



PHOTO COURTESY OF SWIM VIETNAM

Volunteer Vietnamese teachers and children in a Swim Vietnam pool at a secondary school in Hoi An

# Things going swimmingly for Scottish woman in Vietnam

Keeping it simple helps Joanne Stewart potentially save many children's lives, but absence of big funds keeps authorities from providing deserving support

By THUY VI

**F**our sixth graders drowned last week in a hydropower reservoir in central Vietnam.

As tragic as these deaths are, the greater tragedy is how often this happens. Official figures show that more than 6,000 children drown every year in Vietnam, a country with long coastline, numerous rivers and lakes, but apparently few swimmers or qualified swimming instructors.

A woman from Scotland is doing what she can to change this situation, believing swimming lessons for local children as well as adults will go a long way.

"These types of deaths could have been prevented if the children knew how to swim and survive in the water," said Joanne Stewart, who set up Swim Vietnam in Hoi An five years ago.

Located in the flood-prone province of Quang Nam, the club has taught more than 4,500 children to swim and trained around 120 adults as swimming teachers.

It holds eight classes every day for children between 6 and 14 years old.

"Ideally we like to teach younger children, as the younger we can teach them to swim, the quicker we can protect them from drowning," Stewart said.

The 41-year-old has never been a professional swimmer. She was

senior performance analyst at an investment management firm in Singapore when she decided to leave everything and swim into uncharted waters.

She was then training with the Tribob triathlon club in Singapore and through some chance conversations, learned that it was looking for someone to run a charitable swimming program in Vietnam where it had discovered a "huge" drowning problem. Stewart took it as her cue to quit her job.

"I was 35 and wanted to do something more meaningful with my life. I wanted to do something different and more adventurous."

The program was planned for three to six months at the time, but Stewart has managed to find many sponsors around the world and build a Vietnamese management team from local volunteers.

Stewart said that when she arrived in Hoi An, all she had was a telephone number of someone from the Hoi An Tourism Department. A meeting with the town administration was arranged and it approved her proposal to set up the club and introduced her to the education department.

"I realized that what was needed was very simple. To run a swimming program, you essentially just need three things. You need children, teachers and somewhere to teach them."

So she had the Hoi An Education



Joanne Stewart, director of Swim Vietnam

Department work with local schools to bring the children to her, while she contacted all the hotels with sport and recreation departments in town to see if they could lend their swimming pools and send a Vietnamese teacher, besides an Australian teacher who was her friend.

A number of hotels agreed for the club to use their pools.

And Stewart found Duong Van Thanh, then a swimming trainer at Palm Gardens resort who had been trained in the army.

"I have been supporting the program since the first days as I know it will help a lot. It enables the children to protect themselves, and they can share the swimming and water safety knowledge they learn from the club with their friends," Thanh said.

The 47-year-old taught many children and also trained teachers until he quit last year as his day job

was taking too much time.

But much other help has come along the way.

Stewart said she received some good swimming teachers from Australia at the beginning and they trained a few more Vietnamese teachers besides Thanh.

Then two "very important things" happened to the club, she said. The Vietnamese owners of Yaly clothing company in Hoi An built a swimming pool in a primary school for it, and, thanks to an Australian volunteer, the Australian National Body of Swim Teachers (AUSTSWIM) agreed that the club could run AUSTSWIM training courses.

Two of the senior teachers in the club have become the first Vietnamese to complete their training as AUSTSWIM presenters, allowing them to train new people as AUSTSWIM teachers, who are recognized internationally.

Doan Minh Trung, one of the two teachers, was pretty excited about his certificate.

"I want to teach all children in the country to swim, not only in Quang Nam," said Trung, who was recruited to the program in 2008 when he was a lifeguard at Victoria resort in Hoi An.

The 35-year-old is now manager of the program and works more like an instructor to the teachers and supervisor for the classes.

He said he used to work part-

time for the program while maintaining his personal business of organizing tours around town. But he has stopped the business.

"Our country has too many drowning deaths, among the top in the world, but we do not seem too concerned about it.

"As a Vietnamese, I will try to contribute to the program as much as I can, so it can help my communities," said Trung, whose 12-year-old son is attending the classes.

He said he gets paid by the program, but it is a small amount.

"There's not just me, but many people in the program accepting the charity income just so they can help."

Trung said he was inspired by seeing a foreigner coming to Vietnam to help local children.

"She works so hard. And helping her means helping our children.

"I am willing to go all the way with her. I will only stop when she has no money to continue."

Trung said Stewart's fundraising skills have won the program many sponsors including Paul Sadler Swimland in Australia, her former employer Capital International, and Vietnam Swans, which is an Australian Rules Football team based in Vietnam. Hong Kong Round Table just became a new sponsor by donating US\$8,000.

The club has been expanding. It has built a second swimming pool in Hoi An, and has reached out to three districts in the province including Dai Loc, Dien Ban and Duy Xuyen using above ground pools.

But Trung said the program will need more than an enthusiastic team and generous sponsors to keep going.

He said Swim Vietnam could become much bigger and help save even more lives with more involvement from the government, including financial support.

"I think that more people, especially parents, need to be more aware about the problem of drowning.

"The authorities should work with the schools and media so that people realize how important this is and what Swim Vietnam is doing to help solve this problem."

Stewart also said that she would love to have the government's attention to expand the program to other regions.

"I think the Vietnamese government should work with organizations like ours ... so that all children have the opportunity to learn to swim," she said. **VW**

**Donations to Swim Vietnam can be made directly through its website [www.swimvietnam.com](http://www.swimvietnam.com)**

- US\$20 sponsors one child through the entire program.
- US\$300 sponsors a whole class.
- US\$1,000 provides a teacher training course for 30 swim teachers.
- US\$8,000 builds an above ground swimming pool in a rural area.