



MAKING A SMALL DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD

In central Vietnam, a single-parent family finds purpose.
By Teresa Coates



THE YOUNG children, barely able to conceal their anticipation, stood shoulder-to-shoulder across the cement steps of the Tam Ky Baby Orphanage, straining to see us, the new pale-skinned volunteers tucked into an aging white Fiat.

Our first meeting was a clumsy mix of high fives, stares and run-by leg slaps. The orphans were just testing us, I'd later realize, but I worried at first that committing to be a volunteer at the orphanage for two months was the worst idea I'd ever followed through on.

Ten months earlier, I had suggested volunteering in Vietnam to my two children, then 8 and 13. They agreed, and over the summer, the fall and into the winter we made preparations: obtaining passports, applying for visas and selling most of our belongings to finance the trip.

Now, as I stood in the chilly, concrete play area, surrounded by faces filled with curiosity, doubt and a tinge of fear, I couldn't help but wonder what exactly I had gotten us into. But after the first hour, when I heard my kids and the orphans both giggling, I no longer worried. This was indeed worth everything we'd sacrificed to get here.

Every morning for the next eight weeks, we visited the baby orphanage, a small cement complex of rooms, to play with the children. My son, Stuart, as the only male to interact with the children, was an immediate rock star. At each arrival he was

swarmed by his admiring fans, and two hours later the children would have to be pried off his back, shoulders and legs.

Audrey, my 9-year-old daughter, let her nurturing instincts shine through and spent much of the time with a trio of orphans we nicknamed the Three Musketeers—they were always together. Our daily visits promoted a wonderful friendship and she became particularly close to Kieu, a spunky little 2-year-old girl who had been abandoned within the first few days of our arrival.

Quang, a delightful 5-year-old, had immediately connected with Stuart, and the two developed a relationship that ended all too abruptly when an American family came to adopt him. It was bitter-sweet, saying goodbye yet knowing his life would be filled with love from this family.

Despite our inability to communicate, or even pronounce their names correctly, my family developed a fondness for the many children who called this place home. Some had been there for years. Others, like Kieu, had been there a short while. They all had their own personalities and their faces are emblazoned on our memories for a lifetime.

While my children played with the orphans, I often found myself in the baby room, barren except for the large, wooden slat beds where the babies were laid until we came to hold them. Covered with mosquito nets that sat over them like small umbrellas, the babies were eager to be cuddled, kissed and

sung to; I was more than happy to oblige.

The orphanage (like the country as a whole) was very poor. The food it provided for the children was limited to rice gruel three times a day—a diet lacking in many of the vitamins and minerals that young children need. To combat the problem in some small way, we brought fruit every day, and learned the Vietnamese word for each kind, yelling out a mangled “*dua*” or “*le*” as we brought in the bags.

Several children faced serious malnutrition issues prior to their arrival and simply couldn't put on much weight despite all that the orphanage “mothers” could do. We brought along *sua chua* (yogurt) for the extra calories they so desperately needed.

Our two months as volunteers were filled with activity: playing near-constant games of chase (my son was the official rough-houser of the group), consoling the criers, playing house with a few battered toys and bottle-feeding the babies. I watched from the side many mornings, pleased to see my children sharing themselves with others as they quickly made friends, regardless of the cultural differences. Communication was limited to gestures, but somehow the kids managed—even flourished.

This, the connection between cultures, between countries, was what I had hoped for all those months ago, sitting in a café on a March morning in Portland, Ore., when I marked on my volunteer application: Vietnamese orphanage, two months. ■

VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATIONS

Global Volunteers
globalvolunteers.org

Cross Cultural Solutions
crossculturalsolutions.org

Global Volunteer Network
volunteers.com.nz

Detours Abroad
detoursabroad.com.au

Habitat for Humanity
habitat.org

GIRLS IN EVERY PORT

A new site that will help you find the ladies.

By Colleen McCaffrey

TANYA CHURCHMAN, a lifelong traveler, was fed up with the scarcity of travel sites catering exclusively to lesbian and bisexual women, so in September 2007 she launched *Girlports* (girlports.com). Maybe the best thing to happen to travel since the portable MP3 player, the website is designed to help women find the lesbian and bisexual community in many other parts of the world. “It is important to support lesbian- and gay-owned businesses,” says the 38-year-old journalist and sole writer for the site. The still-evolving site covers events, organizations, restaurants, nightlife and lodging, and Churchman hopes it can serve as a worldwide online community for businesses both owned and operated by lesbians, or those boasting a primarily lesbian clientele. *Girlports*, which caters primarily to women in the 30- to 50-year-old range, features 19 destinations on five continents and will soon include Key West and Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.

Designed by the crew at Plank in Montreal, Canada, the site also features a unique mapping tool called *Passports*, which allows the adventurous vagabond to highlight places of interest and then print out an individualized map with her preferred destinations, like Pride in South Africa or *Girlfest* in Australia (a Dinah Shore-like event *Down Under*).

Churchman also loves finding part of the community in a new place, which can be beneficial to travelers as well as to locals who live in areas that lack a central lesbian guidebook. “Some cities have a community because of the efforts of two or three women organizing, and collaborating and making a huge effort [to build one],” says Churchman.

One of the most fascinating features on the site is an audio translation section, which Churchman says “provides lesbian-centric phrases” such as how to ask a girl if you can buy her a drink in French, because “the idea is just to have fun, at the end of the day.” And if an afternoon flirting with Parisian gals at a local watering hole is not your idea of fun, you can always tell a German cutie how much you like her accent in her mother tongue.

Churchman has big plans for *Girlports*. She wants the site to transcend her creation and become an interactive tool for women, an online resource and community that encourages feedback on events and establishments. Already in the works are a monthly newsletter and a homepage ticker scrolling the newest updates and events.

“There are places with interesting and vibrant lesbian communities [e.g., Seoul, South Korea] that if you're not looking for it you wouldn't know. They're more underground but so vibrant; it's a different little world filled with community spirit,” she says about her motivation for starting the site. Covering worldwide places of interest is quite an undertaking, and while Churchman notes that processing the amount of information currently available is daunting (even when she gets help from new media strategist Rebecca Coggan from Exalt Creativity), *Girlports* makes an effort to provide information for women in all walks of life—young, old, transgender, bi, lesbian—and of every race. ■

