

Michael Son Pham: a businessman with a passion for helping kids

Posted on 08 September 2011

Tags: [2011](#), [Michael Son Pham](#), [Vol 30 No 37](#) | [September 10](#) - [September 16](#)

By Ninette Cheng

Northwest Asian Weekly

Photo provided by Son Michael Pham



Son Michael Pham directs a team of up to 400 people on more than seven projects and visits Vietnam on a regular basis. Shockingly, this is not even his day job, but rather his volunteer work for his nonprofit, Kids Without Borders.

Pham's original vision was not just about helping kids; it was also about getting their peers involved in activism. Kids Without Borders focuses mainly on Washington state, but it also extends to Pham's homeland of Vietnam.

Pham immigrated to the United States from Vietnam on April 29, 1975, the last day of the Vietnam War.

"[My family of seven] left on the very last ship in Saigon," Pham said. "It took us a little longer than all the [other] people because we didn't get any help. We were stuck in the Pacific Ocean [for 14 days] without any food and water."

The family's first stop was a refugee camp, before settling down in Chicago.

Pham recalls that, in 1975, some Americans were resistant to accepting new immigrants into their communities, as the economy was poor. "Unemployment was already bad," he said. "It wasn't easy for new immigrants."

Pham's first job, as a refugee resettlement coordinator, was his only paid job in the nonprofit sector.

In 1988, Pham and his wife, Judy Pham, moved to Seattle, where he is now the owner of two businesses. Pham's main business, in franchise development, is based in Bothell. It is called Performance Franchising Inc. He also performs consulting for business development in Vietnam.

Pham's inspiration for Kids Without Borders began with 9/11.

"There was so much more of being a community after 9/11," he said. "When we started doing it, I was able to get a hold of some children's products. I thought, 'How about we turn these products into opportunities for volunteers and service?' The very first donation was five pallets of baby pajamas. I could easily hand the products to different organizations in the area serving low-income families, but I didn't want to do that. It's about getting kids involved in service in their communities and around the world."

Pham emphasizes that, first and foremost, Kids Without Borders' priority is serving the local community.

"Seventy percent of our work supporting youth is in the U.S. and 30 percent overseas," he said.

"Vietnam is where we have our international model project."

Katrina Dohn is a Tukwila-based elementary school teacher who has worked with Pham on both local and international projects.

They met two years ago, when Pham found out about the clothing drive Dohn held for new refugee students in Tukwila.

"He had the clothes. I had the need," Dohn said. "We met and we started Kids Without Borders South."

Dohn and Pham share the same philosophy: getting kids involved.

Do the kids understand or care?

“It depends on who we’re working with,” Dohn said. “Most of the kids [in Tukwila] really have a sense of what it’s like to need help because they’ve all been there. You could probably find anybody who fits any [level of caring or understanding]. I think most of the kids are typical American kids going about their day and they just don’t think about it. Most kids love the chance to help, but I think daily life goes on and doesn’t happen that much.”

This is where Kids Without Borders comes in.

“By bringing Kids Without Borders down to a kid’s level, we are giving them an opportunity to make a difference in a way that is concrete and manageable for them,” Dohn said.

Dohn, herself, has learned a lot from the program, particularly during her trip to Vietnam.

“I learned a lot,” she said. “I learned how much I didn’t know about the Vietnam War era and what had gone on in that country.”

Pham warns that nonprofit work, unfortunately, is not always just about helping others.

“It’s a very challenging world,” he said. “We try not to use money as a reason for the resource, but at the end of the day, that always can make or break an organization. We’re not very good at raising money. Often, we have to find it [in] ourselves to balance that.”

Pham does not hire any employees.

Everyone volunteers.

“We are one of the few organizations that are able to accomplish what we have without a paid staff,” he said. “I have a lot of sleepless nights. We have to overcome these challenges.”

Dohn is confident that Pham’s enthusiasm and ability to connect are crucial.

“His willingness to just go for it is just phenomenal,” she said. “He just connects with people and works with them and enjoys them. This is what makes people really want to get involved.”

Pham says that the most rewarding thing is seeing the orphans he has worked with in Vietnam stepping up to the plate.

“Many of these orphans are now grown adults,” he said. “They are already paying it forward. They are volunteers now.”

“It is my hope that the current generation will start taking over,” Pham said. “[I hope they] take the program to the next level, where we can spread our work nationally and achieve greater scales of volunteerism.” ♦

For more information, visit www.kidswithnoborders.org.

To buy tickets to the Pioneers Awards banquet, e-mail rsvp@nwasianweekly.com. For more information, visit pioneers.nwasianweeklyfoundation.org.

Ninette Cheng can be reached at info@nwasianweekly.com.