

Couture designer Mariana Hardwick has given two Vietnamese people a new start. **CHRISTINE ANTONIOU** reports

Fashioning a future

WORK to Thanh Thi Tran was 18-hour days in a restaurant and being forced to sleep on the floor because she had nowhere to go.

Now the Vietnamese 23-year-old has the chance to change her future with a 12-month traineeship with Australia's leading wedding dress and couture designer Mariana Hardwick and the Lifestart Foundation.

Along with Ghi Quang Le, 23, the pair are taking part in the inaugural program for young people from Vietnam from underprivileged backgrounds.

They will return home to Hoi An with fashion-design skills.

Hardwick and Lifestart Foundation founder and Essendon resident Karen Leonard met after Hardwick read a story about Ms Leonard's work with underprivileged Vietnamese youths.

"I went to Vietnam a couple of years ago and I admired the energy, diligence and humility of the people," Hardwick said.

"I had wanted a philanthropic aspect to the business and once I saw the story about Karen I wanted to make something happen."

Lifestart Foundation is a non-profit charity helping orphans, street children and families in Vietnam to become self-sufficient.

Although Hardwick and Ms Leonard had no clear direction of what they wanted to achieve, their "can-do attitude" led them to finding the link between couture fashion and Vietnam's dress-making capital, Hoi An.

Under the guidance of Hardwick and her team, the students will learn specialist dressmaking skills including basic design, draping and garment construction.

They will be paid award wages. And it seems it's just the beginning of something bigger, with



Ghi Quang Le, Mariana Hardwick, Karen Leonard and Thanh Thi Tran. Picture: DERRICK DEN HOLLANDER N51MV100

Hardwick and Ms Leonard envisioning a fashion version of Jamie's Kitchen in the future.

"In meeting Karen I have found a kindred spirit in someone who is determined to make things hap-

pen," Hardwick said. "It's just wonderful. Everyone here loves working with them, they are beautiful people."

Ms Leonard said the program exposed the students to a level of

training not possible in Vietnam. "Saying two young people have transformed doesn't even describe this or come close enough. Their lives will change dramatically for the better," Ms Leonard said.

LIFESTART FOUNDATION

■ It has been supporting families in Vietnam since 2000 and is currently helping more than 100 families

■ Essendon's Karen Leonard started the foundation after a backpacking trip to Vietnam

■ In 2006 the foundation opened a school

■ The charity has provided education scholarships for street children, installed basic services in homes, built houses for families without shelter, boats to provide a source of income, renovated a local orphanage and paid the medical expenses of children with severe illnesses.

Caught in the trap of poverty as was Mr Quang Le, Ms Thi Tran was working long hours in a restaurant with no time to look for another job. Her salary was only enough for food.

Mr Quang Le and Ms Thi Tran said it would be difficult to get the same training in Vietnam.

They said the opportunity was "challenging and scary but great".

"We are very happy to be here and they (the staff) are helpful and answer all my questions," Ms Thi Tran said.

The students will be special guests at the Lifestart Foundation's annual Christmas in July dinner dance and charity auction on July 26.

Tickets: 9740 3968 or go to www.lifestartfoundation.org.au

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