Interns in QC’s Teaching in Vietnam program provide parents of their students with a final show on the last day with each of their classes. Appearing left to right: Isaac Pulatov, Jessica Tran, Samantha Chiu, James Rogers, Vanessa Budhoo, Emily Peguillan, Susan Chon, and Anastasia Loutos.

**Teaching English in Vietnam**

With Ken Burns’ epic documentary series about the Vietnam War just concluding its run on public television, a group of Queens College students recounted their experiences last summer as interns in a program that assists in teaching English to Vietnamese children. Other than an obligatory field trip to a Vietnam War museum, there was little if anything in the experiences they described to suggest the hostility that once existed between our two countries.

Six of the eight students who participated were on hand at the meeting chaired by Donna Smith, Executive Director of the English Language Institute, which administers the program with the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Training Center.
The students were part of the seventh group since the Teaching English in Vietnam program began in 2011 to spend six weeks in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) during June and July. They worked with English-speaking Vietnamese teachers in their Summer Fun program, in which Vietnamese children are encouraged to improve their English skills through fun learning experiences with native English speakers. Arts and crafts, song and dance, and sports were among the ways the interns engaged their Vietnamese charges.

This year’s cohort of eight included three graduate students, explained Smith. “We’ve asked for juniors and up. The Vietnamese asked for more mature students.”

The required advance preparation included developing lesson plans and tutoring foreign students in the Queens ELI program. “They worked extremely hard on their lesson plans before the trip, and some of them have never taught before or are even planning to become teachers,” remarked Smith. “But they rose to the occasion and worked through all those nerves they experienced in anticipation.”

Emily Peguillan, who is in QC’s Master of Arts in Teaching program, remarked on some of the cultural differences in Vietnamese vs. American classroom seating arrangements and teaching styles. During the regular school year the Vietnamese favor a more traditional model where students’ desks face the teacher in front of the class. For the Summer Fun classes, however, they employed the more interactive circular seating arrangement often found in American elementary school classrooms. This prompted James Rogers, a graduate student in QC’s Adolescent Teaching program, to comment on the unusual way his Vietnamese co-teacher brought the class to order when the students became a bit unruly: “I don’t know what my co-teacher would say, but it sounded like a noise [he offered an approximation], and whenever she made it, the students would go from running crazy to stopping in their tracks.”
Teaching differences aside, he remarked, “The teaching experience in general in Vietnam taught me a lot about how I want to be a teacher now.”

For one student, Jessica Tran, a junior in the TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) program who is of Vietnamese heritage, language and culture were not an issue. She has been to Ho Chi Minh City before and noted that while her co-teacher was aware she spoke Vietnamese, her students were not.

As the Vietnam Project Director, Smith, herself, made a site visit to Vietnam this year. It was her second visit; she last went six years ago. Among the changes she noticed was that the city has developed quite a bit. Where the interns in previous years were housed at the school where they teach, now they are housed at a hotel within walking distance of the school. “The students are housed and working in District One, the safest and richest district of Ho Chi Minh City,” she said.

All student expenses for room, board, and weekend excursions are covered by the internship, with the college helping to pay for airfare. In addition, students receive $25 weekly for expenses. “That’s a lot of money in Vietnam,” said Smith.

Smith explains that because the QC students are there under the auspices of the Vietnam Ministry of Education, all of their expenses were considerably cheaper than they would be for tourists. “You go outside of where the students are housed and there’s Gucci and these things that nobody who lives there can afford. . . . So the students are very sheltered. It’s good for us because they’re safe and not likely to go into culture shock.”

They did, however, go to a beach town south of Ho Chi Minh City where the surroundings were significantly less gentrified and more reflective of the living experience of average Vietnamese people. “Unlike District One,” said Smith, “very few people speak English and you find yourself struggling with the language. And you get a lot of attention if you’re a foreigner.”
“We’re now going into round eight,” Smith noted. “Each year we get between 60 and 70 applications, of which we interview 15. From those we select the number that our Vietnamese partners request based on their enrollment. Last year it was eight; this year, it’s six.”

Since 2011 the program has sent 44 QC students to Vietnam. Queens College is the only school with this kind of program in Vietnam, said Smith. “It’s the only international internship program within CUNY.”

*If you are interested in applying for this program, [click here](#) for an application. The deadline for applying is January 2, 2018.*