

Phước Thiện: A Non-Profit Primary School

While the Teachers Fellowship program is our core focus, we at AMA periodically select external educational programs in Vietnam that are financially needy and deliver meaningful and tangible impact in the local community. In such instances, we raise a segregated pool of capital that is earmarked for supporting a particular educational project on behalf of donors, which is distinctively separated from the funds raised exclusively for the Teachers Fellowship program activities. One such external program is a non-profit primary school called "Phước Thiện" located in District 7 of Ho Chi Minh City. The story below summarizes our experience and assessment of "Phước Thiện" during our visit on 17 January 2014.

I want to share an amazing story with you regarding Miss Thu Thảo and her non-profit primary school in Ho Chi Minh City, which we visited on 17 January 2014.

Twenty three years ago, Miss Thảo saw that kids in her neighborhood could not read nor write. Because these kids and their parents moved into the city from surrounding provinces to work as migrant laborers, they did not have "household papers" and therefore were not allowed to attend local public schools in the city. These were poor families. The parents had to work all day to earn money, while the kids were just hanging out. Miss Thảo herself also grew up in a poor family and her education ended at 9th grade due to poverty. Out of love and compassion for these kids and their families, Miss Thảo decided to educate them by opening a non-profit primary school in her own home (see attached photo). She wanted these kids to have an opportunity for higher education despite their difficult circumstances. She applied and later received approval from the Department of Education for the opening of her school - "Lớp học tình thương Phước Thiện," or "Phước Thiện" in short form. Miss Thảo has been running this school and financing all the costs with her own money for the last 23 years! Because these students' families do not have household papers, her school does not qualify for any government funding.

During our 3-hour visit last Friday, we learned that the school has been doing an amazing job and playing a critical role in its local community. Firstly, the school is well-organized. All the students wear school uniforms and are very well-behaved. The 1st and 2nd graders are located on the ground floor facing the street, effectively in Miss Thảo's living room, while the 3rd and 4th graders are sitting upstairs on the covered rooftop (see photos). The students come to the school at 6am, study through the morning, take a shower and then take a nap at school at midday. They continue studying through the afternoon until their parents return from work to pick them up. Secondly, the school provides a quality education. The student-teacher ratio ranges from 8-to-1 to 15-1, versus 35-to-1 or 40-to-1 in the local public schools. There are approximately 50 students at the school, with 3 teachers hired and paid for by Miss Thảo. What is even more amazing is that these 3 teachers were once educated by Miss Thảo many years ago and decided to come back to help her despite very low salaries. Miss Thảo's students follow the same academic curriculum as the public schools and must meet the same standards in terms of grades and exams. We then learned that the students at Phước Thiện have done very well in standardized tests in the past and generally outperform against their peer groups in public schools. I was thoroughly impressed during the tour and took some pictures and videos to share with you.

After Miss Thảo returned from working in the market at 11am, I sat down for a business talk with her in order to assess the school's suitability and eligibility for AMA's support. She does not know what AMA does and what our full intentions are. After all, she has been surviving on her own as a widow all these years. I asked her about her monthly revenues and expenses. She basically makes some income from (1) rental income by renting out 2 rooms in her small house and (2) selling food and drinks from a street stall in front of the school (see photo). She used to manage a vegetarian restaurant, but she sold it and moved to District 7 to her current house. She is older now and her earnings power is down. Thankfully, starting 3 months ago, one Vietnamese family has been donating 5 million VND per month (or ~USD 230) to the school for her to pay the salaries of the 3 teachers (one teacher gets 2 million VND per

