

# SAIGON TEX NEWS

Houston's Bilingual Vietnamese Weekly

## NASA Engineer Theresa Tran Makes Needy Children Her Mission

By Burt Levine Saigon Tex News



Theresa Tran (also known as LyBang Tran), a Saigon native and mechanical engineer management consultant working with a NASA contractor, is President and Founder of Messengers of Love, which is a non-profit foundation focused on improving the lives of the thousands of children in Vietnam abandoned by parents due to illness, death or economic hardship. Tran is pledged to find sponsors and adopting parents for Vietnamese children.

Tran's father was a French teacher and her mother was a business woman in Vietnam. Fortunately, an uncle who was a Chemical Engineering professor living in the U.S. was able to arrange for 25 members of her family to leave Vietnam before the fall of Saigon. They were among the first 300 Vietnamese War refugees to arrive at Fort Chafee, Arkansas.

### What brought you from rural Fort Chafee to the space industry in Houston?

My parents were devout Catholics who left North Vietnam in 1954 to practice their faith in the South. Thirty years later we came to America so that we all could practice our faith that teaches us to have charity to the weakest among us. It's the oldest and the youngest in our world that is the weakest that need our love, compassion and our charities.

My uncle visited us at Fort Chafee on his way to give a lecture in the nearby state. He arranged for us to leave the camp during that trip and drove 11 of us in his car to Missouri where I earned a mechanical engineering degree from the University of Missouri. We then moved to Houston and I earned an MBA from the University of Houston-Clear Lake. I work as a consultant for NASA contractors, which is fun, but I knew I needed to do more to fulfill the love in my heart.

### Why did you to begin committing yourself and resources to abandoned children?

It all started the Sunday before Christmas Day of 2002. I had been praying for God to let me know the true meaning of Christmas. While at church, I saw a little Asian girl in a pretty dress sitting a few rows in front of me. She kept turning around looking at me. She seemed happy and at ease. I noticed her look over to a Caucasian lady who stood beside her and reach out to hold her hand. The girl was obviously not her biological daughter. I realized that the girl was adopted. The lady kept looking over to the little girl, to make sure she was doing all right. The sight of such love and tenderness between two unrelated people touched me deeply. I couldn't stop looking at them. I admired the mom for having genuine love and affection for a daughter who isn't her own blood. I was happy for the little girl for having found such love. Suddenly, sadness came over me. I started thinking about all the little girls and boys in orphanages who aren't so lucky.

They don't have a mom or dad to love them, to kiss them good night, or show them affection.

I knew then that I had been given the answer: Christmas is a time to celebrate the love of God, and a time to remember that we ought to love others. This grace that opened my heart to love and have compassion for the orphans, led me to realize that the 'others' that I was to love, are these abandoned children.



*MoL Theresa Tran with the orphans*



*MoL members at a Tet's festival fund raising*

### **Tell me the story of how you started Messengers of Love?**

I met two nuns who came from Vietnam. My friends and I helped them organize a fund raising event. I asked the nuns if I could sponsor two girls and they found two little girls for me. Linh was three and Huyen was one. I received their pictures and I immediately fell in love. Linh always had a smile on her face, but Huyen was sad. Huyen was abandoned by her mom at birth and was raised by the nuns. She rarely smiled. Linh's mom died when she was 10 days old. There were 25 children in the orphanage. I didn't want any to feel left out so I sponsored three more and asked family and friends to sponsor the rest. We started sending money monthly to buy food and other essentials and I made sure we addressed their emotional needs. I wrote letters and sent gifts for holidays. I felt by our gifts and personal attention they would feel loved. All the kids at the orphanage have blossomed into healthy and happy children. Huyen has grown up to become a happy beautiful child with a smile on her face. She is now 6 years old. Linh is now 8 years old.

I started Messengers of Love with the intention of finding additional support to expand the number of orphans we can help, to give more children the feeling that someone cares for them. Thanks to the support and generosity of people, we have been able to add more orphanages to our support list each year. This past year, we were able to provide sponsorship to children from 3 orphanages and provided Christmas and New Year gifts to over 3000 children. We were able to accomplish this with the help of many friends and families and many good hearted people in Houston and outside of Houston. I really appreciate them being a Messengers of Love to the children.

### **Have you returned to Vietnam as part of Messengers of Love?**

I travel to Vietnam as often as I can to visit the children. The bonds we have developed and the love we share is priceless.

We now provide long-term sponsorship for three orphanages. In Christmas 2007 and Tet 2008 we also gave gifts to more than 3000 children including orphans from 11 orphanages and children from nine poor villages.

We built homes, remodeled school and orphanages and provided scholarships for the poor. We have remodeled schools in Hue, built dining halls for three rural schools and provided full scholarships for 28 students. We helped dig wells to provide clean water systems in villages close to Thua Thien. We also bought school uniforms for 300 students yearly and provided one acre of cashew trees to a poor village near Kontum. We recently sponsored two children to come to the USA for surgery.

### **What is your ultimate dream for Messengers of Love?**

Through our sharing and caring, we bring happiness and peace to ourselves and at the same time, make a difference in the lives of others. UNICEF Executive Director, Carol Bellamy, asserts “Children have a right to grow up in a protective environment. Having lost their parents to disease or conflict does not mean they are not entitled to the care and protection that a family provides. Children will not be free from exploitation until all levels of society – from the family to the international community – work together.” Messengers of Love agrees with this statement whole-heartedly. Because of poverty, abandonment, death of parents, criminal activity, divorce, prostitution and childhood illnesses there are over 1,800,000 orphans in Vietnam right now. In 2005, UNICEF reported that 24 percent of Vietnam’s youth between the ages of 5-14 were working in child labor. Eleven percent of youth in this same age group were married. Orphaned youth often turn to child labor, early marriage, and even prostitution because they feel that they have nowhere else to turn. Messengers of Love’s programs strive to enrich and propel the lives of orphaned youth living in Vietnam and protect them from the many ills of society. We strive to show these forgotten children that there is still hope for a brighter future. We dream someday that there won’t be any more orphans left unloved. If each of us takes only one child to sponsor, we can fulfill that dream.

We hope those reading this will call 832-647-7233 or visit our website at [www.messengersoflove.com](http://www.messengersoflove.com) to help fulfill our dream. It only takes \$10 per month to sponsor one child to go to school, to give him or her food, milk, clothing and a bright future. We are a 501c(3) organization, thus all donation will be tax deductible. To donate on line, please visit our website and click on donation. To send in monthly donation, please send it to either one of these two addresses: Messengers of Love, P.O. Box 590936, Houston, TX 77259 or Messengers of Love, c/o Father John Kha Tran, St. Bartholomew Catholic Church, 5356 11th St., Katy, TX 77493.