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It's NOT Trash, It's ART

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It's NOT Trash, It's ART

Kathleen Kile¹

Stepping off the plane in Hue, Vietnam took my breath away. I was slammed with heat and extreme humidity that is common for mid-May. I stood at the bottom of the jetway, trying to adjust not only to my new environment, but to the fact I took this leap of faith and traveled half way around the world to teach children with intellectual disabilities about art made from trash. I stood there on the tarmac for what seemed like forever, as the other passengers moved around me trying to get to their final destination. It was the combination of excitement and fear that forced me to take that next step. Little did I know that that step would have such a huge impact on my life and further strengthen my core values.

Meeting with my contact, Phoung Tran from the Office of Genetic Counseling and Disabled Children (<http://ogcdc.org/>) that first Monday morning was inspiring. I would be spending time at three different locations. The first being The Future School, located in Hue City, where I would be located for 2 ½ weeks. Another portion of my time would be spent at an Organic Farm in the Nam Dong District, Thua Thien Hue Province. The last leg of my trip was spent at The Healing Hearts Workshop, in Hue City.

Arriving at the Future School that first day left my palms sweating, but this time not from the humidity, this time from worry. Would they remember me from last year? Would they want me back? As the kids came running out with their precious smiles and hugs, I knew I was where I belonged. The next few weeks flew by. I spent my days with the kids making tops from old CD's and bottle caps, string people from scraps of fabric and bottle caps, bells from tops of water bottles and string. In the evenings, I would spend my time picking up bottle caps while walking down the street, washing out water bottles, or cutting cardboard boxes to use for painting projects. And I loved every minute of it.

In my class, there was a young boy named Tai. He refused to speak. I had spoken with the district supervisor who told me he lived in a small village and was often teased, so he chose not to speak. Yet one afternoon, we were sitting in class and he said my name. Five simple letters, one small word, but it was a huge step and a cherished moment I will hold in my heart for a lifetime. Those five letters, that small word left me speechless; all I could do was hug him to let him know how special he was.

Feeling the same combination of fear and excitement, I stepped out of the car at the Organic Farm in the Nam Dong District, Thua Thien Hue Province. After meeting with the local officials, with no running water or air conditioning, I learned that I would only be allowed to stay one night at the farm. I knew that I needed to make the very most of the two days I was there. Not having the time to collect things locally, I brought along a lot of the things we needed. While staying in Hue, I tried to keep costs down by not eating out every meal. I kept snacks in my room

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to hold me over until my next meal. I used the snack boxes by cutting them into pieces and used them as canvases for our leaf painting project. Using different leaves, glass, and other parts of plants, we painted them and pressed them onto the make shift canvases to create our works of art.

Working together as a team takes practice and a lot of patience. To do it with little to nothing is even harder. I watched as they worked together with little effort completing their chores by taking turns cooking meals, picking vegetables from the garden, sweeping floors, and even showering from an outside make shift shower. The two days I spent with this group of individuals taught me a great deal about myself. The first being: I do not need more in my life to be happy, I need less. The second: there is always something to be grateful for.

My final stop on my journey was Healing the Wounded Heart Foundation, which is a humanitarian activity that OGCDC runs in Hue, Vietnam in cooperation with the Spiral Foundation in Los Angeles. It sells handicrafts made by disabled artisans using recycled materials: such as bags made from recycled soda cans and noodle wrappers, bowls made from colorful recycled telephone wires and so much more. Healing the Wounded Heart gives back to the community, and helps to promote a sustainable environment. The foundation protects the livelihood of disabled artists by offering fair wages, medical insurance and housing. The money raised in the shop goes towards heart surgeries for children suffering from congenital heart disease.

The artist's skills and patience surpass any disability they may have. They were kind enough to take time out of their work and try to teach me their art form. I left there with great respect and the knowledge that there is always room to learn.

On June 25th, I once again was standing on the tarmac not wanting to move. This time it wasn't because of fear or excitement, but from pain and heartbreak. I did not want to leave. I wanted to turn and go back to continue what I had started with these amazing human beings. I want to thank The Henry Luce Foundation, and the other stakeholders involved with Envirolab Asia, for giving me the opportunity to experience such an awesome adventure that further taught me about the simple acts of kindness.

