



The Right Time for a Reunion

By Tricia Houston on behalf of Operation Reunite and Photos by Anh Đào Kolbe

Operation Reunite Vietnamese Adoptee Tour, April Reunion in Vietnam

After a year of planning the reunion of first generation Vietnamese adoptees, Operation Reunite attendees gathered in Ho Chí Minh City, Vietnam, April 1-16. The group returned to remember the fall of Sài Gòn and the historic Operation Babylift, but most importantly to return to our common homeland together. The two weeks were filled with adoptees from America, Canada, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Norway, Sweden and Australia sharing their stories, finding their personal histories, and creating bonds with each other that will last a lifetime.

At one of the initial gatherings of a pool party at the Rex Hotel, many adoptees were in awe of how many were present. For many to travel from where they are now living and return to their motherland of Vietnam at this specific time was an overwhelming sight to witness. Ralf Lofstad is an adoptee from Norway who

had never been to an adoptee event of this great importance. Some adoptees expressed, "I didn't know there were so many of us." There were 40 adoptees who participated in the reunion. It was a humbling experience for all!

The reunion activities brought everyone together. Operation Reunite and Project Return II (led by Le-Thanh and Safi Dub) planned activities such as a VAD to be Back Dinner at the Quán Ngon restaurant, pool party at the Rex Hotel, a day at the local Dam Sen Park, tours of Ho Chí Minh City led by Son Michael Pham (www.kidswithoutborders.com), a bus tour of District 5 and 7 sponsored by Tammy Nguyen Lee (www.thebabylift.com), and an emotional memorial at the C-5A crash site on April 4 that included adoptees who were survivors of the tragic day. The memorial was combined with Sister Susan McDonald's Motherland Tour.

There were volunteering opportunities at Go

Vap Orphanage arranged by Kim Nguyen Browne, who is an adoptee who regularly returns from London to her own orphanage to volunteer. Many adoptees volunteered their time, such as Peter Hendy and Joshua Lang who spent a couple of days painting a room and fixing a fan that was much needed in one of the bedrooms, and Kevin Maes and Mike Frailey who fed tiny babies. Tia McConnell, a registered nurse in America, used her expertise in the baby ward. Tricia Houston, who is a teacher in America, had the privilege to teach an English lesson to teenage children who were mentally challenged.

One Saturday, Browne arranged a care day that included a tour of the Go Vap orphanage, taking 40 kids along with their caretakers to a western bowling center in Ho Chí Minh City, and a luncheon at the Majestic Hotel. Operation Reunite and Browne's non-profit Vietnam Volunteer Network (www.vietnam-volunteernetwork.com) donated supplies to the



Photos by Anh Đào Kolbe

NINE ADOPTEES from around the world told their stories on a local Vietnamese reunion TV show in hopes of locating birth family. Top right, on April 4, adoptees attended a memorial service for the Galaxy C5-A plane crash victims. Bottom right, Trista Goldberg takes a DNA sample from a Vietnamese local.

orphanage along with arranging for the care day. It was a day that adoptees, who were once orphans themselves, cared for orphans. The adoptees instantly recognized the good hearted character in each child. Along with that special care day, there were a group of adoptees who delivered donations that were raised by Operation Reunite and the Vietnam Volunteer Network to an orphanage in Nha Trang.

An important event was the launch of the DNA Database in association with DNA Family Tree, which is a project that Trista Goldberg invested many hours in launching. Adoptees were given a DNA kit for them to take home and complete in privacy. The database was established to discover if there are any adoptees who are related to each other, including siblings and cousins.

As the group gained media attention during the stay with an appearance on a Vietnamese TV show and interviews in local newspapers, the project reached birth mothers in Vietnam. We were able to sample a handful of birth mothers to join our database but continue to seek funding for the hundreds of people who called in to reconnect with their kin.

For those interested in participating in the DNA project, contact Trista Goldberg by visit-

ing www.operationreunite.org or send her an e-mail at tristagoldberg@earthlink.net.

The reunion was designed for the adoptees to come together with an open door policy for travel and personal exploration of searching for history. The reunion was not focused on searches, but some adoptees searched on their own for their unanswered questions in their past. Mike, an adoptee from America, went to Đà Nẵng to find his orphanage. He found his real name and birth date among the list of Vietnamese names. Thuy Nguyen Ryan, an adoptee from America, looked in a registry at her orphanage and found her real birth year. She happily discovered that she might be two years younger than she once believed. Many questions were answered for them in their journeys.

