

EVERYDAY neighbors

Veterans Build on Future With Vietnam Libraries

And they shall turn their dollars into libraries and they will study war no more

By Dennis McLaughlin



—PHOTOGRAPHS BY LARRY GOLDSMITH

In December, members of the Library of Vietnam Project were guests of honor at the Kent Converse-Kinsley Rotary Unification Library in Kien Giang Province, at left. The Worley-Engelken Library in Pakxe, Champasak Province, Laos, top, shows the architecture of all the libraries. Above, Ngat Dao visits with some of the students at the Bac Giang School for Blind Children near Hanoi.

Winning the hearts and minds of old adversaries doesn't have to cost a billion dollars. It doesn't take a lot of top brass, either, or layers of bureaucracy to spread some American goodwill around a country where more than a million U.S. troops once fought.

To prove that point a small group of Vietnam veterans from the Midwest—smaller than a rifle squad, and most of them enlistees and draftees back when they served in America's longest war—have built 15 libraries for the Vietnamese since 2000. They also have three libraries finished or under construction in Laos, two in Cambodia, and, now, several on the drawing board in Afghanistan. So far, they have spent barely half a million dollars, and later this year when all 20 libraries in Southeast Asia are open and operating, the overall expenditure will not have topped \$700,000. That's right: \$35,000 for each two-story standard design facility.

Walking the point on this mission, officially known as the Library of Vietnam Project, is Francis Theusch, an attorney and title company owner in Milwaukee. Although he practiced law in Chicago for 17 years and even ran for a congressional seat in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1984 (a race he lost), Theusch doesn't really think of himself as a lawyer. Instead, he sees himself as the dairy farmer he was in his youth and as a specialist 4th class soldier in Echo Company of the 11th Brigade of the Army's renowned Americal Division. The title company he now runs provides him a living and the flexibility to devote time to the library program.

Actually, it is Theusch's cow-milking skills that have garnered credibility for the project and put him in good stead with Vietnamese farmers.

"Most of the libraries we build are in rural areas," he says. More than a few times he has overcome

local resistance and initial skepticism by grabbing a bucket, rolling up his sleeves and discussing the matter with community leaders while milking cows.

Most of the money for the libraries is raised by a handful of veterans who reach into their own pockets and rely on a few corporate sponsors.

"We haven't hired a professional fundraiser," Theusch says. The group wants to be sure that fundraising activities and administration costs don't outstrip the efficiencies it enjoys. "But we welcome all the support we can get."

Program origins

Like many who serve in America's military operations, Theusch's wartime experience in Vietnam in 1969 and 1970 left an indelible imprint on his psyche. When he returned to the states he entered college and eventually earned a law degree. Later, he went back to school for a master's degree in military studies focusing on Russian and German military history.

In 1999 as negotiations between the United States and Vietnam were under way to normalize trade relations by mid-2000, Theusch's interest was piqued. He wanted to see firsthand what was happening in this country that had been engaged for the better part of a century in wars with China, Japan, Cambodia, France and the United States.

He booked round-the-world passage on a special Millennium tour leaving Chicago in December 1999 with stops at various world capitals, including Hanoi.

When he got to Vietnam, Theusch, like all visitors, was assigned an official tour guide, Tran Dinh Song. It turns out that Tran had been an officer in the South Vietnamese (ARVN) Air Force, but when the North Vietnamese

took over the country he was sent to a "re-education" camp. Worse things could have happened considering he was an enemy officer. Instead, he was morphed into a tour guide. Given their shared military background, Tran and Theusch formed a bond beyond tourist and guide.

As they talked about their war experiences, the conversation turned to peace park memorials dedicated to Vietnamese civilians killed in war. Theusch wanted to get involved. But Tran convinced him that American veterans would be doing a greater service by providing the Vietnamese people with something that would help them develop their future. Libraries came to mind.



—PHOTOGRAPH BY LARRY GOLDSMITH

Kent Converse attended a graduation party at the Le-Ditzel Library in Ho Chi Minh City for Ngat Dao, left, and Nguyen Thi Trang. Converse, a Garfield, Kan., farmer, put both women through college.

the involvement of Tran Dinh Song, whose official occupation still remains tourist guide. Tran's tireless work has been responsible for the rapid approval, planning and construction process for each library, but he has yet to draw a single penny (or dong) in compensation.

"He is our in-country representative and my first Vietnamese friend," says Theusch. "He has selflessly donated time and talents to this project since its inception in 1999."

Efficiency is job one

Each library conforms to a standard two-story design. There is a distinctive roofline, and hand-capped access ramps wind around to the upper floor balcony. The first floor houses an open study, meeting and assembly area, while the second floor contains books, computers and files. There is method to these design features. Many Vietnamese lost limbs and suffered other immobilizing injuries during the war so they need the special access. Also the annual monsoons are always a threat to flood the region, so the books and perishables are shelved upstairs.

But there is another reason for the standardized design. "The distinctive look is unique and provides an architectural signature to our libraries," says Theusch. "When the Vietnamese and Laotians enter a library anywhere in their country, they know they are in a friendly place, and this recognition is essential to our larger vision of reconciliation, cooperation and peace."

"The Vietnamese cherish education and understand its vital role as they journey into the future of a shrinking world," says Theusch. The idea so enthralled him that he immediately cashed in the remaining flight and lodging vouchers for his trip.

With the travel cash in hand, Theusch launched something special of his own—the Library of Vietnam Project. He maintains the project could never have evolved without

For more information about the Library of Vietnam Project, visit the Web site at www.libraryofvietnam.org. Dennis McLaughlin is the managing editor for *American Life & Traditions*. Visit our Web site at www.AmericanLife-Traditions.com.

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Pilot builds on crash site

A farm in the great expanse of western Kansas could be the perfect place for a helicopter pilot to forget about his wartime experience of being shot down in Vietnam. But that's not the way Kent Converse sees it. Garfield, Kan., near Great Bend, is where Converse has spent most of his life, and as a farmer it's in his blood to grow things.

So instead of retreating from what might be a bad memory, Converse has embraced the nation he fought and is cultivating a bond between Americans and Vietnamese through his involvement in the Library of Vietnam Project.

"Kent Converse is a book in himself," says Francis Theusch, the founder and chairman of the project. "He personally assembled the funding and construction of the Unification Library in Kien Giang Province."

Kien Giang is in the Mekong Delta region where some of the war's fiercest battles erupted, and the Unification Library was built near the site where Converse and his crew crashed after taking ground fire.

Building libraries, however, is not the only thing Converse has done for the Vietnamese. Last December he attended the college graduation of his two "adopted" Vietnamese daughters in Ho Chi Minh City. Converse, who played center on the University of Kansas football team during the Gayle Sayers era, paid the tuition for both Ngat Dao and Nguyen Thi Trang. After the commencement ceremonies, Converse was a guest of honor at the 100th birthday party of the grandmother of one of the girls.

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