

French woman 'repays' Vietnam

Thursday, August 14, 2025, 06:00 (GMT+7)

Deep in the pain of being abused and discriminated against, Isabelle Paulette Müller once thought she could not overcome it until she followed her mother back to Vietnam to visit her roots.

French-Vietnamese girl Isabelle tightly held her mother's hand, Mrs. Dau Thi Cuc (commonly known as Loan) as she stepped off the plane at Noi Bai airport, Hanoi. No one was waiting for them. Her maternal hometown "welcomed" her with sweltering heat and noise. "But deep down I still felt something familiar," Isabelle Paulette Müller, 61, said about her feelings when she first set foot in Vietnam in the summer of 1990.

At the airport, when the immigration officer looked through her passport, stamped the tourist visa in red, and returned it through the glass, Isabelle suddenly felt disappointed. The stamp was a reminder that she was just a tourist standing outside the door of her homeland.

However, the feeling of being a "guest" quickly disappeared when Isabelle enjoyed a hot bowl of pho at the hotel. The steam rose with the scent of cinnamon and star anise, bringing her back to the stories her mother used to tell her in France. "If it tastes like home, then we are home," Ms. Loan said.

From that moment, Vietnam appeared more vivid and opened up for her a journey to find and repay her homeland.



Isabelle Müller in a class in Ha Giang in 2024. Photo: Character provided

Isabelle was born in 1964 in a small village in Tours, Central France. She is the youngest of five siblings. Her mother is a woman from Ha Tinh, who left Vietnam in 1955 with her father, a former French soldier who fought in Indochina and was discharged in a state of psychological trauma.

They were stuck in poverty. Her mother was both the economic burden and the discrimination of her neighbors.

"I was pushed to the margins of French society, living in the shadow of isolation and discrimination," Isabelle recalls. School was the only place she had social interaction, but it was not enough to ease the pain of a daughter who had been abused by her father for nine years. Finding no way out other than obedience and silence, Isabelle attempted suicide twice, at the ages of 13 and 17.

After graduating from university, she went to Germany to work as an interpreter and met her husband, a technology entrepreneur. This was also the time when Isabelle saved enough money to return to Vietnam with her mother for the first time. Her desire to explore her roots stemmed from the stories her mother told her. Above all, she wanted to see if Vietnamese people were like her mother, who grew up with many challenges of fate but remained resilient.

On that trip back to her hometown, she and her mother met Uncle Le, Loan's younger brother. For the first time, she saw a thatched house and green rice fields. A cousin picked pineapples for her to eat, and when she was thirsty, they climbed a coconut tree to get cool water.

"The warmth made me feel that this was the place for me," she said. "Step by step, I gradually felt more clearly the love for this country."

In 2003, Loan passed away, leaving behind a wish to "build many schools for poor Vietnamese children". Isabelle promised to fulfill her wish.

"She wants to bring equal learning opportunities to children," Isabelle said. At the same time, she wanted to do something to show her gratitude to Vietnam, the place that gave her the love to heal her dark childhood.

In May 2016, when she had enough money, Isabelle established the Loan Foundation. After 9 years of operation, the Foundation has implemented more than 48 projects, including granting scholarships to poor students and orphans, building boarding houses, kitchens and supporting natural disaster response, with funding from individual sponsors, international organizations in Europe and Vietnam, and money from copyrights of her works.

"I don't want children to see me as a rich 'Western woman' who only gives them money," she said. "My efforts will be zero if the children don't realize the value of education."



Isabelle Müller at the ceremony to hand over a kindergarten in Na Hang district, Tuyen Quang, September 2023. Photo: Provided by the character

Several times in the highlands, Isabelle met children who knew how to beg for money, demanding 5 USD each time they took a photo with them. She was heartbroken and realized that financial support or scholarships alone were not enough to make lasting changes. Tradition, family and social structure often caused children to drop out of school or marry early.

Four times a year, she flies back to Vietnam, attends awareness education classes, provides counseling and talks, helping children develop their will and shape their future. She herself is also inspired by teachers who live in remote areas, trek through forests, cross muddy roads, and have their wheels stuck in the dirt and rocks to get to school.

They are starting to reap the first "sweet fruits", like Ma Thuy Thuy, born into a poor farming family. Her parents once forced Thuy to quit school to work in the fields, forcing her to run away from home and take the bus to Hanoi. Finally, thanks to Loan Fund, she was able to enter Dong A University of Technology, majoring in food technology.

Sung Thi My, 22, was born and raised in Dong Van Stone Plateau, Ha Giang. Four years ago, she was at a crossroads between continuing her studies or dropping out due to poverty. Isabella came to her when she was in 12th grade at Ha Giang Boarding School for Ethnic Minorities and encouraged her.

"I felt like I found light in the dark tunnel," My said. Currently, My is working part-time at an old quarter hotel and is preparing to graduate from Hanoi University of Commerce in 2026.

Ms. Vu Yen, Isabelle's partner at Loan Fund, highly appreciates her efforts with children in the mountainous areas of northern Vietnam. For each school construction project, Isabelle travels more than 10,000 km from Germany and directly surveys the field, even in difficult locations, halfway up the mountain, or in remote areas. When the road is slippery and cars cannot go, she and the group ride motorbikes and walk. For children in difficult circumstances, Isabelle goes to each house to listen to their stories to gain a deeper understanding.

"I was impressed by her view that children are a piece of the puzzle that helps shape the world," she said.