

Correcting violent mistakes

## BUHS students seek to 'RENEW' Vietnam

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BRATTLEBORO -- Bill Holiday was teaching about the Vietnam War even before the U.S. withdrew its troops.

His students at Brattleboro Union High School were born more than two decades after the war ended.

But that hasn't stopped the long-time teacher and several students from getting together to revive a group that aims to help address the pervasive problem of sometimes-lethal explosives buried throughout Vietnam.

On Tuesday, members of Students for RENEW gathered to talk about their mission, their latest fundraising efforts and their dedication to a seemingly faraway cause.

"I strive to correct violent mistakes that previous generations have made," said Josh Lake, the organization's president.

The local organization grew out of a 2007 trip that Holiday took to Vietnam through the Teach Vietnam Teachers Network. Though he was well aware that the country still was plagued with thousands of unexploded bombs, Holiday says he didn't fully understand the extent of the problem until that trip.

He and the student group produced statistics showing how widespread the threat still is: The U.S. and its allies dropped 15 million tons of munitions on Vietnam during the war, they said, and an estimated 300,000 tons of unexploded ordnance or land mines remain.

More than 40,000 people have been maimed or killed by those explosives since the war ended. Students for RENEW's presentation included a photo of a boy searching



Brattleboro Union High School student Josh Lake speaks about the Students for RENEW and efforts to raise awareness about UXOs (unexploded ordnance) in Vietnam, during a press conference at the school, Tuesday morning. (Zachary P. Stephens/Brattleboro Reformer)

for explosives with a metal detector.

"It's very risky, because it's a very delicate procedure," said Meyru Bhanti, a BUHS junior and a member of the RENEW group.

She noted that some explosives are very small, while others "are very well-camouflaged."

Her sister, sophomore Tana Bhanti, said 17 unexploded devices were discovered while workers were building a single baseball field.

"There had been no casualties yet," she said. "But it was only a matter of time."

Tuesday's presentation also included a short film by Reggie Martell.

Efforts to address the "UXO" problem have focused in particular on Quang Tri Province, which is described as "the most heavily bombed and shelled area of Vietnam" by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund.

Project RENEW is a cooperative, non-governmental initiative launched by the memorial fund and the Quang Tri Province People's Committee. The organization's goals form the acronym in its name -- "Restoring the Environment and Neutralizing the Effects of War."

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That happens through public education about the dangers posed by hidden explosives. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund reports that, since Quang Tri Television began airing public service announcements in 2002, only three people have been hurt by explosions in the province's most heavily populated district.

Project RENEW also has undertaken other steps in Vietnam including upgrading medical supplies, training health-care workers and even instituting a mushroom-growing project with local farmers.

Students for RENEW works in the Brattleboro area to support those efforts. Members have tried to spread the word by speaking to groups including students at Keene State College in New Hampshire; Holiday said he is hoping a RENEW chapter starts at a college or university.

Holiday said he also has received word that a chapter is starting at a high school in Virginia.

The BUHS student organization raises money for Project RENEW's work in Vietnam. A recent donation of \$1,000 covered approximately half the cost of a new home for a mother of two who had lost a leg and her husband to buried ordnance.

The group has started a new "donate a dollar" campaign: The idea is for all students and staff members to give at least a dollar to the cause.

"There are 1,200 people in this school," Lake said. "If each and every one donated a dollar every semester, we'd have enough money to build a house."

Added Holiday: "A couple of them, at that rate."

Also on hand Tuesday was social studies teacher Megan Scherer, whose students raised \$94. Additionally, Holiday said Scherer personally donated money to purchase a prosthetic limb for a victim of a mine or ordnance.

Scherer said small donations can add up to create significant change in Vietnam.

"It makes me sad that we have so much excess money in our community here, and we spend it on things like chips and pop," Scherer said. "If you just pool that money together, it makes a lifetime of difference."

More information about Students for RENEW is available on Facebook or at [www.studentsforrenew.org](http://www.studentsforrenew.org).

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