

Building homes and friendships: Habitat for Humanity in Vietnam

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Louisa gets better acquainted with the family.

Aren't you too old for that? That was a question posed to three sisters as we embarked on a trip to Vietnam in 2013 with Habitat for Humanity to help improve living conditions for low-income families.

We were ages 62, 60 and 52—hadn't even thought about the age thing! Good thing we hadn't because age doesn't matter. This was our fourth trip travelling abroad with Habitat. All you need is a good attitude (anything can happen), a desire to learn, a sense of humour and a willingness to help and learn about a new culture from the people that live there. Oh, and a few clothes, work gloves, bug spray and your passport.

We all come from different backgrounds. Louisa works in

public health, Kathryn in property management, and I had just retired a few years earlier in 1990. Having zero construction skills, I started volunteering in the Calgary job sites about 10 years ago, and discovered the Habitat International building program that spans 93 countries, and has built more than 800,000 homes worldwide.

Now, none of us three sisters had a clue about how you'd build a home in Vietnam, but we loved to travel, we got along well and thought, why not? The three of us, along with five



Homeward commute by barge.



Building forms for the walls.

other siblings had grown up in Zambia, Africa where our parents lived for 20-some years. Perhaps this was why we thought: why not see the world and lend a hand at the same time? We haven't looked back since!

Our trip to Vietnam was shared with 14 other people

from all over the world: Canada, USA, Australia and the UK (six Canadians in the group, four from Calgary). We met up in Ho Chi Minh City. We were bombarded with the sights and sounds of a million motorbikes, sidewalk shops, markets, bicycles, monks, street vendors, and tiny back alleys,



Playing with children at break time.



Everyone pitches in.

home to shops smaller than your walk-in closet, filled with exotic and colourful items that we thought we just had to have! We ate strange and wonderful food, sampled Vietnamese coffee, couldn't speak the language, and met the gentlest and kindest people—and this was just our first night.

The next day we travelled to Rach Gia in south Vietnam to work on a Habitat project on the Mekong River, where Habitat Vietnam partners with low-income families build, repair or upgrade their homes. The families contribute "sweat equity" or their own labour and typically reduce the costs through micro-finance loans. International volunteers provide a hand up by building alongside the families.

A modest clean hotel was our base for us for the next ten days. We travelled to and from the worksite along the Mekong River by barge, fascinated to see giant barges laden with goods, water taxis, the occasional swimmer and people doing their laundry—all part of life along this famous river.

Our team was divided amongst three houses, for which we built new foundations. We would then move the homes on to the new foundations, providing them with a slab floor, a huge improvement that would help keep the inhabitants dry during the country's torrential rains. Sounds simple, and it was: no

cement or concrete mixers, just good old hand mixing, hauling buckets of concrete and cement by hand through the narrow gap between the houses, digging out trenches for the foundation wall—by hand, shovels and buckets—bending rebar by hand (using nothing but another piece of rebar), making wire forms for the concrete, and more mixing, mixing, mixing of sand, cement, mortar and concrete.



Traffic in Ho Chi Minh City.



The walls go up.

knife and fresh fruit picked up from the market on our way to the barge in the morning: mangosteen, rambutans, dragon fruit, the best little oranges you've ever tasted, and sometimes delicious little cakes baked by the families—treats you've never imagined—worth the trip for the food alone!

We sometimes reached a house by canoe, on which villagers had prepared our lunch, most of which we couldn't identify. But the food was always fresh, delicious and all locally sourced and grown—I think the local food craze in our part of the world started in Vietnam many years ago. A daily delicacy we all came to love was a plant we grow in our gardens in Calgary—morning glory leaves—sautéed, in soups and stews. Yum! This plant grows wild and is full of all those good things we need.

Time after lunch was for resting, visiting with the families and playing with the children. No matter what country you travel to and what language you speak, or don't, the appearance of a Frisbee, a skipping rope or a ball works magic. The children were shy initially, but by the time we'd left, they had us giggling, laughing, taking their photos and playing games we'd forgotten how to play!

Work on a Habitat build generally continues for three or four days, then we take a bit of a break to visit some of the local schools, clinics or other community facilities used by locals in their daily lives. This gives us a better understanding of the challenges faced in some developing countries and how people manage with few resources. We were constantly amazed at how they find solutions to their everyday challenges with such limited resources: another lesson learned.

One of the highlights of the trip was a school visit—you'd have thought we were royalty by the greeting we received. It wasn't long before we had the kids skipping, playing Hokey Pokey, charades and ball sports, while disrupting the whole school (we did see the head teacher smile a few times). Beautiful children—despite extreme poverty, parents take great care to dress children as well as they are able in clean clothes. It was easy to see they were well loved and cared for.

After a full week of work and a school visit we had a bit of a break and headed off to a little island off the coast for some R&R—beaches, sun, quaint little town, a great coffee shop, more great food, and even a bit of Wi-Fi. Some of us indulged in a massage on the beach—so inexpensive, it was almost free.

A welcome break, then back to work on Monday, where we were almost finished the floors and had to prepare ourselves for moving the house on to the new foundation. This involved waiting for the crane, or some imagined "thing," to move the house . . . wondering how it would get here on the barge (we couldn't see any major roads anywhere) . . . just wondering: what was the plan?

As usual, our Western way of wondering wasn't going to make it happen. Our job site supervisor had a plan, we just had no idea what it was: wait, another lesson about to be learned.

They say it takes a village to raise a child. Take that another direction: it takes a village to move a house! That's exactly what happened. Our team, along with numerous locals, just picked up the straw /wood/thatch house and, metre-by-metre, moved it on to the



Everything is transported by barge.



The three sisters (left to right), Peggy, Louisa and Kathryn.

new foundation. Who would have thought it possible? Not us! But another great lesson: if you don't have what you need, use what you have and it all works out.

The houses moved, the job complete, the families are presented with a small house-warming gift from the team—electric fans—a welcome addition in the heat. A few other team members went shopping for fans earlier in the week on the back of a motorbike—very safe they said, but you're on the road with thousands of other motorbikes that all seem to know exactly where they're going and always faster than you: no helmets, traffic lights a mere suggestion and no right of way for pedestrians even on crosswalks. We found it best not to look—just hang on!

A wonderful dedication ceremony ends the work. We leave knowing we did make a small difference to three families: they will have a solid, dry foundation to weather the rainy seasons. We will have lasting memories of the wonderful people we met and worked with in a country we knew little about, but where we learned much.

Once the work is done, most Habitat team participants take the opportunity to visit other parts of the country—since you're there, so far away, what a shame not to. Not enough space or time to tell about those

few days, but Hanoi, Hoi An, Ha Long Bay (a World Heritage Site), temples and pagodas, floating villages, water puppets, Cambodia . . . The list is endless, the place is magical, the people wonderful . . . but that's another story, for another time.

Over the past six years, the three of us sisters, along with my husband Rick and many other team members, have been shopping for fans earlier in the week on the back of a motorbike to Zambia and Vietnam. Friendships made on these trips have become close for some of us. It's the best way to travel, learn and have fun.

Volunteers each pay their own way, plus airfare, plus a donation to the local Habitat affiliate. These costs generally range from \$3000 to \$5000, depending on the location of the build. A charitable receipt for these costs is issued to each participant. We're just back again from Zambia, where I have been privileged to lead teams, including a core group of Calgary volunteers, for the past five years. That this same core group returns again and again says a lot about these programs and the richness we come home with. To learn more about this program, or to become involved in your own Habitat group here in Calgary, visit www.habitatsouthernab.ca www.habitatglobalvillage.ca



Life along the Mekong River.