

Fairy Stream women's shelter houses abandoned elderly

Thomas C. Fox | Feb. 20, 2011



Cay Gao, Vietnam ? Thirty miles northeast of Ho Chi Minh City, an underground stream runs through this village. Locals now call it "Suoi Tien," or "Fairy Stream," a name given to it by the Dominican Sr. Isabelle Tran Thi Kim Huong.

The story of the stream and how it got its name says something of the women religious who work in Vietnam.

Some years back, Huong, who runs a shelter for elderly women in this village, decided to dig a pond more than half the size of a football field to raise fish. Some of the fish would feed the women she cares for; the rest would be sold at market and earn money to help run her shelter.



Huong told a recent visitor that she had heard there was water in the area

and figured with God's assistance her pond would eventually find a source to keep it filled with fresh water. So the digging began.

The operation took months and she begged and borrowed to find the means to get it done. Even when the workers ran unexpectedly into a layer of rock, she pushed them to continue.

What she did not know when she began, but eventually would learn, was that an underground stream ran right under the spot she had chosen for the pond.

As the workers completed the dig, the pond filled with water. Huong has been raising fish ever since ? some 11 tons a year.

Locals now call Huong's discovery the "Fairy Stream." The name took hold and the center this determined

woman religious runs in rural Dong Nai province is now called the "Fairy Stream Center."

The story has the earmarks of a fairy tale. Visiting the center brings this fairy tale to life.



The elderly women ? widowed, without relatives, abandoned, some

paralyzed, others confused with age ? all live in a cheerful and prayerful atmosphere shaped by the four Dominican women religious who protect and nourish these vulnerable souls. Fifty women in all, including a few younger mentally handicapped, make up the Fairy Stream community.

Officially, local authorities require that the women mostly come from Dong Nai province. But unofficially, abandoned elderly women come from all parts of Vietnam, most often through the Catholic social network. After many years of waiting, Huong recently received a government license to shelter up to 100 women, a reluctant concession by the communist authorities that Catholic women religious are providing care for the needy when others, including the authorities, are not.

Huong's fairy tale-like story has a hard cash ending. Her pond has a seemingly endless source of water and produces 11 tons of fish yearly.

She says the water is just one example of the way God continues to provide for the women at the shelter, which dates back to the mid-1990s when another Dominican woman religious began a smaller version of the project.



After finishing two terms as prioress of

the Vietnam Dominicans, Huong wanted to do something different, she said, and to live among the poor. She began helping out at the shelter in 2003 and became director after its founder died.

Huong is a cheerful woman. When asked what gives her the most joy in life, she answered: "Serving the suffering Body of Christ." When asked what gives her the most sadness, she answered: "Nothing."

Nothing?

"Nothing," she responded. "It's truly joyful living among the poor and needy."

The Fairy Stream women's center rests on seven and a half acres. Mango and durian trees dot the landscape. On the edge of the property Huong and the three other Dominicans on staff raise chickens for daily eggs.

They also raise pigs. Each litter provides one pig for the center and the others are sold at a nearby market to help cover shelter expenses.

The pig project was made possible some years back by start-up money from the Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters. That grant, said Huong, has led to more litters than she can count. The pigs continue to be a steady stream of income ? although, Huong added, the price of grain needed to feed the pigs continues to rise.

The women living at the center have no spouses and are without any family support. Were it not for Fairy Stream these women would be abandoned and living on the streets of Vietnam.

At the center they have community and prayer lives. The women pray four times daily. They cook their own food, which the Dominicans purchase daily at the nearby market. Some of the fruits and vegetables are homegrown.

The women greeted visitors the other day with much amusement, happy to receive visitors. Some of the women are blind or nearly blind. A dozen are partially paralyzed and need assistance getting out of bed. The women exercise daily to the degree they can. They get up at 4:30 each morning for the first set of prayers and end their days by early evening.

There is a sense of friendliness at the Fairy Stream. It seems to permeate from the personality of the vivacious and good-natured Huong.

On her wish list are a couple of wheelchairs, a used seven-passenger vehicle to take the women to town for medical care, and permission from local authorities to build a small chapel on the land. She has a spot reserved and is confident the modest building will get built.

It's in God's hands, and God always provides, Huong said.

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