

Black clouds cover the blue sky. Strong winds blow the last leaves of autumn off the branches. I stand alone in a familiar position, at a window in my classroom. The new school year is approaching but I will no longer be here. The United States, which is half the world away from this place, is my destination. My dream of studying abroad is coming true; yet it will mean that I will be separated from my closest friends.

Two years ago, on a rainy day like today, in the same classroom, at the same chair, I also stood alone. But the difference from that day two years ago to today is that then, I had no friends. My friends had all gone to different schools. I was the only one of my close peers to attend this institution in University of Viet Nam, which was known for its top ranking in mathematics education as well as for its heavy workload. My classmates in this new school scored the highest math scores of all the students in their provinces. Their only goal, it seemed, was to rank within the top ten students of the country, and so they studied mathematics every spare moment of the day. It seemed the words “playing” and “chatting” simply did not exist for them. I barely had the chance to talk to them. I felt terribly lonely in my new school.

To me, school is not only where students come to gain knowledge but also a place for them to communicate and to discover other people and themselves. As class president, I came up with a plan to bring my classmates together. The plan consisted, quite simply, of holding a music competition. At first no one, besides my music teacher, supported the plan. Over time, however, people began to warm up to the idea.

The competition began with a performance from my music teacher and me. With the sonorous sounds from the Trung (a traditional instrument) played by Mrs. Tinh, I sang the song, “Dance in Highlands”:

In the beauty of nature and mountain,

Under the light of the sun

Beside the greatness of the forest

We sing and dance together....

My attempt to dance and sing as tribal people do in the Highlands roused the true Highlanders in my class. They came straight to the stage. Hand-in-hand, shoulder-to-shoulder, we soon became a flood of melodies and friendship. The performance ended in a roar of applause.

Before long, others began to feel free to express themselves. A boy from Northern Mountain picked a leaf. He kept it near his mouth and used it skillfully as an instrument. Four girls from Me Kong Delta participated with a southern folk song. They were the most impressive performances that I had ever seen in my life. In this competition, everyone turned out to be a winner.

The success of the competition surpassed all of my expectations, and was the topic of many conversations later. Because of this one event, the distance between my classmates was shortened, the relationship was tightened, and the atmosphere in the classroom from that point on became warm and friendly.

Two years have passed swiftly by. The morning my peers and I discussed mathematics problems, the noon we had lunch, and the afternoon we played soccer together now belong to the past. Soon I will be attending a university in the United States, half the world away. But the promise to sing the folk songs of my friends in Swarthmore College, and to play the leaf horn that I made before leaving, will forever persist.