

Action for Life 2 Newsletter #24

24th May 2004

Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh) and Cambodia (Phnom Penh)

Xin chao!

Welcome to Vietnam, or more specifically to Ho Chi Minh City (HCM City) - home to 5.5 million people and nearly 3 million motorbikes! Our team arrived with the hope that we will make more friends and encourage them to attend the Asia Pacific Youth Conference (APYC). We were also very happy to see Ngan again. She and her friends had set up a fantastic program that particularly focused on Vietnam's young people.

The team visited '15 May School' which educates poor children in the center of HCM City. The school is run with the help of young local and international volunteers, including Ngan before she joined Action for Life. The school encourages the participation of students in all activities, including fundraising, and fosters creativity. The day we visited students were doing embroidery and preparing for a circus, as well as their usual curriculum of language, maths, etc.

Some of us also visited the Christina Noble Children's Foundation - an international partnership of people dedicated to serving children in need. Current projects include children's schools, medical centers and orphanages in Vietnam and Mongolia. We were particularly touched by Christina Noble's painful life story and how she felt guided to help children from this part of the world. It really confirmed the idea that God gives us pain and struggles, but in coming to terms with these experiences we are purified so our pain can be used to heal other people's suffering.

Violeta from Moldova, observed an invisible thread connecting the stories of two volunteers we met at the Christina Noble Center and '15 May School' "Both of them became disillusioned by their workplaces. Anu (England), a volunteer at the '15 May School', previously worked in a company in England that was discovered to be guilty of a major fraud. Aoife (Ireland) from Christina Noble's Center was affected by the contrasts existing in the world - her company could afford to lose \$10 000 in one day while there are children in great need. That is how they both decided to be volunteers and work with children in Vietnam."

We also met the local Youth Movement for Co-operation Activities (YMCA). They are involved in many projects that aim to bring balance between the mind, body and soul, including programs for street children, orphans and the disabled, care of old people, programs for HIV affected persons, youth training and cultural exchange programs.

The AfL team also used the time in Vietnam to understand the history, religion and culture of the country and its people. Bhav from England writes: "Learning about the war with America from a Vietnamese point of view was fascinating for me. The Cu Chi tunnels showed the ingenuity of the people, and the Remnants Museum gave a balanced account of the suffering everyone faced. My western training told me that Vietnam fell to the communists, which is terrible. What I saw in Vietnam was not what I expected. I think the West's strong anti-communist feelings have led it to respond destructively to others. Vietnam taught me to open my heart and try and understand more, rather than attack something I don't really know anything about. The people have the same struggles as people of any land, and no system can ever bring hope and morality to individuals, whether it is socialist or democratic, or give a solution to the materialism that is eroding our Spirits."

Buddhism is the principal religion in Vietnam, and we were fortunate to meet Sister Tam Van at the Pagoda where she is Abbess. She touched us with stories of her struggles in becoming a nun, and her deep concern for people and nature. We hope she will be able to come to APYC to speak about the role of Buddhism in creating lasting peace for the region.

Natasha from Australia: "Our weekend 'home stay' experience in Ho Chi Minh City really touched my heart - a family so genuinely and generously welcoming a complete "stranger" into their home. I often feel fearful before staying with host families, as it takes me out of my "comfort zone" But I always feel very grateful for the experience. Phuong Ha's family took so much trouble to look after me, and it was a fantastic insight into Vietnamese home-life. The sense of community in their large apartment block makes me reflect how care for our neighbours is often missing in so-called 'developed' countries."

One of the most fruitful times was the regular meetings with the four Vietnamese who attended the last APYC and their friends. They were touched by the honest sharing of our life experiences and the challenging questions we asked. We are delighted that 24 of them have applied to come to the APYC.. Here are some of their reflections:

Tam from the Foreign Trade University: "When I was a child I wanted to become a businessman. Now I believe that after attending APYC I will become a good businessman. I am also seeking the answer to the questions: What do I need to put right in my life, and what are my special skills to contribute to making a better world?"

Phuong Ha from Van Lang University: "Although I have known AfL for only three weeks, I have learned many things from the group. At the beginning I just thought I would practice my English but after I met all of you everything changed. I discovered there are still a lot of things to do and learn besides studying. AfL helped me build wider friendships. Thank you for helping the young Vietnamese find their bigger purpose in life."

Dang Thi Hai from England, and Phan To Loan from Australia, who took part in AfL1 also supported our team during the time in Vietnam. Loan says: "Coming back to Vietnam with AfL2 was like nurturing the seed that had begun to grow. Closer to my heart was the opportunity to have a face-to-face catch up with my soul sister, Ngan. She touched me deeply with her story and spirited will to live and help others in need, especially street children. Her sharing reinforced that there is a wondrous nature to how things fall into place when you decide to live your life in a spiritual way by caring for others. Ngan also rekindled the hope and faith in me to continue the 'caring and sharing' work commonly known as MRA/IC."

PHNOM PENH....

We're back into our busy and (still!) hot schedule of organising the APYC with the Khmer Youth Association (KYA), meeting an amazing array of change-makers and supporting the local MRA/IC teams. We feel greatly privileged to have the opportunity to work with the KYA - their experience, skill and kindness will make the APYC a big success.

The APYC in Malaysia had a big impact on the Cambodians who attended. As one of them shared recently with tears: "At first I could not understand why people were talking about their personal lives. I never shared anything because I felt vulnerable. Then I asked my roommate why she shared and ended up opening up to her. I admitted that my parents were divorced and that I felt very embarrassed about it and pretended we were a happy family. Now I am not afraid to share honestly about myself and I realise that people become friends not only because of a common commitment but also through constant honesty and sharing."

Fredric Griffin from the US sadly left us and joined the Taiwan team but we are very glad to have Naro Thiek from Nagaland back with us after six weeks of absence.

With warmest wishes from Cambodia,

Bhav, Hai, Laura, Natasha, Naro, Ngan, Peter, Rob, Vuth, Violeta, and Wambui