Mission 'Nampossible
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By Jake Silove

Day One
In Vietnam, every trip from point A to B could be your last. It is almost impossible to describe the pure terror that is the roads of Vietnam. Hundreds of bikes swerve aimlessly, back and forth. ‘Lanes’ clearly aren’t as important here. The most used item is the horn, and the drivers beep constantly in the hope that the bikers will move to let them through. Usually, they do. Trucks overtake bigger trucks by driving on the wrong side of the road, straight at oncoming traffic. To get a bus to stop, the taxi driver pulled up in front of it as we were moving, stopped, took the key out of the engine and beeps repeatedly. In the middle of the road. And yet no one seemed to care.

Eventually, we made it to our first destination. Social Support is a community that has been created by the Government to house homeless people. There are roughly 150 people currently living there. Many, if not most, of the children have some sort of disability, whether physical or mental. Some cannot move from their bed without the help of two incredible people, Mr. T and Mr. P, both of whom volunteer at this community. It was truly heart wrenching to watch these kids, who were unlikely to ever leave their cots. And yet, each and every child I met had a huge grin on their face. Even those who could not move gave us a smile. These kids, even going through the terrible experiences that many of them had, were happy. Each person in this community is fed on $18 a month (360,000 Dong). While the money we raised will not go specifically towards this community, there are so many like it that it will help. If we
have left over funds, we may even pay Mr. T a salary, allowing him to work at the community more often. A grueling hour and a half drive later, during which my life flashed before my eyes no less than fourteen times, and after checking in to our hotels, we went out for our first proper Vietnamese meal. ‘Banh Xeo’ was, at a glance, a pigsty. Food littered the floor. A mouse-sized cockroach scampered past. We sat, unsure of what was to come. First, a brown and black sauce was put in front of use. Then, sheets of paper. Lastly, what looked to be several kilos of omelet. After learning the basics of Vietnamese eating, we were truly into the culture. Halfway through my meal, a stray dog appeared, eating our table scraps. While this was only one room of the building, through a door we could see the rest of the owner’s family. We were literally eating in their kitchen.
Day Two
Today can be divided into four main sections- Peace Village, Baby Orphanage, Teaching (sort of) and Food. Peace Village is an orphanage for people of any ages who have disabilities of some sort. The majority of the residents are quite young, although others are very old. All of them are victims of Agent Orange. The girl in the picture is Ngan. She is sixteen years old. The Government funds three staff. There are 27 residents. While the less than 1:10 ratio might sound good, after just a few hours there I can tell you that it is not. Many of the children require one-on-one time for at least 20 minutes just to feed them one meal. Many of the more able children have to help the less able, as the staff simply don’t have enough time to reach everyone. Money raised has helped hire two other staff members, but this is still not enough.

Quick, less important side note. The food in Vietnam is amazing. Mrs Hun, a crucial part of the volunteering process, cooks all of our meals. That’s breakfast, lunch and dinner. Each are only a few hours apart. Breakfast was Western- Baguettes, honey, eggs (I had 5). Lunch was noodles, Vegetables, Tofu, sauce. I don’t actually know how to use chopsticks, but I managed to fake it enough to get by. Dinner. Wow. So there was the best chicken I have ever tasted (Made of Tofu, obviously), ‘Morning Glory’ vegetable dishes, rice, rice and more rice, beef wrapped in banana leaves and real chicken
wings. Afterwards, pomegranate and four kilos of the best Mangos I have ever had. I love Mrs Hanh!