month or ~\$93; 2nd teachers gets paid ~\$64 per month; 3rd teacher receives ~\$68 per month). Miss Thảo doesn't even know who this family is by name or how to contact them. They simply send a person to deliver the money to her monthly. The family can stop giving tomorrow and she would have to cough up the money herself somehow. At the same time, her expenses are climbing. Miss Thảo literally pays for all the expenses (except for the teacher salaries), ranging from school uniforms, school supplies, electricity, water supply, books, etc. She also helps the kids' families when they are in need, such as when a kid needs to go to hospital due to illness or injuries from an accident. The escalating expenses recently forced her to cancel her 5th grade class. At one point, she hired an experienced teacher from one of the public schools to introduce more subjects so as to better prepare her students for national exams to get into middle schools, but the teacher charged her ~USD 200 per month while coming in to teach for only a number of hours per day over only 3 days a week. She also noticed that the teacher did not show sufficient love or genuine care for her students. As a result, she decided to maintain 4 grade levels only and the 3 existing teachers.

After a while, I asked Miss Thảo the following question: if you were to receive a donation today, what would you do with the money? Miss Thảo knew the answers immediately. She needs financial support to pay for the daily meals of each student, the utility bills, and a small reserve for medical emergencies for the kids if there is any money left. She took out a pen and a piece of paper to do the math for me. Recently, given her financial situation, she thought about charging parents 10,000 VND (~ \$0.46) per day for each student's meals. However, she knows that these parents are very poor and she is reluctant to do that. As a result, she would rather use donation money to cover this expense (~11 million VND per month, or \$511 per month). Secondly, her utility bill is about USD 84 per month. In total, these two items add up to USD 595 per month. The more I understood about her situation, the more I realized that her school needs serious financial and moral support for it to be sustainable. She also voiced similar concerns given her age and escalating costs. I then told her that I was deeply touched by her compassion and dedication over the past 23 years. As I said these words, tears started rolling down my face and I had to recompose myself. I was impressed by her spirit and generosity despite being not financially well-off herself. I saw the pure beauty of her humanity in front of my eyes. I then told her that AMA would donate USD 600 per month to support her school. She was visibly shaken when she shook my hand with both of her hands. She also shed tears as we sat there together with Miss Minh from AMA. She told us that the school has never received any financial support from any organization such as AMA in the last 23 years. She had to pay for everything so as not to burden the poor parents of her students. I am proud of the Vietnamese family that recently started to contribute 5 million VND per month to pay the teacher salaries, and I am also proud to pledge support to Miss Thảo's school. I wish I had a Miss Thảo in my neighborhood when I was just hanging out all day while my father was outside trying to make a living in order to feed me and my two siblings.

At this point, I'd like to ask if our friends are interested in donating some money to support this cause. AMA has already made the commitment to give USD 600 per month or USD 7,200 per year to Miss Thảo's school and we will raise this money somehow. We are also thinking about collecting Vietnamese books and building a small library for the kids. We may also support or organize some field trips for these kids because they only take one field trip per year or per every 2 years. We will keep you updated on our additional efforts later.

Your donation will go directly to this educational cause, which supports primary education. It is separated from the pool of capital that is used to support AMA's scholarship and development programs at the University of Education in HCM City, which supports tertiary education.

Please let me know if you are interested in lending support to Phước Thiện. We are happy to take you there for a visit during your next trip to Saigon.

On behalf of everyone at AMA, thank you for your consideration and support.

Please see attached video and photos.

Best Regards,

Peter Mach

22 January 2014



Street view of the school. Miss Thảo sells some food and drinks in front of the house to make income to pay for some of the school's expenses.



The living room is used as a classroom for 1st and 2nd graders. They were learning phonics when I sat down for an hour.



The 2nd floor outdoor area was converted into a classroom for 3rd and 4th graders, who face different directions. Plastic drapes are used to reduce sunlight and heat. This teacher came out of this school.



These students are very studious and smart. The school gives them free uniforms and school supplies, as well as meals and showers. The kitchen is located in the back section.



The students were napping on the floor and on top of desks while we were speaking with Miss Thảo for an hour.



Miss Thảo is in the middle, with Miss Minh on the right. Miss Minh is a teacher who graduated from the Univ of Education and introduced AMA to Phước Thiện. She is now part of AMA and the coordinator for this project.