

The XO Travels to the Vung Vieng Village Floating School in Vietnam



Imagine you are sitting on your comfy couch watching TV. You decide to tune in to 60 Minutes. They are talking about a non profit organization that is on the way to bring a low cost laptop to children in developing countries. You think that is a great idea and decide to learn more. Fast forward two years later and you are in the middle of a floating fishing village in Ha Long Bay in Northeast Vietnam. You have started a project to bring a number of these laptops to the only school in the village. While you are there you are tackling a variety of speed bumps that arise. These range from relatively easy to extremely challenging. As the days pass you can see the joy in the children and adults of the village. You realize that you have made a difference and changed their lives. You have changed their world for the better.

This is the story that Nancie Severs of New Hampshire relayed when she presented at the One Laptop per Child's Cambridge headquarters.

Hearing Nancie speak is inspiring. She brings to the table an incredible amount of heart and energy. Last year she visited the Vung Vieng Floating Fishing Village with her husband, Mark while traveling in Southeast Asia. She thought of the One Laptop per Child project and

she realized that she could bring the XO (the name that OLPC has given to their laptop) to this village with a plan. She says that if the XO laptops work out here "in the middle of the sea" where learning resources are limited, books are destroyed by the salty air, newspapers blow away or get wet, then she will be convinced that it can work almost anywhere. She was surprised that when she returned the villagers told her she was the first foreigner to ever come back to this village to do anything for the people. She was the first foreigner to ever sleep in the village. She slept in the small pearl shop for a few days at a time and worked from the mainland for several weeks.

She learned that school attendance drops dramatically as the children get older. She also learned that on the mainland there are Internet cafes where kids hang and use the computers. But kids are being left behind in the fishing village. Her plan is to ignite the children's learning experience with the XO. She hopes that the children will take this excitement all the way to high school and graduate. The OLPC VVV XO Laptop Project got off the ground because of two people in Vietnam. Mr. Tuyen Luong, the Vietnam project co-director, was Nancie's tour guide when she first visited the floating village. He has volunteered many hours arranging logistics, translating, and looking out for Nancie's safety in Vietnam. His boss, Mr. Dung, the owner of Indochina Junk, JSC, the ecotourism boat company with which Nancie first visited the



village, believes education will improve the lives of the village residents. His plan is to get the kids out of poverty and employ them. He told her that the villagers are thirsty for computers and learning. Together they quickly realized that they can help each other accomplish goals.

It's a three and a half hour boat trip from the mainland to the village. Floating docks connect most of the buildings that you walk across to get from place to place. Food is sometimes sparse (two cups of rice per day and sometimes a bit of fish). The parents in these places had never seen a computer. The only school in the village is cramped to say the least. The teaching style is rigid. Teachers lecture and the children are expected to absorb the information relayed. There are many problems in the village. However, the adults truly want their kids to learn. There is a lot of support for this project from them and the local government. The first time that Nancie was showing the XO to the children she showed them how it could talk. This was completely unexpected and every child broke out into laughter because they had no idea it would speak to them!



Nancie overcame many challenges along the way. None of the teachers at the school spoke any English. At first Nancie felt really crippled without being able to speak the language. But she managed. She discovered a young woman named Hong who had gone to high school on the

mainland. She spoke English and really wanted to learn more. Hong later learned how to use the XO and joined Nancie's team. Hong became an integral part of the team because she would be the one teaching the teachers how to use the XO. Another challenge was the endless meetings followed by more meetings before any action took place. Everything took a long time. This seemed to be part of the culture there. The people there work in a strict hierarchical way. It is very different than the Western collaborative approach to the workplace. In Vietnam everyone has a boss, everyone has a rank. How would she deliver solar power to a floating village? The teachers had to be shown everything on the XO. It has not been the learning style in Vietnam to poke around on their own and figure things out. With tenacity and finesse she was able to work with her team to bring many solutions to these problems to the community.

Opportunities lie behind challenges. The children clamored around the XO. There were not enough of them. Sometimes small fights would break out. Kids will be kids. Even the younger kids were learning learning much more advanced concepts than the alphabet and math basics. The kids learned they could build their own memory games with their own images! One time she was delivering a teacher training session. A fish



farmer from the community joined them. He was typing on the XO with one finger at a time. He seemed to struggle with comprehensive

language skills but was thoroughly enjoying the XO. Nancie was absolutely thrilled to teach him how to use it.

Nancie was often wondering how her plan can benefit the community. She learned that her project thrived when the residents were onboard. Through her work she was able to get the teachers, local government and businesses involved. A key question remains though. How are teachers going to use the XO to deliver their prescribed curriculum? She admits that she does not know the answer but she has some ideas. She thinks that the children will benefit by learning transferrable skills. The adults will benefit by learning about solar and other ways to produce renewable energy. She hopes the adults will realize: we can learn to use the XO. We can use it to create a letter, or a poster or a business plan for our pearl shop. During her time there Nancie realized that she cannot fix everything. She has to choose which problems to address.

Where does Nancie see this going? She hopes that she can secure some corporate partnerships. She hopes word will spread and that her



microdeployment can be replicated. There are seven fishing villages and she would love to see the XO go to each one. When asked what she needs she responded with a resounding desire for more XO laptops. Nancie and her husband, Mark Severs have generously underwritten the expenses to lay the infrastructure for the OLPC VVV XO Laptop Project.

The additional laptops need to come from donors. If someone wants to donate 100 or more of the XO then she will have one for every child in the VVV and can start a parallel project in another floating village. Small amounts of money will go a long way. Ten dollars will buy three green and white mice or go towards headphones for the XO.

In the words of Nancie Severs:

"To do this you have to be really gutsy! A little naive but naivety doesn't hurt. Was this the retirement I was expecting? No!

Would I do it again? YES!

Is it important? YES!

Is it worth it? YES!

You have to believe that you can just do it."

After her presentation Nancie showed me the first email that Hong had sent her. I realized that Hong had made a difference in me.

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Here are some further links regarding Nancie's work:

["I Have A Great New XO Project Idea! How Do I Make It A Reality?"](#)
by Nancie Severs

[Nancie's OLPC Vung Vieng Village XO Laptop Project Blog](#)

[The Vung Vieng Fishing Village Laptop Project Wiki](#)

Own an XO? Consider [donating](#) it to the Vung Vieng Village.