

HUONG PHUONG MONASTIC COMMUNITY STUDENT SPONSOR PROGRAM

Many women in poor areas of Vietnam have the status of second class citizens: they do most of the hard work and have few chances for betterment by education. Helping a woman to obtain a university degree is one way of improving the status of women.

Women who come from economically poor rice farms cannot afford education. A lifetime benefit to a woman can be provided by sponsoring a year of university education. Half of the whole cost of training a doctor, including fees, basic food and rent, is only \$500 per year. The whole cost of training a religious/social worker is only \$825 for the whole university course.

University education helps women become future leaders.

If opting to sponsor 50% of a course cost, then the monastic community and family of the student would be requested to match the sponsorship with the other half of the cost. (100% sponsorship is preferable, but might not be possible if funds are limited and student numbers are high).

Sponsoring a woman to train at university provides a path for women into professions and skilled occupations. You are also helping the people of Vietnam, by providing additional doctors, pharmacists, and social workers.

We will provide a profile of your sponsored student. Your sponsored student will email a progress report to you at least 3 times per year. You and the student may wish to communicate more regularly, particularly if the student is studying English.

A donation will directly result in additional sisters from the monastic communities of Huong Phuong village and Vinh City area of central Vietnam becoming doctors, pharmacists and other professionals.

Any donations are first collected into a trust account held in Australia.. For this not-for-profit donations account there are no commissions, admin costs or account keeping fees. St George Bank kindly agreed to waive fees. Each year's sponsorship funds are paid from the account at the start of each year

Costs to sponsor a woman to study at university for a year or for a whole course are as follows.

50% sponsorships are:

Course	One year	Whole course
Medicine	\$500	\$3,000
Pharmacy	\$500	\$2,500
Foreign language (English)	\$375	\$1,500
Theology/social work	\$275	\$825

An itemised breakdown of the costs for a woman to study at university in Vietnam is set out in the table below:

Course	Food allowance	Uni fee	Room rent (digs)	Book & sport allowance	Course length	Sponsor 100% course cost of one year	Sponsor 50% course cost of one year	Sponsor cost of whole course	Sponsor 50% cost of whole course
Medicine	10,000 vnd/day = 50 cents 0.3M vnd/month 3.6M vnd/yr	4.5M vnd/sem \$225A/sem 9M vnd/yr	0.25M vnd/m onth = \$12.50 /month	2M vnd/sem 4M vnd/yr	6 yrs	20 M vnd/yr \$1,000/yr	10 M vnd/yr \$500/yr	120M vnd \$6,000	60M vnd \$3,000

			3M vnd/yr						
Pharmacy	As above	As above	As above	As above	5 yrs	20 M vnd/yr \$1,000/yr	10 M vnd/yr \$500/yr	100M vnd \$5,000	50M vnd \$2,500
Foreign language (English)	As above	2M VND/sem \$100/sem 4M vnd/yr	As above	As above	4 yrs	15 M vnd/yr \$750/yr	7.5 M vnd/yr \$375/yr	80M vnd \$3,000	40M vnd \$1,500
Theology /social work	As above	Nil	As above	As above	3 yrs	11M vnd/yr \$550/yr	5.5M vnd/yr \$275/yr	33M vnd \$1,650	16.5M vnd \$825

Note: Currency conversion to \$A will vary. This table is based on a \$100 = 2M VND rate.

PERSONAL VISITS TO STUDENTS DURING EASTER 2011

Women from the Huong Phuong monastic community currently study in student households at Hue, Dong Hoi and Saigon. Some personal impressions are recorded in my travel diary of visits to these households. This was during a holiday after Easter in 2011.

STUDENTS AT HUE UNIVERSITY – SISTERS HUYEN, HIEP & FRIENDS DINH, NAM, SISTERS CHAU, NHAN



Left to right: Hue university students Nam, Sister Nhan, Sister Huyen, Sister Hiep, Sister Chau, Dinh.



Washed student jeans on a line. This scene could be in university student housing anywhere in the world.

Sometimes there is something lost in translation. The monastic order that I travelled to visit in Vietnam translates into “Lovers of the Holy Cross”. Doesn’t translate very well, does it? This is because in modern English, the word “lover” has altered in colour over time, the most recent meaning being “sexual partner (heterosexual or homosexual), usually out of wed lock”.

