

Cultivating Peace: Virtual Learning Buddy in Rural Vietnam

Vietnam

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Section I.

My project provided the underprivileged youth in Vinh Phuc Village in rural Vietnam access to computer education through the establishment of a sustainable "Interactive Learning Center" and basic computer-skills training programs. This community initiative engaged them in intellectual development to not only learn how to use technology, but also begin to see and engage the world in positive ways, using their new skills and outlook to build a peaceful future.

I recruited 14 volunteers and I divided them into small groups of instructors on computer science, English, public speaking, and logistics, and a leader of each small group reported to me. My brother, a computer technician, gave me advice on purchasing computers. A friend introduced me to a computer company that supported the cause with a discount and free shipping. Four volunteers with computer science expertise worked with me to set up the interactive learning center with 10 computers, a projector and screen, a printer, speakers and Internet connection. We purchased ten new tables with firm wood boxes especially designed to protect the computers from being stolen. We also purchased one big bookshelf and over 500 books on various academic subjects.

We taught classes in computer science, public speaking and English to 50 students from 10 to 18 years old. I divided the students into three groups based on the age and customized the curriculum to each group. In the computer classes, we introduced students to software and basic skills like typing, and searching for information. We focused on Internet application and educational software for the high school students while we highlighted creative activities with computers like drawing, painting and design for younger groups. In public speaking class, we taught students to express themselves freely through acting or poems and boosted their self-confidence that their ideas are worth sharing. In English class, we taught basic concepts and how to use software for self-learning. We made color handouts with tips on each subject and gave them to the students and kept copies in the library for future reference. All the classes were highly interactive and gave the students transmittable skills that they can share with residents in Vinh Phuc Village.

The Interactive Learning Center and classes were incredibly well received by the school and residents. However, it took time and effort to introduce the unique tools and a novel way of learning for the students who have never seen a computer before. Two kids had learning disability, so they could not keep pace with the class. Thus, we tutored them 1-on-1 after class.

We did an assessment to check the student's progress on a biweekly basis. We could tell the influence of the project on the students by the growing depth of questions they asked, the hours they researched on the Internet in their free time and how much more confident they were to express their ideas in class. Outside classes, we regularly organized extracurricular activities such as a flash-mob, environmental day, sport day and science fairs, which attracted not only students but also residents in Vinh Phuc Village. With 10 high school students, we paid more attention to job orientation by providing mentoring, 1-on-1 on resume assistance and help with job hunting.

I publicized the project on Facebook and local newspapers and continuously reached out for more partnerships. One local business came to visit the school and promised to give the students a scholarship worth \$500 this September. Approximately 500 books have been donated to help build the library.

After we left, the principal will be in charge of the center. The school will integrate the center into their curriculum and will open the center for two hours in the evening for the students for self-study. Our project did encounter some challenges on sustainability. We found it difficult to have an on-going computer teacher in the school and in Vinh Phuc village. Half of my volunteers will study abroad this year and the other half only committed to visit the center once a month. I am still looking for a person with expertise on computer science to supervise and maintain the center weekly. We are still publicizing the project to ask for more funds to support the Internet cost of the center in the next year.

Section II:

Nothing could have made me happier than the day I woke up in the U.S. and received an email from the students. They told me about their lives, their studying, and how they hoped I would come back next summer. They also sent me a painting of us together that was drawn with computer software. When I think about them, I think about peace. Given access to technology, the students in Vinh Phuc Village can connect and engage with the world actively. Most of them had never gone out of the village, so the Internet opens a door to walk into many parts of the world, encouraging exploration and communication with people across cultures. The students love seeing my photos and asking about my life in the U.S. One boy was very determined, "I want to study in the U.S. like you!" The children have been growing up in poor living conditions; however, I always saw their bright smile, energy, and hope for a better future. A girl told me now she could search for more tests to practice for a national entrance exam for Hanoi medical school, a boy watched a YouTube video about a water-rocket and then made it successfully, and a girl who loved reading read the news on-line for hours every day. The project has inspired the youth in Vinh Phuc Village to dream, and gave them powerful tools and hope to make their dreams happen.

Throughout the project, I gained many valuable skills: project management, time allocation, networking, and team work. I learned to stay positive and look on the bright side because as a leader of a team, my spirit is my team's spirit. Regardless of our different background, we shared a common goal. We worked hard work and we also laughed together. With valuable skills and experience learned from the project, my volunteers will continue to sow seeds of peace by initiating other community projects all over the world. Together we will establish a network of international agents who actively engage in our communities and create social change.

In the light of world news of terrorism, war and general unrest, the idea of peace can feel unattainable and impossible. However, this project proves that peace can initially come from individuals, and then spread to many more people, creating a peaceful society. That is like when I started the project myself. It was initially just a dream and then I received so much support from others. The Projects for Peace funding made it possible but I also am grateful for: the enthusiasm of the local residents who cooked for me and my 14 volunteers everyday and let us have a place to sleep in the community, my volunteers who set up and taught in the center, the computer seller who gave us a discount, the principal who visited the center every week to support us in our teaching, the parents and students who said "thank you" with such genuine sincerity. I have so many wonderful memories that make me believe even with individual initiative, peace can spread among a community where people from different backgrounds seek to understand and keep making an effort to make the lives of others better.

"The idea of world peace can feel unattainable and impossible. However, this project proves that peace can initially come from individuals, and then spread to many more people, creating a peaceful society. My project was initially an overwhelming dream. However, with each step I received so much support from others that wanted to be part of the effort to provide computer education to open up access to the world for 50 youth in rural Vietnam who will pass their knowledge on to others. I have learned that peace can come with small committed groups of people working together on a common goal."

Ngan (Jasmine) Nguyen

