

One Immigrant's Journey from a Dumpster Mattress to Changing Lives in Vietnam

Imagine being told at the age of nine that your mother cannot help you.

Cuong Chau's mother, a Vietnamese immigrant, articulated that reality to her son, a stark declaration that set the course for a life marked by resilience and commitment.

"We can provide food and a roof, but anything else - if you want to go to college, it's up to you."

This spurred a dedication within Cuong that delivered him to the position he holds today - impacting the lives of many in his homeland.

For him, education emerged as the most wholesome way out of poverty, creating a ripple effect that inspires and uplifts entire communities. And so, his mission began to deliver educational opportunities to the community he came from.

In my conversation with Cuong, he shared his defining moments and passion for starting his own NGO, a dream he pursued until he crossed paths with an organisation based in Central Vietnam - Children of Vietnam (COV) in December 2017.

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Seeking out volunteer opportunities within the NGO space always conjured conflicted emotions within me. As a white Australian woman, I feared falling into the 'white saviour' narrative. However, I am proven time and time again that listening deeply with undivided attention to someone sharing their origin story, their pain, and their triumphs is a beautiful act of service.

Children of Vietnam (COV), predominantly serving Central Vietnam, has a mission to lift children out of poverty by eliminating barriers to fulfilling their potential through wraparound services. These programs address the many challenges children in poverty face, covering early and long-term education, sound nutrition, healthcare, and clean water & sanitation.

With a desire to leverage my marketing skills for a project I deemed worthy, I found myself in the office headquarters in Da Nang. A humble two-story home turned staff office, hidden in a residential street within the city.

This was my second day in the office, the first spent interviewing staff members who began as beneficiaries of COV. One young woman, Tam Mie, was sponsored to attend school from years 6 to the end of university, and now works full-time as COV's accountant.

Today, I was asked to interview COV's most prevalent donor, Cuong Chau. Later, I would discover he played a significant role in Tam Mie's history with the organisation—a contribution he prides himself in as he affectionately refers to the children he's sponsored as "his students."

As the board director led me to meet Cuong, I encountered a man whose story and contributions would leave an indelible mark on my understanding of philanthropy.

"Hello, it's nice to meet you!" he extends his hand for introduction and I am slightly caught off guard by his American accent. "Charles is my western name, it's easier." He continues.

Cuong is an Actuary Science professional. When asked if he enjoys his work, he responds,

"It's not about the work, but what that work provides. I don't dwell on what I do for work, having money allows me to fund a purpose beyond myself."

That purpose, he explained, is directly linked to his luck—the good fortune of having had the opportunity to immigrate to the United States in 1985, sponsored by his uncle.

"I am no better or more deserving than these kids; it was pure luck that placed me in the U.S."

Initially growing up in a place where poverty was the norm, Cuong didn't realize his economic standing until stepping onto foreign shores. The stark comparison became apparent.

"I'll never forget that my mattress was from a dumpster," he recalls.

A symbol of never forgetting where you started from—the simple comforts overlooked in our Western worlds.

"Stress is a privilege," he believes. "Having more than enough in the Western world sort of gives us an identity crisis."

Somewhere between sleeping on a dumpster mattress and working at Arby's during college, Cuong knew he wanted to return to his homeland and give back to his community. Visualising himself as one child in a family unit of five siblings and the only one with the opportunity to immigrate, he felt compelled to return and help his other siblings.

Cuong's resilience led him to a Hope scholarship in Georgia, working odd jobs to support himself through college. Education became his ladder out of poverty, and it has been a catalyst for influencing his beneficiary focus.

The turning point came in 2017 when Cuong discovered COV. Sponsoring ten students through the Study Step program, he visited Vietnam in 2019, solidifying his trust in COV's impactful work. Cuong sponsored an additional ten university students, kickstarting a momentum that transformed COV's educational initiatives.

COV, in his eyes, bridges the infrastructure gap in Vietnam, providing opportunities for those who would otherwise fall through the cracks.

“Never forget the 2%. That’s my motto. And it means being involved more and contributing ideas and feedback to COV. Always doing more. I gave them a list of 14 things I wanted improved about the programs and I work with them to see this happen.”

Remembering the 2% for Cuong signifies going above and beyond the monetary value he provides to COV. It looks like bi-annual visits, developing workshops for the children to prepare them for a corporate landscape and confidence workshops.

Cuong breathes an air of humble confidence, and he wishes for the students to exude this same energy. "In the land of few opportunities, confidence makes a difference," he explains when asked why he places importance on confidence rather than other professional skills. Education breeds confidence and Cuong's passion bleeds into his purpose.

Personally, when I meditate on Cuong's life motto, I conclude that "never forget the 2%" translates to embracing the impact of the small positive contributions we make—especially when we may perceive them as unworthy. In a world that often feels daunting and dark, where resources are limited for one person to make a significant difference, the cumulative effect of the 2% philosophy becomes evident.

When prompted by my response, a friend once told me,

“People often get caught up in how to make their profession meaningful and fulfilling, but what if they used the money earned from their profession to give it meaning?”

He then told me how he pays for two children to attend school, whom he had met in South America years earlier. And I realised then that there is power in looking at right now—how can I contribute now? In a world that often seems overwhelming, with challenges too vast to tackle individually, the 2% philosophy offers an actionable solution—a reminder that even the smallest actions can create profound change.

Cuong's journey, as a Vietnamese immigrant to becoming a pivotal force in Children of Vietnam (COV), serves as an inspiration. In embodying the 2% philosophy, we recognise that contributing to positive change doesn't always require grand gestures or monumental efforts. It starts with a commitment to make a difference within our means, in our immediate circles, and in ways that align with our unique strengths.