

# the bridge back

Local teachers and veterans try to build a

bridge of goodwill back to Vietnam as they take badly needed supplies from the United States to schools, medical clinics, a hospital and an orphanage.

What they found was not only a country left economically

devastated by war, but an enterprising people who have gotten over the war and are moving on with their lives.



A Vietnamese woman, who lost both legs after stepping on an American land mine when she was 8 years old, learns how to sew at a vocational school near Ho Chi Minh City.



A shop supervisor inspects an artificial leg made at the Thu Duc Orthopaedic Center near Ho Chi Minh City. The center makes prostheses for people who lost their legs during the war or more recently stepped on leftover land mines.



BY SHERRY WILLIAMSON  
STAFF WRITER

KON TUM, Vietnam - Young children with dark hair and eyes press against each other to get a better look inside the open windows of the main building at the Kon Tum Orphanage.

They're fascinated by a growing pile of toys - plastic trucks, rag dolls, puzzles, coloring books, crayons and other things they may have never seen before - appearing on the table as a gift.

Such toys are a luxury for the 137 children who live at the orphanage in the mountainous Central Highlands - one of the poorest regions of Vietnam.

The toys were brought halfway around the world by The Bridge Back, a nine-member group of Wake County educators, Vietnam veterans and community members traveling on an educational and humanitarian trip to the communist country in April.

Sponsored by the Wake County Public Schools, the group toured and brought badly needed supplies to the orphanage, schools, medical clinics and a hospital during its 13-day trip. The group and a Washington, D.C., travel agency coordinating the trip also donated money to the orphanage.

The orphaned children are from Vietnamese minorities. More than 50 minority groups live out a meager living, mainly through slash and burn agriculture, on rocky plots on the sides of mountains. In times of drought, children and adults face starvation.

"The mother, the tribeswoman, often dies after childbirth so the children have nowhere to go," said Ms. Nguyen Thi Sang, the head nun at the orphanage. "There is little hope of adoption."

The orphanage, which has children ranging in age from infants to 15 years old, is run by Catholic nuns who are members of the minority groups. The children leave when they can support themselves.

"After this, all the children in the orphanage will be in your hands," said Ms. Nguyen, an elderly woman with a radiant face. "The gifts of money and toys are a great help and a joy."

The orphanage, located in several buildings behind a wooden Catholic church, was started for children 3 years old and older.

It quickly expanded to include

*Staff Photo by Sherry Williamson*  
A small boy plays with a car at an orphanage run by Catholic nuns for minority children in Kon Tum, in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

babies that the tribespeople didn't have the resources to care for adequately. Another 30 babies recently have been added to the orphanage's population.

The nuns are trying to raise \$10,000 to construct a building to house the babies at the over-crowded orphanage. To help do that, they weave and sell multi-colored, patterned tapestries to visitors.

Ms. Nguyen softly explains that it takes 15 tons of rice a year to feed all the children. It costs about \$8,000 a year per child to pay for its needs including food, clothing, shelter and medicine.

She takes the group on a tour of the utilitarian, no-frills orphanage, first past a crucifix and then by some children sleeping on beds made of wooden slats with no mattresses.

Teen-age orphan girls take care of babies lying on cloth pallets on the floor in an upstairs room. In another room, several sticky babies quietly sleep in simple cribs.

"This one is paralyzed," Ms. Nguyen says, pointing to one of the babies who needs medical care far beyond the orphanage's means. "Because he can't get the medical care, he will never walk."

**Oppressed minority groups**

The minority groups, the most commonly known one being the Montagnards, have historically been oppressed by the native

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## the bridge back II

*The Bridge Back II, project that will include select students is temporarily on hold, due to Funding challenges. The first trip with veterans and teachers was a tremendous success. Sherry Williamson with the Cary News, was a member of the group and won an Emmy for her stories.*



*Staff Photo by Sherry Williamson*

Members of The Bridge Back pose for a picture at the former demilitarized zone near Dong Ha in Vietnam. They are, seated from left, Sherry Williamson of Durham, Cary News staff writer; Barbara Abernathy of Raleigh, a Wake County Social Services administrator; Bob Matthews of Cary, an Enloe High School teacher; and Mike Lynch of Raleigh, a Vietnam veteran. Also, standing from left, Kathy Lucas-Benfield of Greensboro, a photojournalist and Vietnam veterans' advocate; an unidentified Vietnamese tour guide; Lindy Poling of Raleigh, a Millbrook High teacher; Link Page, a Broughton High teacher; Esther Dunnegan of Morrisville, a Wake County Schools administrator; and Mike Yelverton, a Vietnam veteran from Johnston County.