

## VNAH's Outreach Mission In Central Vietnam

Danang City - On March 9<sup>th</sup> my colleague, Trauma Rehabilitation Specialist, Cameron Macauley from the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery (CISR) at James Madison University, and I had the good fortune to participate in a mass fitting for amputees in Tam Ky, Vietnam. When we arrived, some 200 men and women were awaiting their turns to have plaster casts made which would then be used to manufacture new, durable and very comfortable prostheses. They removed their old prostheses and I was astonished by these ancient, hand-made artificial legs constructed of wood, rubber, wire and cloth. Most of them had broken and had been repaired numerous times.

We were invited by Mr. Ca Tran, President of the Viet Nam Assistance for the Handicapped (VNAH), a US-based NGO, who sponsored the outreach event. Founded by Vietnamese-American philanthropist Ca Van Tran, VNAH regularly visits communities in rural Vietnam to offer free prosthetic devices and wheelchairs to people with disabilities. Its President, Ca served in the US Marines during the Vietnam War and went to the US in 1975. He found work washing dishes at a Mexican restaurant and was soon owner of the Taco Amigo chain in Northern Virginia. He has used much of his personal money to support programs for people with disabilities in Vietnam and is now interested in opening new projects in Myanmar.

“A new arm, leg or wheelchair makes all the difference in the world for these people,” said Ca. “It makes work, play and everyday activities possible and allows them to live with dignity and self-

respect. Nothing gives me greater joy than to see an amputee walks with grace,



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pride and comfort. Even though the situation is improving for people with disabilities in Vietnam, much more needs to be done.”

Today's event was an opportunity for amputees to be fitted for new prostheses, which will then be manufactured in VNAH-supported prosthetics workshop in Da Nang. The community of Tam Ky is home to many people affected by the Vietnam War and the UXO resulting from it, however access to modern mobility devices has been difficult. Of the two-hundred-plus amputees who appeared at the event, nearly all were using worn, outdated, home-made prostheses constructed from wood,

rubber, wire and cloth. Poorly-made devices of this type are uncomfortable to use and often lead to skin breakdown on a residual limb, as well as chronic back pain and joint problems.

After being fitted for a new prosthesis by having a plaster cast made of their residual limbs, many of these amputees will be transported to the workshop in Da Nang where the new prostheses will be carefully customized to their needs. They may also spend some time undergoing physical rehabilitation and learning to walk with the new device. Amputees who require upper-limb prostheses will learn to use their new hands to dress and feed themselves and to ride a bicycle or a motorbike. All of these services are provided free of charge.

These amputees were men and women who had lived for decades without the benefit of tough, comfortable prosthetic limbs that would tolerate physical abuse and exposure to weather. Their residual limbs were calloused and scarred from chafing inside poorly-fitted sockets. I could see the look for joy and relief at the thought of being able to work, play and take a relaxing stroll without feeling the pinch and cramp of a barely-adequate prosthetic leg.

I lost both my legs to a landmine in Somalia in 1993, and so I know what it means to walk on artificial legs. I have met thousands of amputees in countries around the world and I know how important these new limbs are to them. VNAH is providing mobility, comfort, safety and even beauty in the lives of these Vietnamese, many of whom never dreamt that they would ever be lucky enough to get a new prosthesis. It is a wonder and a profound delight for me to see such kindness in action.

Ca Van Tran recognizes the value of being able walk with dignity and grace, of being able to run after a soccer ball, of having a leg that won't buckle under your weight. Thank you, Mr. Ca, for your dedication to people with disabilities in Vietnam and around the world, and to your efforts to making their lives easier and better.



Amputees with home-made devices come to VNAH's outreach for new limbs