Onto my favorite part of the day. The Baby Orphanage houses 74 children between the ages of 0-13. Walking in, the kids seemed apprehensive and curious (White people are an oddity, as I’ll talk about a bit later). By the end of it, I decided I would take one of them home, was giving piggy-backs to another, shaking a few off my leg and being pulled around by others. So was everyone else with me. These kids were so happy, so loving, even despite the fact that most of them had been dumped here. One kid had been left in the mountains to die, another found in a box. There are six disabled babies in this orphanage, ranging from blindness to Cerebral Palsy. We sat with almost every child, and did whatever it was they wanted to do. Leaving was almost impossible- thankfully we’ll be returning soon!
Day Three

Today started with a ceremony put on by the Vietnamese Government to celebrate 20 years of friendship between Vietnam and South Korea. As Peace Village was built (although not funded) by a group of Korean Veterans, the ceremony was held at Peace Village. All of the kids came to watch, and all of the staff and contributors were dressed up. Before the ceremony, I found Ngan again. As soon as we entered the room she was in, she started smiling and even laughing. It was the first noise we had heard her make, other than crying. Usually so sullen, so quite, it was incredible to watch her come out of her shell a little bit. Finding it impossible to leave her to watch the ceremony, we decided to take her with us. Sixteen years old, and I was still able to easily carry her and sit her on my lap. During the ceremony, Ngan was so observant it is impossible for anyone to suggest she isn’t intelligent. She would watch everything, and try to move anything that obstructed her vision. She is extremely strong. She would hold both of my hands, and when I clapped at the end of a performance she clapped with me. Eventually, we taught her to clap herself, which she seemed to thoroughly enjoy. She always knew exactly what she wanted—hand here, leg there, higher, lower. And yet, with the number of staff at Peace Village it is impossible for her to get the love and care she needs. She’s the third kid I want to bring home (so far).
Day Five

Day five of Mission ‘Nampossible would be completely different than any other day so far. Rather than going to visit the various children, they would be coming to see us. For the first time, we were able to sleep in (waking up at 8, two hours later than usual). Anna was hosting a party for all of the children in the three orphanages she works at, as well as the staff members. As we will be leaving soon, along with Anna who has been here for a year, she wanted to put on something really special. There were at least 170 people coming, mostly children, and many very young. To put it simply, it was an incredible and yet incredibly difficult thing to do. Still, it went off without a hitch. The event was something I’m sure the kids will never, ever forget. Used to some rice, along with some bits of meat or vegetables, these kids were given course after course after
course. Spring roles, salads, soups, fried rice, beef, chicken, noodles, ice cream, everything was provided. The kids were each given a Christmas present, a party bag put together by Anna. The kids were all so amazingly happy. The main form of entertainment was Karaoke. In Vietnam, everyone LOVES karaoke, and wouldn’t miss an opportunity to sing. Young kids got up and sung in from of over 100 people, something we in Australia would never even dream of. Although all the kids weren’t necessarily the best singers, the pure confidence was astounding. Personally, I would never, ever be able to do the same. Many of the inhabitants of Peace Village also got up to sing, including Sun, a victim of Agent Orange who has severe physical deformations. He is always happy, always wants to talk to us, a truly lovely person despite his physical problems. Even though these kids had hardly anything, they still dressed up in their best clothes, and still gave Anna presents.

After the party was over, we had a rest and then decided to go to a nearby beach. The water was amazing, actually warm, the exact opposite of our usual Maroubrian temperature. Many people would come up to us to try to sell us things; chips, drinks, seafood. The one that had the most impression on me was an 86 year old who was selling Quail eggs. Regardless of her age and seeming brittleness, she would walk up and down the beach every day and sell these eggs for 10,000VND, or 50 Australian cents. She seemed in good spirits, but I simply can’t imagine having to continue to work like that at such an old age. Many of these elderly people have many children, but they cannot be supported as the children find it difficult to even support themselves. The Government here does not give any pension money.
Day Six
Today we visited a boarding school three hours from Tam Ky in the Mountains. The school, Kham Duc, has 1100 students, 400 of which board in at a nearby property. There are two sections, for boys and girls. The girls' building has been newly renovated, but the boy's dormitory is completely dilapidated. The bathrooms are flooded, the windows smashed. They use newspapers for blinds, and most of them sleep on a completely solid surface. The only food they are given is rice, with some salt and chili, every day they are there. It is impossible for anybody to prosper on this diet. Many rooms house 15 students, with only 10 beds. Your donations have paid for a clean water system to be put into the boarding school, as previously there was no safe water for the students to drink.
We couldn’t miss an opportunity to go to the Baby Orphanage. I think the kids have started getting used to us. The moment I arrived, I saw a blur followed by a child wrapping themselves around my leg. Soon, several more jumped on my back. Throughout our visit, I had a minimum of two and maximum of four children following me, on me or trying to get onto me. At one point they managed to wrestle me to the ground and hold me there for a long time, much to the older kids’ amusement. When the taxi arrived, I literally had to push the kids off me, and they held onto my hand even as we drove away (to the taxi drivers dismay). I really can’t believe that I am only here with the kids for two more days. Leaving is going to be impossible, without taking each and every one of them with me. I’ve only been here for a week, and some volunteers have been here for over a year. Leaving might be heartbreaking for me, but I can’t even imagine what it will be like for them.
Day Seven

