

Going home
Vietnam Library Project reconnects St. Joseph, Waukesha parishioner to her homeland.



Page 8

Growing support
Wildflower Bakery owner, Dolly Mertens serves compassion, generosity with her pastries.



Page 14

Baking goodness
Wildflower Bakery owner, Dolly Mertens serves compassion, generosity with her pastries.



Page 16

Why volunteer?
Read the inspiring stories of several local seniors who give back to the community through volunteer work.



Next week

Serving the people of the Milwaukee Archdiocese

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FOCUS

Woman reconnects with homeland through library project

Return to Vietnam brings healing

By Cindy Crebbin
SPECIAL TO THE CATHOLIC HERALD

WAUKESHA — Le Thi Hoa Dombroe is serious when she offers to take care of Vietnam veterans' feet. Along with her husband Neil Dombroe, the co-owner of Absolutely Nails, an elegant Brookfield nail salon, feels giving a pedicure to a veteran is the least "I can do to give them comfort for walking in my country."

She also hopes Vietnam veterans will consider returning to her country to see that "it is not a battlefield, but a country." She wants them to be healed as she said she was healed by going back to Vietnam.

Describing herself as a "cradle Catholic," Thi Hoa, a member of St. Joseph Catholic Church, Waukesha recently took her son, Thanh, to Vietnam. She made the trip to introduce her son to her country and family, and those in need, but also to take books for the Library Project of Vietnam, started by a former Vietnam veteran, Francis (Chuck) Theusch.

"Disney Books donated 120 pallets of books," said Neil Dombroe. "We were able to send 63,000 books in all. Once FedEx got wind of the project, they transported all the books free."

"I grew up without a book," noted Thi Hoa, stressing the impor-



importance of the books. Today, through the efforts of Theusch and supporters such as the Dombroes, there are at least 10 libraries in different parts of Vietnam and Laos. Some are free-standing, others are part of schools or orphanages.

Thi Hoa said Theusch began the library project about four years ago in his small office at 3135 W. Greenfield Ave., Milwaukee, where he coordinates the collection of books and donations.

On a recent trip in late 2003, Thi Hoa said, "I went to visit several libraries to make sure they had enough books." She and her son also attended the dedication of a new library.

LIBRARY

continued from page 8.

community," he said. "The new generation is who the library project now stimulates — toward literacy and technology."

A vivacious woman, Thi Hoa admitted she never had a desire to return to her homeland. In 1991 she had searched for and found her family. Then in 1993 she returned with Dombroe to build a home for her mother and stepfather. She also has three brothers and three sisters in Vietnam.

"I never thought I'd go back," she admitted. "But when I met (Theusch), he said 'what are we going to do, change (communist rule) with books or change it with guns?' We want to change the system. As Christians we can do little things and it can be great."

But her journey to that point was a long, painful one. She came

to the United States at age 19, engaged to an American soldier who fought in the Vietnam War. Arriving in the Detroit area in 1972, she said they broke up because it was a difficult time for American soldiers to marry Vietnamese women. "He broke up with me because he couldn't take the pressures of our society," she said.

Speaking little English, Thi Hoa moved to Milwaukee to be close to a friend. She found a job as a waitress and lived in the attic of a home. Then, she said, a miracle happened — she met Neil.

While waitressing in an upscale restaurant on the southside, Thi Hoa, who was very shy, was told by the manager she had to mingle with customers more, instead of busing tables. In fact, the manager told her she was to greet her son, who was coming to the restaurant that evening for his birthday, or she would be fired.

So, Thi Hoa pulled herself together and kissed the man on the

forehead when he arrived. But it was the wrong man, it was Dombroe. After that night, Dombroe continued to visit the restaurant to see her, though he was engaged at the time. He broke off that engagement and said he believes it was his destiny to meet Thi Hoa.

Married for nearly 29 years, they have two daughters Mai Lien, 7 and Khaijie, 6. Dombroe also helped raise Thi Hoa's son from a previous relationship. "I did the best I could with the circumstances I had," she said. Her son, Thanh, works in the computer systems management field.

However, there's another part of Thi Hoa's journey back to Vietnam and Saigon (officially today called Ho Chi Minh City).

She was determined to bring her mother who lives in the small village of Tan Binh back to the

Catholic faith. During the war years and later her mother went to worship in the Buddhist temple because needed food was distributed there. But while Thi Hoa could get her mother to church physically, she could see she was not there spiritually.

That brought Thi Hoa some despair. In tears, she sought help from the church's pastor, who gave her a Bible for her mother. Upon returning home with her mother, Thi Hoa talked to her 37-year-old sister, who had married a Buddhist, telling her she wanted her mother to come back to the Catholic faith. Her sister Le Kim Chi then blurted out, "but I was baptized a Catholic. I want to come back to the faith." Today her sister reads the Bible daily to their mother. And her sister's husband is voluntarily accompanying her to

NAILING DOWN THE DETAILS — Le Thi Hoa Dombroe, a St. Joseph, Waukesha, parishioner, poses in her Brookfield nail salon. She is involved with the Library Project of Vietnam, which helps build new libraries in that country. (Catholic Herald photo by Sam Lazaro)

support for this. We have all our American books in Vietnam libraries stamped on page 15, 'A gift from the United States.' And Vietnamese national teachers teach English so the books can be read."

According to Dombroe, the project "can be received openly by the Vietnamese because the character of the Vietnamese government currently is not based on a hard lined government; it's more socialist. It allows ownership of property, businesses, and a mere capitalistic type of existence based on taxes, which are quite liveable. I think (Communists) have a vision of becoming part of the new world

See LIBRARY page 9.

the Catholic Church.

Symbolizing the success of her journey, Thi Hoa wears a crystal cross around her neck — a gift from her mother.

FISH FRY

ST. VERONICA CHURCH HALL
Whitnall & Norwich
THIS FRIDAY
May 7th

Offering both fried & baked fish.
Fried in no-cholesterol oil.
4 to 7:30 p.m.
Don't Miss It!

Adults...\$7 Child (3-12)...\$3.50
Children Under 3...Take Out

Vietnam vet finds library project is 'investment of a lifetime'

Founder of the Vietnam Library Project called a New Dawn, Francis (Chuck) Theusch was a mortarman in Vietnam during the war. In 1999 he returned to the central highlands and Quang Ngai Province.

"At that point I bought two baby water buffalo for two Buddhist people in the village," he said. At that time though 600,000 people were dealing with severe flooding. Through an interpreter, a South Vietnamese Army officer, Theusch found bridges were needed because five in the region had been washed out. So, he offered to build one. But the army officer discouraged him from doing that saying by the time he could do that the bridges would be completed. Instead he suggested donating a library.

"So that's how it started," recalled Theusch. At the time he was on a world wide trip. His next stop was China and then the Vati-



Other libraries in Vietnam. Then we have one large one started in March 2003 in Laos. There are also two smaller ones there. In addition, there are plans for numerous other libraries."

Theusch, who is Catholic, said one library near the Cambodian border was built on the grounds of a Catholic parish by Rotary International in the Kien Giang Delta.

The First Book Foundation, based in Washington County

NEW DAWN — Francis (Chuck) Theusch, a Milwaukee businessman who served in Vietnam during the war, founded the Library Project of Vietnam to help bring books to the people. So far eight libraries in Vietnam and three in Laos have been built. (Submitted photo)

was paid for by The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, as well as Jan Scruggs, the founder of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, Washington, D.C.

A lawyer by profession, Theusch operates a small title insurance business in addition to his work with the library project. Of the Vietnam Library Project he said, "it's been an investment of a lifetime. It's been very gratifying."