School was about to let out when we headed back to Son Ca I. It was snack time and Sister Chantal was distributing cookies. Again, there was no chaos or ruckus as each child received their treat.

I was convinced to take some children on a cyclo ride. This

bike had a huge seat on the front — sort of like a rickshaw — that held the children as I whisked around the courtyard.

A little girl, Mai Ahn, was latched on to my daughter. After this experience, Stacy said she understood why it is difficult to leave children behind.

Philippe's godchild, Anh Xuan, sat with me. After taking a cookie from Sister Chantal, she took my hand and led me to a place across the courtyard where we sat. It was as if she didn't want to share me with anyone.

Later, the children who are permanent residents filed into the dining room where they all had assigned seats. The little ones sat at lower tables, while the older children sat at high top tables. There was no chaos or misbehavior as Sister Chantal led them in prayer. Then they sang a short song in Vietnamese.

The staff, both nuns and lay people, served the children a meal of rice and shredded meat. After dinner was done, the children were led back to their respective bed rooms to prepare for the show that some of them would be performing later that evening.

We then headed back to the area that we first entered earlier in the afternoon, where we met Sister Julienne Loan. Sister Julienne took over the responsibility of the orphanage in 2007.

She is supported by Sister Chantal. Sister Julienne replaced Sister Marie Kim, who is currently in charge of a school for poor children in Tuy Hoa, in southern Vietnam.

Sister Julienne thanked us for the gifts we brought and also for the previous donation we sent in 2008.

Every Christmas I ask friends and family for donations, and then the sisters buy what is needed. They've bought three tons of rice, a washer and other supplies for the children. On this visit, I brought a monetary donation, candy and office supplies at the request of the nuns.

Sister Chantal, who read from a script, told us that although this is the first time we met, we are already friends. She explained that when the good sisters returned to Kim Long in 1991, the place was surrounded by barbed wire and was a slum of hen houses and dirty stables. With the help of God and many others, she said, everything and more has been rebuilt. She spoke of the war and Sister Xavier's longevity at Kim Long. She thanked us for the washer and stove our first donation had bought, and said we would always have a place at Kim Long.

We then went to the dining room where we enjoyed homemade wine and a can of Saigon 333 beer, which is pronounced ba-ba-ba. Sister Julienne brought the first course of Pho, a Vietnamese noodle soup. Then we had a platter full of fried chicken that was breaded with panko, and a whole fish. After dinner, the children were waiting for us in the courtyard. We sat in padded chairs while the others sat in wooden or steel chairs. We were treated like royalty.

Trang, reading from a script, addressed Stacy and me. She said it was a great honor to have us at Kim Long and for me to return after all of these years. She told me that because I had sent a picture of the church to Philippe back in May of 2008, which verified Kim Long was the orphanage I had known, she started calling the church "Bob's Church." She was happy that the church was the link to my return.

The church had been returned to Kim Long by the government just a few weeks before my visit. Sister Chantal told us

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Top left collage: This church was the link to contributor Bob Staranowicz's return to an orphanage in Vietnam. Staranowicz was stationed in Vietnam in 1970. Staranowicz snapped a picture of two boys, Tu and Lan, in a garden at Kim Long. Top, right: Mai Ahn is one girl who lives at Son Ca II, the new section of the orphanage.

Middle from left: Staranowicz's youngest daughter, Stacy, sits with orphan Mai Ahn. Staranowicz sits with another orphan, Anh Xuan.

Bottom from left: After nearly 40 years, Tu, Staranowicz and Lan were reunited. Staranowicz first took a photo of the two men when they were just boys playing in a garden. The photo can be seen in the top, left collage. The children of Son Ca II orphanage in Kim Long pose for a photo at the beginning of 2013. Sister Xavier, 91, who was a member of the orphanage staff in 1970, was still a part of the staff in 2009.

Photos courtesy of Bob Staranowicz

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it will be necessary to build a wall around the church to bring it back to Son Ca I, the original orphanage. She thanked us again for the previous gifts and new gifts, and asked me to take thanks back to all who contributed. She felt that we would leave a piece of our heart in Kim Long, and I know we have. She told us that she and the staff would never forget us and we would always remain as one of their best friends. She ended with another thank you and said she was sad that Philippe could not be there with us. She invited us to come back at any time and said we would always be welcome.

Trang introduced the first act and each subsequent performance. There was singing and dancing. All of the outfits worn by the children were made by older girls in a seamstress class. Some were very ornately decorated and many were silk.

Our companions for the evening, Anh Xuan and Mai Anh, sat with us through the entire show, holding our hands, snuggling, just sharing their love. When the show was over it was difficult to let them go and to say goodbye to all the children.

We returned to the reception room where we were given gifts by the sisters — two bottles of homemade wine and four bags of Vietnamese coffee. A taxi was summoned and we were soon to end our visit of more than seven heart-warming hours. It all went too quickly and it was definitely not enough to spend at this place.

The sisters said goodbye to us in the traditional European manner of a kiss on both cheeks. We got into our taxi as Sister Chantal gave directions to the driver and we were off.

This day was one of my most rewarding days. I am, and will be, eternally grateful that I had my daughter there to share it with me. I don't think that I have ever felt as good about anything I have ever done in a charitable way that I did that day. I am absolutely positive that neither Stacy nor I will ever forget our day at Kim Long. We rode back to our hotel just talking about what we had experienced that day.

For more information about the orphanage or to donate, contact me at bobstar101@gmail.com. Learn more by visiting st-paul-hue.com, a website dedicated to the orphanage.

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