At Hue City I arrived in the small hotel for French tourists next door to the student barracks. This was because the motor bike chauffer took me to the student housing, but the landlady of the student housing could not believe that I was intending to visit her humble establishment. She instead waved me to the unlikely named “Bella Garden” French/Vietnamese hotel next door. Young Sisters Huyen and Hiep then led me to visit the student house.



University student housing next to Bella Garden Hotel. (Sister Hiep in orange). Good to see men doing some laundry (no choice of course!).

I had got to know Sister Huyen's family reasonably well over the Christmas to Tet holiday period. Her brother Thanh is a sensitive young man, haunted by the memory of his family's near starvation at one period in 1994. He is one of three young men from the village who are studying for the priesthood in New Zealand. Young sisters Hiep and Huyen had kept in touch by email, talking of their attempts to practice English with "foreigners" (as western tourists are called in Vietnam). I was very happy to visit them. So when I arrived at Hue City and they asked, "Why are you in Hue?" the answer naturally was "To visit you, of course. Why else should I be in Hue?"



Sister Huyen's brother Thanh on left, Tien on right, both seminarians in New Zealand.

On another occasion I met a sincere and gentle young priest from Saigon who was visiting the convent. Fr Tin asked me, "Why are you here?" Are you celibate? I replied certainly not. I love to have women around (I am sure he does as well). Later at breakfast I received more polite interrogation, "Are you Catholic?" I gave my standard response, "Yes, but not a very good one". The confused expression on the priest indicated that this was a cross-cultural exchange. The cheek of the response might be normal in Australia, but possibly not standard protocol in Vietnam, where appearance is very important.

Around the same time I was invited by my client Fr Vien to come back and live with the sisters “when you are 80 years old”. Presumably that is a safe age. I said that to wait 24 years to visit the sisters again might be too long and asked Mother Superior to come for a visit to UC (Australia). She seemed happy to do this. So the problem of seeing at least one of the sisters again was solved.

Back to the students. Like students almost everywhere around the world, they are stressed about study, poor in cash, rich in young company and often don't eat enough.

Sisters Huyen and Hiep, who study English language, share a bed in a small room in the student accommodation. A photo of them in their room shows all the necessities for a student life in Vietnam: a place to sleep, a bookshelf, and a small gas cooker for meals. There are boxes with many packets of two-minute noodles, the staple food of students all around the world (just as pasta seems to be the staple of European back packers). In this case, a CD player recorder for language tapes, prayer book and crucifix complete the furniture.



Left to right, Sister Hiep and Sister Huyen.

Both had emailed about having sore eyes so it was good to take them to an eye doctor for an examination. They left with some antibiotic and other medications for eye inflammation. A visit to the Thien An monastery and some chains and crucifixes finished the healing.

Sister Yen graduates in medicine in two months. It has been a long hard road for Yen, with borrowed laptop and no internet. She was still worrying about her exams when I saw her, but I am sure she will do OK. A picture of Yen shows her in the room that has been her refuge for 6 years.



Sister Yen, who is graduating in medicine, in her student room.



Sister Yen, with the equipment and possessions of the last 6 years of study.

Their friend Sister Chau, who is preparing to enter the novitiate of another order, showed us her room. The room has some pink (girl) things such as a mirror and cheap wall paper. There is a small book shelf, Post-it stickers with English language notes, language CD player and a boiling jug (so that bottled water does not have to be purchased).



The kit of student equipment in Sister Chau's room.



The kit of student equipment in Sister Chau's room: Small table and chair, Textbooks, language study notes, language conversation tape player, kettle, rice cooker, bed. Pink wall paper, shoulder bag and mirror signal that this is a girl's room.

Their fellow students Dinh and Nam are gentle and sincere young men, both devout Christians, also at Hue University. Their student accommodation is typical of student digs everywhere: cheap rent, a lot of company and a lot of activity. Jeans have to be washed and dried; meals have to be prepared and assignments have to be completed.



Student accommodation.

With their friend Sister Nhan, who is also preparing to enter the novitiate, we went out to dinner. It was wonderful to see these hungry young people enjoy a good meal. The 50 cent per day food allowance does not pay for much. I asked Sister Nhan, who appeared to me to be unlikely for the novitiate, how she felt about it. She said she needed to concentrate on her studies. I agreed: study is the important present task.

I travelled with the students by bicycle through the beautiful small alleys of Hue. We visited the student rooms where they lived; the monument to the national hero Trung and the Thien An monastery, from which they helped move the Mary of La Vang statue for the orphanage chapel.



