

“Operation Smile” Dental Mission 2006 to Viet Nam – *Journey to the past and present*
By My-Linh Tran

Dear friends,

I had the privilege to be a part of an Operation Smile team of thirty volunteer dental professionals who provided dental care to children in three regions of Viet Nam (Ha Noi, Thai Binh and Hue). I am grateful to Operation Smile for the opportunity, to those who supported us volunteers with donations and prayers, and to my family who had allowed me to have this life-changing experience. I came to see a Viet Nam different from my memories of Viet Nam sixteen years ago. The country was both, so strange yet also so familiar.

We arrived there in March, when the hot season had not yet begun. However, the weather was so humid that 76°F seemed like 100°F. My team was in Hue, the central part of Viet Nam. Each day, we divided ourselves among four work sites: the clinic and three mobile dental vans that went to three elementary schools in the outskirts of Hue.

On the days that we treated children at the elementary schools, we parked our van on school grounds. Our team consisted of two dentists and two volunteer assistants. We started the day with oral hygiene instructions. Each child received a dental care kit with tooth brush, tooth paste and floss (some of them told me that their whole family had only one toothbrush). They then lined up to await their turn for treatment.

I will never forget my first patient, a seven-year old little girl. She had an infected tooth that had to be removed. She never flinched, teared up nor even made a small cry during the delivery of local anesthesia. Shocked, I asked “Does it hurt?” She nodded calmly: “Yes”. After I finished extracting her tooth and gave her a small used stuff animal, all the kids in line would jump up and raise their hands excitedly: “pick me, pick me, I want to be next”. These kids had faced so much hardship. To them, having access to dental care was a privilege. Every day, our van treated about 120 children. Operating within three regions of Vietnam, the whole team had treated about 2300 children.

My heart aches whenever I think about them. They remind me of how blessed my life is. Looking into their happy smiling faces -- so innocent and untainted by hardship of life -- for a moment I thought I had seen myself twenty some years ago. Underneath those bright smiles, I wonder, what would their dreams be? I asked them, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Some responded with a shy smile. A little girl said, “I want to be a doctor just like you”. I realized that we not only treated dental conditions but inspired and brought hope to these children so that they may come to believe that dreams are possible. They in turn inspired me to be a better person, to appreciate all the things I am blessed with in life, even the simplest thing as an ice-cold bottle of water. I am privileged and honored to be a small part of their lives.