

# UPDATE

Bi-monthly Membership Newsletter Reporting on US - Vietnamese Current Events and Culture  
Issue 3 May/June 1999



**Mission Statement:** GSVA is committed to promoting positive relationships and mutual understanding between the people of Greater Seattle and the people of Viet Nam. We will accomplish this by promoting contact and cooperation in the areas of education, humanitarian work, trade and the arts.

## THE GREATER SEATTLE VIET NAM ASSOCIATION

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## Coming Down to Earth After a Month in Viet Nam

by Beth Whitman

Just back from the journey of a lifetime. Yeah, yeah. Those of you who know me and my history of travel are all saying "We've heard that before, Beth." But, really, my month in Viet Nam was an outstanding experience.

My trip began with a small group from GSVA. Our mission was to start the building of a playground at the Hoa Phuong Orphanage, for which we have been raising funds for the last year. The People's Committee of Hai Phong, (the hosts of our trip), treated us like royalty: we were served scrumptious meals, given beautiful rooms at the government guest house, and were shown around much of Hai Phong with a driver and interpreter. Often, this consisted of being taken to schools and programs in desperate need of money, as is most of Viet Nam. These visits allowed us to see an inside perspective of the country. The school children were always prepared with a song for the occasion, and we failed miserably in returning the favor. Late night Karaoke was the closest that we came to performing, and that attempt was to be kept between our small group and our guide, who was most impressive at the mic.

The children at the orphanage stole our hearts as they reveled in joy over the gifts that we brought them, (many of which were donated by GSVA friends), and taught us how to ballroom and line dance. What joy we learned and shared with these remarkably strong individuals.

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## Medical Trek Proposed by GSVA Members

by Beth Whitman

Five GSVA members visited Viet Nam earlier this year to join in the groundbreaking ceremony for the playground at the Hoa Phuong Orphanage. While there, they also looked at numerous other projects that could potentially be sponsored by GSVA.

Upon returning from this trip in March, one project stood out to GSVA board member and Rotarian, Son Michael Pham; a medical trek through the hill-tribe regions of northern Viet Nam. What is a medical trek?

"The medical trek is an opportunity to bring medical care and supplies to minority populations in remote villages that may only be accessed through trekking," says Son.

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## On the Board

Thus far, you've had the chance to "meet" eight out of sixteen GSA board members. This month, I'd like to introduce you to two more.

### Jim Kern

Jim Kern is a native of Erie, Pennsylvania. After graduating in 1968 from Cornell University with a BS in Hotel Administration, he "migrated" to the Philippines as a Peace Corps Volunteer in 1969, where he spent two years working as a volunteer in agricultural production (working with



farmer groups in cultivating coffee and vanilla as secondary crops beneath coconuts). Deciding to stay longer, he then joined the Peace Corps staff as a training program director for three more years. He met his wife, Alma, a University of the Philippines student, and they were married in 1974. Returning to Pennsylvania, he decided to pursue graduate study at the University of Pittsburgh, where he received a Masters in Public Administration in 1979 and a Ph.D. in Public and International Affairs in 1982. With a strong desire to return to Asia, Jim, Alma and their two young boys moved to Indonesia in 1979, where they lived for the next nine years. During most of that time, Jim worked as a consultant with the Harvard Institute for International Development, on a contract with the

Ministry of Finance and one of the largest State Banks of Indonesia. In 1987, the family returned to the States. Jim decided to start his own business, a marketing company called International Market Brands. He chose Seattle, with no knowledge of the area, but only hearing about the outstanding quality of life. He and his family have lived in Seattle ever since, and Jim and his wife are both active in business and community activities. Besides Jim's involvement as a board member of GSA, he is the President of the King County International Trade Board, is on the board of the Greater Seattle Sihanoukville Sister City Association, and has been the chairperson of the International Service Committee for the International District Rotary Club. In addition to his overseas business, Jim is the owner of a local printing company, and is also a founder and organizing director of the Northwest International Bank. Though modest about his skill, Jim enjoys ballroom and swing dancing, and occasionally likes to kick up his heels when he's not engaged in work or volunteer activities.

