

ABOUT PLATYPUS

Commencing in 2012 to help an initial cohort of 50 Vietnamese children from poor families obtain an education, eleven years later your continued very generous support has enabled Platypus to assist more than 700 at-risk and disadvantaged Vietnamese complete their education, kick start a business or pursue a career and break the poverty cycle by forging a better future for themselves, their families and communities. This newsletter reports on Platypus activities in 2022 and sets out our plans and goals for the coming year. We thank you for your ongoing support and welcome your input as we continue our mission of helping our program participants forge a path out of poverty.

COVID-19 IN VIETNAM

Last year was an incredibly difficult one with significant disruption in most Platypus communities as a number of crises unfolded one after another. After initially being hailed as having one of the best COVID-19 responses in the world - a combination of strict border closures, quarantine and uncompromising lockdowns - which meant that the South-East Asian nation did not report a single Coronavirus-related death in the first six months of the pandemic, the mid-2021 outbreak of the more infectious and dangerous Delta strain

overran the country's hospitals and crippled Vietnam's preventative healthcare system for a twelve-month period. From June 2021 to February 2023 Vietnam reported more than 11.5 million COVID cases and 43,000 deaths. And while in the past 12 months more than 266 million vaccine doses have been administered among a population of 96 million. Yet despite all of this, we have witnessed the extraordinary courage and resilience of the people we serve as they face challenges, disarray and turmoil.



EDUCATION SCHOLARSHIPS

Scholarship Finalisation Day and Grandmother has accompanied her youngster as it was a huge day for both



We operate in 6 districts in 2 provinces in Vietnam and our in-country partners account to us each year via detailed information sheets, after which, lockdowns permitting, we meet with our students individually. Three quarters of our students are female, mainly due to past imbalances within the Viet education system. Our scholarships cover 11 ethnic groups, with 75% from minority groups. The age spread is excellent and our students are enrolled in over 40 schools. With access to education severely disrupted for two years due to COVID and with the poorest households in our mountainous districts the least likely to enjoy equitable access to the internet that would give them a chance to be part of an on-line learning community, the resilience, determination and drive of the 210 Platypus secondary school scholarships students in Quang Nam and Ha Giang was all the more remarkable. Achieving a 95% pass rate in 2022, such dedication is a wonderful testimony to the priority given to education in the regions. In September 2022, Bob Greer and Craig Yaxley visited Ha Giang, an incredibly

scenic and remote part of Vietnam, and met with Platypus scholarship students at their schools in 3 towns over 3 days – Meo Vac, Yen Minh and Quan Ba. Our students were predominantly from ethnic minority groups including H'mong and Dao to name a few, and it was wonderful to have an opportunity to see them in their traditional costumes and to get a chance to meet them and talk to them through an interpreter. "One thing that strikes you straight away, Craig observed, is that it is a very challenging place for the families to make a living where the main source of income is growing corn...Platypus goes a long way to helping the poorer families in this region to make ends meet to keep their children in school to complete year 12." Three things really stood out for Bob:

- With mountain kids you cannot rely on school grades to assess capability. Kids sometimes have long walks to school and many home duties, unlike their city fellows, many of whom lead relatively pampered lives with transport, extra lessons, laptops and other advantages laid on.
- Students take offers of higher education seriously and will seldom be distracted. They give it their best shot, always.
- It is vital we continue our annual student round trip in Vietnam rather than relying solely on our local partner the Vietnam Women's Union. The VWU is as straight as can be but eyeballing the youngsters and checking on their progress and welfare is important.

CHRIS REES MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP

Sung Thin Pha, through the generosity of Bob Rees and his motorcycle mates, is the Chris Rees Memorial Scholarship recipient undertaking a veterinary science degree at Hung Vuong University. Platypus has been supporting Pha, a delightful student from Quan Ba, since he was 14 years old. Without an initial Platypus secondary education scholarship, Pha would have been taken out of school at an early age to work on a farm to help support his family (including his brother who is autistic). And notwithstanding that the Vietnam Government provides free university tuition for ethnic minority students, Pha's family could not afford to pay university living expenses. Without further support he would likely have been headed for a sweatshop existence. Now in the fourth year of his veterinary science degree he is doing so well that he has already been offered a job in his home region upon graduation and is likely to be offered a government scholarship to undertake advanced training in Scandinavia or Israel. Pha is Hmong and he will not only be a leader in his community but will inspire youngsters from an ethnic minority that has faced difficulties for a couple of centuries.

Bob Greer catches up with Sung Thin Pha



SELF-HELP PROGRAMS

MICRO-BANKING

Introduced in 2014 the Platypus micro-banking scheme initially provided interest-free loans of AUD\$300-\$500 to women in poor communities creating opportunities for families to transition from poverty to a sustainable income. In 2022 it was again exciting to know that sixty beneficiaries were being supported to become entrepreneurs as they built up family finances to educate their children, obtain better health care and a higher standard of living. These women are hugely driven to care for their families, so there have been no loan defaults across the entire history of the scheme.

