

## **Volunteering at Don Bosco Đông Thuận - An Update after 6 Months**

Peter Hampshire, Vĩnh Long Province, Vietnam, March 2017

Volunteering from September 2017 to July 2018

Since my last update, I have a much better idea about what goes on in Đông Thuận. Simple things like remembering everybody's name and the community timetable have made a real difference. I'm more aware of what activities are taking place and where I can contribute. Furthermore, the Fathers, Brothers and Sisters (Salesians) are aware of my limitations, and have taken the care to help me understand more about the community. Having said this, my placement still has its ups and downs and is often challenging. But I feel lucky to live in this kind community and be frequently exposed to new experiences that are diverse and stimulating.

### **Inside the Community.**

After several months of community life I'm continually impressed by the way in which the Salesians engage and work with the young students. They go the extra mile when it comes to exercising works of charity towards them.

The boys are allocated one hour of sport every day from 4:30 - 5:30 pm, during which they have freedom to do any sport they wish and they generally choose to play football, basketball, volleyball, lift weights or go dancing. The Brothers participate very often and also the Fathers participate when they can. A couple of times I've even noticed the Director, Fr Hùng, running up the basketball court and scoring hoops during games (which is amazing considering he's 62 and holding his own against boys who are mostly aged 16 and 17). Fr Khá's nickname among the boys is 'Rambo' since he's got the biggest muscles and can lift the heaviest weights in the community. This is probably because he spends most of his day lifting large machinery in the workshops. And my personal favorite example of genuine participation is when Br Hảo set up a hip-hop dance group with about 10 boys in the few weeks before Christmas. On the feast day of the Immaculate Conception (December 8<sup>th</sup>), they all dyed their hair brown, wore matching outfits and performed an absolutely hilarious routine during the festival. Everyone was laughing and cheering throughout the show and the dancers (and of course Br Hảo) had huge grins on their faces. What surprised me most was that Br Hảo was (pretty much objectively) the best hip hop dancer, but he also blended in exactly as if he was one of the boys.



The hip-hop dance performance. Br Hảo is on the front row, second from the left.

The vast majority of the girls love dancing (sometimes some of the boys participate too) and the Sisters have arranged for a professional teacher to come into the community for about 3 days a week. He teaches them to dance but also designs routines to practice and perform. Sr Lan is always present for the classes, showing support and organizing the music. She was a very keen dancer when she was younger and she's very enthusiastic. She also uses her sewing classes at the school to design and create Vietnamese dress for the dancers. Sr Nhân also gets involved. She is an excellent cook, and makes a delicious sweet soup for the teacher after every class. The girls perform a cross between hip-hop and traditional Vietnamese dancing which results in some really entertaining routines. I can see they have a lot of fun whilst performing together.



The girls and boys performing on  
National Teachers' Day.

The boys and girls are assigned 45 minutes music practice from 10:45 - 11:30 am every Monday to Friday. Furthermore in students' free time, (6:45 pm - 7:15 pm during weekdays and with more free time on weekends) many keep practicing, which shows how much they enjoy it. The Salesians teach the students how to play instruments and also organize bands and orchestras for the festivals. The common instruments played include the bamboo flute, harmonica, guitar, ukulele and box drum. Br Nam is notoriously enthusiastic and plays a wide variety of instruments. These include some really obscure ones like the Biwa and the Pan flute. He seems to have organized a different band/orchestra to play a different song almost every other week and regularly participates in these performances.



Br Nam playing the Xylophone in a festival leading up to the Lunar New Year.

We have some exciting upcoming events in the community. In April, the Salesian community Bến Cát will visit Đông Thuận for a football, basketball and volleyball match. Furthermore in May our community will go to Cambodia for several days to visit the Don Bosco school in Sihanouk Ville to celebrate the feast of Mary Help of Christians. We will also have opportunity to visit some of the tourist sites, such as the Angkor Wat temple, the largest religious monument in the world!

The fact that the Salesians embrace and encourage the students' interests so directly results in very strong friendships and support between the teachers and students. Every day I see the Salesians sitting among students and chatting to them as equals, particularly during break time at school. This is sometimes in groups but oftentimes one on one. They also laugh a lot together whilst playing sport or music. In addition, the Salesians also attend the students' parties and regularly sing in the Karaoke, which the students love. The boys and girls welcome the involvement of the Salesians in their activities.



Sr Lan (left) and Sr Nhân (center)  
partying with the girls in a restaurant.

### **Outside the Community.**

The Director, Fr Hùng, has organized Đông Thuận to be a sort of youth center for young children (age about 10-15) from a local school.

Roughly 100 students use the sports pitches and other facilities, or just hang out from 3:30 - 4:30 pm every day. The school children have their own table tennis and table football tables on site. Some of the most regular students are taught the saxophone and trombone by Đông Thuận's brass band teacher, Mr Sang, during the Đông Thuận school day. Fr Sơn is given responsibility for these students whilst they are within the grounds and he almost always gets involved. This week I saw him flying a kite with some of the students which looked like a lot of fun. Fr Sơn sometimes takes them on fun day trips around the South of Vietnam and even took the 10 of the most regular students on a short holiday to Đà Lạt (one of Vietnam's naturally beautiful tourist areas) during Tết holiday.





Fr Sơn (far left) with local school students on a day trip to the Đầm Sen waterpark (Ho Chi Minh City) this month.

In actual fact the relationship is two sided: the local school students have opportunity to give back to the community. They frequently turn up and perform in Đông Thuận's music festivals and some play the instruments they learnt from Mr Sang. I also remember that some of the most regular local school students attended the funeral of the mother of one of the Fathers in the community last December. We set off from Đông Thuận at midnight and they travelled with us by bus to the Father's hometown and back for mass. The total journey time was over 8 hours that day.



