

## **WESLEY COLLEGE - OVERSEAS STUDY PROGRAM**

### **Working in Vietnam with AVVRG - January 1998**

**By Cecelia O'Brien**

#### **Introduction**

My name is Cecelia O'Brien and I am a 3<sup>rd</sup> year Medical Science student at Sydney University. I come from Inverell, a country town in the north west of NSW and reside at Wesley College, Sydney.

Wesley College offers an Overseas Study Program for six students to travel and work in Vietnam during December 1997 and January 1998. Jane Little and I were two students who were interested to work with children in Vietnam. Through the Australian and Vietnam internet link, we found out about the opening of the orphanage in Ba Ria. After talking to Kathryn Gow and Barbara Crawford we organised to spend 10 days in Ba Ria, working in the orphanage during January.

In the two months I worked and traveled in Vietnam, the 10 days spent with AVVRG in Ba Ria was the highlight of my trip. I have kept a diary while in Ba Ria as each day was a learning experience, producing wonderful memories and developing special friendships.

#### **Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> January**

Jane and I meet the team from AVVRG in Ho Chi Minh City, traveling together to Ba Ria and then Vung Tau for a meeting. We were all introduced to the President of the Ba Ria-Vung Tau Union of Friendship Organisation. This turned out to be very important as we were filmed and appeared on the local television news. Everything was approved and planned out for the ten days, and we traveled back to Ba Ria.



#### **Friday 9<sup>th</sup> January**

Today was the organising and sorting out what each of the group were doing, planning our English lessons, brainstorming ideas for the water management project in Ben Suc and getting to know our way around Ba Ria. I went to an adult English class at night with the translators from the Guest House. We sat in small groups, talking and they asked questions about Australia, especially how we celebrated Christmas and about our education system. I enjoyed this very much as the men and women were my age and we could relate to each other in many ways.

#### **Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> January**

It was a 6am start, and after a strong coffee we were ready to teach English classes starting at 7am. The classes ranged from advanced to beginners and the children at the Kim Dong School were very friendly and excited to have some visitors. Jane and I taught a

class that had been learning English for two years. Old McDonald was a hit, and the children neatly copied the words into their note books to keep. Jane's smile face stickers were great icebreakers as we used them as nametags. Unfortunately it was the only lesson as the teachers were pushed for time with their curriculum. I had noticed that the children are very good at the written and grammatical side but needed practice in listening and speaking.

In the afternoon we visited the orphanage, introducing ourselves and planning the week ahead. After traveling in Vietnam for over a month, I had not seen a place so well designed, equipped and as clean. We met with Dr Doan Ngoc Suong and the staff of the orphanage. We visited the classes for the deaf and dumb day children, which was very interesting. We meet half of the orphans today as well. We sat around one of the outside tables, showing our photos from home. They all took it in turns to find us in the photos. At this stage I realised that we could communicate in different ways, and the language barrier was not going to be a problem.

### **Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> January**

We traveled around the Vung Tau - Ba Ria Province, visiting fishing villages and pagodas near Long Hi. It was interesting to observe the different lifestyles and environments. Jane and I were invited to a birthday party of one of the students from the adult English class I was so touched by their hospitality and generosity to us.

### **Monday 12<sup>th</sup> January**

It was a very early start, as we wanted to get to the orphanage by breakfast. We all made nametags in the morning so that we could learn each others names and ages. It was a difficult task as the tones in Vietnamese are very hard to pronounce. I spent the day playing games like hop scotch, elastics, volleyball and skipping. It was a lot of fun teaching them new games that I used to play at their age, and sharing in their enjoyment of these games. It was a getting to know you day.

### **Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> January**

We arrived at 8am armed with lots of drawing paper, textas and coloured pencils. The children learnt to enjoy this activity. At first they sat looking around at each other to see what everyone else was drawing. But eventually the children realised it was free drawing and took it seriously. Jane and I brightened up the dining room by pasting the drawings around the walls.



