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# UPDATE

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER FOR THE GREATER SEATTLE VIETNAM ASSOCIATION

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Editor, Dwight Davis

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## Amputees in Vietnam get help from Seattle

A well known and inventive Seattle orthopedic surgeon who helps amputees walk again was honored last month with Rotary's International Humanitarian Award. Dr. Ernest M. Burgess designed the "Seattle Foot," a prosthesis that offers new mobility and flexibility to amputees, and he created an organization of volunteers and paid staff to bring the modern prosthetics technology to places where it is most needed, most significantly to Vietnam.

### **Pioneer technology for artificial limbs**

Dr. Burgess was a U.S. Army surgeon in the South Pacific from 1943 to 1946. "I saw many poorly-handled extremity amputations," he said. "Most doctors didn't like doing them, found it demoralizing."

Upon discharge from World War II, Burgess moved to Seattle where he began a private practice in orthopedic surgery. His interest in amputations and rehabilitation continued.

He consulted regularly at a Veterans Administration hospital. After the U.S. Congress provided funds for prosthetics care and research, Burgess founded Seattle's Prosthetics Research Center.

Employing new light-weight, materials, the Center developed a system for creating a flexible, spring-loaded and energy-storing prosthesis allowing amputees who lost a leg below the knee to move again almost naturally, to run, hike and even to play basketball.

The first versions of the manufactured prosthesis were costly. They were hand-carved by highly trained technicians, often requiring months of refittings. To get more adaptable and less costly prostheses, Burgess pioneered the use of computer technology initially developed by NASA scientists. This is called CAD-CAM, for Computer Aided Design and Manufacture. Now a technician with minimal training may produce a customized socket from a mold of the residual limb in a matter of hours. The socket holds the artificial foot. This Automated Fabrication of Mobility Aids, or AFMA — a term coined by Burgess — is now the industry standard.

### **Surgeon creates outreach program**

Then nearly 80 years old, Burgess might have retired. Instead, in 1988, he established a separate organization, the Prosthetics Outreach Foundation, with the mission of bringing the new production technology to the Third World. An all-volunteer staff was funded from grateful former patients. One, a Vietnam veteran, suggested starting a prosthetics service in Vietnam. Burgess agreed. He believed America had an obligation to help there, where the population has an estimated 200,000 amputees. Before he could begin he needed to visit Vietnam, and getting a visa in the late 80's was a problem at first. The U.S. State Department could not help, reminding Burgess that an embargo was in effect. He went to the U.N. in New York for help. There he met by chance a U.S. veteran who was a fluent Vietnamese speaker and disabled himself. With the help of this man, Marine Col. Robert Dalton, Burgess was able to meet Vietnam's U.N. Minister. That got the ball rolling.

Burgess sent two volunteer engineers to Hanoi. "They were very well received," he says. "Of course they saw many amputees, most with no (artificial) limbs, some with bad ones. Our goal was to set up a clinic staffed by Vietnamese to provide modern limbs free to amputees."

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## **McDermott and Lowry speak at GSVA party**

U.S. Congressman Jim McDermott told GSVA members and friends that he was optimistic about the pending confirmation of Congressman Pete Peterson as the first U.S. ambassador to Hanoi and about the eventual approval of Vietnam as a Most Favored Nation for trade with the U.S. He spoke at the party February 16 at the Burke Museum. The other guest speaker was Washington's former governor Mike Lowry, the first U.S. governor to lead a trade mission to Vietnam. Mr. Lowry praised GSVA for its work so far and said he wanted to continue to have a role in encouraging links with the people of Vietnam.

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## **Seattle's Prosthetics Research Foundation works in Vietnam**

The Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs assigned a building. Burgess agreed to the remodeling price tag of \$23,000, but getting the money to Vietnam was another problem. "I sent them a draft for the \$23,000, and the bank there sent it back," Burgess said. "They didn't think the American bank could cover it. So we had to send someone over with cash." Soon Vietnamese technicians came to Seattle for training. "They wanted to work 12 hours a day, 7 days a week," recalls Burgess — a challenge to the local volunteer staff.

The visitors learned fast. The Hanoi clinic opened in the summer of 1989 and fit over 1,000 prostheses the first year. Now relocated at 3 Gia Phong Street, the clinic has a seven-person, all-Vietnamese staff, who have fitted 5,500 amputees so far with new limbs.

Japan gave the clinic a van for visits to other locations in Vietnam. On the first outreach trip to Haiphong, Seattle's Sister City, word preceded the van and 150 amputees were lined up around the block.

