

VIETNAM CHILDREN'S PROJECT

2021 Annual Newsletter



2020 was a year which saw our horizons physically contracted as each of our home countries valiantly tried to limit the spread of the Covid-19. Yet amongst the turmoil, challenge and grief, people's better natures have generally prevailed. Here in Australia, we are in a fortunate position with the spread of the virus significantly under control. Our heart goes out to those in countries where this is not so.

As a result of the pandemic, activities in different parts of the Vietnam Children's Project have been limited and contact with Vietnam is only from a distance. Thanh Lan and Dieu Giac Kindergartens both closed from 2nd February to 24th May last year, following Government instructions. In general, the situation in the country had been fairly stable, the number of infection cases consistently low and the number of deaths negligible during phase one and phase two. Life and contact with other countries had returned to normal for some months when a phase three, and then phase four just recently, unexpectedly overtook the country. International travel is once again restricted, and many prohibitions applied. Schools and kindergartens are required to extend their New Year (Tet) holidays till the end of February with warnings about possible further changes.

In this time of worldwide economic challenges, we are so very grateful for the ongoing financial support that makes the work of the VCP possible. An endless thank you to our Australian and American sponsors for their steadfast support of children living at Dieu Giac. Sponsorship and donation money provides for everyday necessities in the Orphanage. Alongside this, it enables the young children and others living in poor circumstances to start their educational journey in a Steiner Kindergarten. Some children have even been supported to the end of University study.

A big thank you to the Freunde der Erziehungskunst R.S. (FREUNDE) and the International Hulpfonds (IHF) for continuing to coordinate the sponsorships of kindergarten children at Dieu Giac and Thanh Lan, and to the Steiner-Waldorf Education Association in Viet-Nam (SWAVN) for providing alternative training opportunities for the kindergarten teachers during these difficult times. IHF and the International Association for Steiner/Waldorf Early childhood Education (IASWECE) are as generous as ever with pledges to support the trainee teachers in need and the early childhood teacher training courses once these programmes could safely resume.

Finally, we take this opportunity to remind you that a one off or yearly donation would help us do extra things for the children with special needs, be it medical, financial or educational.

Wishing you a Happy and Joyous Easter!

Susanna Pearson
For the Management Committee

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VIETNAM REPORT DIEU GIAC ORPHANAGE NEWS

Health, Safety and Education

We are happy to report that all is well at the orphanage in terms of health, safety, and education. From the nuns who assist there, the house mothers, general workers to the children, nobody has succumbed to Covid-19. Children had to be homeschooled for a short while but classes have now resumed as normal. Nun Nhu Tri, the Director of the Orphanage, has been healthy and a pillar of strength during this time of challenges. In spite of regular short rests demanded by chronic health issues, she soldiers on. The children continue to get fed and stay protected; Dieu Giac Temple doors open to welcome the congregation whenever it is allowed; and extra social services which require attention are duly dispensed.



Service to others

During 2020, for many months of severe restriction and scarcity, Dieu Giac organised free lunch distribution to poor people in the neighbourhood. Older children and housemothers would cook and pack individual food portions and distribute them to whoever needs a meal. As the virus situation improved, this practice tapered down to a weekly then monthly routine for the rest of the year. People who had lost their job and thereby their livelihood would also receive parcels of rice and staple ingredients as gifts.



In a lull of the pandemic's ravages, a typhoon and flood took over and destroyed many small towns in Central Vietnam. Typically, Nhu Tri organised timely relief distributions of food, clothing and money to the victims in these areas.



As recognition for her service to the community at large, she was presented with a Certificate of Merit by the Prime Minister of Vietnam at a public national conference in November. The children and all at the orphanage were very proud.

For her to be able to achieve all this, Nhu Tri never forgot the part played by the VCP, its working members together with its sponsors and supporters. She wrote a thankyou letter to all of us recently.



