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Social Justice



Philip MacLaurin teaches English for children at the Binh Trieu warm shelter run by the Friends for Street Children association, which serves children in poverty or in need. (Mary Nguyen Thi Phuong Lan)



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The happiest human beings share love or all they have with others, especially with the poor, or homeless, or disadvantaged children.

The Friends for Street Children association, or FFSC, was founded in 1984 by Thomas Tran Van Soi. Presently, the association has four centers (Binh An, Binh Trieu, Binh Tho and Luu Minh Xuan) and one "warm shelter" in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Yearly, these centers have welcomed a large number of displaced children who have migrated to Ho Chi Minh City from rural provinces. Most of them are from poor families, or difficult situations.

Happily, Friends for Street Children has also welcomed many volunteers from inside and outside Vietnam, who come to FFSC centers to share love with children through gifts, to play with them, or (most importantly) to provide them with the chance to gain knowledge, and develop their potential and life skills so they can have a better life in the future.

One of the volunteers that we most admire is Philip MacLaurin, 60, from London, England, and his wife Frances MacLaurin, 54, from Scotland. They are Catholic, and have a great affection for the poor children in Vietnam.



Frances MacLaurin playing with children in the Loveable Camp summer program for street children at Dam Sen Park (Provided photo)

They live in Ho Chi Minh City and have been doing volunteer work with Friends for Street Children for about 12 years. They truly love the poor children, as well as students in Vietnam, and generously finance scholarships or support other needs to help these children have better lives and brighter futures. Although they must work hard to earn a living in Vietnam, what they do have they use to do charitable works for the poor children in Vietnam.

Philip came here to work as a director of Premier Oil's Vietnam branch in 2006, and just retired in June 2020. Since he is not working for the company anymore, he told Sister Mary (who is in charge of caring for the orphans at the Binh Trieu warm shelter) that he would have more time to do charitable works. “I really thirst to help the poor young students, show them how to get a good job, or how to achieve success in their life in the future."

When he was working from Monday to Friday, he spent two days on the weekend to do volunteer works in some of the Friends for Street Children centers. For example, every Saturday he taught English to younger children from 3 to 10 years old, at the warm shelter in the Binh Trieu center. These kids love to study with him because he is very friendly and creates a pleasant learning environment, not forcing them. They especially love his teaching hour when he uses video clips, nice pictures, and English songs like "Baby Shark" and the "Finger Family Song" ... things that help kids remember their lessons and relax after a week of study. In fact, the aim of his teaching hour is to bring joy to children, and it also relaxed him after a hard work week.

Even more wonderful is his wife Frances, who came with her husband to Vietnam; she is a full-time volunteer, doing only charitable works. On weekdays, she teaches free English for adult children (grades six to 12) at Binh Trieu's warm shelter and at Stephan (another warm shelter in Ho Chi Minh City that is not an FFSC center). She is a psychology teacher, and knows how to encourage children to study. She usually has prizes for children who achieve in her classes. Or she might reward them by taking them to the supermarket to choose any gifts they like, or by taking them to get fast food like pizza, spaghetti, or fried chicken at a restaurant. The children have never eaten such dishes, and are very glad to study with her.

Realizing the affection that the MacLaurins have for them, the children are very joyful and happy to see them. When they come to any Friends for Street Children center to teach or attend events, the children say “hello” loudly, then run up and hold them with welcoming hugs. The children truly love them, and consider them like their parents.



The MacLaurins give Tet gifts to the children from families in need. (Mary Nguyen Thi Phuong Lan)

In addition, every year the MacLaurins provide scholarships for poor students with good grades in the university. They also help with gifts like money, rice or oil for children whose families are in difficult financial circumstances for the Vietnamese Tet holiday at the end of the year. They particularly like to give their share of contributions in the form of educational programs for the poor children in Friends for Street Children.

We sisters, teachers and volunteers of the Friends for Street Children program really are grateful to Phillip and Frances not only for loving the Vietnamese children and giving significant contributions for our program, but also for giving Vietnamese children a good impression of foreigners.

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We are proud to have zealous foreign volunteers like them, and consider them wonderful role models for us to imitate in serving and loving the poor children. We particularly learned about their generosity and love for children in Vietnam when we did an interview with them:

> ***Nguyen:*** **What motivates you to love the poor children in Vietnam?**
>
> *MacLaurins:* We are very privileged in our lives; we had a high-quality education and good jobs. Now we feel we have a lot to offer in terms of our life experience, knowledge and skills. We want to encourage disadvantaged children to achieve their potential and motivate them to have a better future.
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> **How do you feel when helping poor children in Vietnam?**
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> It is always a pleasure because the children are so appreciative, warm and joyful, but it is also heart-wrenching to see the very difficult situations that some children live in. Too many have substandard homes and need to work to support their families. However, if we can do even a little bit to make their situation easier or encourage them in their lives, that is very rewarding for us, and hopefully for them as well.
>
> **What do you want them to do when you support them?**
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> We obviously want them to succeed. For us, success does not mean being top in the class, it means achieving their potential, and being decent, hardworking young people, who have good values and care for themselves and others.

We thank God for sending the MacLaurins to the Friends for Street Children program; all of us — staff and children — pray for them every day. May God bless their charitable works, so that they can continue to bring love and happiness to others. May God bless them with pleasure in sharing their love with the disadvantaged children in Vietnam.

As St. Paul said, “Happiness lies more in giving then in receiving" (Acts 20:35).