



*Rotary Volunteers aid Hong Kong refugees.*

## A people not forgotten

by Fay Doyen Ellis

**H**ong Kong may be an exciting, cosmopolitan city to most of its visitors, but to the thousands of Vietnamese refugees held in its guarded camps, it is a city of frustration. Having escaped the oppression of their country, these displaced people wait in a sort of limbo for the world to decide their fate. They have no president or ambassador to turn to, no passport or place to call home.

But they do have Rotary.

By agreement with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, The Rotary Foundation of R.I. staffs the makeshift clinics of Hong Kong's camps with volunteer dentists. More than 590 Rotary Volunteers have served in 58 countries. In Hong Kong, their Rotary cards cover a glass-topped desk in the main camp clinic, the banners of their hometown clubs (26 so far) hang on its walls—a testament to the fulfillment of Rotary's pledge to reach across

oceans and past international boundaries to make life a little better for our fellow man.

That's not to say the going doesn't get rough along the way, as Dr. Robert Lacey, of the Rotary Club of Binghamton, New York, U.S.A., and his wife, Esther, discovered when they arrived in Hong Kong in April 1987 for a five-week stay.

As the Laceys soon learned, more than 10,000 Vietnamese wait in Hong Kong's camps for the day when their dreams of a new life in a new country may come true. Kai Tak is an open camp on the mainland where people are allowed to leave each day to work at jobs in the city. Chi-ma-wan and Hei Ling Chau are two closed camps built on islands in Hong Kong's harbor. These former prison camps are surrounded by chain-link fences and barbed wire; their inhabitants are not allowed to leave.

Each refugee family is allotted a sheet of plywood as its home in a triple-tiered labyrinth of teeming

humanity. A large family might get an entire bunk. There are no mattresses on which to lay a sleeping child, no doors or windows to close for a private moment. But worse than that, there is nothing to do. For these bright, talented people, many of whom left behind promising careers in engineering, medicine, art, and music, this is the ultimate humiliation.

Despite the hopelessness of their situation, Dr. Lacey found Hong Kong's refugees to be a gallant and hopeful people. But as he worked with children born in the camps (some seven and eight years old), and their courageous parents, Dr. Lacey found his working conditions less than ideal.

"Each morning we would leave the downtown YMCA where we stayed and head for one of the camps," he explains. "To reach the closed camps we had to ride on a government transport boat for 1½ hours. That left only four hours to work with the long lines of people

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DR. AND MRS. JØRGEN HØEJERSLEV

*Left: Children are mesmerized by Inge Høejerslev's demonstration of the proper way to brush teeth.*

who came for treatment each day."

All too soon, Dr. Lacey understood the dismay of his predecessor, Dr. Jørgen Høejerslev of the Rotary Club of Søllerød, Denmark. He saw children crying all night with toothaches and badly inflamed molars, while the hodgepodge of antiquated equipment slowed work to a snail's pace.

"If you raised a dental chair, it would blow the circuit and you'd have to trip it back on . . . then the lights would go out," recalls Dr. Lacey. "In one camp there was no examining light, so work had to be done by the light of a window, and that was only sufficient for two hours a day."

Other Rotary Volunteer dentists faced similar problems. Dr. Robert Liners, of the Rotary Club of Watertown, Wisconsin, U.S.A., describes a clinic he worked in during his 1986 trip to Hong Kong as "a small room already filled with storage boxes and indescribable clutter. Sterilization was an impossible challenge—everything was dirty and depressing."

Dr. Liners and his wife, Lois, also found it difficult to motivate the refugees to practice simple dental hygiene. "Many of the women and

*Thousands of refugees have been helped by Rotary Volunteers.*



*Ominous chain link fences and barbed wire surround the closed camps.*

children wear cotton pajamas all the time because there is little incentive to get dressed, or wear makeup, or brush their teeth," says Dr. Liners.

Lois was able to spark the interest of the children with the novelty of a giant set of false teeth and an oversized toothbrush. The gift of a toothbrush was a real treasure for these young refugees who could only call a handful of possessions their own.

Drs. Liners, Lacey, and Høejerslev all tried to brighten the lives of their captive patients with small gifts: a yo-yo for a child, embroidery yarn or a ball-point pen for an adult. Perhaps the most appreciated gift was a Polaroid snapshot. The process spoke of magic to the children; for the adults, the pictures were a chance to show loved ones left behind in Vietnam that they were alive and well.

The dentists eventually returned home, but they did not forget. Each one tried in his own way to reach out to those left behind.

Letters crossed the oceans; funds were raised to bring more supplies on the next trip. Dr. Høejerslev and his wife, Inge, even sponsored two young Vietnamese men, inviting them to live in their home in Denmark while they learned the unfamiliar customs and language of their host country.

But Dr. Lacey's thoughts kept coming back to the outmoded equip-

ment that had hampered his ability to help the refugees. With the support and encouragement of his predecessor, Dr. Høejerslev, and his successor, Dr. Harold Howard of the Rotary Club of Taradale, New Zealand, Dr. Lacey came up with a plan.