Special children

Youngest baby – For the last couple of years, Dieu Giac had stopped taking in young children due to the over large number in the orphanage. By this year, while many young people have come of age and left the big family to live independently and work outside, young babies seem to have found their way to the community again. The first to arrive is a baby boy who was left at the Temple gates at the beginning of January 2021 when he was just about one week old. He is now a bouncy two-month-old and Nhu Tri gave him the name of Van Khanh Hoang.



Van Thien Son – Some of you will well remember Son, the miracle disabled toddler whose progress has become familiar to us all. Son has never been able to walk by himself although he can get around adroitly on his tailor-made ‘chair with wheels’. Money had been raised for a ‘proper’ wheelchair but what he uses now seems to suit his needs best. It has to be modified each year as he grows of course. Son is now 19! As you can see in the photo, he looks handsome and intelligent, can understand most things that are said to him or around him but can only speak a few words in reply. He still cannot do anything with his arms or legs, including feeding or cleaning after himself. A housemother helps him with these chores. The important thing is, he seems very happy and content within his big Dieu Giac family!



31st Birthday – The orphanage’s birthday is on 25 August. During the lockdown on that day in 2020, Nhu Tri and the children celebrated among themselves within the orphanage gates. Everywhere are the words, “Happy Birthday – Family Dieu Giac – 31 year old”. And there are cakes, balloons, presents, and a traditional banquet!



Tết - The Vietnamese Tết or Lunar New Year fell on 12th February 2021. It is the Year of the Buffalo and its celebration is something all children look forward to. The customs involve the wearing of special new clothes; eating special food; older people giving money in a red envelope to younger people or children; taking photos with special people or groups etc.

GREETINGS

From Orphanage sponsorship Coordinator

Hallo, to all dear sponsors! For many of us this past year has been life as we've never known it before. I have observed that for some – like myself – the quieter pace, allowing for introspection and time at home, has been very welcome. For others the adjustment required – working at home while home-schooling, being suddenly unemployed and in some cases homeless – has been testing, sometimes beyond endurance. And as well as this the grief of so many over losing loved ones. It is my heartfelt wish for all of you and your families that you have weathered these times without too much suffering, and that you feel strong, well and at peace.



It is a testimony to the sponsors' strength as a community that we have been able to maintain our support to the Orphanage over the past year. While some have of course had to reduce the amount, others have increased it – we even have two new sponsors. The continuation of this support has been especially precious since contributions to the VCP from other sources have been postponed or terminated.

We are very fortunate to maintain regular communication with Dieu Giac office workers during this time. As a result, you will be able to receive information about the children and the orphanage as usual.

Thank you everyone. With love and blessings,

Anne Bell

From VCP's Secretary and Kindergarten sponsorship Coordinator

Even more so than in other years, I see the blessing and joy of small children flourishing in the warm and loving environment of a Waldorf-based kindergarten. Faced with the uncertainty and challenges of poverty in the changing world today it must be difficult for those under extreme stress to consider the value of social health. Yet here we are, a scattered world community continuing to help and support how we can. The homily of 'giving becomes receiving' rings even more true as inequalities and dualities seem so widespread. Anxiety and fear surround us more than ever, subtly pervading our senses. Consequently, I am grateful for the opportunity to put my energies into working to bring positive change in practical ways for others. To connect with sponsors and the children that we are supporting gives me great satisfaction and pleasure.



A reminder to everyone - please take a look at our beautiful new website <https://www.vietnamchildrensproject.org/>

This is a project that the VCP had attempted on and off for the last 20 years but it has had to wait for a person like Isabel Macmaster with the right know-how and boundless enthusiasm to appear to bring it to fruition. Our special thanks to Isabel for setting up the website. Thank you to all who contribute to the wellbeing of these children!

Jennifer Lloyd

THE KINDERGARTENS

Dieu Giac Kindergarten



With Covid-19 still flaring up now and then in Vietnam, the plan to renovate a new site as the **kindergarten classroom** has had to be postponed as it is considered unsafe to have workmen come from outside into the grounds to do the renovation.