### Rebecca Levison

Rebecca was hired by GSA from September 1997 to May 1998 to teach English in Hai Phong. Her students were Vietnamese English teachers, who had previously been teaching Russian, up until a few years ago, when they switched to English. Funded under GSA's Teacher Training Project, Rebecca trained 170 teachers in both rural and urban areas of Hai Phong. Teachers sometimes bicycled up to 40 kilometers to come to class, eager to learn the newest methods and to practice their pronunciation.

Before receiving her Masters Degree in Adult Education and Teaching English, Rebecca was heavily involved in political activism. She was the Campaign Director for the Washington Public Interest Research Group (WashPIRG), a consumer and environmental advocacy organization. She also worked as a Development Assistant at the National Campaign for Freedom of Expression.

Rebecca now works for South Seattle Community College in the Refugee Program. She is an ESL instructor based at New Holly Park in South Seattle. Her students work hard, and according to Rebecca, have lived through much turmoil. Many have experienced terrible civil wars and have been imprisoned for years at a time. Her job is to provide her students with survival skills to make their transition to life in the US a little easier.

Rebecca also works at the School for Teaching English as a Second Lan-



guage, an affiliate of Seattle University. She teaches a course in Methodology to graduate and potential graduate students. She hopes to return to Hai Phong next year to continue her work with the Teacher Training Program. She would be happy to speak with anyone interested in learning more about her experience. She can be reached at [rlevison@nwlinc.com](mailto:rlevison@nwlinc.com).

## Medical Trek

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Tran Trong Kien organized and completed the first successful medical trek in February of 1999. Owner of Buffalo Tours, an adventure travel company based in Ha Noi, Kien is also a trained medical doctor. He recruited four associates from medical school to volunteer for the project and through Buffalo Tours, donated transportation and medicines for the trek. The group spent two days trekking in and out of a remote village and two days evaluating and administering medicine to villagers, who, in most cases, had never seen a doctor in their lifetime.

With \$10,000 in medicines, they

were able to help 170 people with ailments as varying as mental disorders, lung problems, heart troubles, and broken bones. It is Kien's hope to raise \$5,000 for each future medical trek so that the doctors may properly treat approximately 500 people.

While GSVA and its members will lend support where needed, Son is currently seeking financial support from Rotary for the next two medical treks and will be leading a research project to Viet Nam this July. He plans to meet with the appropriate authorities and individuals responsible for the trek and to determine the best location for future medical treks.

Son explained the significance of the research trip: "We plan to explore the living conditions of the villages, as well as the health of the people. We will also determine the logistics of the medical trek, including cost and type of medicines to be purchased, number of people with medical needs and the timetable for the medical trek."

In addition to the Vietnamese doctors involved, six to eight doctors from the US will be recruited to help in the actual medical trek. Volunteering their time, energy and knowledge, they will join the local doctors in evaluating and treating these ethnic minorities.

Sandra Davis, co-owner of Seattle based tour-company, Earth Odysseys, is planning a seven to ten day add-on itinerary for these doctors, and other individuals, to tour parts of Viet Nam immediately following the medical trek. Sandra, who is a GSVA member,

has a special fondness for Viet Nam. During her first visit there, she witnessed how the Vietnamese



let go of the fact they had been involved in many wars and she connected with the inner peace of the people.

"Happiness is a state of mind and despite the many hardships that befall us, we have a choice as to how we live our lives and how we conduct ourselves." She sees the medical trek and subsequent tour as a healing of cultures. "In Viet Nam, we have a tremendous opportunity to make a difference."

The first GSVA/Rotary sponsored medical trek is tentatively scheduled for the fall of 1999. If you are interested in participating or donating to this project, please call Son Michael Pham at 425-836-5354.

### UP & COMING EVENTS

**September 6-11:** Five day meditation retreat in Santa Barbara, CA with Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. Nhat Hanh will also be presenting a "Day of Mindfulness" in Oakland, CA on **September 18**. For more information, contact the Community of Mindful Living at 800-863-5290.

