Horror and Heroism as Vietnamese Confront the legacy of Agent Orange

AP raises $9,000 for six affected families

Phan That (photo left) awaits the future with trepidation. Mr That was exposed to Agent Orange, the defoliant that was sprayed over Vietnam during the war, and passed the poison on to two children who are now severely handicapped. Adding to his worries, the That house sits on low-lying land, which leaves it exposed to flooding.

Mr That is not alone. According to the Vietnamese Red Cross, three million Vietnamese have been affected by dioxin poisoning caused by Agent Orange. Most were born after the war.

The US government has funded efforts to clean up contaminated "hot spots" and supports several pilot programs that include medical assistance. But the rest of the world views Agent
Orange as an American problem, leaving the Vietnam government and communities to struggle with compensation and support.

In an effort to shift the focus back to victims and their caregivers, The Advocacy Project (AP) is today launching an appeal on Global Giving to buy a cow for the That family. This will be the seventh time that AP has helped an Agent Orange family, in partnership with the Association for the Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (AEPD), a leading advocate for war victims in Quang Binh province. The campaign has raised $9,000 to this point.

The six families funded so far continue to battle heartache. Two of Mai Thi Loi’s sons have been driven mad by Agent Orange and chained up to prevent them from smashing up the house. Three of Le Thanh Duc’s children have been paralyzed by Agent Orange and a fourth child was killed in an accident. Le Van Dung and his wife Dang Thi Met produced 13 children and lost 12 to Agent Orange.

There will be no happy ending for these parents, because the condition of their children is irreversible. AP has grown close to the family of Pham Thi Do and her cheerful 22-year old son Nguyen Van Toan, one of three siblings poisoned by Agent Orange. Toan (photo) is a talented craftsman and his model of Hue University brightens up the AP office in Washington, but he recently went into hospital for hemophilia and may never leave. His father sits at his side, while his mother cares for his ailing sister at home.

But while these children probably cannot be cured, much can be done to ease the pressure on their parents, who respond to donations with gratitude and hard work. AP’s approach is to purchase livestock or poultry that will produce a sustainable income. Mai Thi Loi’s cow, Opportunity, has doubled the family’s earnings.

Once funds are raised for Mr That and his wife, AEPD will buy a breeding cow that will produce calves, milk and fertilizer, enabling the family to buy medicine and shore up the house against future floods. Mr That will be assisted by an AEPD outreach worker who was himself wounded in the war and can relate to
other survivors (photo). A Peace Fellow from AP will visit next year and check on progress.

This approach relies heavily on the dedication of Peace Fellows, who have contributed most of the $9,000 raised so far. 

Ai Hoang (2016) was helped by donations from her own family in the US - an act of remarkable generosity given that the family fled from Vietnam when Ai was a child.

This year's Fellow, Jacob Cohn, a student at the Fletcher School (Tufts University), raised $1,500 for Mrs. An, a widow whose son Huong is going slowly blind. Jacob also visited the previous beneficiaries and found they are making good use of their grants. His updates can be found in his blogs and on the profile pages.

By deploying committed Fellows like Ai and Jacob, AP is able to track results and deepen our relationship with the families. But the experience also leaves its mark on these young Americans, who were born after the Vietnam war but can now witness its deadly legacy at first hand.

As Jacob writes in a moving final blog:

"I've had the good fortune to talk with people who remain devoted to beating the odds and fighting for a better future for their children. Having the chance to share (their) stories with the world will probably be one of the most fulfilling experiences of my career. I'll be bringing a lot more than souvenirs home from this trip."

* Click here to donate to the That family and thank you!

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