

# A Special Trip to Vietnam

Orinda couple and team bring gift of hand tools for those who lost limbs

By Bobbie Dodson



Orinda resident Don Jenkins helps fit a hand tool to a recipient in Vietnam. Photos provided

“Imagine being fitted with a hand tool and then writing your name for the first time in 20 years. Seeing the joy of the man who did this was so exciting and heart-warming,” says Orinda resident Linda Jenkins. She and her husband, Don, were part of an eight member team who journeyed to Vietnam with 500 hand tools in their luggage to fit them on as many people who had lost limbs as possible in their two week stay.

Don Jenkins explains, “It doesn’t look like a hand as it is basically three fingers, or hooks, on the top and two underneath. The wrist can rotate 180 degrees, has complete mobility and can grasp up to 50 pounds. Operating it requires using the other hand to open or close it, or it can be hit on something. To be eligible to receive one the recipient must have at least 10 percent of their forearm below the elbow. All it took was a one-day training session for us to learn how to fit and put them on. After being instructed in how to use the hand tool, those who received them could use silverware, pick up a cup, write, comb their hair and even type. Once back into their homes they could do such things as rake, hoe, or become a barber again.”

Linda Jenkins adds, “One of the sad times was when someone had traveled hours to get to us and we had to turn them away because they didn’t have the forearm. But for those who acquired the hand tools it was life changing. Now they can perform a multitude of daily tasks that we do without giving it a thought. A man told us, ‘Now I don’t have to wait until my wife wakes up to get my teeth brushed. I can do it myself.’”

Rotarians have been sponsoring projects to provide hands for six years. The Lamorinda Sunrise group donates \$2,000 every year which buys 50 hands. Over 1,000 hands have been donated in Vietnam and over 15,000 throughout the world.

On this trip, where they joined with the LN-4 Hand organization, the team was comprised of the Jenkins from the Lamorinda Sunrise club, who were first timers, Rotarians John

Bernardin and wife, Charlotte, from El Sobrante, who have gone five times, Randy Linquist and wife, Barbara, from Chico Sunrise, four timers, and Jeremy Francis, a 20-year-old who got his Eagle Scout award for training 20 other Scouts on how to repair the hand tools as they inspected them to be sure they worked properly. They paid for all their personal expenses.

“The group stopped in seven cities including Hanoi and Saigon. Each town put the word out that we would be there giving out free hands and people came from miles around. Some had lost both hands, but we could only give them one this time,” Don Jenkins explains. “The loss for older people was usually land mines, and some were blinded too. Younger ones had lost limbs mostly in industrial and farm accidents and a few were birth defects. The clients were mostly men, though we saw some women and children too.”

“Our days were long, but sometimes made longer when special needs arose,” Linda Jenkins adds. “One evening when we had everything put away two men rode up on a motorcycle. They had driven for an hour and one had no hands. We brought out all our equipment and provided each with one hand. This happened three more times that day, people arriving late, but we couldn’t think of not helping them. We also fit a hand in the lobby of our hotel for someone who heard about us after hours, and wanted so much to receive a hand tool.

“When you are in a room with perhaps 350 people all missing hands, one gets a new perspective on what has happened to the citizenry of Vietnam,” she continues. “Although the war ended in April of 1975, there continue to be many who still suffer from loss of limbs which occurred during the conflict and those who later lost limbs to land mines. We were happy we could help better the lives of those we were able to treat.

“Their smiles were a reward we will always treasure,” she adds. “And Rotarians will be back.”



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