The first step was to draw up a list of the most essential equipment needed to make the camp clinics more functional. At the top of the list were dry-heat sterilizers needed to replace the outdated cold sterilizing solutions in each of the four clinics. Other badly needed equipment included operating lights, high-volume suction devices, and cavitrons to remove tartar buildup. The clinics themselves required new paint and flooring. The total cost: U.S. \$9,650.

*A seven-year-old Vietnamese girl examines Dr. Høejerslev's handiwork.*



Dr. Lacey wrote to each of the Rotary Volunteer dentists who had served in Hong Kong, asking donations for equipment. He also contacted the presidents of their respective Rotary clubs. Dr. Jorgen Theilade, a member of the Hong Kong Rotary Club and a professor at the Prince Philip Dental School, agreed to oversee the installation of new equipment. The Hong Kong project was on its way.

*[continued on page 57]*

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Dr. Jørgen Høejerslev at work in Hei Ling Chau, a closed camp. His North Vietnamese assistant left behind a promising career as an engineer in his oppressed home country.

letter to clubs that had not responded to his first request for donations, pointing out how close they all were to realizing their goal.

A call came in from Dr. George Ledger of Somerset, England, saying that his Taunton Rotary Club was sponsoring a "shop," or rummage sale, to benefit the project. Net result: 1,250 pounds sterling. The refugees had not been forgotten.

The final tally included contributions from 12 Rotary clubs and five Rotary Volunteer dentists from the U.S., Denmark, England, Germany, and New Zealand which, when matched by the Special Grant, brought the grand total for the Hong Kong project to U.S. \$12,912. It was enough to really make a difference in the quality of care at the refugee camps.

There are still plenty of problems to be resolved. As long as there are refugees with nowhere to go, there will be problems. But fewer children cry night after night with toothaches, fewer adults have to contend with the prolonged misery of an abscessed tooth, and new smiles abound—thanks to the dedication of Rotary Volunteers. ☺



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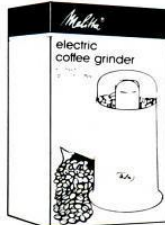


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# Glossary

## (1) Rotary Volunteers

Rotarians put Rotary's motto of Service Above Self into action every day and in every part of the world, generously contributing their time and skills to help others. Rotary clubs carry out service projects that address critical needs locally and often work with distant clubs to co-sponsor international efforts. Rotary Volunteers are vital to the success of this humanitarian work. The Rotary Volunteers program fosters active volunteer participation at home and abroad, drawing upon the spirit of community and global service that lies at the heart of Rotary International's mission.

The Rotary Volunteers program aims to:

- \*\* Increase awareness among Rotarians and non-Rotarians of volunteer opportunities in their own and other communities that require special expertise or skill;
- \*\* Assist clubs and districts in finding volunteers with skills that are unavailable locally and discovering the benefits of using volunteers in service projects;
- \*\* Help Rotarians identify volunteer opportunities available through projects sponsored by Rotary clubs and districts and other worthy organizations;
- \*\* Encourage and facilitate Rotarian participation in volunteer activities that foster understanding, fellowship, and goodwill;
- \*\* Improve quality of life and reduce economic disparity worldwide through education, health care, agricultural productivity, technology, sanitation, and potable water.

## (2) Vietnamese War Refugees in Hong Kong

After the Vietnam War ended in April 1975 with the Fall of Saigon, North Vietnam reunited the northern and southern halves of the country, many people began to flee out of fear of the new Communist Government. Many refugees headed by boat to nearby countries, initially Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the British Crown Colony Hong Kong. Many Southeast Asian nations had repulsed "boat people", but Hong Kong was one city that had kept the door open. Hong Kong received its first wave of Vietnamese refugees on 4 May 1975 (*see photo below*). The result, as Hong Kong Rotarians said, was inhuman over-crowding in one of the world's most heavily populated cities. Rotarians were working hard, though, to relieve the situation. Hong Kong Rotarians, in co-operation with the Government and other local service organizations, had prepared a film and an illustrated booklet explaining the plight of Indochina's refugees and Hong Kong's efforts to relieve the situation. The film and literature were distributed among the service organizations in the United States, stirring support for efforts to resettle the thousands of homeless refugees. Hong Kong had been one of the central disembarkation ports for Indochinese "boat people" in search of an open port and new home. The result was over-crowded camps filled with sickness, hunger, and misery.

Backed by a humanitarian policy of the Colonial Hong Kong Government, and under the auspices of the United Nations, some Vietnamese were permitted to settle in Hong Kong. The illegal entry of Vietnamese refugees was a problem which plagued the Government of Hong Kong for 25 years. About 15 refugee camps were set up in various locations to provide free shelter, food, medical services, educational classes, etc. The problem was only resolved in 2000. Between 1975 and 1999, 143,700 Vietnamese refugees were resettled in other countries and more than 67,000 Vietnamese migrants were repatriated.



COURTESY OF GEORGE CHOI

This article was edited by Herbert K. Lau (劉敬恒) (Rotary China Historian) on 1 July 2014.