

Compassionate

Journey



Bringing Massage to Vietnam's Orphans

By Tina Allen

Chien's fighting spirit saved his life. At birth, Chien was left in a dumpster, where his cries caught the attention of a garbage collector. The man carried the malnourished and fragile infant to the steps of a privately run orphanage in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, where Chien's second chance at life began. Today, Chien is 18 months old and living within the confines of a facility that is home to 328 other infants and children with similar backgrounds.



Stories like these are repeated in orphanages all over the world. Infants and children are displaced, abandoned, and left to fend for themselves on some of the world's most dangerous streets. Dedicated caregivers struggle to provide help in overcrowded orphanages, drawing from their limited tools and basic knowledge of child care and development. As the number of orphans rises around the world, the demand for sensory stimulation, nurturing touch, and palliative care within these settings grows along with it.

SHARING NURTURING TOUCH

Recently, my nonprofit the Liddle Kidz Foundation, along with a group of 20 global ambassadors, spent just under three weeks in Vietnam, traveling from Ho Chi Minh City to Ha Long Bay and providing hands-on massage

therapy and nurturing touch to hundreds of infants and children in orphanages along the way. We had visited this area roughly two years earlier, and the team was excited to see familiar faces, meet new friends, and experience the sustainable impact we had made from the previous trip. Our program is rooted in massaging children and infants, but also in leaving a lasting impact by teaching orphanage workers how to use nurturing touch.

Education is an integral part of our mission. Our experience has shown that caregivers lack the funding and resources to provide much more than standard daily care. Through our work, we provide no-cost education in optimal nurturing and tactile stimulation, none of which requires the orphanage to obtain any special equipment or increase any budget. Through our education and support programs, we are able to give hope to children

and caregivers, as well as shine a light on the devastating effects of the institutionalized care of children in developing nations.

WELCOMED WITH OPEN ARMS

Que Huong Charity Center (QHCC) in Ho Chi Minh City was the first stop on our trip. We had visited QHCC in 2010, and the memories of our struggle to convince some of the caregivers about the benefits of massage were still fresh. But this time was different.

“What made the trip so rewarding was when a caregiver



Photos courtesy of Tina Allen and the Liddle Kidz Foundation.

really understood our work and when a child really craved it,” says Rachel Speranza, LMT, from West Palm Beach, Florida. “At times, some children would receive a massage, and then would get up and offer it to another child, or go to another volunteer and ask for more.”



“A PERSON'S
A PERSON,
NO MATTER
HOW SMALL.”

DR. SEUSS

Huong Tieu Huynh, the director of QHCC, thanked us for returning and divulged the true impact our previous trip had made. Before our first visit, the children had approximately 40 hospital visits per year between them all. Going to the hospital is not only scary for the children, but a large financial burden on a care system already struggling to feed and clothe them. After implementing the massage techniques we shared, the hospitalization rate is down to only 2–3 times per year in total. We could have never imagined such an amazing outcome, and the staff was eager to learn as much as we could share; the children just soaked up the love.

TOUCH MATTERS

“One of the first experiences I had on this trip was the most profound,” says Karen Dickson, LMP, from Carnation, Washington. “The first day I went into the infant room and saw a handful of babies wrapped up on the floor. One stood out because she looked more fragile.”

During our initial team debriefing, Dickson expressed her desire to work with the baby and asked the team if they would join her in taking turns doing so the next day. Throughout the day, the baby was held and given massage and nurturing touch by members of the team. Dickson could see a difference almost immediately. “She had opened her eyes—something she wouldn’t do before—and was freely moving her arm,

and she had taken a bottle!” she says. “I was so floored to know that we really helped this baby survive.”

MAGIC HAPPENED

During our time in Hanoi, we visited the My Dinh orphanage. The children there appeared physically healthy, with a small number of them having special health-care needs and emotional traumas.

In the corner was a little girl about 6 years old with special needs, possibly autistic. Her body appeared underdeveloped, the muscle tone in her feet and ankles was low, and she was standing on her toes. “Tina noticed that she was in a crib and took her out, attempting to get her to stand up,” Speranza says. “It became apparent that she could not do so. I worked, coaxing the child’s feet with massage. About an hour later, this little girl was trying to take her first steps!”

The quick progression of events amazed the caregivers, who apparently believed she was unable to walk. This child was ready to walk, had the desire to walk, and only needed extra support to help facilitate it. This interaction provided a wonderful example to the caregivers that just a little touch goes a long way with children of different needs.

Watch the documentary *Liddle Kidz in Vietnam* at www.youtube.com/user/LiddleKidz, and see what it was like working with the orphaned and abandoned children of Vietnam.



"Her sadness changed, her eyes widened, and the biggest smile I have ever seen grew across her face."

Tina Allen

THE FULL-CIRCLE MOMENT

We had the opportunity to finish our volunteer work in a facility that serves children affected by HIV and AIDS. Here, all of the children are infected with the virus and will live in this facility until they are old enough to be on their own. My work with pediatric massage started with my desire to facilitate touch therapy for children who society felt were untouchable; ending at this facility in Vietnam made me feel as if my spiritual journey had truly come full circle.

In the beginning of my work, I was naive and surprised to find that those who would benefit most from touch could be considered untouchable. It seems unfathomable that infants and children would be deprived of touch, especially when their life is complicated by a diagnosis that makes cuddling and nurturing seem so appropriate and beneficial.

As our bus traveled down the long road to this children's facility, we passed a large, ominous building. Our translator described it as the facility for adults infected with AIDS and the parents of the children kept in the structure we were traveling to. The stigma surrounding this entire area permeated the air. The adults and children were separated in

secluded areas far from the "regular population." I was first exposed to this type of intense segregation years earlier in the United States when I started working around babies infected with AIDS.

When our bus stopped at the children's facility, we were welcomed by a large group of caregivers and children. We started by running an

educational session that was met with excitement and participation from all parties. Afterward, we had the opportunity to explore the grounds and work with children in their individual rooms.

While some volunteers helped provide massage to aid in afternoon naps, others provided hand-holding, hugs, and pushes on swings outside. During all of the commotion, I suddenly noticed my teaching doll was missing and remembered seeing a little girl holding it. Smiling to myself, I tracked her down so I could take a picture of her holding it. We approached the little girl, only for her to look up at us with saddened eyes. My translator asked if she had the doll, and I quickly explained, with the translator's help, that I wanted to give it to her in exchange for a photograph. Her sadness changed, her eyes widened, and the biggest smile I have ever seen grew across her face. She leapt off her bunk and ran down two flights of stairs to a hidden room, where she lifted a mattress and recovered the doll. The doll had been with me for nearly two years, traveling from country to country, training hundreds of caregivers, and it finally found its destination in the arms of a little girl in Vietnam. **m&b**

G Tina Allen is the founder and director of the Little Kidz Foundation. She is the recipient of the 2012 Massage Therapy Foundation/Performance Health Humanitarian Award. For more information on the foundation's Global Volunteer Outreach, visit www.liddlekidz.org.