

An American finds the compelling eyes of Vietnam

"If you're not sure what to do, look in your heart for the answer"

(Neal F. Bermas)

Eleven years ago, visiting Ho Chi Minh City for the first time, an American came across the dark, yet compelling eyes of a young girl selling postcards in the streets. Taken with the stark image, he returned to Vietnam many times. Over time, he realized that he had to do something about those young but dark eyes. That something grew into STREETS International, a new, innovative, regional training center and restaurant for streets kids and other disadvantaged youth. Casual in style and dress, Mr. Neal warmly met us at **Streets Restaurant Café - 17 Le Loi Street, Hoi An** and talked about what he has done and will do.



Could you tell me something about the classes at STREETS International?

- As I traveled around Viet Nam, I realized the extraordinary opportunity for the hospitality industry in Vietnam. However, without good human resource training, Vietnam could never realize its potential. STREETS is designed to provide comprehensive, international training. The STREETS program lasts for 18 months and our first group of trainees are well under way. Our approach to training was developed in conjunction with The Institute of Culinary Education (America). At the end of the training and work experience, the trainees will get a certificate from the Institute. We have a professional staff of Trainers in English. They

have English class from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. and specialized curriculum from 3 p.m to 5 p.m. In addition, each trainee has a chance to practice the skills that they have learned in class at the STREETS Restaurant. We also provide supervised housing for all the trainees: one for the girls and one for the boys.

Could you tell me about the process of selecting the trainees as well as the criteria?

- We visited orphanages in Da Nang, Quang Nam, Hue, and HoiAn to introduce our program, we got over 85 applications. Our criteria was age 16 - 22, completed at least 8th grade, no serious criminal history, and an in-person interview. It was also important that the trainees had some aptitude to learn basic English. And, we looked for a "sparkle" in their eyes, something that said they wanted to work with us as much as we wanted to work with them. In the end, we found 16 trainees.



Why do you choose Viet Nam to start this program?

- (Smile) You are not the first person who has asked me this question. The first person was my father. I am a lucky person because I was born into a good family. My father is a lawyer and my mother was a teacher. They always taught me that it was important to help other people whose lives were more difficult than ours. I never forgot that lesson. When I first traveled to Ho Chi Minh City, the vendor kids in the streets tried to sell me many things. I'll never forget my first night in HCMC,

as I walked back to the hotel, a sad, lovely young vendor girl urged me to buy me a card. Unexpectedly, I looked at her eyes and I found something sad but so compelling in those eyes. Without knowing it then, something had been started deep within me. Also, I was a university student during the American War in Vietnam. Many of us were against the war and often protested in the streets to stop it. Maybe part of STREETS grew out of the turmoil that the War created.

Do you have any plans to expand and improve the class?

- We have gained a lot more experience in organizing the program. I am hopeful that the local authorities and business community will help us to grow and help more disadvantaged Vietnamese youth. At the moment, the funding for our project comes from businesspeople and benefactors in America and Europe. However, as a charity, we hope to get not only money but also the spirit of people all over the world especially Vietnamese benefactors to better help the STREETS trainees. In recent months, , we have also supported an English class in



Pham Tran Nu Tam, (1990 - Hoi An)

Tam joined the first STREETS class on June 15th, 2009. Her mother is chronically ill and her father has heart disease so her family economics are very difficult. She has two younger brothers. Because of this, she had to become self reliant when she was very young. It was a lucky day for her when she began training with the STREETS program. After 18 months of training she will have enough self-reliance to become a good chef and earn money to support herself and her family.



Nguyen Tran Thanh Vu (1991 118 Da Nang)

Last year he was recommended by a Da Nang orphanage to send an application letter to STREETS. As a result he got the chance to learn valuable life skills

Hue. Our next group of trainees in Hoi An will start after Tet holiday.

Thank you very much. We hope that you will have more "Vietnamese sparkling eyes" for your class.