### **Adaptations to the environment**

Vietnamese specialists now are producing the Seattle Foot at 10 percent of the cost in the United States. But there have been a few glitches. Many of Vietnam's amputees are farmers. Repeatedly extracting a Seattle Foot from rice paddy mud proved awkward and exhausting. So the Prosthetics Outreach Foundation developed an "all terrain foot," similar to the tip of a pogo stick. The Asian environment is unkind to the Seattle Foot in other ways. Bacteria invades the plastic materials, which disintegrate rapidly. Technicians then developed an antifungal foam that extends the foot's life to about two years, and they speculate that natural Vietnamese rubber, which is resistant to bacteria, may prove to be a more durable material for the devices. Back in Seattle, awards and certificates cover Burgess' walls. A letter from Dr. Han Anh of the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs lauds Burgess for his contributions which "have helped thousands of my countrymen and been an important step in reconciliation between our two nations."

**Persons interested in more information** about the program for helping amputees in Vietnam may write to the Prosthetics Outreach Foundation, 726 Broadway, Suite 306, Seattle, WA, 98122, or telephone (206) 726-1636. Executive Director of the Foundation is Shirley Forsgren. It is a corporate member of the Greater Seattle Vietnam Association.

## NEWS BRIEFS

### Government gives tax relief

Vietnam has dropped its tax on gifts and cash from abroad. Earlier reports said taxation of remittances had caused a significant drop on the amount being sent home by overseas Vietnamese. The revised ordinance announced by the Standing Committee of the National Assembly also raises the level of monthly income subject to personal income tax from U.S.\$108 to \$180. In another action, the Government of Vietnam has eliminated the export tax on low-grade rice and has reduced the export tax on high-grade rice to 1 percent. In 1996, the country exported a record three million tons of rice.

### New Air Routes

Vietnam has approved construction of an airport at Cao Bang north of Hanoi. The facility is expected to serve air traffic between Hanoi and Cao Bang and Haiphong and Cao Bang.

### Aquatic exports climb

Vietnam's aquatic exports for the last year were valued at U.S. \$670 million. This is 22 percent rise from the year before, and places the aquatic sector as the country's fourth largest export industry — after rice, crude oil and garment products. Japan continues to be Vietnam's main export market for aquatic products, buying 65 percent of the total. The U.S. and China are second and third. The Mekong Digest reports that officials in Vietnam say the sector, in spite of its current vigor, is hampered by the shortage of investment for buying new equipment and by inadequate access to new technology for developing processed products.

### Germany helps Vietnam

Germany has pledged aid to Vietnam for construction and upgrading of various buildings for social services. This is intended for facilities for schools, public health institutions and houses for orphans in the central provinces of Quang Nam and Quang Tri and in the border provinces of Ha Giang, Lao Cai, Yen Bai and Lai Chau.

## Changes at top for GSVA

A new president and a new vice president have been chosen by the Greater Seattle Vietnam Association.

Gary Johnson was named president and Tyler DuLam was picked as Vice President at the January 28 meeting of the GSVA Board of Directors. The selections were made after the announcement by Norma Mohr that she was forced to resign as president for health reasons.

### Good year anticipated

Johnson, a neighborhood liaison for the City of Seattle, had served as vice president. He recalls that he has long been interested in Vietnam — first while growing up in the 1960's and '70's while the war dominated the headlines and affected so many lives here at home and later as a social services manager in Seattle's large public housing projects where he met and became friends with many Vietnamese families displaced by that war. Johnson and his wife included Vietnam as part of their honeymoon itinerary in 1990, and he represented GSVA at a sister city signing ceremony in Haiphong last October. Gary then traveled from Hanoi to Guangzhou, China, where he and his wife adopted a beautiful baby girl. He said, "This year promises to be very rich personally, being a new father and having the opportunity to work closely with very dedicated GSVA members as we pursue fruitful interaction with our friends in Vietnam."

### DuLam is U.W. Alumnus

In the summer of 1979 at the age of 10, new GSVA Vice President Tyler DuLam immigrated from Dalat in southern Vietnam. Along with his parents and three older brothers, Tyler went to Hong Kong, where the family spent one year. Tyler attended a Catholic school run by nuns in Hong Kong, where he first learned English. In November 1980 the family traveled across the Pacific to the Northwest. They first settled in Beaverton, Oregon. Tyler was graduated from the University of Washington in 1993. Then he tried several career options, many of them law related. He joined GSVA in 1995 with an interest in AIDS prevention for Vietnam. He was elected to the Board of Directors in August 1995 and worked for several months at the Northwest Aids Foundation. His current job is in the office of the Assistant Dean at the University of Washington School of Law and his academic goal is to obtain a graduate degree in International Business.

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### Greater Seattle Vietnam Association

A grassroots, non-profit, duly incorporated and registered organization dedicated to helping the people of Seattle Create and maintain links with the people of Vietnam.

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