

SATURDAY



Hope for the future: students line up at Karen Leonard's school, eager to learn, while others less fortunate face a life of hardship on the boats.

Karen's other world

A Melbourne music teacher swaps the comfort of home for the squalor of Vietnam's poorest people to give them hope

FOR 30 years Karen Leonard has taught piano in her comfortable Essendon home where the harmony is broken only by the yapping of her poodles, Koko and Mel.

Over the next 10 days though, Karen will be frantically cramming in make-up lessons for music students who won't see her again for a month.

The pupils are surprisingly supportive of Karen's frequent absences — they even give her toys and clothing for the children she visits when she is away.

Karen's "other life" is the world to which she intends to devote her next 30 years — helping the poorest people on a flood-ravaged peninsula of the Vietnamese coast.

The course of Karen's life changed seven years ago through a chance meeting with a boy selling postcards.

Since then she has used her earnings from music teaching to improve the conditions of families living on crowded home-made boats and in squalid huts with barely enough to eat.

Karen divides her time between her two worlds.

At home, she has the music school and an 83-year-old mother — on the peninsula, she runs a charity that builds houses and provides clothing, health care, education and hope to hundreds of Vietnamese people who call her "mum".

Her two lives could not be more different.

Throughout September, she will stay in a \$13-a-night attic room where she knows every cobweb and crack in the wall.

She will wear flip-flops on her feet and three-quarter length pants because they are most suitable for the squat toilets she'll be using.

She says she feels lucky to have the luxury of a squat. "None of my families have toilets," she says. "They go in the river."

Many of the 56 families supported by Karen's charity, the Lifestart Foundation, live on wooden boats on the Thu Bon River in Quang Nam province.

Families of seven or eight cram on to the tiny boats, surviving on the fish they catch from the polluted river.

They have had no education and no hope of employment.

Karen's mission is to help them build skills and earn income by giving them equipment, training and encouragement.

Her "office" is the boats where the families live. She gets involved in their lives, eats with them and works out the best ways to help them.

Despite the prevalence of life-



NEIL KEARNEY
ON SATURDAY

threatening diseases including tuberculosis, polio and malaria, she has never been ill.

"I don't know why it is, but I just seem to cope over there," she says.

"I see rats as big as my dogs and don't blink an eye.

"If I were at home and saw a two-inch mouse, I'd be up on the table, squealing."

The people she supports are on a reclaimed peninsula that floods so often that they are constantly left homeless.

"The benefits we give them are more than a money thing," she says. "For them, it's seeing that someone cares. They matter. This is about hope."

Karen, 49, a divorced mother of one, goes to the Quang Nam province three or four times a year, staying for between one and three months, then returns to Melbourne to raise more funds.

Her crusade began in September 1999 when she and a cousin were backpacking through Vietnam and they got talking to a 13-year-old postcard seller in the heritage town of Hoi An.

The boy, Thanh Nguyen, invited them to visit the "not-so-touristy" side of town.

They walked 1km past the flimsy bamboo shacks with tin roofs to come across poverty that Karen says she could never have imagined.

The plight of the people moved her deeply, but she was just as taken by their resilience and the uncomplaining way they went about life.

When she left Vietnam, she promised Thanh that she would come back and do what she could to help the boat people.

That Christmas, instead of giving each other presents, Karen, her family and friends raised enough money to sponsor a family.

Thanh, now 20, helps Karen as a translator with a charity program that grows bigger every time she visits.

Besides building 13 houses and



Driven: Karen Leonard can't wait to return to her Vietnamese families. Picture: DARRYL GREGORY

directly supporting 56 families, Karen's Lifestart Foundation runs programs to provide medical supplies, arranges jobs, finds homes for orphans, raises sponsorships and educates families that haven't known what school is.

In March Lifestart opened the peninsula's first school in a building provided by the Government, which is very supportive of Karen and her volunteers.

"It was just so moving to see those 25 children in their first classroom, using pencils and crayons, things they'd never seen before," she said.

"When you watch an 18-year-old drawing his first line on a page and he's so engrossed in what he is doing, it makes you cry.

"Australian kids take these opportunities for granted, but over there they are just thrilled to know there's a chance they can improve their lot."

Because the children work selling postcards to tourists in the nice part of town every night, the school starts each day at noon.

But school is so popular children queue from 9am onwards in the hot sun to make sure they get in.

Karen believes she will eventually live full-time on the peninsula, but at this stage she needs to come home to raise funds, to see her mother and daughter Jade and their two dogs.

Lifestart Foundation's only fundraiser, the recent Christmas-in-July ball, raised \$18,000, which

she will use on this trip to buy whatever her families need to improve their lives.

No one gets money.

Karen assesses individual needs and provides the goods, trying to give people the ways and means to start building an income.

Under the Adopt a Family program, a \$400 donation might buy chickens and a coop for a poultry breeding enterprise, or to build or repair a boat for a fishing family.

Karen rides around on a motorbike, finding out what animals are available, and gets one of her Vietnamese helpers to buy the animals.

"I never imagined I'd be buying goats or pigs, but it's amazing what you learn when you need to. I've got to the stage where I can look at a cow and tell you whether it's going to be a good investment."

She says she never strikes jealousy between the families.

"They are happy for each other to receive help."

When she and five volunteer helpers leave Melbourne on August 31, they will take about 250kg of clothing, school supplies and personal care products, including head lice treatments to fight an outbreak that has swept through her school. Treating the nits will be the volunteers' first task.

During this month on the peninsula, Karen will take seven-year-old Ngoc Nguyen to Saigon, 1000km away, for an assessment that might lead to major surgery.

Ngoc is from the first family Karen helped when she started her program. Ngoc has cerebral palsy and is unable to feed herself or even go to the toilet herself.

But surgeons believe she may be suitable for operations on her hips, arms and legs that would vastly improve the quality of her life.

"There's nothing definite at this stage, but it would be just wonderful to give Ngoc a better future," Karen says.

WHILE Karen's Melbourne friends are in awe of what she is doing, most admit they couldn't do what she's done.

"I guess I just felt that we are given one life to make a difference," Karen says. "And I didn't want my life to be defined only as a music teacher."

"The need among these people is to do something for the greater good."

"I can't help all of Vietnam. I can't even help all of one province."

"But I can work with one community and make a generational change."

"I hope that the kids born in 15 or 20 years' time won't face the difficulties that their parents have — they will have safe housing, they will go to school, and they will get medical treatment."

"If that happens, I will have made a difference."

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