In 2023 the program is being extended through an anonymous and extraordinary donation of AUD\$100,000, provided on the sole condition it be "spent wisely". An initial forty, two-year interest-free loans of AUD\$750 have been approved in the Quang Binh district of Ha Giang province for pig farming, the purchase of cows, a clothing manufacture start-up and a range of other entrepreneurial initiatives. A further call for additional micro-banking proposals is being coordinated by the VWU and will be evaluated during the year.

GIFTS OF ANIMALS – "PASS THE PIG"

Many country folk are wary of lenders of money due to unscrupulous operators in the northern mountains. They also lack confidence in their ability to repay debt, so we gift a single sow to a household and watch the woman of the house become an entrepreneur using the proceeds from the sow's litters to diversify into all manner of beasts. In the mountains that is wealth. She then hands back one piglet to our local partners who gift it to someone else on the same terms. This is a gift that keeps on giving. The photo to the right is of a litter born to a lady near Quang Ba after she had lost all five of her first litter. These women do not quit, so she got advice and went again. This was a major crop for her with the prospect of two litters per year she now really knows what she is doing. Today she will have a cow and assorted animals and she'll be a marvelous role model for others. In time she will teach her kids and help them get set.



Near Quang Ba

RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS

From time to time we are asked by our in-country partners whether we can support a 'random act of kindness.' A few years back, KOTO approached us with a proposal to fund 5 disadvantaged minority women complete an introductory hospitality course with the potential to re-shape their lives. AUD\$1200 was found and the program began successfully. Second up, two battered wives were supported to complete a six-month course leading to employment and a leg out of poverty for the women and their children.

Most recently, in September 2022, the Vietnam Women’s Union approached Bob with a proposal to help an ethnic minority Tay deaf-mute lady, from Ha Giang province, who had been subjected to brutal attacks on two occasions, to lift her family off the bottom rung of poverty. With the gift of two sows and a covered, warm pen to house the beasties, and stipends for her two children to complete their schooling, the family is on its way to a new and better life.



IN-COUNTRY PARTNERS

In 2023, Platypus is continuing its work with our in-country partners, the Vietnam Women’s Union (VWU) and KOTO, supported by our trusted local experts and on the ground research.

VIETNAM WOMEN’S UNION

The VWU has been with us from the very beginning and when in country we are often accompanied by Nguyen Linh, the VWU International Director, or another senior representative. Established in 1931, the VWU has an impressive record in campaigning for women’s rights with particular emphasis on sexual health, combatting drug addiction and family violence, and promoting education. We have been impressed by the rigour of selection processes run by the VWU on our behalf and by the support provided to program participants. The VWU gets involved, monitoring, educating and solving problems. In just one such case, a Platypus family that had received a pig had suddenly lost all ten of the sow’s piglets. The VWU stepped in arranging support for the family as well as education on animal husbandry and health.



KOTO



Located in Hanoi, KOTO is a superb not-for-profit hospitality training restaurant for disadvantaged and at-risk youth and the country’s first legally recognised social enterprise offering vocational education, life skills and English language training. KOTO’s graduates are employed throughout the Vietnam hospitality industry as well as five-star hotels abroad. After having to suspend its activities during the height of the pandemic, KOTO is now up and running again

VIETNAM MOTORCYCLE TOURS

In partnership with Asian Lotus Travel, Platypus is proud to offer bi-annual Indochina motorcycle tours. The forthcoming November 2023 ride, our fourteenth, starts in Hanoi before heading out to the mountains of north Vietnam and finishes within a day to unwind on Cat Ba Island in Halong Bay. Along the way riders will experience magnificent vistas, unapparelled hospitality from the communities we visit, and great camaraderie as well as raising significant funds for our programs. This tour is now fully subscribed. Planning for our 2024 tours has commenced. Both will be suitable for qualified riders with a range of experience. We will also have room in a support vehicle for non-riders who enjoy a trip.



Enroute to Ba Be Lake1

PLATYPUS COCKTAIL PARTY

WEDNESDAY 10TH MAY 2023 6.30-9.00PM – HOWARD PARK WINES 35 HAY ST, SUBIACO WA 6008

Please join us for our annual fundraiser featuring Vietnamese delicacies from Bunn Mee, Premium wines from Burch Family Wines together with an auction and raffle. Tickets are \$125 pp. Contact Burch Family Wines on (08) 9235 2200 or email reception@hpw.com.au. And on the night please bid in our charity auction. There are hot laps in a Porsche, relaxing escapes in Margaret River and a magnificent painting by one of our long-time supporters, John Cullinane. You can catch John’s latest exhibition from 27th April at the Gallows Gallery in Mosman Park.

