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March Newsletter - Volume 9 Issue 2

## Transcending Time & Space "Telling Stories Through Art"

Our March newsletter is rather unique. We're featuring a project that is not funded by FVSO, but one that is, without question, dear to our hearts. Tricia's husband, Rich Grame, is our newest Board member, and he must be proud of his wife and her new-found love for the children of Vinh Son. This is her story.



The idea for some kind of interaction between children here and Vietnam originated from my husband, Richard, who challenged me to formalize an educational project that could enrich the lives of the children at Vinh Son orphanage (Kontum, Vietnam), as well as my students in northern California.

We bounced around some ideas, and eventually decided that because the "creative mind" is so universal, I should develop a bridge between the two cultures through art. "Telling Stories" quickly became the artistic platform for what I perceived as an "exchange of lives." By profession, I'm an artist and educator, so this project appealed to me on every level. I had no idea just how deep this connection would go.

In my class of middle-schoolers, I introduced the idea, and not surprisingly, they were most eager to begin. I asked them to tell "their story" by creating a large postcard, depicting a facet of their lives that would eventually be given to a Vinh Son child, someone whom they would never meet, but who would embrace the opportunity to connect with them, through art. My student's curiosity and openness was truly inspirational, and I knew we were about to begin something very special. Of course, I would have to travel 10,000 miles to complete the circle and discover if I was right or not.

**Vietnam.** On January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012, the good Sisters at Vinh Son orphanage ushered 70 children into a large room (aged five to fifteen, wide eyed, curious and eager) gingerly seating themselves in front of a stranger, who although did not speak their language, embraced them with a smile and a belief in their ability to "create art." By prior arrangement, there were interpreters on site with us to assist with the language barriers. "**Ciao, loi la Tricia - I am an artist and educator from California and honored to be here to teach you art.**" It didn't take long before we were all speaking the same language!

### "Dear Friend"

Tricia Grame (upper left) is surrounded by her enthusiastic class of budding artists.





First, I showed the children photographs and the postcards created just for them by my students in California. I explained that this art project, **Telling Stories Through Art**, meant that they would pick an “Art Pal” from California, someone, a student like themselves, who would become their special friend. They were asked to select one of my students’ postcards, basically choosing their “new friend.” They proudly held onto each one like it was a precious jewel.

I then instructed the children to express themselves and their dreams by drawing on a blank card. For this, we put out boxes of colored pencils, markers and oil pastels that they examined and selected with the greatest of care. They had never experienced such an art class!

The room was buzzing, children were smiling, and the artwork just poured out of them! They focused on the choices of colors and of what they wanted to say through their symbols, images and forms. When they were done, Richard photographed each child as they proudly held up their finished product. In the afternoon, another group of wide-eyed children slowly walked into the room, sat down at a desk, and eagerly awaited their turn at the drawing table.

Needless to say, the reception I got that day would forever alter the way I viewed Vietnam. Richard had told me so much about the country and its people, but I was still stunned by the kindness and generosity of the Vinh Son community.

The excitement and fulfillment of the Vietnam experience was certainly matched by the reaction I received upon returning to the classroom. When I got home with all that “artistic treasure” and presented the photos and postcards made by the Vinh Son children, my art students were overwhelmed. They couldn’t wait to respond to the newly forged friendships. Opening their hearts to the less privileged from a foreign land, a world away, helped them discover another side of themselves. Indeed, Vinh Son had touched their young souls. When you read their remarks, you’ll see what I mean.

I have been an artist and educator for most of my life, but little did I expect what happened to me at Vinh Son. The experience of working with the orphanage children was the very first time I felt the true gift of art and teaching....and of giving.



The children cherished every moment and appreciated everything I had to offer. The love they gave me in return was such a gift. My purpose in going was to help the children find a voice through the creative process. I believe in the power of art, and one’s ability to express themselves. It encourages self awareness, confidence, hope, desire, acceptance and strength. Congrats to my students on both sides of the ocean....we did it!

I plan on returning to Vinh Son in June, with more art, more gifts and more **Art Pals**.

### **Tricia Grame (right) with one of her newest art students in Vietnam**

Tricia is an art educator and artist. She teaches and curates for the California Institute of Integral Studies, holds a Ph.D. in the Women’s Spirituality Dept. Tricia is also the art commissioner for the town of Danville (located in the San Francisco Bay Area). Currently, 8 schools (elementary to college level) and about 500 students are participating in this program.

***“As an educator and artist, I continue to explore, from an historical and personal perspective, how the language of the symbol is revealed through the creative process, becoming tangible in the work of art.”***



# These Pine Valley students share their feelings about Art Pals (Tricia teaches art at Pine Valley Middle School in San Ramon, CA)



Although, I am from Ethiopia, I was a baby when I left and thought that everyone in the world had the same amount of riches and property. When I first saw the pictures of the children from the orphanages that had no real beds like mine and maybe not even a hospital that was close, it made me realize the kids in America always want too much. **Abel**



I felt good when I donated to the children. I know they have very little and we have everything, and keep asking for more. Mrs. Grame told us stories about all the children she met and what chores they have to do, like take care of the chickens and pigs, wash their clothes and cook. **Noah**



The orphanage art project was such an amazing experience and made a great impact on my life. I, of course, do not know what it feels like to endure life in a third-world country, and take so much for granted. These children have taught me to cherish my family and to learn to appreciate everything that I have. **Christina**



Even though these children live halfway around the world, it is magical how we can sense a feeling of love and compassion towards others, seeing the picture of that little girl holding my art, and me being able to hold the postcard she had made for me, gave me a feeling I never felt before. I will carry this with me forever. **Samara**



This art project made me aware of the world outside of America. It made me realize how much I have and do not appreciate. It feels so good to be able to help these children that have so little, ask for so little, but appreciate so much". **Jessie**



We all have so many outfits in our closet. The orphanage kids probably have just one. When Mrs. Grame told me about her **Art Pal** project, I went home and filled two large bags with toys and clothes. I think it would be fantastic if more schools would join our **Art Pal** project. **Shea**

**“While the pictures of the orphans bring me to tears, seeing them smile, even in those living conditions, was a beautiful sight.” Christina**



Our 2<sup>nd</sup> charity concert at Thunder Valley Casino Resort was another huge success, selling out the room and delivering \$10,600 to FVSO. Please join us in thanking Glenda Gonzales and Bart Ruud for their tireless efforts that made this all happen!

## Update from Rich Grame who is on-site at Sao Mai orphanage in Pleiku, Vietnam

*“The 2 girls with epilepsy (Anh and Khoi) have not had another seizure since they started taking new medications. The kids are happy, Sisters are happy and so are we.”*

### Vinh Son & Sao Mai Orphanage Facts

- Population – approximately 730 Montagnard children in seven orphanage facilities
- Administered by the Sisters of the Miraculous Medal & St. Paul Chartres
- Location – Kontum/Pleiku, Vietnam
- \$12 feeds, shelters, and educates one child for one month

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### Donation Information

Please make checks payable to FVSO or Friends of Vinh Son  
 Donations are gratefully accepted year round  
 100% of administrative costs are paid by the Board and Officers