



NEWSLETTER

Issue No.15, December 2010

TOGETHER... WE MADE IT HAPPEN

2010 TRAVEL DIARIES OF SAVICE VOLUNTEERS

Monday, September 6, 2010: ...The most memorable part of the journey was the two days we shared with Quyên, the SAVICE Volunteer based in Hà Nội, and with Uncle Quí, who was Quyên's father. The journey took us through 6 Northern provinces—a total of about 1200 km. We covered 600 km a day, from 5 in the morning until 10 at night. We still wonder how it was that we covered such distances with such speed considering the road conditions we faced. Uncle Quí's driving skills were commendable. Many times we noticed that Uncle Quí showed signs of exhaustion and we wanted to take over the driving wheel but he refused our offer, insisting, in his familiarly resilient Northern ways: "It's really nothing, a bit of rest and we'll go on, I'm used to the roads and the way they drive in this part of the country, I haven't forgotten..." Thus Uncle Quí delivered a group of us, SAVICE Volunteers, to our destinations over those two long days. Uncle Quí refused any compensation for his time or for the fuel. He even generously fought to pay the lunch bills for the entire group. SAVICE would not have gotten very far without Volunteers like Quyên and his father, our Uncle Quí.

Tuesday, September 7, 2010: ...This afternoon, we reached the end of the road that accommodated travel by car and took to the motorcycle from Nam Định to Thái Bình. By motorcycle, we were able to weave through large farm fields in North Central Vietnam (Trung Du Bắc Bộ). When the motorcycle could not take us over water, rickety ferries that were probably constructed in the 1960s carried us the rest of the way. While Uncle Quí laboured to drive the car over roads that were often in the middle of being repaired, taking care to avoid large boulders, we brothers and sisters of SAVICE enjoyed the indescribable feelings brought on by the gentle breeze and mild sunshine of the first days of Northern Autumn. Perhaps it was a gift from nature because when we landed in Nội Bài airport only a few days ago, we were engulfed by the harsh hot Hà Nội summer still lingering there.





TRAVEL DIARIES OF SAVICE VOLUNTEERS IN CHARGE OF CENTRAL AND MIDLAND HIGHLAND REGIONS OF VIETNAM



Awardees from Thái Bình.



Awardees from Nam Định



Awardees from Vĩnh Phúc

Sunday, August 23, 2010: The bus from Điện Bàn district to Tây Nguyên (Western Highlands) left at 9 pm. As I boarded the bus I wondered whether and if my fellow SAVICE Volunteers from Sài Gòn were able to get to their appointments on time. I still did not know how I would rest that night.

Monday, August 24, 2010: At 6 am I stepped off the bus. Changes in Pleiku took me by surprise—the last time I set foot in Pleiku was 42 years ago. Pleiku was immensely larger, no longer “minutes away, path to the old place” like I used to quietly sing to myself.

Tuesday, August 25, 2010: Volunteer Quốc had arrived in Pleiku the previous evening, I took from what he told me that his flight was not exactly comfortable and smooth due to a storm, the first of the season in the Central Highlands (Miền Trung Cao Nguyên). The two of us were reunited after braving travel by air and by ground.

All of us, now including two St. Paul Sisters from Pleiku, set out together to An Khê under heavy monsoon rain. Mr. Quốc volunteered to be our navigator through the famous An Khê mountain passes. At half past 12 noon, we had a flat tire on the highway. The two of us, Mr. Quốc and I worked together to change the tire and 20 minutes later we were back on the road. By this time stomachs are growling.

We arrived in An Khê at 3 pm and when Sister Ngọc arrived fifteen minutes later, the SAVICE awards ceremony was underway. We immediately were greeted with song:

*“Together we sing our song
Welcome to our home our land!
Together we sing along
Dear guests, we give you our hands (clap) 123,12345...”*

I was moved by the sound of students singing and completely forgot my skipped meal and declining energy.



Speeches, flowers, dedications, and expressions of gratitude followed song. Children’s folk poetry reverberated off the walls. A few students were in tears because lowered grades meant that the SAVICE awards committee had to take their names off the awardees’ rosters to make room for other excelling students. Sister Ngọc consoled these students and encouraged them to improve their performance and reapply for scholarships next year.



