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## Aussie gives hope to the blind



**Raising awareness:** ACCV student Nguyen Thi Hong (centre) and Alison Vidotto (right) speak with school children in Ha Noi about the daily lives of blind people in the community. — Photo courtesy of ACCV

by David Mann

Imagine not being able to see. Then imagine living in a remote village, your survival entirely dependent on another person, unable to go to school or have the opportunity to interact with other human beings. Now imagine that is your life for eight years.

This was everyday life for Ha Minh Quan, a young man from a village three-hours drive from Ha Noi.

Quan's eyesight began deteriorating in the fifth grade because of an undiagnosed and untreated condition. There were limited medical services available for the once-enthusiastic student, who had loved reading and playing in the schoolyard.

A chance meeting in 2007 between Quan and Australian mother-of-six Alison Vidotto would become a major turning point in both their lives.

Vidotto, chief executive officer of the Brisbane-based, family-run engineering business, Vidotto Group, had visited Viet Nam the previous year on a family vacation. After spending time with underprivileged children at a local orphanage, the family returned home determined to do more. That year, the Australian Charity for the Children of Vietnam (ACCV) was born.

A former English language teacher, Vidotto saw an opportunity for vocational education to help break the cycle of poverty for disadvantaged young people, both blind and sighted.

"For some, it is only their eyes that don't work. Their brains are healthy, individual and amazing and, like my own children, I want to see them reach their potential," says Vidotto.

"If there is a teacher, a lawyer, a social worker inside those minds, then let's support that dream. Everyone should be given that opportunity."

After two years of planning, fundraising and sending countless emails to blind education experts around the world, Vidotto developed an English language and IT programme for blind students. In 2009, Quan and nine other blind students attended their first English language class in Ha Noi.

Five years on, ACCV now runs English language and IT classes in five districts around Ha Noi in partnership with the city's local blind associations. The curriculum, which includes modules on grammar, punctuation and syntax, has been devised in Australia and is taught by English-speaking volunteers.

When I meet Vidotto for the first time in Ha Noi, it is evident that painstaking effort has gone into making these classes a reality.

Braille templates are carefully developed and manufactured in Australia, before being brought to Viet Nam to make worksheets for the students, Vidotto says.

In addition to its English Language and IT Education programme, or ELITE, the charity sponsors disadvantaged students completing their studies at high school and university. A partnership with the Vietnam Paediatric Hospital, allows it to deliver vital medical care to seriously ill children.

The impact of these programs has been profound, says Vidotto.

"It's been amazing to see these once shy and withdrawn people become confident and develop personal goals and ambitions," she says.

For Quan, the classes have become as much about building friendships and a community for blind students, as they are about learning.

And the results speak for themselves. After just one year, Quan was a fully qualified massage therapist. He could travel independently and was even taking his girlfriend on dates.

Now the proud owner of a new laptop, he will complete an IT traineeship this year, and become a step closer to gaining full-time employment.

For many other students, the classes have offered a pathway back to school or university, arming them with braille notebooks and a fresh appetite for learning.

Pham Thi Hue, who attends the charity's Hai Ba Trung class, is now a top student at the Hanoi University of Science and Technology. Two students, Tran The Dat and Nguyen Thi Hong, even travelled to Australia recently to complete a course in advanced Braille and computer training.

These success stories have sent ripples through Ha Noi, inspiring more blind students to join the classes. Quan, Dat and Hong, whether they like to admit it or not, have become role models to their peers, and even assist younger students with their English and computer skills.

With these milestones under her belt, Vidotto insists that more needs to be done.

"Our ultimate goal is to one day provide an educational and social centre where young blind people can complete vocational courses, join a braille library, take part in English clubs, or just hang out with their friends.

"I'm inspired by these young people everyday, so I'm confident that one day we can get there."

To find out how to get involved or to donate, visit [www.accv.net.au](http://www.accv.net.au). — VNS

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