

The aftermath of Agent Orange

Local woman forms nonprofit to aid affected children



COURTESY JESSICA WILSON

Jessica Wilson in a class at the Thanh Xuan Peace Village in Hanoi.

"They understand
the big things.

They understand love."

— Jessica Wilson on
Vietnamese children adversely
affected by Agent Orange

By Kimberly Nicoletti
Aspen Times Staff Writer

Jessica Wilson knows what it's like to be disabled. Doctors amputated her leg five years ago after a car accident. But last month, she found herself surrounded by children who have far greater challenges.

Wilson, 24, who grew up in Aspen, spent three weeks at Thanh Xuan Peace Village in Hanoi, Vietnam. The "village" is one of 12 organizations a German nonprofit started in 1991 in Vietnam to help kids who have mental

and physical disabilities caused by dioxin in Agent Orange. Americans sprayed Agent Orange in the country during the Vietnam War. Now the Peace Village houses and helps children born with no eyes, shortened limbs or other deformities, as well as mental disabilities.

Wilson worked with a class of 30 children, teens and young adults with a wide range of mental challenges. Some were catatonic while others were able to hold a conversation but unable to retain any of the information for more than a few minutes.

"You go the first day, and you make all this



PAUL CONRAD/ASPEN TIMES WEEKLY

Jessica Wilson talks about her recent trip to Vietnam and the mentally disabled children she worked with.

headway, and you go the second day, and it doesn't matter because they don't remember," Wilson said.

She quickly learned, however, that love meant more to the kids than learning the alphabet. "Still, they understand the big things. They understand love. They can't remember the hug the next day, but they're so excited for the next hour. That's why you're there."

One day, she spent nearly eight hours calming down and resting with a

kid who was acting aggressively. The next day, he didn't recognize her. But it didn't discourage her, because while she was there, she saw how happy the children were to interact.

"There was absolutely no resentment toward Americans. It was like 'This is what happened, and we're trying to get over it, and thank you for coming.' The last thing they need is for you to feel sorry for them," she said. "It's not the kind of place you leave



COURTESY JESSICA WILSON

Jessica Wilson and some of her students at the Thanh Xuan Peace Village in Hanoi.



COURTESY JESSICA WILSON

The kitchen of the Thanh Xuan Peace Village.

crying, but you certainly leave thinking, 'What more can I do?'"

So when she returned home to Aspen, she made a plan to continue helping. She and her friend who lives in Germany, Alexandra Krockow, plan to form a nonprofit to help the Vietnamese kids this year, then expand their work to "other communities affected by hostile forces," Wilson said.

"The funding needed to make the Peace Village a hygienic and warm place for the children is minimal and can be raised in no time, even within our circle of friends, and so Jessica and I felt now that we have seen the place, know the children and figured that it is possible, there is no excuse anymore not to set up a nonprofit organization to make it happen," Krockow said.

Wilson has worked with Native Americans in Colorado and Japanese internment survivors, but this is her first large-scale project. After working with contractors, she and Krockow budgeted \$9,000 to rebuild the six existing bathrooms in the Peace Village, which she says are substandard: Many don't have toilets, there is no hot water, and the walls are moldy. The money also will provide compartments for food storage in the kitchen. Currently, rats can get into food easily, she said.

Though Wilson and Krockow thought hygiene stood out as a No. 1 priority, the headmistress' primary concern was keeping the kids warm. She said gloves and socks were the Peace Village's most des-

perate need, so Wilson and Krockow made that their next goal.

"It's a difference between having constantly cold fingers and toes or not," Krockow said.

To raise money before the women obtain nonprofit status, they have partnered with Journeys Within Our Community, a nonprofit based in Cambodia. They plan to develop a website within six weeks, then speak at small community events about the cause.

After providing adequate bathrooms, kitchen storage and warm clothes, they want to give the Peace Village startup money to launch a pharmacy, which would help the organization make a profit and become more self-sufficient.

"This will go a long way for them," Wilson said. "It's such a relevant issue to all Americans, no matter how you feel about that war. It seems to be an American responsibility, since it's repercussions from our war."

If she runs into obstacles raising money, she'll remember one Vietnamese girl in particular, who, despite having curled arms, wove intricately-pat-

terned friendship bracelets day after day. One bracelet took hours to create; still, the girl persisted.

"I hope to not let myself get frustrated ever again, just thinking about that," Wilson said, fingering one of the multicolored friendship bracelets. □

Kimberly Nicoletti's e-mail address is knicoletti@aspentimes.com

"It's such a relevant issue to all Americans, no matter how you feel about that war."

- Jessica Wilson

If you want to help ...

Jessica Wilson and Alexandra Krockow intend to raise \$9,000 to rebuild all of the six bathrooms at Thanh Xuan Peace Village in Vietnam. The organization acts as a school, hospital and orphanage for children mentally and physically disabled from dioxin in Agent Orange. Once they build bathrooms, they'll continue to solicit donations to buy all 100 kids coats and make sure the facility has enough blankets. Their third goal involves collecting money so the hospital can run a pharmacy and make a small profit to become more self-sufficient.

Though Wilson and Krockow intend on forming a nonprofit within a year, for now they will function under the nonprofit status of Journeys Within Our Community, based in Cambodia. Donations are tax deductible. For more information, contact Wilson at (970) 920-6704 or at jessjeanwilson@gmail.com.



CAROL DOPKIN REAL ESTATE, INC

122 WEST MAIN STREET, ASPEN, CO 81611 OFFICE: 970.920.1186 WWW.CAROLDOPKIN.COM

Best Value in Five Trees!



Ski-in/Ski-out with breathtaking views...

Magnificent 5 bedroom home features a private theatre, an artist studio, an Asian inspired spa, fabulous wine room, game room and much more! Over 9,500 sq.ft. of slope-side living space, offered furnished for \$9,375,000 ~ call for a private showing!

Listed by **Marion Ferrera**

Broker Associate

Mobile: 970.319.8726

marion@caroldopkin.com



Ski-in/ Ski-out Estate in Aspen Highlands!



Meticulously maintained, on the market for the first time

This stunning estate is very private with old world style and an ideal slopeside location! Features 4 plus bedrooms, a gorgeous great room and exceptional outdoor entertaining terraces and decks. Offered for \$7,900,000 ~ call Carol to arrange a private tour!

Listed by **Carol Dopkin**

Mobile: 970.618.0187

carol@caroldopkin.com

