



PHOTOS BY JULIE VOLA

# Swim Vietnam

Saving lives, one stroke at a time

As many as 3,500 children and teenagers die every year in Vietnam due to drowning, according to a 2017 report by the Vietnam Ministry of Health. It's a shocking statistic that Swim Vietnam is determined to try and reduce through its free swimming and water safety lessons for children. Based in Danang, the charity will celebrate its 10th birthday in February next year.

## In at the Deep End

Jo Stewart has been the driving force behind the charity's growth over the past decade. She was tempted to Vietnam following a career in investment management that took

her to London and Singapore. It was a case of in at the deep end.

"I used to do, and still do, triathlons. A company started the first-ever triathlon in Vietnam in 2007 and they held it in Hoi An. They tried to organise a children's race and they asked the government to provide children, but they were told that they can't give any kids because they can't swim. After research [the organiser] found out drowning is a huge issue in Vietnam."

It was from here that the charity was born.

"I worked for six months getting it going. I had no idea what I was doing, though I knew you need kids, you need teachers and

you need pools," says Jo.

Originally hotels let them use their pools. Hoi An Beach Club was the first to offer its pool.

"We found one person in town who worked as a swim teacher for the army. We offered him a job and went from there."

"We started small — one Vietnamese teacher and one Australian volunteer. Now it's 100 to 150 teachers, and we pay the Vietnamese teachers, so we can help them with income as well as giving them a skill," says Jo.

## Today

Swim Vietnam now has eight pools of its

own, all located in Quang Nam province in central Vietnam. Growth has been impressive, and it has gone from teaching 400 children in the first year to over 4,000 last year, with the total number of children taught now over 20,000. While still a good number, in a country of 90 million people, Jo believes it's a drop in the ocean.

However, in the past couple of years she has seen a shift in attitude within government, who she says are now much more focused on solving the problem. Jo says it's one of Swim Vietnam's proudest achievements — they now work closely with provincial governments and advise them on water safety. If it was only Swim Vietnam trying to tackle the problem, "it could take this lifetime and the next," to solve it.

"Now we're advising the government and that's huge," she says.

## Staying the Course

The swimming programme itself is spread

across 18 lessons and is based on Australian standards, in particular those of Austswim. "We're not trying to teach people to get ready for the Olympics," says Jo. "It's water safety lessons — what you should do if you fall in and how to rescue someone safely."

"As long as they can move through water for 25 metres, tread water for one to two minutes; rescue themselves and others, then that's the focus. That's our pass mark."

It's a programme that has served them well, and teaching the importance of water safety is something that for the most part their parents are thankful for.

"In rural areas you will get some parents saying they don't want their kids to go swimming because they think they might drown, or they'd rather have them work on the farm."

"They [the children] are told not to go near the water. They are told to fear the water, but they're not taught basic water safety," adds Jo.

## Success stories

Some of their ex-students have now become teachers for the charity, with many keen to give back and impart the knowledge they've learnt to children and help save lives. It's one of the charity's ultimate goals, for it to be self-sufficient with local people running it. So far, they have trained over 150 Vietnamese teachers to Austswim standard.

Jo is proud that the years of hard work have helped raise awareness of how bad the problem is in Vietnam, particularly with the government, who are now finally committing serious investment into water safety in primary schools.

"They realise now we want to solve it, and we can clearly see how to get there."

— Thomas Barrett

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