

The village voice

NEWS

Harbant Gill

A BACKPACKING encounter with a street kid in a Vietnamese village changed Melbourne music teacher Karen Leonard's life.

In the five years since that trip, Leonard has raised money to clothe and feed hundreds, renovate an orphanage, provide medical aid, build houses for the homeless and boats for struggling fishing families.

She has also opened a free school for her adopted coastal village of Dong Hiep, which sits on a floodplain in central Vietnam.

"It was a normal backpacking trip when I met one street kid in particular who spoke really good English," says the Essendon-based Leonard, who has run a music school for 30 years.

"He had such a fine mind and I



Vietnam aid: Karen Leonard.

just sat there thinking, 'Oh, what a shame, through lack of opportunity or whatever, this is his destiny'.

"We got chatting, he told me his story and took me home to meet his family. Through him I met other street kids and found out they had dropped out of school and were usually supporting a whole family.

"They sell whistles when they are little and then they progress up to postcards and when they are a bit older they sell newspapers.

"They have a use-by date. By 16 to 18 they can't get any work and aren't educated. It's a dilemma."

Leonard offered to pay for the 13-year-old's education and that of some of his friends.

"I said to them I'd be back. I don't normally revisit places, but something said I will actually be coming back."

On her return to Melbourne, Leonard told people about her journey and asked them to donate money instead of exchanging gifts for Christmas.

"That's how it started, and it's had a snowball effect ever since," she says.

Leonard quickly enlisted the support of the Vietnamese Government and police to focus on their poorest.

When strangers started giving her money, Leonard ensured everyone knew 100 per cent of donations went to help educate, clothe, feed and support the villagers.

Leonard, who runs a Christmas-in-July dinner-dance each year to raise \$15,000-\$20,000, has also been busy gathering sponsors for her projects.

She spends several months of the year in the village.

Music, however, has yet to make it into the school curriculum.

"We are dealing at the most basic level of children who are coming to school hungry.

"They're cold and they're dirty because they don't have running water," says Leonard, who continues to teach music to fund her trips.

"They look at what I do as being quite frivolous. They can't believe people pay me money to teach them music. They find that incredible."

Details: www.lifestartfoundation.org.au