

In Binh Hung, Vietnam, don't use the word 'orphanage'

Thomas C. Fox | Feb. 22, 2011



Children watch television at the Binh Hung Social Center in Binh Hung, Vietnam. (NCR photos/ Tom Fox)

BINH HUNG, Vietnam -- First off, don't call it an orphanage. It is a 'social center,' which happens to be the home for 45 parentless children, as well as the setting for another 140 poor area children who come daily for schooling.

Next, forget all those *Oliver Twist* images of abused, hungry children pounding on tables asking for food. While meat, fish and vegetables are equally shared and portioned for the children at the center, there is an 'all you can eat' policy for soup and rice.

And forget the locks on the doors, images out of a Dickens' novel. This center has an open gate policy. 'You want to make it out on the streets on your own, feel free. ' Need a quarter or two in change to get you started, here it is,' Mary Nguyen Nhu Tha, a 44-year-old, ten year fully professed Sister Lover of the Holy Cross,



explained.

'Some of the children feel the need to leave, to try it out on their own, to live on the streets for a bit. I say to them, 'here's an extra shirt and pants. Go and try it,?' Tha said with a chuckle, unable to contain her spirited laughter. 'They come back in a day or two, shirt and pants dirty and looking for food. It's usually boys being boys.'

Tha has been living with and working among the children of Binh Hung Social Center for the past seven years ? with hardly a vacation, except for an occasional retreat, she says, not a hint of complaint in her voice. She says she thoroughly enjoys the children, who she describes as keen on self preservation, meaning cunning.



Catholics in Vietnam are forbidden to run private schools or hospitals.

But ?social centers? for homeless children is another story. Vietnamese women religious congregations are running dozens, if not hundreds all over the country.

I happened into the Binh Hung center around dinner time and children were eating their food ? not at long tables ? but informally in the courtyard, sitting in small groups with friends their same age. The children here run in age form two to 19.

The children go to classes and are are taught by some highly motivated women. Four women religious and other assorted volunteers make up the staff. Some notebooks are donated by the local government authorities. But pretty much all the other educational needs come from the sisters? congregation.

Years back, when the center was first established, the women had to go out persuade families to bring their children in for education. Many families who live in the area are immigrants from the countryside, and children



begin work at a young age, often doing petty commerce on the streets.

?At first we had to compensate parents for the loss of income when their children came to school,? Tha explained. ?But after a while they began to see the value of the education we were providing and they began to bring their children to the center to sign up for classes.?

There are a dozen computers in the computer room. Tha says computer education begins at eight years of age.

As I wondered around the center after dinner most of the children were sitting on the floor in one room watching a cartoon on a TV set fixed at a cartoon television channel.

No one asks to grow up parentless. But for one reason or another all of the children at the center find themselves in the unfortunate situation.

Their stories wrench the heart. That said, the women religious who are filling in for parents here appear to understand these children?s special needs. They masterfully mix child psychology and love to support their

nurturing efforts.

By the time these children get through their teens they will have high school diplomas or technical skills to make it out in the world on their own.

And if things don't quite work out the first time they leave, well, the Sisters of the Lovers of the Holy Cross are there at the social center waiting to provide even more support.

[Tom Fox is *NCR* Editor.]

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