

## Restless in Seattle

*By Minh Tri Nguyen*

Author's note: 'Chi' is a Vietnamese word that literally translates into 'older sister'. It is a word used to address an older female of your generation. 'Em' is a Vietnamese word that literally translates into 'younger brother/sister'. It is used to address persons that are younger than you. Because both words are used very frequently, I have decided not to omit them in this essay.

When I moved to Seattle for my summer internship, I was stranded in an entirely new place. I did not know anyone. Unlike school, the internship gave me much free time in the evenings, and as a result, I wanted to quickly find ways to do community service and to meet people. Being Vietnamese and having mentored Vietnamese children back home, I knew I wanted to do something similar in Seattle.



My search for such an organization led me to Helping Link and retrospectively, I wish that I would have found them right at the beginning of my summer, for Helping Link has created some very beautiful memories of Seattle for me. I was involved in their mentorship program for teenagers as well as their ESL tutoring program for newly immigrated Vietnamese.

I found the Helping Link organization through a website that provided volunteer-matching services. After a few emails and phone conversations, I met the program's Director, Chi Minh Duc, in her office one evening. On the very first day that I met the Helping Link organization, I met some of the teenagers that happened to stop by to help Chi Minh Duc with her immense paperwork. I remember the two inseparable Thuy Trang and Hai Chau, who burst out in laughter while entering Chi Minh Duc's office, and simply could not stop laughing although I was present in the office.

This moment, as trivial as it might sound, was what made me recall how much I enjoy being around teenagers and children, and I could see clearly that there would be exciting months to come. By then I could already see that Helping Link promised much fun and refreshing laughter. After the initial introduction and paperwork, we agreed that I would be mentoring a teenage boy by the name of Em Thanh.



Meeting with my mentee Thanh in the Seattle library was a little bit scary for me because I was concerned about whether or not Em Thanh would learn to trust me or consider me a friend. Thanh turned out to be very mature for his age, always eager to learn, and he was very pleasant to work with. I think I was fortunate to have Thanh as my mentee, for I can remember having less-motivated children in my previous mentoring experiences.

Thanh was very easy to talk to, despite my insufficient Vietnamese. Outside of our tutoring sessions, he was simply a very funny boy. We met about once a week, and we spent the sessions reading and writing English.

At that time, the children of the program were working on a group project, assembling a website about the Vietnamese culture in Seattle. Thanh wrote about Vietnamese history.

I must admit that it has been a very enriching experience working with Thanh, for he knew more about Vietnam than I did. How lucky I was to have learned so much from a younger person! In addition to wanting to spend more time with Thanh, I wanted meet the other teenagers. Luckily, there was a Helping Link picnic that seemed a good opportunity to accomplish both endeavors.

I was a little intimidated when I first drove down to the picnic but this quickly subsided once I arrived at the picnic. The teenagers were lively, playing games and having a barbecue by the time that I arrived, and they welcomed me in a way that I will not easily forget. With no hesitation to approach an elder, an ever-so-talkative mentee by the name of Quyen introduced herself to me with some twenty made-up names. I decided to remember her simply by her hairstyle. I assimilated quite quickly as I joined their games, and I even introduced some games that I remember from my mentorship program back home.



Teenagers and children have this immense power to brighten up your life, as long as you are willing to let them approach you. I really enjoyed being around them that evening, and we quickly started to make plans for new events. I started to love the kids, and I always looked forward to the activities that Helping Link had planned.

Helping Link has given me an immense joy with these children. The kind of joy that makes you smile all of the time.