I went looking for Binh, the student who worked in construction during his years in high school, to get a picture with him. Binh graduated with top grades and was accepted into both the medical school and the teaching program at the university in Sài Gòn. Binh has chosen to pursue medicine, and will receive an award from SAVICE as part of the new University Awards program. *(In the second group picture below, Binh is wearing purple and is in the first in the second row).*

We exchanged parting words and expressions of hopes to see one another the same time next year. The party ended at half past 4 pm. Each of us had one bowl of soup, two cookies and a glass of mineral water, enough to stay our stomach for the road back to Pleiku. As we set out on our journey, the sky began to rain. We worried about students and parents who had to wade through mud and large puddles to get home, some of which were 50 km from An Khê.



Awardees in An Khê and surrounding areas (Binh is wearing purple and is pictured here second from left)



Night in Pleiku...



Sister Lan and Sister Luyên in Huế checking rosters of SAVICE awardees.

Saturday, September 4, 2010: At 2 in the afternoon I boarded the bus for Huế and arrived at 6. Worries about the sack of scholarship money in my safe-keeping occupied my mind during the entire journey. Surrounded by 5 motorcycle taxi drivers soliciting their services—who can I trust to take me where I’ve never been? I wandered away pretending to be a local. Over there! A motorcycle taxi man with mild manners and respectable appearance: “Please take me to a road side cafe and help me to find the cheapest room for rent over-night in this city.” If he is a good man, I will have made a friend in Huế..

Saturday, September 5, 2010: I finally arrived in Kim Long at 8 to meet Sister Luyên and Sister Lan, two of the people Dr. Hoàng Trọng Châu entrusted with the task of choosing student recipients of SAVICE scholarship in Huế. We checked rosters of students, recounted envelopes of scholarship money, spoke to students and handed out scholarships to awardees.

At 10 I began for Đồng Hới, Quảng Trị. Knowing that awardees and their families, located all over a large geographical area, are anxious to receive their awards, SAVICE Volunteers fanned out to cover the entire country, bringing the scholarship money directly to the hands of students. At award ceremonies all over the country, awardees and their parents dress up as if they were going to a gala at noon often in the hot sun. At this particular ceremony, I met Mr. Diệp, a parent and a diligent SAVICE field worker based in Quảng Trị. At half past 1 in the afternoon, I left Quảng Trị with a heavy heart for a drought-ridden region deep in perpetual poverty.

Monday, September 6, 2010: I took a motorcycle taxi to Truồi village, about 40 km away. At half past 9, I met Principal Mỹ of An Lương Đông School, to coordinate the handing out of scholarships to students in Truồi and surrounding areas. Last year, SAVICE sponsored the building of An Lương Đông School, an effort that was successful much thanks to the efforts of Principal Mỹ, who is available every year to receive us and help us to hand out scholarships.

Back on a motorcycle taxi heading to the station to catch a bus to the old Hội An city, I think about my next trip to Kế Xuyên, Tam Kỳ and to Đà Nẵng to hand out scholarships to students in Quảng Nam Province (South Central). My heart fills with gratitude for Vịnh, who introduced SAVICE to me, for Bảo Quốc, Thu Sang, Dr. Châu, and all my fellow SAVICE Volunteers all over the country, and especially for SAVICE, for giving me the chance to do humanitarian work.



Awardees in Gò Vấp, Sài Gòn, South Vietnam



Awardees in Nam Định province, North Vietnam



Awardees in Midland-Highland Regions



Awardees in Huế city, Central Vietnam



SAVICE Volunteer Thuận sharing his thoughts with students and their parents in Huế City



Awardees in Đồng Hới, Quảng Trị Province



An Lương Đông School, Truồi Village



Awardees in Quảng Nam Province



Awardees of aboriginal descent in Đắc Lắc

"Dear SAVICE Volunteers and Sisters,

You have successfully completed the difficult task of distributing SAVICE awards to deserving students in every region of the country. You took on arduous journeys over mountain passes, across rivers, with back packs on your shoulders; you travelled by all modes of transportation available: by motorcycle, by coach, by ferry, by boat; you reached each and every province in order to hand scholarships directly into the hands of our students. I truly admire your whole-hearted, selfless, and generous efforts. Although we could not accompany you on your journeys all over the country, we want you to know that we are always with you in spirit and that we share your sincere love for compassionate humanitarian work. All for one: our beloved students living in deep poverty..."

