

Metro

A Melbourne music teacher is realising her dream to help children in Vietnam, writes Dewi Cooke.

LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS



WHILE most Australians are worrying about the recent interest rate rise and retailers fret over a drop in consumer sentiment, Melbourne woman Karen Leonard is trying to figure out how she can get 250 kilograms of charitable donations to Vietnam.

For six years, the Essendon music teacher has been travelling to Hoi An on the country's central coast, and each time she returns, the change she has effected becomes more evident.

"I know that I can't fix an entire province, I certainly can't fix all of Vietnam, but I can go in and make a generational change in one community ... and I'm proving that now," she says. "What I'm trying to do is implement projects and programs

that cover the gamut of social issues that a small community in a poverty-stricken area faces."

It started with a backpacking trip to the World Heritage-listed Hoi An, renowned for its tailors - tourists can get custom-made suits for a fraction of what they would cost in the West. But Leonard ventured beyond the usual traveller's path and discovered young people living in dire poverty.

"They have pressures that our children and even we as adults don't really understand. Young children support an entire family, and when I say young, I mean 10, 12 years old, and they're feeding a family of eight."

It started simply. Leonard had sponsored one of the young people she met on her travels and sent him to school. Then, one Christmas, she suggested to family and friends that they eschew traditional gifts and

instead donate the money to help a family in Vietnam.

This planted the seed for the Lifestart Foundation, a one-woman project that has grown into a development organisation that helps feed, clothe and educate more than 100 young people, and continues to support numerous families.

It's run wholly on charitable donations. Leonard works as a piano teacher in Melbourne so she can save money and return to the region. She pays her own travel and living costs, so all money raised goes towards the people and programs in Vietnam. She also knows every child and family the foundation has helped by face, name and story.

Twelve months ago, Vietnamese government officials called in Leonard for a meeting. They were aware of her work with the community, knew of her focus on education and had a proposal.

Leonard says she kept an open mind but was sceptical, and she remained so even as they told her the Government wanted to provide a building for her to use as a school. She followed them to the proposed location and couldn't believe her luck. It was a two-storey concrete structure in the centre of the community, and the top floor was hers for up to 20 years.

"I had become aware of the amount of illiterate children that there were," she says. "These were kids that had fallen out of the loop, so to speak." Some children were from families that couldn't afford to send them to school. Others had "been taken out of school to work on the streets". Their

success there meant the difference between the family eating or not.

The Lifestart Foundation Free School opened in March this year, and its first 25 students are aged from eight to 20. Local Vietnamese-speaking staff are paid a wage, and Leonard has also taken on some trained volunteers.

It costs between \$5000 and \$6000 a year to run at a basic level, although there are plans to expand what the school offers students. At the moment they're taught to read and write, and also learn some English.

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KAREN LEONARD

The Government plays no role in directing the curriculum.

The school's opening was a scene somewhat different from anything one would expect to see in Australia.

The announcement was made that school would start in the afternoon. "They would queue up in the hot sun from nine o'clock, waiting for us to open up," Leonard says. "And then at the end of the day we'd say, 'OK, pack up, it's time to go home,' and they'd all sit there not wanting to go."

Many of the children come from backgrounds of abuse and extreme disadvantage, and the school works on a model of one teacher to each four or five children. Illiteracy is not the only problem.

"I sort of promised myself that those children would get really specialised care up until Christmas this year," Leonard says. "We've got abused children and neglected children, so they really need so much extra before I can consider expanding and bringing other children in. We've identified this group as being the absolute most in need."

She describes some of her first encounters as like meeting children who were living in "grey".

"You expect four, five and six-year-olds to be inquisitive

might have imagined she would be winding back commitments, rather than the opposite.

Her adult daughter, Jade, has taken over the running of her Essendon music school to allow Leonard to focus on the organisation. Melbourne time is spent organising the next trip, sorting donated clothes and trying to track down specific items, such as the wheelchair she's taking over at the end of this month for a disabled child.

And the projects continue to grow. The school represents about 20 per cent of the foundation's work, and Leonard also works with Vietnamese police to help rehabilitate young offenders and give them "a last opportunity to turn their lives around". It's a struggle to generate support for such projects, because young delinquents tend to attract less sympathy than orphaned children.

"That's, I suppose, people making a judgement without understanding what it is we're trying to do," she says. "But if we can turn those kids around that are angry young teenagers at the moment, we can again make a big change within the community."

The challenges are ongoing - for every issue resolved, a new one arises - but Leonard says she no longer looks back at what she has left behind to pursue this goal.

"I never planned any of this, it just sort of happened," she says. "It's just really clear that this is what I was meant to be doing."

LINK

www.lifestartfoundation.org.au

On a mission: "It's just really clear that this is what I was meant to be doing," says Karen Leonard. Below left: the Lifestart Foundation Free School in Hoi An.

MAIN PICTURE: EDDIE JIM