Today’s first stop was Phu Ninh Orphanage, 20 minutes outside of Tam Ky. There are about 20 occupants, and many of them were at school when we arrived. Phu Ninh is located very close to some extremely large and elaborate Governmental buildings. It receives absolutely no support from the Government. It relies on sponsors, and was created purely out of the good-heartedness of the director. We had never before visited this Orphanage, and yet as soon as we arrived we were crowded with kids. They were all so excited— it wasn’t often that they got the attention they deserve, and were able to play. The staff there are all lovely and extremely helpful; there simply isn’t enough of them. We played basketball (Anna had a Basketball ring created for them), Soccer (balls that we purchased), blew bubbles (to their endless delight) and played other games. For much of the time we made Friendship bracelets to be brought back to Australia to become a part of Juli’s initiative, to make the world’s largest Friendship bracelet. Many of the children here had disabilities, and a good number had Down’s syndrome. They were all extremely happy, and loved having us around. Also, because Ellis wants me to record this, he became the master of Cows (managing to subdue Mr. Brown (A cow)). It was difficult to leave, knowing that we would never come back (at least this trip. I’m almost sure I’m coming back here).
After lunch, we visited Peace Village. After delivering several months supply of nappies, and after many 'hellos' and 'how are yous', I was drawn straight to Ngan. She wasn't as smiley today, and we just couldn't figure out why. Still, picking her up she cuddled right up to me, and we went for a long walk around the building. She was entertained for a bit by various toys, but really all she seemed to want were hugs and hugs and hugs. I would try to move her into a better position that would make it more comfortable for her, but she just wouldn’t let go. Probably afraid that I would put her down and move on, like more of the staff are forced to do, as there just aren’t enough of them to look after her as much as needed. We need get a few good smiles out of her, even maybe a giggle. Eventually we did need to put her down and leave, and it was truly heartbreaking. She started crying as soon as we left, and although we tried to get a staff member to take care of her they had to attend to another inhabitant. We left to her sobs.

Next up was a short walk to BABY ORPHANAGE! Something we look forward to every day, and yet not as much after leaving PV. As we were walking there, we went passed the school most of the orphans go to, and walked most of them home. Me being ‘big and strong’, I ended up carrying all of their school bags, much to their delight. Not so much mine. It makes you feel really amazing, watching as kids see you from the gates, start sprinting towards you and,
although most went to Anna, some hugging my legs for dear life. We walked them back, and met everyone else there. They quickly got changed and it was as though we had never left. We played, they jumped on me, some took me for walks. Choi, as always, was very protecting of me; she wouldn’t come near me if I was playing with several other kids, but if I was by myself she would take hold of my pinky and just walk around the grounds. When the Taxi came for us, I had four children wrapped around me, trying to stop me from leaving; all of the other volunteers were having the same experience. Eventually shaking off two, I climbed into the Taxi, prying the last two of my legs. Silly me, I opened the window and stuck my arm out. They held on even as we drove away. Tomorrow will be the last time I see them.