**\*Wednesday, September 15,** marks GSVA's Annual Meeting and Fund-raising event. Mark your calendars now for what promises to be an exciting and informative program, scheduled to be held, once again, at the beautiful Bell Harbor Conference Center in downtown Seattle. This year we will be honoring Seattle resident, Betty Tisdale, "The Angel of Sai Gon," for her work in getting over four hundred orphans out of Viet Nam during the last days of the Viet Nam war.

**October 22-24:** The Northwest Regional Consortium for SE Asian Studies and the Canadian Counsel for SE Asian Studies will be presenting it's bi-annual conference in Vancouver, BC. The theme for this year's conference is "Emerging SE Asia Identities in an Era of Volatile Globalization." Conference fees are \$120 for faculty; \$60 for student, plus accommodations. Topics include problems of regime legitimation and political instability; gender and women's issues and the current financial crisis in Asia, to name but a few. For more information call 604-833-6212; email csear@interchange.ubc.ca or check their website at [www.iar.ubc.ca](http://www.iar.ubc.ca).

\* Our goal for the fall fund-raiser is to raise a minimum of \$10,000, to be used towards funding innovative and practical projects in Viet Nam. Prime seating is guaranteed when your group or corporation purchases a corporate table. Priced at only \$500 for a group of 10, **The Corporate Table** is a great way to introduce your friends and colleagues to GSVA, and entertain them with a stimulating program and a scrumptious meal. We only have five Corporate Tables to sell, so get your reservation in soon! Keep your eyes posted for additional information about this event in the next issue of The Update.

## A Month in Viet Nam

*Continued from page 1*

After traveling all that way to Viet Nam, I couldn't bear to think of not visiting my friends in the south. I made an impromptu trip to Sai Gon to see those families that I had met during my first trip in '92. Miraculously, they all remembered me! It was as if, even after all this time, my name was on the tips of their tongues. I was welcomed back into their homes like a long lost family member.

I also visited Hoang Van Cuong, a UPI photographer during the war. I had met Cuong and his family on my first visit and taught his son, then 7, English. His famous images adorn his home, as well as recent photos of he and war correspondents Peter Arnett and Nick Ut, BBC correspondents, and the like. He has had world wide documentaries produced about him and has copies of articles written about him in international newspapers hanging framed on his wall. A man with a truly amazing spirit, he remained hidden after the fall of Sai Gon for many years. Captured only months after his marriage, he spent five years in a re-education camp, not meeting his son until he was released in 1990. I'm happy to report that his son now speaks very good English (I have to take SOME of the credit!), and, in general, the family seems to be doing quite well. This quiet, gentle man has always struck me as so remarkable because of the hardships that he has endured in his lifetime, and the peacefulness with which he now lives. I have to remind myself that he is one of many thousands with similar haunting stories. His just happens to be a success story. Many of those that fought for the south Vietnamese army are now cyclo drivers striving to make ends meet and struggling to feed their families.

The most special event was when I went to visit the family of my friend Kim at the cafe that she started in Sai

Gon in '92. She married and had been living in California last time I talked to her. But as I approached the cafe, there she was! We eyed one another disbelieving that it was true, that after four years and a baby (hers, not mine!), here we both were back in Sai Gon. As always, she and her family took very good care of me, and it's with them that I feel I have a second home.

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**“The children at the orphanage stole our hearts as they reveled in joy over the gifts that we brought them, (many of which were donated by GSVa friends), and taught us how to ballroom and line dance. What joy we learned and shared with these remarkably strong individuals.”**

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Viet Nam is about people, and it's with the locals that I discover the kid in me. I had countless “precious moments” that made the entire trip worthwhile. From the night bellboy in my hotel, the White Castle (!!), who innocently (or not so) offered to come back at 1 a.m. to “express his emotions” to me (I don't THINK so, I laughingly replied), to the orphan children teaching me how to dance. Then, there are those moments that ripped my heart out like a young boy I became attached

to at the Hoa Phuong orphanage who has a “problem with his brain.” Undiagnosed, he can neither talk nor walk, but, boy, can he smile! And a 4 year old boy in a Sai Gon care facility with a one in five million skin disease in which his skin reproduces 300 times faster than you or I. Abandoned and not touched for his first four years he's now in a place that can give appropriate medical attention.

