

Nov. 06, 2011

Strangers I am eager to meet.

It has been 2 weeks since our mission in Vietnam ended, and 9 days since we returned to Toronto. The jet lag is slowly subsiding and the cold I caught from the change in weather is getting better; my mind is still occupied by thoughts of our time in Vietnam.

And what a time I had in Vietnam! It was my second trip back to my native land since I left in 1975. The first was when I brought my family back in 2005 for the 30th anniversary of the ‘escape’ at the end of the war.

I became aware of the Medical Aid for VietNam through a colleague who participated in missions to China. As applications and cheques were mailed, airline tickets and visas were obtained; I was filled with much anticipation and a little apprehension before the trip. I was worried about being “flexible” and hoped that I would do well and be useful to the team.

The process through the Vietnamese customs was pleasantly simple and the greeting from Paul, Tuyen and Kim Anh at the airport was reassuring. After the first team meeting, my wife Bek and I felt very comfortable with these “strangers” by the time of our first dinner in Saigon. Besides Tuyen, Kim Anh, Pat and our team leader Paul, most of us were “rookies” in the whole Medical Aid field and we all managed to bond further during the bus ride to our first outreach clinic.

Under the leadership of Paul and Fr. Nhat, I was impressed with the team’s performance under the most trying circumstances for the duration of our mission. We all seemed to adapt well and went about doing our job efficiently. I got over my apprehension and immersed myself in my duties. I have never sweated so much before at work; but I have also never drank so much beer before either! Bek and I have never laughed so hard and long on a trip before.

The food was simple yet amazingly fresh, delicious and authentic. I tasted dishes that I rarely had before and some even brought back the memory of my short childhood in Vietnam. We had so many “toad” fruits, dragon fruits and fresh coconuts and crabs to satisfy an army’s cravings. The food cooked at the local churches and lunches at Tuyen’s and Hanh’s homes were heart warming.

I believe that all the team members, like Bek and I, treasure the times we spent together on this mission. From our meals to the morning masses, from the hard working days to our silly times on the beach or in the pool, those were moments we will remember fondly forever. How can any of us forget the magical night on the beach with the glowing wave crests and sparkling sands in Ke Ga?

October 2011 mission was my first mission and it was the team members that had the most lasting impression on me. Everybody worked with a sincere and dedicated drive, toward the common goal of serving the people. Even Our driver Tai and his helper, the 18 year old Hai got their hands wet to help the dental team. Nghi and Kim Anh were super organized in setting up make-shift dental operatories and smoothly managed the dental clinic. The cool and capable Sunny, sweet talking and gentle Quynh and I, worked our hardest to keep our patients comfortable. Sister Thuy Nga and Bao gave us the much needed extra help. And who could forget the merry laughs of the bubbly Linda, who enthralled many children and adults with her oral hygiene instructions.

The medical and the dispensary were staffed by the wise and experienced Pat, interpretive and affable Tram, and the passionate Janet. The compassionate Dr. Tom along with Dr. Thuyen and Dr. Lam completed the medical team. The responsibility of categorizing and dispensing the mountains of medicine fell upon Sister Nguyet, Tuyen, Hanh and Bek. The team also could not do without the support of Derrick, sister Chau and Fr. Nhat. Visions were improved with the Ophthalmology team of Dr. Lan and the local optician.

Paul, our leader along with the energetic Fr. Nhat, was the cement that bound the team members together. Paul was responsive, flexible and wickedly funny. We could all appreciate the hard work of Tuyen (Monica) in arranging everything from hotel booking to our meals... and many other things for the team. I also remember the generosity of Quan. Overall, I was overwhelmed by the genuine good intentions and sincerity of every one I encountered on this mission.

These are the “strangers” I am eager to meet.

Perhaps the most eye opening experience for me was my encounter with the girl from the first orphanage we visited in Bao Loc. She approached and conversed with me with her notebook. I was writing in Vietnamese, which I had not done since I left Vietnam, on her notebook. Her answer to my question of what she wanted to be when older was that she just wanted to finish her homework for tomorrow. I am still contemplating her answer. I can still learn something in my middle age from a disabled child.

Thank you Fr. Tien and Dr. Neima for the foresight in establishing **Medical aid for Vietnam**. I am grateful for being given the opportunity to come back to serve the people of the country I left 36 years ago. In the process, I learnt more about myself, my connection to the birth country. I was removed from Vietnam but I guess Vietnam never left me.

I am looking forward to future missions.

Dan Le
Toronto, Ontario

Ps. I think I still have my HUE accent.!!!

