

# WOMEN IN FACIAL PLASTIC SURGERY: EXPERIENCING FACE TO FACE FOR THE FIRST TIME

By Marylynn Moran, MD

For some reason, I always thought you had to have an inside track to be able to go on one of the FACE



TO FACE trips. I figured since I wasn't part of "the club" (whatever club that was) I would have to somehow earn the privilege of being invited. This perception changed one day in 1999 when I received a call from John "Mac" Hodges, MD, saying that a colleague who was a close friend of mine had to withdraw from a trip to Vietnam and thought that I might want to go along. I have to say that I had to take pause.

While the invitation was very compelling, I really didn't think I could afford to leave my solo practice. My desire to go prevailed and I committed to go. I had many sleepless nights worrying about how I was going to do it but then I stopped worrying and just got productive. I shocked myself with how much busier I could make my practice if I put my mind to it. When the time came, I had enough extra cash in the kitty to cover my overhead.

Preparations included arranging coverage when I was gone, not operating for two weeks prior to my departure, and of course shopping for jungle friendly clothing and items. I had no idea what to expect. I imagined we would be operating in third-world conditions with mosquito nets everywhere. I imagined that the Communist government would be watching our every move and that we would have to be very careful about mentioning the war. I was also concerned that I didn't know how to do cleft lip and palate procedures since I assumed that's what you do on these trips.

All of my assumptions could not have been further from reality. As it turns out, Vietnam is more of a second-world country. Communism is definitely present, but in a somewhat benign way from an outsider's perspective. The people are warm, welcoming, and could not have been more appreciative of everything we did. There was no tiptoeing or watching our step. The officials that we dealt with were equally as gracious. They put us up in four star hotels and fed us three times a day with amazing amounts of incredible food, starting early in the morning and lasting until late at night.

We presented a five-day course of lectures and live surgery that was simulcast in the air conditioned (thank heavens) lecture halls. We expected maybe 30 attendees who were to pay the university \$90 for the course, which is more than their monthly salary of \$80. We had nearly 100 attendees from as far away as Hanoi. I was impressed and humbled by the level of education of the Vietnamese surgeons and nurses. It far exceeded my expectations on all levels. Even the operating facilities and procedures were quite acceptable.

We understood that they wanted to learn cosmetic procedures; however, we didn't realize it was because their knowledge of reconstructive techniques was already adequate. That was a difficult issue for a few of the members of our team initially. We felt that our job was to "help" an underprivileged nation advance their surgical skills and help ease the burden of complicated cases. In retrospect, it seems like such a patronizing attitude, although we did do that to some degree. We also realized that they really did need to learn cosmetic techniques. They were and are increasingly influenced by Western ideals and images and they

are gaining the means to pursue them. Unfortunately without formal training, many of their patients weren't receiving the level of care they could be. We spent some time correcting cosmetic procedures gone wrong and shared many techniques that they wanted to learn in greater depth. The officials turned a blind eye to allow this since it was not acceptable to use government facilities for cosmetic procedures. We were careful to present it in more of a reconstructive light so as not to put anyone in a difficult position. The first meeting was a huge success for all of us. We made lasting friendships with the department and established an ongoing exchange that has enriched all of our lives.

That was seven years ago. In the interim, Dr. Hodges and his teams have returned nearly yearly. I was unable to make my second trip until last October. The changes that have occurred since my initial visit were startling. The nation itself has grown by leaps and bounds. The facial plastic surgery skill level had obviously advanced greatly and a new level of sophistication is apparent. They have wireless Internet in the hospitals and some of the doctors have opened up their own medispas. They appear healthier and wealthier, but through it all have retained their humility and graciousness. It appears to me that every seed we planted has become a tree as a result of their determination and dedication. I am haunted by the exotic beauty of the nation and the kind gentleness of the people of Vietnam. It has impacted my life in a profound way.

I hope that you will have the opportunity to go on an AAFPRS FACE TO FACE trip (see *Call for Volunteers* on page 10). You can't put a price on that kind of life experience. ■