After dinner, we invited a boy and his grandmother to come to Mrs. Hahn’s. The boy was apparently very gifted and school. He was also an orphan. The grandmother had looked after 8 orphans in her life, and was very old. Still, she was supporting this boy through school, supplying school uniform, textbooks, food. The boy needed extra tutoring, as that was essentially a part of Vietnamese life, but could not afford it. Every month, we have decided we will be paying the $20 it costs to afford extra tutoring so that he can get the marks he wants. After school, the boy wants to be an architect. When we asked the Grandmother about why she takes in orphans, she first told us about how after the War the American’s just dumped babies on the side of the roads to die. She would take them in, look after them. We asked her why, why she did this when so many did not. She seemed to struggle with the response. “Love”, she said. “Only love”
Day Eight

Today was the hardest day for me during this trip. Today, we said goodbye to the kids. It has gone so fast, and we have done so much, but I wish we had more time.

We went to Peace Village for the last time. As always, Ngan and I were inseparable. She seemed to sense that something was going on—she clung tighter than ever before. We got some laughs out of her, and even managed to get her playing with some toy cars. Mum taught her to hit me (hard) in the face, which she seemed to thoroughly enjoy. At least one of us did. As each minute passed, I became more and more sad. I couldn’t help but think that, although we had made her week so much better just by being there, she wouldn’t get the care she needed in the future. I questioned the hope she had, the possibilities for her in the days, weeks, and years to come. There were none that I could think of. I can only hope that as she comes out of her bubble, the other occupants start to take care of her as they do for one another. With 20 minutes to go, I went for a final walk with her. She gripped so tight, it actually hurt. I willfully admit to tearing up, even crying a little, knowing that I had to leave her and the other kids. Eventually we sat her down. Instantly, tears, and she tried to crawl towards me, her hands in the air. The sound of her cries ripped through me, but there was nothing I could do. We said our goodbyes to everyone, and most understood that we were going home.
and would not be coming back. Ngan, though, probably did not.

After a quick trip to the markets to buy some birthday presents for the kids after we had gone, it was time to go the Baby Orphanage. The kids were happy as always, playing their usual games, with the addition of jump rope. I can’t help but smile, thinking of all those little people running around, without a care in the world. What has amazed me the most in the past few days is how the older kids (12-14 years old) care for the younger kids, in an almost mother-like sense. It was great to watch, and makes me fully confident that the kids are all in great hands. Leaving here was a little bit easier than leaving Peace Village. Here, these kids actually have prospects, have the potential for a good life. They are happy, go to school, many of them studying late into the night. These kids have a real chance in life. Only one of them realized we were not coming back, although we told them we would return the next time we could (we weren’t lying).

This trip has been a truly amazing experience for me. I could try to sum up everything, to come up with an overall message, but I think it is better to just take a bit from everything that has happened, and interpret it yourself. Personally, the lesson I’ve learnt the hard way is that you can’t help everyone. As much as you want to, as much as you think it necessary, it just isn’t possible. But, it is important
to take away the little things rather than spiral into depression at the hopelessness of it all (a very easy thing to do, given the enormity of the problem). Ngan was so happy that we were there, and was given the attention she needed even if only for a little bit. Three families have been given livestock that will change their lives. Five children will be attending school because of your donations. A boarding school has clean water. Nine new bikes were purchased for children who really need them. The sewer at the Baby Orphanage has been fixed, so that it no longer overflows when it rains. So many lives have been changed, with little cost to us. And, we have quite a bit of money left over that will be used to continue to help these families, these communities even after we have left. I could not recommend this volunteering experience more to anyone wishing to make a real difference in the world.

Finally, Ellis and I want to thank everyone who has followed my journey. We want to thank everyone who made donations, send supportive emails, gave us products or wishes to hand over to the children. Most importantly, we want to thank Anna for being the amazing, strong, giving person that she is, and all of the other volunteers we met along the way. We hope that you are able to see the world slightly differently; not as an impossibly flawed organism, but one that can be repaired if we all do our part. Sure, we can’t ‘fix’ everything everywhere, but we could sure make it better.

I hope you all have an amazing, interesting and significant holiday. I sure have.