Local school children and Fr Sơn (top right) performing in a festival for the feast day of the Immaculate Conception.

In addition, strong friendships exist between some of the Đông Thuận students and the local school students. My friend in Đông Thuận called Hoàn has invited me three times to race his friend, Thục, from the local school. Hoàn knows I am a keen runner and that I regularly go jogging in my free time. But it turned out that Thục is prodigiously quick (at least that's my excuse) and I've been thrashed three times on the trot, much to Hoàn's amusement.

There is a healthy relationship between the members of Đông Thuận and the local people. The Salesians are aware of the needs and value of the young people in Vĩnh Long. The young people are kept busy and joyful with many exciting activities and they contribute to the prosperity of the community.

### **A New Teaching Experience.**

Funnily enough, a few months ago Fr Sơn mentioned five girls (aged 15) and one boy (aged 11) from the local school wanted to have English sessions with me. We arranged to meet together every Friday for one hour.

To be honest in the first month or two, I found these classes really difficult to prepare for. I didn't quite know what sort of activities would be most valuable/enjoyable for the students.

The girls study and are examined in English at school so speak pretty well already. But unfortunately the young boy hardly speaks any English at all! I don't have the experience (or the Vietnamese) to do any sort of formal teaching of grammar or anything like that. Instead, I have focused on teaching about English culture. We have had sessions on text language and also English food and music. The weirdest one was when I decided (for reasons still unclear to me) that we were going to have a Yoga class and I had them all doing toe touches and cat dips outside.

However, despite the challenges, I have made friends with them all and we sometimes play table tennis after the session. We often have a laugh together, so I enjoy the hour. They are a kind and grateful bunch. It was my birthday recently and they planned a surprise party for me with games, presents and cake that week.



A photograph from my surprise birthday party.

### **A New Cultural Experience.**

Last month, there was a huge celebration in Vietnam for Lunar New Year. This is known as Tết. Many people in the community went back to their hometown for two and a half weeks to see their extended families. I hadn't heard of Tết before I came to Vietnam, but people have described it to me as my Christmas, New Year and birthday all rolled into one. Needless to say, everyone was very excited.





Some boys cooking Tết cake for their families just before going home.

I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to share the Tết celebrations with Br Nam, who graciously offered to let me join him during his holiday. Br Nam speaks English very well and we had fun during our adventures.

Of course we spent a good deal of the time partying with his family in his hometown and we had several days visiting tourist sites (the Củ Chi tunnels and Suối Tiên Theme Park) and also some of Br Nam's old friends.

On one occasion, we took a 2 hour detour whilst travelling to visit and express support for the mother of one of his old classmates (the classmate was studying abroad and was not able to come back to Vietnam for Tết). We had a busy schedule, so only stayed at the mother's home for about 5 minutes and literally gave out peanuts as a gift before leaving. However, Br Nam's overwhelming opinion was that it was time well spent and was a very important part of the period away from the community.

Br Nam planned for us to spend almost half our time visiting the families of the students in Đồng Thuận. He mentioned to me that he did the same last year with the Director, Fr Hùng. We travelled to many different places in the South of Vietnam to see students: Bình Phước, Đồng Nai, Cần Thơ and Bến Tre. We visited about 20 different families in total and we slept at the homes of students on 2 separate occasions. At each house we gave the family small gifts,

passed on our new year wishes and prayed together (and of course took a nice picture- Br Nam is an avid photographer as well as musician). At the homes we were given drinks or shared a meal with the family. Some parents invited us to parties with their whole extended families or on short trips to see the local beauty spots, which was awesome!



Lunch at the house of a student in Đồng Nai.

Br Nam was in his element meeting all these different people. He's very sociable, and many times I could see the parents of the students laughing at his jokes and generally getting on with him well.

It was mostly enjoyable work but very exhausting! We were travelling by motorbike for up to 12 hours per day and had to get up very early in order to make it to all the different places. On top of that it was a constant cycle of meeting new people and trying to give a good impression before racing off to the next home. Although it was tiring for me, Br Nam must have been absolutely shattered, since he did all the driving and energetically chatted to parents in Vietnamese. In contrast, all I could really do was keep smiling and enjoying the food. Br Nam managed to fall asleep on one day in a 4D cinema whilst being blown by fans and soaked in water! However, he was up for a laugh from beginning to end and never lost his enthusiasm.

Tết was undoubtedly the busiest and among the most valuable two weeks of my placement so far. I really appreciate the fact that Br Nam welcomed me into his activities and into this part of the Vietnamese Culture.

Overall, living in Đồng Thuận is really interesting. Just by being here and trying to get involved, I am learning about the Salesians' approach to tackling issues of poverty. I can see how they carry out their mission to serve the young and the poor and the huge effect it has on the students and the local community. It is a new and action-packed cultural environment for me and I have been able to try many different types of work and activities and reflect on their importance. I will be able to take these experiences with me into my future and so I'm grateful to be here.

You are very welcome to make a donation to the community. The details are below. Any amount is greatly appreciated. Just say: "For the Director at Don Bosco Dong Thuan to use as he thinks best".

**Receiving account Holder:**

Name of payee: Le Tran Thanh Huynh

1<sup>st</sup> line of address: 03 Hoang Thai Hieu (ACB Vinh Long Branch).

Town/City: Vinh Long City. County/State: Vinh Long Province. Country: Viet Nam.

**Bank:**

Name: Asia Commercial Joint Stock Bank (ACB)

BIC/Swift Code: ASCBVNVX

IBAN/Account Number: 202873549