



Kim Miller reaches out to the children of Hanoi

Vietnam's recent economic growth has brought success to many. However, Blue Dragon Children's Foundation officer Kim Miller has found that it's not universal. For many of the children of Hanoi, the increased demand for commerce has led to a greater dependence on child labour. Charmayne Allison reports from Hanoi.

Kim Miller can still vividly remember the moment when she knew she would be moving to Hanoi to work for the Blue Dragon Children's Foundation. Intending to stay for only a brief visit with her friend and CEO of the foundation Michael Brosowski, a smile from a little boy was all it took to make her fall in love with Hanoi, and with its children.

"His mum had passed away. Dad was in jail," Kim comments, her face breaking open in a smile as she remembers the little boy. "This kid was living with his uncle who was a really nasty piece of work. He sold this boy to what we would call a circus, and this kid was used and abused in every possible way."

Rescued soon after by the Blue Dragon Children's Foundation, the little boy had only been at the foundation for a week by the time Kim met him. "He was the shell of a kid," she recollects. "He didn't smile, he didn't talk, he didn't communicate with anybody. He was the saddest kid I'd ever met in my life."

Over two weeks, she watched the little boy slowly emerge from his shell. Each small gesture of love caused him to blossom further, until one day she saw him smile for the first time.

"We were riding from the outreach house to the island to play some sport with some of the kids from the shelter." Kim says, "This little boy was on the back of Michael's bike, and I was riding next to them. I looked across, and this kid had the *biggest* smile on his face. And it was the first time that we'd seen joy and we'd seen what this kid could be. And at that moment I went, 'Oh my gosh, I'm moving to Hanoi.'"

Although this realisation came 11 years after the launch of the foundation, Kim Miller had known of Blue Dragon since day one. Teaching English in a local university, Kim's former university colleague Michael Brosowski had developed the idea for the foundation after meeting a group of street children whilst enjoying his nightly coffee on the streets of Hanoi.

"There'd be kids coming up and wanting to shine his shoes," Kim says. "He was starting to think, 'Why are these kids not in school?' or 'they should be home in bed, like what's going on?'"

It was not long before Michael realised that these children came from the poor, rural areas of Vietnam. Some fled to Hanoi to escape abusive home life, whilst many others came with the false hope that they could earn enough money in the city to lift their families out of poverty. One of the boys in the group had come to Hanoi with such a hope.

"He thought he was coming to an exciting life, and that he was going to earn lots of money," Kim says, "Of course the fallacy was that he was earning about a dollar a day. And if he'd earned enough money that day to have a bed, he'd have somewhere to sleep, but if not, he'd have to sleep on the streets."

Not contented to sit still, Michael Brosowski arranged for a place for the children to sleep, and ensured that they were safe, fed and sheltered. Once those needs were met, he turned to their deeper need for education.

Michael came up with a simple idea to buy each child in the group a bicycle. These bicycles would help the children to move about with greater ease, and increase their possibility of attending a school. In need of financial assistance, Michael asked for help from Kim and his other university friends back home in Australia. Eager to aid a friend, they each contributed money, and the children were soon in possession of bikes.

Michael did not imagine that this simple act of buying local children bicycles would develop into something much greater. Since that first day, the Blue Dragon Children's Foundation has grown from working with six children to 1500 children each year, rescuing them from a range of circumstances including street begging, labouring in garment factories, and working in the sex trade.

However, with this growth has come not only a need for more staff, but also for greater support from the outside. As School Liaison Officer, Kim Miller's main focus is garnering such support through raising awareness in schools overseas.

"About 30% of our income each year comes from schools, so schools are really important to us," Kim explains. "As well as being able to advocate for Blue Dragon, I'm teaching schools about human trafficking, homelessness, child labour, and how all of those things are interconnected."



Blue Dragon Children's Foundation rescues children from poor living and working conditions in Hanoi

Once rescued from these situations, Blue Dragon's main focus is to reunite children with their families. "If there's a way that we can get them home with their families and support them with their families, then we do that," she comments. "We've repaired or built 78 homes. We sponsor children's education so they can be back with their families and be able to go to school."

For the children without family or within abusive home situations, Blue Dragon offers a new home in one of their three shelters. The one condition being that each child commit to attending school.

"We think the only way to stop the cycle of poverty is to have kids in education," Kim says. "So the kids who live in our shelter commit to being in school and they go to schools all around Hanoi."

Meanwhile, for those too old to attend a school, Blue Dragon has created the Transition House, a shelter offering vocational training and eventual employment to each child. Through this, the foundation has been able to see individuals reconnect with lost aspirations.

"When we first meet the kids, they don't have hopes and dreams," Kim explains. "You ask them what they want to do for their future and they don't know. They just want to have food in their bellies. They want to have somewhere to sleep. Whereas when they've been with us for a while, that's when they start to come back to believing that they will have a future."

However, Kim has found that an increasing number of children are deprived of the chance to dream due to corporations turning ever more to child labour in order to keep up with industry demands. She attributes this in part to recent global economic growth, with the boom in industry leading to an increased pressure on corporations to produce at a faster rate.

"The demand of consumers to want things as cheaply as possible means that businesses and industries are taking shortcuts, and they're using child labour," Kim says. "The only way to sell something cheaper than somebody else is to not pay your workers a fair wage. There are very few adults who will agree to that."

Although child labour is illegal in Vietnam, companies are eluding consequences by outsourcing child workers to small, home-based factories.

"The kids will be in a really small room, there might be a row of sewing machines down each side of the room, and they sleep on the floor in between the sewing machine," Kim describes. "So when big brands and big corporations go to visit their factories, the factories look clean, the factories look like there isn't any child labour happening."

As Kim has taught other students about these issues through her work as Blue Dragon's School Liaison Officer, she has been encouraged to see children interested in advocating for change, with many asking how they can alter their consuming habits in order to make a difference.

"One of the things I always say to kids is to look at what you're buying, and look at the cost of what you're purchasing," Kim says. "If you couldn't buy and make the product yourself for the same price, where does that come in? How has the product been capable of being produced, and sold for the amount that it's being produced and sold at?"

Through Kim's work, the support raised by schools from around the world has already led to many more children being rescued from hopeless situations. So what does Kim hope the future holds for Blue Dragon and the children of Hanoi?

"We would like to eradicate child labour. If we can stop child labour in Vietnam, that's one of our ultimate goals here. All children have the right to be children. They've got the right to be safe and to go to school, to play, to be treated with respect, to be heard, to be understood, to be loved. You know, just to be kids."