Vietnam mission proves as rewarding for teachers as local participants

By Matthew Coleman

When Lauri Nelson first heard that the Global Foundation for Children with Hearing Loss was making trips to Vietnam to provide hearing aid support and education to teachers, parents, and children, she immediately realized what an excellent opportunity it would be. It was the perfect chance for her graduate students to gain an understanding of what was going on in hearing care in other parts of the world.

Nelson, an Associate Professor in Utah State University’s Department of Communicative Disorders and Deaf Education, immediately contacted Paige Stringer, the Founder and Executive Director of the foundation, and after four of her eager graduate students raised money to fund the trip, they embarked on their journey to Vietnam this past summer.

What began as a trip with educational aspirations transformed into an even more incredible and rewarding experience for Nelson and her students.

“One of the things that just touched me so much about being there was the kindness and genuineness of the people in expressing how grateful they were for us to be there. Also, how hungry they are for knowledge because they already know a lot, yet they realize there is so much more that they need to know in order to really make a functional difference for the kids to learn how to use spoken language.”

The Global Foundation for Children with Hearing Loss provides educational research, hearing technology, and support services to deaf and hard-of-hearing children throughout the world. Nelson and her students took part in the organization’s Vietnam Deaf Education Program.

“The thing about the Vietnamese is that Vietnam, even though it’s still considered a developing country, still has support systems,” said Stringer. “So, there is an urge to be able to provide services to children who are deaf and hard of hearing, with the additional support of qualified teachers, more access to hearing aids, and hearing screening.”

The program provides teacher training, hearing aid distribution, and other audiology support to 35 participating schools for the deaf across 20 Vietnam provinces.

Because audiology is in its early stages of development there and universities currently do not offer a master’s program in speech, hearing sciences, or deaf education, children with hearing problems are left in a difficult situation. Yet the program has already helped 900 children with hearing loss.

“All the knowledge we have provided has been like a sponge,” said Stringer. “It’s been wonderful to watch how the people are actually acting on the knowledge that they are getting. We are not just teaching them and giving out hearing aids, but this is actually a multi-disciplinary effort covering audiology, speech, early intervention, and auditory/verbal education to really help kids.”

Liz Hankins was one of the four students who participated in the trips. Her experiences echo those of Nelson and Stringer. “I was amazed at how excited the Vietnamese people were to learn and grow,” she said. “They were some of the kindest, most generous, hard-working people I have ever met. They came early every day and were sad when the day was over. They took notes vigorously and asked some deep, thought-provoking questions.”

Above all, Hankins said she will always remember the incredible dedication that parents demonstrated to provide their children with a better life. “Most of the parents traveled for hours on small mopeds just to attend a few seminars. They were excited to learn about what they could do for their child to make sure the hearing loss was diagnosed properly, to ensure the hearing aids were programmed appropriately, and to make sure that they were doing everything they could to help their child develop listening and spoken language,” she said.

“They were excited to hear that their precious child who had been diagnosed with a hearing loss still had a future ahead of them, and by learning to listen and talk...
through the use of hearing aids, they could be an active and contributing member of society.”

The next Vietnam Deaf Education Program mission is slated to take place Feb. 27 through Mar. 15, with another trip in the works for next summer. Prior to next year’s trip, Nelson will be focusing some of her teaching on the specific needs of the Vietnam program so that her students can take on projects connected to accomplishing the overall goal of the foundation. Recalling a particular experience from the summer program, Nelson said she hopes her students will have the opportunity to travel to Vietnam every summer.

“One day we had completed teacher training throughout the day and the parent program training in the evening, and at the end of one of the parent programs, I walked out of the room and one of the parents walked out at the same time with her little girl.

“The language barrier made it hard for dialogue because there was no interpreter around at the time. But she came over and she took my hand and she knew how to say thank you. And so she took my hand and said thank you, and then it was as if she wanted to say more, but the communication barrier wouldn’t let her, so she paused and then said thank you again. And, I responded by thanking her. That was a connection that really touches you right to the core.”

Graduate student Liz Hankins leads an audiology program breakout session.