

# REACH

Helping Vietnam's disadvantaged youth get their foot in the door



PHOTOS BY JULIE VOLA



**W**alking into REACH's vast training centre on the outskirts of Hanoi you wouldn't guess that nearly four years ago, the organisation was on the brink of closure. Like many NGOs in Vietnam, it was burnt by declining foreign aid, a result of the country's progression to middle-income status.

Relief came at the eleventh-hour from an anonymous donor. "It was a very challenging time; we were thinking we would have to close some centres and turn away our students. I couldn't sleep," says REACH founder and executive director Tam Pham. "But we adapted and bounced back even stronger."

Rebound they did, mounting an aggressive campaign to recruit donors around the globe supportive of their mission: to provide vocational training and job placement services to the most disadvantaged youth.

Donors, mainly corporate and philanthropic foundations, rallied to the cause and provided much-needed financial stability.

### The Need

REACH targets its programmes towards disadvantaged youth, including human trafficking and domestic violence victims, ethnic minorities, youth with a disability, youth with or affected by HIV/AIDS, rural migrants, and youth living in poverty.

REACH marketing and fundraising officer Mai Pham says that with around 1.4 million workers entering Vietnam's labour market each year, it is these vulnerable groups that are being left behind, unable to grasp opportunities for prosperity.

"Vietnam's job market is very competitive and these youth face significant barriers whether it is

poverty, social stigma or lack of education," she says. "Just imagine what that does to their confidence or self-esteem."

### The Programmes

REACH's original programme, the Livelihood Advancement Business School, or LABS, provides 15 to 24 weeks of intensive vocational training in one of nine areas; food and beverage, hairdressing, sales and marketing, cooking, web and graphic design, 3D-modelling, housekeeping, beauty spa and nail art.

The curriculum is also designed to teach important life skills (such as teamwork, financial literacy, confidence-building and work ethic), provide technical qualifications that are in high demand, and provide safe and secure entry into employment through job placement and follow up support services.

According to Tam, this service

model has had dramatic results on the lives of REACH students.

"One student, Huy, from REACH's third batch, lived in poverty and came to Hanoi in search of a job. He was barely eating when he came to us. He was very shy and lacked confidence," Tam recalls.

"After graduation, he got a job with a large supermarket in Hanoi and now he is a manager. He employs our graduates and takes great care of them."

REACH works with over 1,000 businesses, ranging from SMEs to large multinationals, such as Hilton Hotels and Lotte. According to Tam, this focus on ensuring the curriculum aligns with employer demands is part of the reason why nearly 85 percent of REACH's 13,000 graduates have found long-term employment within six months of graduating.

It's an approach that Plan

International has now replicated in over 40 countries to alleviate youth unemployment.

### A Sustainable Future

Keeping up with market trends and financial stability are key for survival, according to Tam. Despite a shelf crammed with awards, both from Vietnam and abroad, established NGOs like REACH can often be victims of their own success, making it difficult to reach out to more needy groups. "There are more vulnerable communities I'd like to help, but we don't have the funds to do it," says Tam.

In order to improve its financial position, REACH is setting up two new social enterprises. The first, EM Hair Salon, opened in October on Phan Huy Ich in Hanoi's Ba Dinh District. It caters for both foreign and local clients, with REACH students learning from professional

hairdressers. Profits fund REACH's hairdressing programme, benefiting vulnerable women and girls.

The second project, a Japanese training restaurant, is a joint venture between REACH and social programme investor SME, with input from the world-renowned Tsuji Culinary Institute and Michelin-star chef Yoshihiro Murata. The project, Mai says, could launch as early as next year depending on the success of an upcoming crowd-funding campaign on Indiegogo this December.

"This is new territory for us but it will open many doors for our students, so it's worth it," she says.

— David Mann

For more information, visit [reach.org.vn](http://reach.org.vn) or REACH's Facebook Page. David Mann is an Australian Volunteer funded by the Australian Government to work with REACH in the role of Marketing and Fundraising Coach.