

ONLY WISH TO EAT FULLY

I was born in Binh Dinh province, my father's hometown. Since childhood, I have not been able to remember much about the beautiful sceneries of Hoai Nhon homeland, the land of martial arts but I soon engraved images of lepers in Quy Hoa leprosy camp. Both my grandparents were lepers.

Like slow-motion movies, each scene appears: I recalled memories of 20 years ago. My father who worked as a hired labor suddenly had to quit his job and stayed at home and my mother worked in a textile company. Hearing that my father lost his job, my mother's acquaintance came to visit and gossiped that my father had effected with leprosy. His body started to have more sores and my mother also lost her job due to their gossips about this.

My family had to move out because family members as well as neighbors were afraid and alienated. My family did not know where to go, so we moved to Ngu Binh mountain, Hue province to live. At that time, it was not as crowded and busy as now. Ngu Binh sounded like an elegant place to play but there were only a few houses, and it was really a place for graves of the dead. The living lived with the dead. There were 5 people in my family, we built a hut. It was hot during summer, cold winds blew during winter, the heavy rains leaked our hut and when we turned during sleeping, all sides were wet.

At that time I was six years old, my family had to run every meal. One day, my mother asked me to take a few thousand VNDs to go to market to buy rice for the whole family's dinner and I lost it so I dare not to return home. I had to stay at the market whole day for begging. I did beg all day but just had enough money to buy little rice. Both parents lost their jobs so my family was even poorer.

Whenever asking for money to pay tuition fees, my parents were always silent. That silence was enough for my brother and me to drop out of school. I followed a friend in my village "begging from graves". This means we went to graves to steal some food which the dead's relatives worshiped and offered for them to fill up our stomachs. There were times I thought of taking off bicycle wheels of other people to sell to get money for my mother to buy rice. I didn't think about being right or wrong, but only thought about how to get money to give my mother to buy rice to eat fully.

The appearance of "a fairy" changed my life.

One day, Sister Nguyen Thi Thay Minh came to our house and lent our parents some money for our monthly living. She asked me: "*Huy, do you want to go to school?*". I dare not to think of going to school for a long time so there was a feeling of happiness running through my body when hearing that question. I was so happy that I replied immediately:

"Yes".

A few weeks later, I was able to go back to school. At the time of 10 years old, I had a new school, new class, new friends but my "identity" was still the same. I was afraid of being bullied and had a feeling of a poor child 's "low class".

Life is full of challenges. Remembering shocks in my life, I can't forget this story. I had a friend named Q. Q invited me and my whole class to her birthday celebration at my fourth grade. At the end of the celebration, when Q called someone's name, that person came up to open the gift. When it was my turn, with empty hands, I only looked around strangely like I was lost in another world. I didn't bring any gift because I didn't know what a gift was. My face was getting red and it was really embarrassing.

After that, the whole class went out to sing karaoke, I thought it was not a right place for me so I went back home. On the way home I met Q, her bike had a flat tire so I volunteered to take it to fixing shop.

Unexpectedly when I returned to get the bike, it was "stolen". That Phoenix bicycle at that time could only be bought by a rich family. When ward police invited me to investigate, my chest seemed exploded and Q's family looked at me like a criminal. For some reason, such words appeared in my head at that time: *"I don't take it, I'm not afraid, I'm not afraid"*. Then the police followed me for a short time and recognized that I didn't have any money, they ignored me.

When I went to school, I always wore plastic sandals which were almost broken. Outside of school time, I also sold ice creams, rice cakes, and other items. During my elementary school years until I graduated from college, I can't remember how many times my family was helped by Sister Thay Minh. She took me back to school and lent my family 15 million VNDs to build a house. At that time, the amount of 15 million VNDs was very big and very valuable. And since then, my family has been living in a house that is no longer afraid of wind and rain. She also gave more money for my father to buy a cyclo as "fishing rod".

I also rode that cyclo with my father to relieve his fatigue so many times my teachers scolded me and told me that I was undisciplined. I was very sad. One time when my school drummer showed the time going to class and my teacher incidentally saw me riding a cyclo with passengers, and my cyclo was in hurry through the school gate and disappeared on street. From that time, my teachers didn't punish me anymore.

I still remember clearly that one day at noon, Sister Thay Minh and a team of physicians visited my family. Sister asked me: *"Huy, do you want to study in Medicine school in future?"* I dreamed of studying Medicine school since then, but I also knew my ability so I chose to study nursing. Riding cyclo while studying, after graduating from school, I was admitted to Department of Psychological Health, Central Hospital in Hue.

I heard that Sister Thay Minh was very weak, so I visited her. Then I knew all the expenses for my education, for my parents to build a house, and for my father's cycle... was donation of the benefactors through "Friend of Lepers" in US for many years and I just received them without any knowledge.

The kindness of overseas people has silently helped my family. I am so grateful, deeply ingrained in my heart, and full of admiration. In response to that selfless love, I followed in the footsteps of Sister Thay Minh and “Friends of Lepers”: I voluntarily became a member, a bridge to help leprosy patients and their descendants in Hue. It is my gratitude heart.

Every year, I volunteer to care for 70 leprosy patients, change bandages, talk about their difficulties, and medication. I am a bridge for the Organization to trust to transfer financial aid to hundreds of students who are children of leprosy patients in the way that I had received before. I ask for money from the Organization to repair dilapidated houses and create livelihoods for many people to be able to support themselves.

The happiest thing is that many students have achieved excellent results, many have graduated from universities and obtained high positions in society, such as Professor Hai Duong, teaching Physics at Quoc Hoc Hue School, and some of them becoming business directors.

I would like to thank “Friends of Lepers” and 15,000 benefactors across US and many other countries for extending your loving arms to raise up the poor and the bottomless in society so that today leprosy families are well fed and their descendants have stable jobs and positions in society.

Through the benefactors’ kindness, I feel "*love is like a never-ending circle, but every day it gets longer and wider*".

My sincerely,

Huy Dang,

Thua Thien Hue