Tied in with my work for GSVa, I visited many charities that could potentially benefit from our future funding. What I learned was that a little money goes a long way. From the programs that provide \$50 per child per year to keep them off the streets and in school, to \$40 loan programs to help women start businesses in the Me Kong Delta, to a Medical Trek into the ethnic minority villages in the north to provide very basic health care to villages that have, in most cases, never seen the likes of a doctor.\* These programs were all quite eye-opening for me, and I am excited to see our organization's dollars help these and other programs.

There is so much bursting on the scene in a country that has captivated my heart. Touching down in Seattle, I felt quite sad. Sorry to leave Viet Nam behind and reluctant to move forward with life here, I'm trying to hold on to the feelings and emotions tied to the country and to all of the memories of a fabulous month away.

Yes, it's now day four that I'm back, and everything is still very fresh for me. Ask me in three weeks where my head is, and my answer may be quite different. But for now, I am actively pursuing ways that will get me back to the country as soon as possible. In the meantime, it's back to the grindstone. Daily life in Seattle. Lattes and rain. And when the sun's out, motorcycle rides in the mountains.

\* (See related article on Medical Trek in this issue.)

# A CHILD'S DREAM



Teri speaking with one of the teachers Rebecca had trained (see "On the Board").

"This trip offered me an incredible opportunity to not only meet wonderful people, but to be gifted with a greater understanding of the needs and workings of the country."  
*Teri Conitt*



Beth and kids at the orphanage.



Gary and Mrs. Linh, staff of the Foreign Affairs Office and our personal guide and interpreter

"The most meaningful aspect of this trip for me were the many experiences that affirmed the incredible spirit of the Vietnamese people." *Gary Johnson*



Kids from the Hoa Phuong Orphanage, staff, GSA's delegation and Mrs. Dai, Director of the Orphanage (far right).

"I was deeply touched by the children. They always had a look, that where they are now is also where their future will be, which is not that much...a daily life of no opportunity or time for school, no money, no secured home. I hope that someday I can go back and help change that."

*Son Michael Pham*

"My Ai, a tenacious six year old, who can neither walk nor talk, touched my heart the most. His adopted "siblings" at the orphanage created a true family environment under difficult circumstances."

*Beth Whitman*



Beth and My Ai



Son, showing the kids at Hoa Phuong orphanage their photos on his camcorder.

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## THE GREATER SEATTLE VIET NAM ASSOCIATION

### gsva UPDATE

#### *Wish List for Our Annual Fund-raiser Includes:*

- Medical equipment
- Frequent Flyer Miles
- Children's medicine
- Dental products
- In-kind donations
- Auction items
- Framing
- And of course...cash donations are always welcomed!

#### *Volunteers Wanted to Help with Fall Fund-raiser!*

If you like to have fun, work with great people, and support a worthy cause, we'd love to have you on our team! To find out how you can participate on one of our fund-raiser committees call (206) 322-1178, and leave a message for Beth or Son.

#### **Hot Tip:**

To find out current news about Viet Nam, search the web at [www.vagency.com.vn](http://www.vagency.com.vn).



**LOGO CONTEST!** The Update is in need of YOUR creative talent! Whether you're a budding, or already established artist, we would love to see your work! We are currently looking for a logo that symbolizes the uniqueness of Seattle and Viet Nam, in addition to the connection that exists between us. The winner will receive a one year GSVA membership, which includes a subscription to the Update!

Submission can be sent to Teri Conti, P.O. Box 27545, Seattle, WA 98125. Teri can also be reached via email: [tconti28@hotmail.com](mailto:tconti28@hotmail.com).

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