



Washington Fellow **Blair Burroughs** and PeaceTrees Vietnam

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Washington Fellow Blair Burroughs had a thirty-year career as a lawyer in Seattle. Fifteen years ago, he attended a lecture given by the co-founders of PeaceTrees Vietnam, a humanitarian §501(c)(3) nonprofit organization working in Quang Tri Province in central Vietnam to assist those whose lives and livelihoods are threatened by the explosive remnants of the Vietnam War. “I remember Danaan Parry and Jerilyn Brusseau vividly. Their compassion for the Vietnamese and Americans who continued to live with the devastating consequences of the war really resonated with me. And, Danaan, like my father, was originally a nuclear physicist by profession. I was intrigued by the idea of someone transforming himself from scientist to global activist.” Little did Blair know that he would be going through a similar career transformation 14 years later.

Inspired, Burroughs did volunteer work for PeaceTrees and then joined the board in 2007. “The good work of PeaceTrees appealed to me because of the times in which I grew up. The war in Vietnam defined my generation; it is the wound of my generation. The debate about the war created rifts between parent and child, friends and neighbors. But, whether one favored or opposed the war, the common ground for all was a desire for what was best for the Vietnamese people. The need to help those impacted by the war—Vietnamese and American—is barely

diminished from what it was four decades ago. I wanted to do what I could do to help.”

While he was on the Board, Burroughs was also in the midst of a successful career as a lawyer. Born in Texas and growing up in Idaho, he moved to Seattle in the 1970s to attend the University of Washington. After earning a bachelor’s in English and a master’s in Russian Literature, Blair graduated with honors from the Law School in 1978. After serving as a law clerk to the Chief Justice of the Idaho Supreme Court, he returned to UW Law to teach before entering private practice. Blair focused on civil litigation and municipal law at the firm of Lawler, Burroughs & Baker, P.C. He was named by Washington Law & Politics as one of its "Super Lawyers" each year from 2001 to 2007.

Yet, despite his success as a lawyer, Burroughs decided to embark on an entirely new career in the nonprofit sector. “Like many lawyers, I went into the law out of a sense of duty to the public. But, I began to feel that I had not done enough for others. So, a few years ago, I decided to devote the last of my working days exclusively to public service. It was time for me to do more to give back.” When he was 57, Blair enrolled in Seattle University’s Master’s in Nonprofit Leadership Program, graduating in 2008—thirty years after graduating from law school. Shortly after graduating, the position of executive director at PeaceTrees Vietnam opened up and the board asked Blair to assume the helm. He says it did not take him long to make his decision.

The idea for PeaceTrees Vietnam arose from a desire to turn sorrow into service. In 1969 an American, Daniel Cheney, was killed when his helicopter was shot down in one of the southern provinces. His sister, Jerilyn Brusseau, was heartbroken that she had lost her beloved younger brother. Instead of turning her loss into anger and enmity, she vowed that one day when the war was over she would work to build bridges of peace and friendship between the American and Vietnamese peoples. That day finally arrived 26 years later. In July of 1995, President Bill Clinton announced that diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the United States would be normalized. The time for PeaceTrees Vietnam had come.

PeaceTrees became the first international non-governmental organization to do demining work in Vietnam. It works exclusively in Quang Tri Province, one of the poorest and most war-torn provinces of Vietnam. Since 1975, approximately 7,000 children and adults have fallen victim to the landmines, cluster bombs, grenades, and other unexploded ordnance (UXO) that remain as a legacy of the intense bombing and fierce battles during the war. A comprehensive study released in July 2009 determined that 83.8 percent of the province still has not been cleared of landmines and UXO.

Burroughs enjoys the challenge of finding creative ways to expand PeaceTrees' work and figuring out how to pay for it. Put simply, "I love my new career." PeaceTrees does a lot with its two Seattle employees and five employees in Vietnam. Mine action involves much more than clearing contaminated land of unexploded landmines and UXO. Mine action includes providing mine risk education, helping survivors of explosive accidents and their families, and engaging in community and economic development.

Today, PeaceTrees Vietnam works alongside the Vietnamese people to build a healthy future for children and families by:

- Sponsoring removal of landmines and unexploded ordnance
- Providing mine risk education
- Offering victim assistance in the form of emergency medical treatment, nutritional support, household economic support, transportation costs, and educational scholarships
- Creating economic and social development projects, such as extending micro-credit and building libraries, kindergartens, and homes
- Leading tree-planting/citizen diplomacy trips for environmental restoration and building bridges of friendship

PeaceTrees Vietnam has accomplished much in the last fifteen years. It has located, removed, and destroyed over 48,000 landmines and pieces of UXO; cleared almost 400 acres of contaminated land; provided survivor assistance to more than 700 survivors and family members; and provided mine risk education to over 66,500 children and adults. More than 41,150 indigenous trees have been planted on safely cleared land. It has built 100 homes, 4 kindergartens, and 8 libraries. Finally, 465 citizen diplomats have traveled with PeaceTrees to Vietnam to continue its efforts to build bridges of friendship and peace with the Vietnamese people.

The mission of PeaceTrees Vietnam is personal for Burroughs and others who work for the organization: "We recognize that it is our challenge and our responsibility to help raise awareness of the serious, continuing legacy of landmines and unexploded ordnance in Quang Tri Province. Helping people from the United States and other countries to understand that the explosive remnants of this war still impact the daily lives of ordinary Vietnamese is essential."

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