

# MY HUONG LE RETURNING HOME

by Jennifer Johnston

My Huong Le was born in Vietnam during the war and raised in Australia after she was adopted as part of the post-war Operation Babylift program. Finally returning to her home country at the age of 35, My Huong has adopted two sons, juggling raising them as a single parent and managing an orphanage in the seaside town of Vung Tau, 90 minutes from Ho Chi Minh City.

Jennifer Johnston sat down with My Huong to hear her incredible story of returning to her homeland and making a difference to those in need.



Class time at Long Hai Learning Centre



Long Hai Learning Centre students in sewing class.

**Through an Australian friend, I met My Huong Le during a trip to Vietnam. We have remained friends corresponding via email when time permits. She is a 47-year-old single mum with two adopted sons who was once an adoptee herself. Her inspiring story is one based on courage, determination, kindness, overcoming adversity and giving back.**

When we first meet, it doesn't take long for me to sense My Huong Le is someone who doesn't like to waste time. We're in her office chatting. My Huong Le is sitting behind a large desk, me on the other side.

"A Vietnamese television crew filmed me recently," says My Huong Le. "But I haven't watched their film, although I watched the documentary the ABC team made."

She laughs at her contradictory statement, clarifying the reason for watching the April 2015 ABC documentary, *Are you my Mother?*

"I watched it because they spent 12 days with me and I was interested in what the heck they wasted my time doing."

My Huong (as she is affectionately known) was born in 1970, during the Vietnam War in a small rural village near Can Tho city, half a day's drive from Saigon. Her Vietnamese mother met her father, an Australian soldier on active duty in Vietnam. One month after My Huong was born, her father returned to Australia. Her mother, a singer in Saigon had another relationship with a married man, an engineer working in Can Tho and twelve months later My Huong's half-brother was born. In 1974 both children contracted polio, her half-brother suffering some paralysis.



My Huong Le with one of the babies at the orphanage in Vung Tau.

Towards the end of the Vietnam war, as the Vietcong headed south to invade Saigon, families with mixed-race children in the south were being fed propaganda about what could happen to their children. My Huong's mother feared for the safety of her children, because their skin colour was different and her son's disabilities could draw attention. She figured her safest option was to give up both her children to Operation Babylift an initiative by President Gerald Ford, where Vietnamese orphans and mixed-race children were evacuated and adopted to families in the United States and Australia. My Huong was just five years of age when she said good-bye to her mother, to board a plane to Australia.

They were adopted by an Australian couple who had been working and living in Vietnam and knew them as children. My Huong admits they were part of a dysfunctional

family. Her adopted mother would discredit her Vietnamese mother, including telling My Huong her mother was dead. After her adopted mother died when My Huong was 15, she found letters belonging to her birth mother in a filing cabinet and discovered her adopted father was actually her half-brother's father.

My Huong completed high school in Canberra and gained a degree in Health Education. In her early twenties, she worked overseas in Zambia, helping orphaned African children for a few years before returning to Australia to work for the government funded Drug Arm as a counsellor for drug and alcohol abusers.

But My Huong couldn't forget her country of birth. In 2004, thirty years after leaving Vietnam, My Huong, now 35, returned to Vietnam. She was one of the few 3,000 Operation Babylift children who successfully found their birth mother. Vietnamese mothers were advised to destroy their children's birth papers before sending them away for adoption. My Huong's mother believed her daughter would return to her, so she kept her papers, saving My Huong's identity.



My Huong Le manages the orphanage in Vung Tau, is Vice Director at Long Hair Learning Centre for underprivileged children and works with the International Social Service to assist Vietnamese adult adoptees with birth-family searches in Vietnam.

My Huong calls Vietnam home, living in a sea side town called Vung Tau, a 90-minute drive from Ho Chi Minh City. In 2009, My Huong volunteered at the Vung Tau orphanage, initially because she wanted to adopt her own child.

"I always wanted children, I just didn't get around to having some of my own," she says philosophically. My Huong now helps manage the orphanage which currently cares for 85 children, including some affected by AIDS and Agent Orange.

She is also Vice Director at a learning centre for underprivileged children. As if she wasn't busy enough, at the beginning of 2017, she accepted a contract by International Social Service (a NGO) to assist Vietnamese adult adoptees with birth-family searches in Vietnam.

My Huong and I are sitting on a bench overlooking the playground at the Long Hai Learning Centre. The centre, established in 2007 was built from the ground up thanks to My Huong and a team of volunteers – all without government funding. The school currently has 150 students, all from very

poor families. During a tour of the centre I observe students in a makeshift garage, where they're learning how to repair scooters and motorbikes. In another classroom, students are taught the intricacies of sewing.

All uniforms for the students are made at the school, valuable life skills to remove them

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from the viscous poverty cycle. If it wasn't for My Huong and staff, these kids would be working on the streets or in factories.

“We know the kids have at least one decent meal a day at the centre,” My Huong says with a knowing smile.

For children without parents, adoption presents opportunities but no guarantees. Two children with bright futures are My Huong's adopted sons Daniel (14) and Sam (6). My Huong's family initially were against her adopting her first son Daniel.

“Vietnamese people don't believe in adoption, so few Vietnamese families adopt,” My Huong explains.

“The Vietnamese people understand an informal kind of adoption. My family didn't understand my wanting to take on another person's child not related to me, because I could take any of my cousin's children who are very poor and raise them as my own.”

She wasn't planning to adopt a second child, but in 2012 when there was an opportunity to adopt Sam, a toddler at the orphanage, My Huong said yes.

“My family didn't care about me adopting my

second son, after I adopted Daniel,” she says grinning.

“My sons and I have a special connection. They bring much happiness and I love them dearly. I pray I can be the mother they need.”

A sentiment echoed by most mums around the world.

Sam wants My Huong to adopt a little girl from the orphanage to grow their family. But there are expenses to consider. With his brother Daniel attending an international school in Vung Tau, My Huong is finding the cost of education challenging.

“I couldn't afford to educate another child here, unless I met and married a rich man,” she says laughing at the idea. I smile too, wondering where she would find the time for a relationship. Her to-do list seems endless.

“My life experiences, have trained me for where I'm now. I wish some things hadn't happened to me and I wouldn't wish them to happen to anybody. But through those times you find the inner strength and become a better person. Without a doubt, I'm very content.

“Very busy, but very content!”