Some of the older deaf children were extremely talented at drawing and I am hoping that they will get the opportunity to use this skill in the future. After lunch, we all had an afternoon nap. The little girls read through their schoolbooks with me, correcting some of

my word pronunciations. They are very proud of their schoolbooks, taking pride in their work and strive to receive good marks for their efforts.

We meet with Abdallah (Dr Shanableh from QUT), exchanging ideas on the Ben Suc presentation on water management. Jane and I were in charge of the children's education project. We designed a storybook. We spent most of the night cutting, pasting and writing the dialogue in Vietnamese.

### **Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> January**

In the morning we went to the orphanage for a few hours before the Ben Suc presentation. The dental team was at the orphanage. I spent the morning with the children, reading through storybooks and teaching them party games to keep their mind off their visit to the dentist. As we were leaving, one of the boys was very upset about having his tooth extracted. I realised how kind the children were to each other, by loving and caring and looking out for each other.



We arrived at Ben Suc with two classes waiting for us. After introducing ourselves we brought in the theme of water and fish through song with the help of Mr Long, our translator. Then one child would stand up and read a page. We then quizzed them to see if they understood. It was very exciting as the mixture of visual media and words really got the message through to them of how to keep the water clean and healthy so that our 'friend' Ca Bong the fish would be happy. We presented the school with the storybook so that the children could refer back to it at any time.

### **Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> January**

The children knew we were leaving on Saturday. We spent the most of the day together preparing for the party on Friday. In the morning we prepared a fruit break for the children. They enjoyed this very much as we all ate together for the first time. After lunch, we made party hats which each child decorated. This was a tiring activity and we all had a nap in the afternoon.

### **Friday 16<sup>th</sup> January**

This was our last day and as we arrived in the gates, I could sense the children's sadness of our departure. They pointed to us and made gestures of a plane. Jane and I spent the morning in the deaf and dumb younger class. We taught the children how to play a maths board game, which we had made earlier. The children are very talented and the teachers are dedicated and wonderful to the children. We also taught the teacher the English alphabet in sign language and helped with her English.

The preparations for the party took the rest of the morning and lunch. We made a photo board of the last few days and left it in the dining room. The children were so excited to see themselves in photos. We decorated the dining room together and left a poem in Vietnamese on the wall saying 'Reach for the stars, I hope all your dreams come true, Your Australian Friends, are watching over you'.

At 5pm the party began. We taught them pass the parcel, which they enjoyed. Each time the music stopped, all the children would crowd around to see if it was the last one. The tape recorder was playing one of Jane's Aussie kid tapes and I will never forget the four boys who crowded around, trying to sing the English words. Then it was teatime, and we prepared the fruit and cake for desert. The children at first were just looking at the food, and waited till we put some in their hands. They were well mannered and polite but once they started to eat they really enjoyed it.

As we were leaving, we gave out a party bag to each child. They were very excited about their gift. At this stage, the children were starting to get upset and tired, and the longer we stayed the harder it was on them. It took about half an hour to walk to the gate as the children all surrounded us, touching us for the last time. We tried to capture the last moments with photos yet nothing could really describe our feelings and emotions as we walked outside the gate. The boys were giving us high fives and the girls with tears in their eyes could not say goodbye. The most difficult



and frustrating part of all was when we were leaving, as I wanted to say so much yet I couldn't speak Vietnamese fluently to tell them how beautiful and talented I thought they all were. I also wanted to thank them for the wonderful time we shared together and tell them I will never forget them. Dr Doan Ngoc Suong thanked us for the happiness we had brought the children, but I really don't think she understood how much happiness they had given us.

## Conclusion

I want to thank AVVRG for giving us this opportunity and for organising our work at the orphanage. It was fantastic to meet and spend time with the children. I want to also congratulate AVVRG on the wonderful work they do. The orphanage is well set up and a happy and healthy environment for the children. The deaf and dumb school is very successful and I believe will produce fine and talented students. I want to wish AVVRG the very best of luck and every success in their future projects, especially the sponsorship of the children in the orphanage.