Dr. Hoàng Trọng Châu



STORIES OF SAVICE STUDENTS

Võ Thị Cẩm Tiên is a student in grade 7 at THCS Long Thới School, in the district of Chợ Lách, Bến Tre Province. Cẩm Tiên's mother has bone cancer. Her father works as a day-labourer for hire to support the whole family. The cost of treatment for her mother has exceeded 50 million Vietnamese Dong (an equivalent of US\$2600). The family was forced to sell off a section of land inherited from her grandparents to pay for treatment. Because the family is poor, the family cannot afford health insurance.

Cẩm Tiên's mother has only one wish and that is to help her daughter keep up with her studies no matter how much her health continues to decline. The family understands she may not live to see her daughter grow into adulthood.

An award from SAVICE is fulfilling the wish of Cẩm Tiên's and her family's. To Cẩm Tiên, Sister Phượng, the SAVICE field worker handling her case, is like a Fairy Godmother from the fairy tales helping her to take her first steps into a good future life.



Nguyễn Hữu Thùy Phương is currently in grade 9 at PTCS Nguyễn Công Trứ School, in the Village of Cam Thành Bắc, Cam Ranh District, Khánh Hòa Province. Thùy Phương and her two younger sisters currently reside with their grandmother, whose health is in decline and mother, who has severe inflammatory arthritis in her joints and is therefore bed-ridden. Thùy Phương's father is a migrant worker living in Sài Gòn, earning his living by driving a motorcycle taxi and by delivering take-out food. His income each month is about one million Vietnamese Dong (US\$55), most of which he sends home to his family.

Outside of school, Thùy Phương and her younger sister take turns driving cattle for hire to help support their mother, grandmother, sister, and themselves. Thùy Phương dearly loves to go to school. This year is her first year receiving a scholarship from SAVICE.

When SAVICE Field Worker Xuân Nga based in Nha Trang came to visit Thùy Phương's family, the sisters were ecstatic. This photograph is their very first in their entire lives.



STORIES OF SAVICE STUDENTS



SAVICE Field Worker Trịnh Thị Thắm visiting Nguyễn Thị Thu at her home.

Nguyễn Thị Thu, in a student in the 7th grade at PTCS Trường Giang School, Nông Cống district, Thanh Hóa province. This year is her first year receiving a scholarship from SAVICE.

Even though she lives under straw roofs and labours everyday to help her parents, she maintains her determination to gain an education and to realize her own potential. SAVICE goes with her on her journey to adulthood helping her in her studies...

"My life is for my child, and SAVICE has invigorated my life..."



Sister Phượng and SAVICE Field Worker Quốc met with Mr. Biên and handed a SAVICE award to his beloved daughter Yến Oanh.

These are the words of Mr. **Nguyễn Tấn Biên**. Seven years ago, Mr. Biên suffered a traffic accident on his way home from work. He was paralyzed due to crushing injuries to his lower legs, despite surgical repair. The suffering and mounting debts were intolerable for his wife, who left him and their daughter, **Nguyễn Hồ Kim Yến Oanh**, only 5 at the time. Mr. Biên succumbed to depression and unsuccessfully attempted suicide.

Because of his love for his daughter, he decided to go on living and caring for her. Each day he sells lottery tickets on his wheelchair to keep her in school. When she has free time, Yến Oanh helps her father sell lottery tickets. Ever conscientious of her father's trials, Yến Oanh is always a model student. This year she is in grade 8 at THCS Long Thới School. When she received the scholarship, both father and daughter were full of joy, but

streams of silent tears flowed from their eyes. Mr. Biên bared the deepest chambers of his heart and gave SAVICE the words we quoted above.