

A Very Unusual Massage Center



GLOBAL COMMUNITY
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Delicious street food stalls and massage parlors.

Most Vietnamese towns can boast many examples of each, but in Dong Ha, capital of central Quang Tri Province, there is a unique institution, possibly the only one of its kind in the country: a massage parlor both run by and staffed with members of the local blind association.

When the Global Community Service Foundation (GCSF), a Washington headquartered non governmental agency operating in Vietnam and neighboring Myanmar, began working with local mentally and physically disabled people nearly a decade ago it sought to provide not only medical assistance, physical premises and training but also the means for such groups to permanently support themselves via so-called micro-finance projects.

Members of the Dong Ha Blind Association began to make toothpicks, incense and distinctive brooms, which have been sold as far away as the United States, but its 'hit' activity has been the establishment of an unusual massage parlor, staffed by its own members who received expert training with GCSF help.

Massage is a daily way of life for many Vietnamese and Dong Ha can boast several centers. But the Dong Ha Association welcomes 15-20 people per day and for 50,000 Vietnamese Dong, the equivalent of \$2.50, clients can undergo a totally professional 45-minute therapeutic treatment.



Photo: Ray Wilkinson

It has been a major success. Perhaps visually impaired persons have a more sensitive physical touch but according to one member of the Association: "Massage is our most successful enterprise and it provides us with 70% of our income." GCSF's local manager, Nguyen Xuan Tam concurs: "They used to ask us for help all the time a while ago. But today they don't ask for anything at all in this area."

Physical disability, including visual impairment, is particularly high in Quang Tri. There are traditional reasons for this in a poor, rural area of



Receiving a massage at the Dong Ha Blind Association

Photo: Karen Kasmauski

the country. People, particularly pregnant women, often receive a wrong medical diagnoses, or take wrong or cheap drugs which can lead to all kinds of disabilities.

But Quang Tri province was also the most bombed area of the entire country during the war, with the U.S. dropping double the amount of ordnance it used in the whole of World War II. Ten percent of those bombs did not explode (one of the most extensive operations in Vietnam today, undertaken by both government and overseas organizations, is mine clearance) and many of today's blind are victims of these still lethal mines.

Officials say there is a very high incidence of disability in Quang Tri province, including 3,000 blind children, compared with other areas of the country.

To help alleviate this ongoing problem, in addition to helping blind association members, GCSF has now helped to establish a center for blind and visually impaired children dedicated in honor of an American, Carter Schmitt, who worked in Vietnam and who, according to a memorial plaque "Cared deeply for the children of Vietnam."

Several hundred American members and friends as well as Vietnamese families raised funds. The government donated building land for the center and pays for seven teachers.

In addition to physical construction, the NGO has funded professional training, sending teachers to Ho Chi Minh City and inviting specialists to the Dong Ha center to continue instruction.

The center can handle a capacity of 50 boys and girls who receive education at a primary level. They may live and study on the campus for as long as seven years before being mainstreamed into regular state schools.