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Nhân vật hằng tuần 15

Streets International nurtures future for street kids

Dozens of underprivileged street kids are experiencing a life-changing opportunity with an innovative hospitality and vocational training program called STREETS International in historic Hoi An Town.

Opened in June of last year, the Restaurant Café and culinary training center at **17 Le Loi Street** is the brainchild of Dr. Neal F. Bermas, a consultant who taught courses in hospitality management and entrepreneurship at both New York University and the Institute of Culinary Education. It is also the first facility of a U.S.-based not-for-profit organization named STREETS International dedicated to transform the lives of street kids and disadvantaged youth. The organization was founded in 2007 by hospitality and food industry educators and businesspersons, along with international development experts.

The idea of setting up STREETS International came to Bermas when he set foot on the S-shaped country for the first time a decade ago. He traveled through Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and poverty-ridden areas in the Central Highlands. He witnessed the hardship of local young children, who were forced to toil on the street as chewing gum and postcard sellers.

Bermas said it was the eyes of the disadvantaged kids he saw on the street that prompted him to materialize his notion of helping these poor kids.

The American man decided to give up his teaching career in the U.S. to focus



on his newly-found inspiration, the STREETS International organization and its first center in HoiAn.

Hoi An, first Streets International location

“It took over five years for the preparation work in both the U.S. and Vietnam,” he said. Bermas explained Hoi An was his choice to carry out the project as the town had yet to have a foreign organization such as he envisioned to aid local impoverished kids compared to some major cities, such as Hanoi and HCMC.

The training program, takes place at the STREETS Training Center and at the restaurant. The extensive training includes lessons in culinary arts, hospitality service and management, as well as Life Skills and Hospitality English. Trainees all participate in a comprehensive 18-month curriculum which requires them to work in every area of the restaurant, from

front of the house duties to cooking and management. Each trainee is also provided with supervised housing, active community-based support, and medical care. The students obtain hands-on experience by working at the STREETS International Restaurant Café. All the training is under the guidance of Bermas and his partner and fellow STREETS Board Member, Sondra Stewart.



During its initial stage, most of the trainees were recruited from local charity centers and orphanages. “The students learn English very fast because HoiAn ancient town has many visitors, making it easier for them to practice the language,” he said. Bermas said it takes lots of support to encourage the kids to succeed and get used to a disciplined and healthy lifestyle.

Memorable encounters

The American founder said his encounters with the trainees and their compelling life stories had left him with unforgettable memories. One trainee from a local charity center, poor and fatherless, left STREETS on the second day of his arrival after reportedly stealing a bicycle. “You should think about what you did,” Bermas told the new trainee after he managed to contact him. “If you still want to continue at STREETS, let me know so we can figure something out.” It only took a few days. “When I was young, I used to make some pretty big mistakes -- just like you,” Bermas told the student. “My father told me if I knew that I had done something wrong, the first step was to try really hard to be honest and brave to fix the mistake.” Bermas also encouraged the trainee to come clean to the police and give back the stolen bike. The boy has since then been an outstanding trainee with

remarkable performance at the restaurant. “The first thing we ask all our trainees is to remember to respect their own and others' dignity.” “I know lots of the kids will have difficulties when staying in the programs because they may have to work to support their families,” he said. “Therefore, all the trainees earn a monthly allowance so they not only learn about savings and budgets, but so they can support their families, too.” Bermas and Stewart frequently visit the separate housing facilities for their male and female trainees to cook and share meals together. “I love this type of get-together meal,” Stewart says, “It gives us all the sense of being part of an important family and community.”

“Neal often told us to be confident,” Nguyen Thi Ly, a trainee at the facility, a young girl, on her own since her mother remarried after her father passed away. “He told us to talk to our friends and teachers to help each other,” Ly, who lived with her grand mother before coming to STREETS, said. “For me, this program is my family while Neal and Sondra are my parents.”

STREETS International is planning to expand its operation to other locations in Vietnam, as well as Laos and the Philippines with the main goal: the success of each trainee.