The beautiful alleys of Hue City are relatively traffic free and easy to cycle. Left to right: Nam, Dinh and Sister Chau.



Arriving by bicycle at the Thien An monastery.

A little room party was organised for my visit. The students had a great time from a few simple pleasures, such as coffee prepared by Hiep on the floor. It recalled a photo I had seen of university students from another time enjoying a party (of my father as an engineering student in war-time Europe).



Sister Hiep prepares Ka Phe Sua (Café) on the floor of her room.



Room party. University students with the simplest entertainment: snack food and each other's company.

Their food allowance equal to 50 cents per day per student barely gives them enough to eat. I bought them and their student friends a couple of "big" meals and greatly enjoyed seeing them eat everything. There were no left-overs.



Farewell party/meal. Left to right: Sister Chau, Sister Huyen, Sister Nhan, Sister Yen (playing with chopsticks), Nam, Dinh, Sister Hiep.

I left with feelings of gratitude and optimism for the generosity of the handsome and sincere young men of Vietnam and the hard-working, strong and elegant young women who study at the university alongside them.

DONG HOI SISTERS' HOUSEHOLD

This is basically a student rental household of three young sisters from Huong Phuong. One studies pharmacy and the other two study music. I had said that I wanted some freedom from the convent routine and planned to stay at a hotel at Dong Hoi. The Sisters instead “shanghaied” me to spend a pleasant day and half at Dong Hoi, accompanied by the students and Sisters Huong, Tuyen and Hien, who all converged there for the occasion.

For my arrival, two live chickens had been bought at the market, kept trussed up in the wash up area. They were soon joined by a third live chicken. In the skilful hands of the Sisters, all the chickens were soon killed, plucked and cooked for our meals.

For that short day and half, the Sisters relaxed from the convent time schedule. The convent rules were relaxed for the post-Easter period. It all had the atmosphere of a children’s sleepover (pyjama party). They gave themselves the rare treat of watching a soapie on TV. From the next room at night, I could hear the Sisters chatting in bed (not done at the mother house). The following day I gave them a small amount of money so they could have the rarer treat of doing a bit of personal shopping at the market. The best money I ever spent! The sisters did some sight-seeing, practiced music, played a game of cards and generally had a good time. Then they saw me off at the airport, where I embarrassed each with a small hug and peck on the cheek (a no-no in Vietnam).



Chickens kept fresh for a later meal.



Beautiful meal cooked by the Sisters, including the monster prawn for the guest.



Clowning around while sight-seeing at Dong Hoi.



Sitting down to a meal.



Glued to a soapie in the evening.



Washing up.



Emerging from the household in the early morning.



Early morning.



It's not Saigon, but there are signs of necessary security at Dong Hoi.



Relaxing on holiday with a card game is definitely outside the normal convent routine.



Sisters relax in their sleeping areas in the early morning, reading music.



The kitchen also provides secure storage for motorbikes and bicycles, which have to be wheeled out before meals are prepared.



The young Sisters, both music students, in the kitchen.

SAIGON CITY – SISTERS NHAN, DIEU, HANH, THUY, HOA, TUYET, GIANG, NHUNG, SANH

Student household: Nhan - theology, Dieu - theology, Hanh - theology, Thuy - pharmacy, Hoa - agriculture, Tuyet – kindergarten teaching, Giang - pharmacy, Nhung – pharmacy. This household of 9 sisters live in a cheap 2 bedroom rental terrace that is up for sale. Once sold, they will have to move out and pay higher rent of 4M VND/month. The purchase cost of about \$80k to \$100k is considered unrealistically high by the convent. Of course, they are comparing Saigon with village prices (an unrealistic comparison).

The current house floods regularly as it is close to the river. I previously made a lunchtime visit to the sisters and they accompanied me to the airport. There I also met Fr Luke Tan an American Vietnamese Catholic priest and convert from the Buddhist faith.

This time, “the Saigon Sisters” and Sister Luan from the Huong Phuong orphanage intercepted me at arrival at the airport, even before my interpreter Hoan could get to me. They brought San, a French-speaking monk, as an interpreter. So my primitive school French got a workout. I made contact with Fr Tin at the monastery and we all went out to a beautiful dinner cooked by the Sisters.



These girls might be uni students. But can they cook!



Celebratory dinner is not complete without C-hai (C2) green tea soft drink.



Left to right: Hoan, Fr Tin, Sister Luan.



With motorbikes cleared out of the living room, the group is set up for dinner with guests.