Just as elsewhere in the country, Dieu Giac kindergarten closed down from February to May 2020; **the teachers** kept in touch with parents and children by phone in order to give moral support and advice. They went to work, cleaning, making toys and preparing the classroom two days a week on half-wage pay. One good thing that has happened is that the teachers' annual social insurance fees will now be taken care of by the VCP, (see under Teacher Training, WOW). In the past, with Dieu Giac being unlicensed this payment was not required; changes in circumstances and regulations have

made it obligatory. Kindergarten has now resumed after a month-long New Year holiday, half of it is the result of another enforced lockdown due to a fourth phase of Covid. Through it all the teachers' spirit remains high and positive.

The **housemothers** who take care of the children living in the orphanage are all free from corona infection and **parents** of the 'outside' children are also safe from the virus as the government tends to act quickly and quarantine the infected areas in time when cases appear. All parents attended the teacher-parent meeting at the beginning of the new school year, eager to resume connections with the teachers and each other and to share lockdown experiences. A number have lost their job and are going through difficult financial hardship.

The children are happy to be back with teachers and friends again. Some were anxious and uncertain at first, but after a short time it was as if nothing had happened. They are joyful, active and boisterous as ever. Currently there are 16 in the class of which 7 are from the orphanage.



Thanh Lan Kindergarten

Thanh Lan, like everywhere else, suffered a lot during 2020. Fortunately, none of the teachers, parents, children or their extended families have suffered the virus. During the time that **the kindergarten** closed from February to May, the teachers kept in touch with the children and parents regularly, giving advice on how to work sensitively with their little ones. They came to the kindergarten two days a week - spring cleaning the classrooms, repairing equipment, making new toys and ensouling the space in preparation for the children's return. They also spent time learning more about Waldorf education and only received half-salary in the 3 months.



Sadly, two thirds of **the parents** lost their jobs, had their working hours cut down or could only work on alternate weeks. These families were already financially insecure before and their situation worsened with the pandemic. The kindergarten fees were lowered to accommodate this but it did not prevent half of the families from having no choice but withdrawing their children. From 65 at one time there are now 25 students left.

When **the children** were finally allowed to return to school in May there was so much joy being reunited with friends and teachers. Despite the anxiety and confusion, the **teachers and staff** have managed to keep a positive attitude regarding health measures, teaching practice and the overall wellbeing of the kindergarten. This is a wonderful testament to their collegial spirit, to the strength of their commitment, and to this approach of education.



Teacher Training

During Covid-19, all the usual teacher training courses were cancelled as international tutors and mentors were not able to leave their own country or to enter Vietnam. In order to fill up the vacuum the Steiner-Waldorf education Association in Viet-Nam (SWAVN) organised a series of online workshops during which tutors and students could at least maintain some virtual contact. They were welcome to all students and teachers, including those at Dieu Giac and Thanh Lan kindergartens. From May 2021, the full courses will resume as part-online events with main lectures delivered online by foreign tutors while practical work will be taught by local professionals. One teacher from Dieu Giac and 2 from Thanh Lan will attend these.

Thanh Cherry who had been travelling to Vietnam at least 3 times a year to visit the Orphanage and coordinate the teacher training courses have had to confine her teaching and consulting work to the computer and mobile phone. She has also been kept busy with translating Steiner education books from English into Vietnamese which hopefully would help all the teachers in the long run.

We are grateful to have the usual assistance, moral as well as financial, from our international supporters - IHF with training fees for the 3 teachers from Dieu Giac and Thanh Lan; IASWECE's promise of a usual yearly grant to support the training courses and teacher mentoring once these activities could take place again; and FREUNDE's continuing support for Thanh's travel expenses to VN. Also, WOW, a fundraising project within Freunde involving ex- and current Waldorf students worldwide to help any Steiner school in need has earmarked a donation sufficient to cover the payment of social insurance for the 3 Dieu Giac teachers for this year. It is truly a godsend at Easter time. Thank you to the young people dedicated to this worthwhile project.

May this Easter bring all of us joy and renewal!

Thanh Cherry
VCP Chairperson
Mittagong, March 2021

