

Vietnamese Alumna Confronts Conflict Issues Resulting from Warfare

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HANOI, Vietnam -- Thao Nguyen, a 2004-2005 alumna of the J. William Fulbright Student Program, is an advocate of Vietnam War-related humanitarian issues and also a leader of alumni activities in Vietnam. Nguyen has studied international relations in both the United States and Vietnam, and has worked on a variety of international issues. Most notably, Nguyen has worked to address the issues of dioxin contamination and landmine removal, in Vietnam, through previous collaboration with members of the U.S. Senate and current work as the country director of the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVAFA).

As the youngest person to receive a Fulbright grant in the program's 15 year history in Vietnam, she completed a master's degree in international relations at American University, in Washington, DC. To complete her master's thesis, Nguyen spent time in Vietnam conducting field interviews of hundreds of Vietnamese families still affected by dioxin, landmines, and other remnants of the Vietnam War. During her Fulbright, she also took time to lecture at American high schools and universities concerning U.S.-Vietnamese relations. She was also active in U.S. Department of State exchange groups, such as the Institute of International Education's (IIE) Washington, DC, social network.

After her Fulbright, Nguyen applied her thesis research by working with U.S. Senator Patrick Leahy's office to develop an advocacy strategy for dioxin remediation projects in Vietnam. Her efforts contributed to the unprecedented signing of appropriations funding by former President George W. Bush, on May 26th, 2007. This funding went toward both remediation of dioxin at contaminated sites and health programs in communities near affected sites.

Nguyen's work on conflict issues in Vietnam holds special meaning for her. "My house was just 13 miles from the border with China, and through my early childhood sometimes at night we could see the red glow of war. As we grew up in Ha Giang, after the Vietnam-China conflict ended, we would hear stories



Thao Nguyen (center) in a business exchange forum during Prime Minister of S.R. Vietnam Nguyen Tan Dung's visit to Washington D.C., June 2008



Thao Nguyen and a landmine victim in her hometown Hagiang on the border with China

of many people being killed by left-over mines. And even today those mines continue to take lives and restrict farmers' access to land [and] threaten villagers.”

Now, several years after her work with Senator Leahy's office, Nguyen is the country director of the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVAFA). She is the organization's first country director born after April 1975 (the end of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War), and leads efforts to advance economic development assistance for victims of war, support rehabilitation programs in numerous war-torn countries, and examine a multitude of other conflict-related concerns. In nominating her for the director position, foundation president Bobby Muller said, “It is with confidence that VVAFA agreed to hand over the reins to her.” Her leadership abilities are seen as, “not just for the benefit of our organization, but for community members we are committed to assisting.”

When asked why she focuses her efforts on issues concerning a war ended several decades ago, Nguyen said, “We cannot avoid but be reminded of why humanitarian assistance in mine action and dioxin remediation is so important. Children continue to be killed by landmines, unexploded bombs, and born with deformity due to possible exposure to on-going contamination of dioxin level residual in the soil in the former military bases. Month by month the death toll creeps up, unobserved by many but painfully noticed by the communities whose people are taken.”

Nguyen also finds time to participate in alumni activities in Hanoi. She has set up informal networks of Fulbright and Hubert H. Humphrey fellows of both U.S. and Vietnamese backgrounds. She has arranged several film screenings of movies with relevance to U.S.-Vietnamese audiences, including Mai's America and Music Within. She has also hosted meetings and discussions covering topics of interest to returning Vietnamese exchange participants.

In July 2009, Nguyen joined nine other Vietnamese alumni to participate in the State Alumni Festival, which took place at the National Library in Hanoi. The festival showcased the work of Vietnamese alumni in their respective fields of research through speeches and exhibition galleries. The event attracted a large public audience that included people from government agencies, NGOs, and universities as well as alumni.

Aside from handling issues related to dioxin's legacy in Vietnam, Thao Nguyen also has experience working with international experts on microcredit programs, education reform, public health, and food security. She is married with two children and is a road-biking and table tennis enthusiast.