

## The Disabled Help the Disabled



“Healing the wounded heart” on Pham Ngu Lao street, Hue city, is the workplace for disabled children to make a living and at the same time, to help hundreds of other children with congenital heart diseases.

The slogan “Healing the wounded heart” is printed on heart-shaped pincushions which come along with all of the souvenirs sold not only in Hue city, but also in the United States, Italy, etc.

### A lady with love for disabled children

The founder of “Healing the wounded heart” center is Marichia Simcik Arese – an Italian history professor who is the president of the US-based non-profit organization Spiral Foundation, which focuses on helping poor people with disabilities. Marichia shares with us her motivation: “Everyone has his or her own passion in this life. Some people may like fishing, for others it is playing golf. For me, I love disabled children, which is the reason for the birth of this workshop.”

*Some of the sample products produced by the disabled in the workshop*



Similar to other Westerners, Mrs. Marichia Simcik Arese first knew of Vietnam through the war. Her story, however, is unique in many ways. “Before 1975, I was a university student in Italy while the Vietnam War was in its peak of intensity. At that time, together with other pacifists, we took to the street to demonstrate our strong opposition to the American bombardment in Vietnam. In my hometown, Seveso, there was an Agent Orange factory which supplied this chemical for the US Herbicidal Warfare in Vietnam. The business was kept in complete secret from public. Not until a fire accident happened was the truth revealed. Being infuriated by this disturbing information, I marched on the streets together with other pacifists. I was arrested and from that moment on, Vietnam has been in my heart.” – Mrs. Arese reminisced.

Even though “Vietnam has been in [her] heart” even before 1975, not until 1998 was Mrs. Arese, who was the Vice-President of Spiral Foundation at the time, able to arrive in Hanoi to implement a project which helped H’mong children to make traditional souvenirs. These products were well favored by many American customers and the money generated from the sales enabled Mrs. Arese to help numerous H’mong people to have a stable job.



In 2003, through the internet, Marichia knew of Dr. Nguyen Thien Nhan – the manager of Office of Genetics Counseling and Disabled Children (OGCDC) of Hue Medical College. The office was seeking aid in order to provide heart surgeries for the ailing children as well as better the living conditions of the disabled ones. With the inspiration from the work that Dr. Nhan and OGCDL had done, Marichia came to Hue City and began a partnership with OGCDL to “heal the wounded heart.”

### **Turning trash into souvenirs**

In Hue, Marichia met the disabled children who lived in the Vocational Training and Job Development Center for the Disabled at 20 Nhat Le (which was called by another name: the Hope House). The Center is now “Healing the wounded heart” on Vo Thi Sau street.

*Pictures of children who receive Spiral-sponsored heart surgeries are included in the souvenirs*



Marichia first taught the children how to make silk products such as handbags and pillow cases. She then used recycled materials including beer cans, noodle and candy wrappers to cover the bamboo sticks. These colorful sticks were intertwined to shape beautiful baskets. Gradually, a wide range of products made from similar materials like bracelets, scarves, purses and picture frames, etc. all came out from this creative manufacturing method.

Soon after the children got accustomed to the process, Marichia designed and introduced new models to American and Italian markets. When customers showed interest in particular designs, the drawing would be sent to the children in Hue for production. Afterwards, the final products were distributed to many outlets of Spiral Foundation in the US.

Each product from the workshop carries the beautiful slogan “Healing the wounded heart” with its message in English: “When you purchase this product, you are embracing meaningful self-values as well as bringing hope and opportunities to many others.”

What makes the project special is its self-sustainability. 40% of the money from sold items covers the salary of the disabled and shipping cost. Another 40% is dedicated to OG CDC to sponsor heart surgeries; the last 20% is used for administrative expenses.

The products have been presented not only in Spiral Foundation’s outlets, but in many restaurants, and in national and international airports as well. For the past seven years, the Simciks’ house in Los Angeles has become the main store of products produced by Vietnamese disabled children.

Thanks to her husband – who is a sound specialist in Hollywood with his wide network, the project is becoming more popular, and many famous actors, actresses and directors from the “capital of movie industry” regularly place orders and advertise the products.

*“Healing the wounded heart” center on Pham Ngu Lao street, Hue City*



During the past seven years, the center founded by Marichia Simcik Arese has secured a stable monthly salary of 800.000VND to 1 million VND for the disabled children (the present average is over 1.5 million VND), not to mention other benefits such as lunches, health insurance, and social welfare insurance, etc.

Even more, she has been working collaboratively with OG CDC to fund more than 250 heart surgeries all over Central Vietnam, 20 Gamma operations for children with brain tumors, and treatment for many young patients in the pediatrics department of Hue Central Hospital.

### **Double the joy**

*By producing the souvenirs, Nguyen Van Hau enjoys being able to support himself while helping other children with heart diseases*





“My happiness is doubled day by day, month by month.” – says Nguyen Van Hau, a 25-year-old deaf-and-mute student of the workshop. Hau, whose mother passed away in his early childhood while father remarried, has worked at the workshop since its very first days and is now one of the best workers with a monthly salary of 1.7 million VND. “Since I started working and making a living with my own hands, my life becomes much more meaningful.” – Hau told us.

Similar to Hau’s case, Hong Lan, 33, with the same disabilities, shared with us her story as she is learning sewing: “Since I stayed here, I have always felt the double joy when I can earn money, have insurance and at the same time, contribute to saving lives of other disabled children like me.”

Nguyen Thi Lan Huong – the manager of “Healing the wounded heart” center recalls her joyful moment with the students: “Sometimes we ask each other: Isn’t it so great that the disabled like us can do something meaningful in this life?”

“In my opinions, philanthropy does not mean donating money of the rich to the poor. I do not do that. As you can see, the disabled themselves are paid for their hard work. It is them who are the saviors of the wounded hearts. Their self-confidence is derived from both the ability to self-support and to help others.” – Marichia explains.

“The customers have also four benefits: owning beautiful high-quality traditional products of Vietnam, giving the disabled a stable job, help healing the wounded hearts and cleaning the environment.”

*“Healing the wounded heart” is printed on a heart-shaped pincushion attached to every souvenir*



With this meaningful message, the high price of these products does not discourage their customers. On the contrary, Spiral’s customers always come back with complete satisfaction and happiness. Thanks to these gorgeous products made from “trash”, the list of heart surgeries for young patients is extended day by day, and the double joy of the disabled workers continues throughout years.