



A Story of Unlikely Friendship Central Highlands, Vietnam

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"In the old days there were angels who came and took men by the hand, and led them away from the city of destruction. We see no white-winged angels now. But yet men are led away from threatening destruction; a hand is put into their's, which leads them forth gently toward a calm and bright land, so that they look no more backward; and the hand may be a little child's."

I ran across this passage from George Eliot's "***Silas Marner***" not long after coming home from Vietnam in 1968, and it captured, for me, what I had just experienced in the War.

As a Military Policeman, assigned to patrol vital highways in the strategic Central Highlands, it was impossible not to notice the dark-skinned Montagnards (respectfully known as "Yards") in the area. Dressed in loincloths, riding water buffalo and carrying crossbows, they looked completely foreign to me. So different were our respective appearances that I believed it would be impossible for us to get past the cultural barriers to actually "know" one another. I was wrong, and it was these Yard children that would build the bridge between our two worlds.

These ragtag children were members of the Bahnar tribe, and each day they would congregate at our checkpoint hoping to receive any unwanted C-rations from the American soldiers. They couldn't speak English, and we certainly didn't understand Bahnar, but we discovered there was much more to communication than language. It all began with a smile.

Without warning or reservation, I found myself completely captivated by the children, and looked forward to seeing them every day. We tried our best to understand each other and every discovery was a treasure. That's why Eliot's line, "*...and the hand may be a little child's...*" meant so much to me. "My kids" epitomized what was good in the world, and served as my reminder that there was more to man than his violent nature. It was through their love and acceptance that my soul was saved from the horrors of war.

When the Army no longer required my presence in Vietnam, I returned to civilian life and my home in California. It would take 26 years, countless hours of worrying, several miracles and some amount of luck to reunite me with my "first family." Armed with old yellowing photographs and vivid memories, I returned to the Central Highlands in 1994

to search for “my children.” On a beautiful March morning, 26 years since our sad farewells in 1968, our reunion took place in a village hut, surrounded by curious onlookers. To me, it was nothing short of a miracle. But that’s another story.

I have been back to Vietnam numerous times to visit my extended and ever growing Bahnar family. During one of these trips, I was fortunate enough to discover the Vinh Son Orphanage located by the old Wooden Church in Kontum. My wife and son were accompanying me, and it was really heartwarming, watching them interact with the children. I was reminded of the magic a small child can generate with a simple smile. In fact, if it had been allowed, my wife would have brought one of the little girls home with us! Once again, it was the Yard smile that captivated everyone.

It’s impossible not to open one’s heart to the Vinh Son children and their caregivers. Since our first meeting in 2000, we’ve maintained a close relationship, and I am proud to be on the Board of Friends of Vinh Son Orphanages (**FVSO**). Your donations work. I’ve seen it firsthand in the smiles of 850 Montagnard children.



Some of my Bahnar children, Vietnam 1968