

Local nonprofit spreads love of art and music in Vietnam

By Stephanie Turaj Staff Writer | Posted: Saturday, July 12, 2014 8:30 am

The per capita income in some poor areas of Vietnam is the equivalent of \$1 per day. School children are known to walk an hour each way to school, and many don't continue their education beyond the fifth grade.

Rock-Paper-Scissors Children's Fund, a non-profit founded by Sara Stevens Nerone of Peace Dale, gives impoverished Vietnamese children an opportunity to explore art and music – something they may not get otherwise. This summer, her family and several South Kingstown youth volunteers will travel to Vietnam to help run the programs and teach music camps to children.

“In Vietnam, the kids, especially those living in poverty, don't have opportunity like kids in the United States do to take music lessons,” Stevens Nerone said. “They don't have money to buy instruments and they don't have money to buy art supplies. So we thought this was a great way to be able to provide that opportunity to kids who have those interests.”

The group of nine will leave July 17 and return to the United States August 4. The volunteers will teach approximately 300 children in three villages, Son Tan, Suoi Cat and Cam Phuouc.

The half-day camps will focus largely on what Stevens Nerone referred to as “ethnic minorities” in the country. Vietnam has about 54 ethnic groups in different pockets of the country, but approximately 90 percent of the population are Kinh, the majority group. The remaining groups, the minority, are often the most impoverished, Stevens Nerone said. Rock-Paper-Scissors partners with the Vietnamese Red Cross to identify the areas of the country to focus on.

Rock-Paper-Scissors has a year-round program in Vietnam. The organization sponsors Vietnamese teachers, who instruct approximately 22 violin and cello students and 15 art students in the village of Cam Duc. In the summer, Stevens Nerone's family helps with this program, and volunteers will prepare the Vietnamese students for a concert for the local government. The volunteers also will teach larger camps in the three other villages.



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Hannah Beekman, Phoebe Nerone, Kaitlin Pothier and Sophie Nerone will teach music in Vietnam with Rock-Paper- Scissors this month.

“When you’re playing together, everyone has something to do; everyone has a part,” said Hannah Beekman of Peace Dale, a volunteer making the trip. “The end result is something that’s really nice.”

This is the first year they will bring the small group of volunteers, all South Kingstown residents: Beekman, Kaitlin Pothier, Robyn Pothier, Marina Cariello and Moses Leonard-Fitzmeier. Stevens Nerone’s daughters, Sophie and Phoebe Nerone, and her partner, Patrick O’Brien, an intern with Independent Newspapers, also will make the trip.

“I want to travel,” Beekman said. “But I don’t want to just go and be a tourist; I’d like to do something that can make a difference.”

The story of Rock-Paper-Scissors began about 15 years ago, when Stevens Nerone adopted her daughter, Sophie, in Vietnam in 1999 and later her daughter, Pheobe. In 2011 and 2012, Stevens Nerone returned with her two daughters and O’Brien to volunteer for seven months in Vietnam.

“While we were living there, Sophie plays the violin and Pheobe plays the cello, and they were practicing, and some of the kids heard them,” Stevens Nerone said. “They wanted to learn how to play. So that’s how we got the idea of starting a music school. We actually taught one of the kids there for seven months and now he’s a teacher.”

When the family returned, they were so inspired by this trip they founded the Rock-Paper-Scissors Children’s Fund. The organization raises funds through private donations and sales of crafts and Vietnamese merchandise online and at local events.

“It opens your eyes to another country,” Pheobe Nerone said of her time spent in Vietnam. “In America, here people are privileged to have a house and stuff; there maybe other people don’t have a place with a roof, or shelter.”

Rock-Paper-Scissors also sponsors a donation program called “bikes for girls,” which provides bicycles to Vietnamese school children who walk up to an hour to school each day, Stevens Nerone said. The organization will donate approximately 200 bicycles this summer.

“After being there, and really seeing the poverty in the country, we just really felt like we needed to do something,” Stevens Nerone said. “When we talk to the kids, we really see how they feel about playing music, how they feel about art, and how they feel about the music community we have created.”