Tia searched for the hospital where she was born in Đà Nẵng. A nun took her to the site that was set to be demolished soon. The security guard agreed to let them through to walk in the abandoned building. As Tia, her husband and the nun looked around, Tia whispered to her husband to pick up something so she could keep it. The souvenir was a loose tile piece. Now she has a piece of where she was born.

Joakim Kronqvist, an adoptee from Sweden,

who came to this reunion with no expectations, was surprised by what could happen on his journey. Joakim discovered information about himself in a registry in Đà Nẵng. Later in the reunion, he put pieces of a picture together. He brought a photo of a nun holding him when he was a baby at the Sacred Heart Orphanage. Joakim spent a couple of days searching for the nun without expecting to find her. He found her on his last day in Ho Chi Minh City. Sister Xuan Thanh came home from a holiday in the states to find that the baby she once held was all grown up.

From this reunion, stories emerged that should be told. There were two adoptees making that a reality. Anh Đào Kolbe, who is a first generation Vietnamese adoptee and professional photographer, attended the reunion to document her peers in a portrait series. She explained her photos series, "Misplaced Baggage" is the title of an ongoing black and white portrait series showcasing those Vietnamese adoptees who attended the first reunion hosted by Operation Reunite and Project Return II: Out of the Ashes in Sài Gòn, Vietnam, April 2010. This collection of photographs and interviews documents 47 adoptees who returned to their motherland to celebrate their lives 35 years after the fall of Sài Gòn. For a preview of the portrait series, visit www.vadportraits.wordpress.com.



Photos by Anh Đào Kolbe

A LOCAL VIETNAMESE NEWSPAPER, Tuoi Tre, hosts a press conference for locals looking for their lost children.

Another project resulted from this reunion was a series of interviews. Dominic Golding, a babylift adoptee, documented many of the events on this reunion and interviewed the participants, which can be seen on YouTube. He believes that the reunion was a start of identifying the adoptees as adults and telling their own stories.

He continues to explain, “The Operation Reunite Reunion is a pivotal moment in Vietnamese adoptee history. Other reunions have been organized on our behalf — as seen in ‘Precious Cargo’ tells the story of several of these children, now 20-something Americans, as they head back on a reunion trip to Vietnam sponsored by Holt International Children’s Services, which ran one of the many Vietnamese orphanages’ and Sancta Maria 2005/2010 reunions. Both go some way giving a space for adoptees to return, but they also serve the aims and objectives of the principle organizers of benevolence. The Operation Reunite Vietnamese Adoptee Tour is what I call soft activism; where adoptees take charge of our history and narratives and journey back

to Vietnam. I wanted to document this as an adoptee, as an insider as opposed to an objective observer/mainstream media reporter. As an artist and performer of my own adoption experiences, documenting this trip it was also important to show we cannot be defined as child victims of war. We are adults who share a unique social/familial ‘experiment’ intercountry adoption and Operation Babylift.”

We may have had no expectations for this reunion but came away with so much more. Now we have personal documentation of the reunion from adoptees assembling professional projects, the launch of a DNA database, answers from our personal searches, and lifelong friendships among Vietnamese adoptees. It was the right time to have this event. This reunion was for many the first step of a journey to discover their birth country. It was the beginning of a larger community of Operation Reunite that reaches internationally with a common thread that we have Vietnam as a homeland.

Tricia Houston is an Operation Babylift

adoptee. She was adopted by a family in Orange County, Calif., where she continues to reside. Presently she is a writer and a elementary school teacher. She writes for Operation Reunite’s international Vietnamese adoptee blog <http://vietnameseadoptees.com>. Along with her writing, Houston is the secretary of Operation Reunite and part of the planning committee for the adoptee reunion.

Born outside Sài Gòn, Vietnam, Anh Đào Kolbe came to the United States via New York City in 1972. She left two years later and grew up with her Greek and German parents in the Middle Eastern countries of Qatar and Oman. During April 2010, she returned to her motherland to document the reunion of 47 fellow Vietnamese adoptees attending the first adult reunion hosted by Operation Reunite and Project Return II: Out of the Ashes. This collection of photographs and interviews is an ongoing series titled “Misplaced Baggage,” to be published into a book and traveling exhibit. For a preview of the portrait series, visit www.vadportraits.wordpress.com. For a sample of her portfolio, visit www.adkfoto.com.