

This one I wrote about my passion for social activities, in particular coaching the orphanage basketball team. Through the process, I learned that you are only happy when you can make others happy. Lonely happiness is never enjoying.

“Anh, the English department has great expectations for you this year. You must win the national English competition. It shouldn’t be hard; after all, you studied in the US for two years! Think how embarrassing it will be if you lose to someone who learned their English in Vietnam.”

The fall semester had barely started, but I was already overwhelmed with work and responsibility. I was to bring home an English Olympiad medal, while simultaneously catered to my other classes, the Vietnamese university entrance exams, and my American college applications. How could I explain to the children at the SOS village that I wouldn’t be able to coach their basketball team anymore?

My passion for social activities sprouted from my grandmother. I can still remember those hot summer afternoons when grandma and I exchanged thoughts about our family, life, and her favourite topic- Buddhism. Grandma explained to me the philosophy of Buddhism, which is living a sympathetic and benign life, and urged me to care for the plight of others who were not as fortunate as I was. She often took me to the local orphanage to visit kids she adopted. I grew up caring for everything there was to care for- my family, my friends, my pets, even my shoes! Then in 10th grade, I set up a group of volunteer students at the SOS

village. The life of the children of this village are reflections of social evils, of parents' abandonment, of ill-treated fates. Unfortunately, I belong to an education system that evaluates its students through their academic achievements. My parents, also my long-time supporters, feared that all my effort would become unnoticed in an environment as academically driven as in Vietnam. Yet, I continued to pursue my "life-gospel". For me, it is moment like this that makes us human beings; we aren't just individual entities concerned with our own goals and not aware of other people.

I am now a senior. Before the school year, I had anticipated what was to come. But what I am now experiencing has exceeded even my wildest imagination. Winning the English Olympiad isn't my only obligation. My desire to study in the US put even more pressure on my shoulder. Late night battles with SAT critical reading are now the norm. Nevertheless, there still exists the chance that by April, I will not be accepted into any institution. One more item was then added on to my list of burdens- college in Vietnam. Every year, 1 million of Vietnam's brightest students compete for 130,000 university seats. I am at the center of this pressure cooker. As the school year rolled on, I found myself in a state of total distraction and diffusion, hardly able to keep my mind in one direction before I am pulled in thousand others. My friends would now find me in the hallway accompanied by the "Blue CB" book or reciting a poem from the revolutionary era. Afternoon basketball games are now replaced by sentence completions. I was fully concentrated on the academic arena.

-“Reng , reng”

-“Hello, Anh's talking”

-“ Anh, where have you been? The kids are missing you!” It was the familiar high-pitched voice of the director of the SOS village.

- “ Uhhhhhh..... I’ll try...” I knew it was difficult.

For the first few days, I did come, although reluctantly. But then the kids saw less and less of me until I supposed a temporary stop to my activities would serve my situation best. Mid term exams were on the horizon.

One lovely October day.

Minh approached me with a paper in his hand. “ I know it might be shocking, but please stay calm”

It was my mid term history test. I made a quick grasp of the sheet of paper that was covered with red markers. A SIX. For the first time in my life, my mid term was a 6. I smiled. Minh frowned. He couldn’t understand what I was smiling about.

“Reng reng”, this time it was not the phone, it was the school bell.

I tilted my head backwards towards my pal: “ Minh, how about SOS”

“ Man, what are you up to? We have our physics mid term in two days!”

I sprinted out of my classroom with my basketball in hand and cycled swiftly across town to the SOS village.

“Bom (my nickname), where have you been? Do you mean to give us more time to practice

on the jump shot you taught us last time?” the children yelled out on the sight of me.

“Shall we play,” I shouted out. The ball flew high in the air and dropped in the hoops beautifully: “SWASH.” How I love to hear that sound!