



December 2002

Dear friends,

The maple leaves change their colors once again, greeting the coming of autumn with a light chill and overcast sky. It is time to send our gratitude for your continued support of and valuable contributions to CHEER's many projects in Viet Nam. For CHEER it has been a year filled with amazing projects and challenges.

Reflections of Viet Nam was our first attempt to raise funds through introducing beautiful Vietnamese traditional and modern crafts to our friends and supporters. We carefully chose hand-made crafts from Ha Noi, Hue and Ho Chi Minh City. The crafts were made by artisans, ethnic groups and handicapped people. Thank you to Renee Montagne and Hennie Marlis who graciously opened their beautiful homes for the occasion and to all of you for participating in this lovely and unique event.

Traversing Borders: Viet Nam Teacher Training Program, our second summer teacher training in July, was another success. Dr. Lillian Utsumi and I conducted a ten-day intensive training for 32 language teachers in Nha Trang, one of the most beautiful coastal provinces of Viet Nam. The teachers, graduates from Vietnamese Universities, currently teach English as a foreign language. We were greatly impressed by the eagerness, dedication and passion for teaching shown by this mixed group of veteran and young teachers. Peace was the theme woven through our training and received with open hearts and joy by our teachers. The training culminated with the creation of a PEACE QUILT dedicated to the college. We will continue the training in 2003 and hope that the message of PEACE will echo beyond national boundaries. Your support brought the Vietnamese teachers to the program.

The A Luoi Valley Project : The A Luoi Valley is a two-hour trip from Hue, a swath of land in central Viet Nam neighboring the Lao border on the west. In October, CHEER Board member Linda Garrett and I drove through the breathtaking lush green mountains on the only paved road, the main artery, leading to the provincial town of A Luoi where the community has sprung up and slowly taken shape during recent decades. Most of 36,000 people in A Luoi's 21 villages are from the ethnic groups of Pa Co, Ta Oi, Pa Hy and Van Kieu. Except for three new economic villages, Son Thuy, Phu Vinh and part of the provincial town, the rest of A Luoi's 18 villages are still impoverished. Over 60% of the people live below the poverty line or below the government poverty standard of approximately \$5.20/month. The daily struggle to survive the dangers of unexploded ordnance, residues of dioxin in the soil and in well water has made life even harder for these people.

During our three days there, Linda and I visited with families who received our micro credit loans last year. We also visited with families in three villages whom we are

considering supporting as part of the new project. We presented loans to 50 new families. Among the new recipients were 10 female artisans who are currently reviving the Pa Co traditional bead weaving under Mrs. Mai Thi Hop, the dynamic head of the co-op and a master of the craft. They were excited about the new loans and asked CHEER to assist them in strengthening their cooperative. "You must help us help ourselves to move out of poverty," said Mrs. Hop.

We also visited Mr. Quynh Luong, a Ta Oi artisan who designs and produces unusual baskets in A Ngo village. We would like to support Mr. Luong so that he could form a coop to teach this beautiful craft to younger artisans in the village.

The visit to the elementary school in Hong Kim village reminded me of my pilgrimage to Viet Nam almost nine years ago which left a profound impression in my soul as I walked into a classroom in Dong Anh, a small village outside of Ha Noi. Except for a black board, chair, desk, worn wooden benches and tables, the classroom was barren. Many children in this class were handicapped. The teacher, equipped with only her dedication and passion for teaching, did the unthinkable: teaching her Down syndrome students how to read. CHEER was founded after this experience.

Almost nine years later, in this remote village of Hong Kim, A Luoi province, I walked into a classroom and relived the same emotional shock. Time stood by quietly. Except for a blackboard, chair, desk, worn wooden benches and tables, and two posters, the classroom was barren. The children sat motionlessly and listened attentively to the teacher whose beautiful writing imprinted an equation formula on the blackboard. Most children did not have textbooks, notebooks or pencils. They repeated the formula after the teacher like the chirping of little birds. Their bright eyes pierced through my soul as if reminding me of my vision: if the children of this remote village and the children of Viet Nam can have a fraction of what my children and her friends who live in the U.S. have, they can certainly soar in the sky.

We returned to Hue overwhelmed with the experience, humbled at the stoicism of the people, burdened with an enormous sense of responsibility but at the same time, excited by the possibilities. After many years of working in Viet Nam, we came to a strategically important decision: We will concentrate our efforts on development and capacity-building projects, within our limited resources. We will focus on one village in A Luoi, continue with our teacher training program, and expand cultural exchanges. As a supporter of CHEER, we are grateful to you, because you have helped make these projects a reality.

At our extended family gathering for Thanksgiving this year in Southern California, my younger sister shared a poem written by her fourth-grade son as a class assignment:
War.

*War is all about killing and death.
People being shot in the ribs. People spitting out blood.
Soldiers putting clips in guns. Deadly weapons going through bodies. People running out of bullets.
Missiles firing, grenades blowing. Arms falling off. Blowing up heads.*

*People retreating and brave people charging.
Proton missiles being launched, proximity mines blowing up soldiers.
Machine guns being fired around.
People shedding blood.
Wives and kids crying.
Friends shedding tears.
Soldiers saluting the dead.
Coffins being made.
Funerals being held.
Moms crying, unknown soldiers being remembered.
Graveyards being filled.
People dying with honor.*

By Khiem Dang

This vivid description of the violence and horror of war and its heart wrenching aftermath, written by my nine-year old American nephew of Vietnamese descent, is a painful requiem at the end of the year when war is no longer a rumor and looms closer. In this wonderful holiday season many of us have found comfort in the arms of families and friends, neighbors and communities. The sense of sharing in this time has made us stronger and at the same time compels us to reflect on our collective responsibility as well as our vulnerability and fragility in this vast universe. The poem earnestly reminds me of that responsibility. I further reflect upon my belief in the immense capacity of our hearts and of humanity to create a caring environment for our children and every child in the universe: A place in which to live with no fear and to dream of a bright future. For almost a decade you have supported the work of CHEER to build trust, tolerance and peace among peoples. Please accept our humble gratitude. We hope that the seeds of compassion and love planted today will bring peace to us all tomorrow.

Peace & Love,

Nam-Hau