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When bad things happen to a “good person”

He slides and he’s fast,” says Dr.
Daniel Herz, a pediatric urologist at DHMC. Herz is de-
scribing the means of locomotion used by one of his patients
—two-year-old Phung Thien Nhan, who has only one leg.
The boy “will throw his good leg out, and his arm,” explains Herz,
“and he’ll scoot and slide on the floor.”

Mauled: Thien is like a whirl-
wind as he gets around—an apt
metaphor for his tumultuous but
amazing young life. His 17-year-
old mother abandoned him at
birth in July 2006, in a jungle in
central Vietnam’s Quang Nam
province, leaving him under a
pile of papaya leaves. Three days
later, some local villagers found
him. He’d been mauled by an an-
imal and was barely alive; his
genitals and most of his right leg
were gone and his wounds were
covered with insects.

His rescuers rushed him 60
miles to the nearest hospital,
where doctors saved his life. They amputated his leg at the
hip and did initial urethral
surgery so he could keep his uri-

nary function. At the hospital,
some visiting Buddhist monks
gave him the name Thien Nhan,
meaning “good person.”

But the doctors couldn’t af-

ford to keep him, so they re-
turned him to his mother’s fami-
ly, where he was neglected and
undernourished and had to for-
age outside for his own food.

Yet Thien was soon a minor
celebrity in Vietnam; his story
touched many people, including
Greig Craft, president of the
Asia Injury Prevention
Foundation. He looked into
the situation and learned that
the boy had just been adopted by
a Vietnamese journalist and her
husband—but they needed help
with Thien’s expensive long-
term surgery.

Craft knew Dr. Joseph Rosen,
a DHMC plastic surgeon, from
Rosen’s medical missions to
Vietnam. Rosen and Dartmouth
teams travel regularly to Hanoi
to train surgeons there. (For
more about Rosen’s work in
Vietnam, see page 60 in this is-

sue, as well as dartmed.dartmouth.edu/
summer07/html/vs_hanoi.php.)

Craft asked Rosen if he would
oversee Thien’s care—several
more genital surgeries over the
next 10 to 15 years, plus eventu-
ally the fitting of a robotic leg.
Rosen agreed. They arranged for
Thien to come to DHMC in Au-
gust 2008 so Herz could perform
a urethral dilation—widening
the boy’s urethral opening and
stitching it to his skin to hold it
open. The surgery was funded by
private donors recruited by Jen-

nifer Ames, the OR operations
manager at DHMC.

Older: The boy also traveled to
the Rehabilitation Institute of
Chicago while he was in the
U.S., to be evaluated for a ro-

botic prosthesis that he’ll get in
Vietnam when he is older.

Rosen and Herz are confident
that Thien will be able to receive
the rest of his care in Vietnam—
including urethral and penile re-
construction and the fitting of
the robotic leg. While the boy
was at DHMC, Herz determined
that his existing urethra is
healthy and extends all the
way to his bladder, which will
make grafting a urethral tube—
built with tissue from inside his
cheek—much easier. “He defies
a little bit of logic,” says Herz,
who is “surprised that he’s always
in such good spirits.”

Sojourn: The boy and his adopt-
vative mother and father stayed
with Ames during the family’s
sojourn in the Upper Valley.
Thien and Ames’s teenage son
soon became fast friends. “They
went out on our front lawn,” she
recalls, and “were ripping up the
grass and throwing it . . . By the
time they came back in, . . .
Thien was calling my son ‘broth-
er’ in Vietnamese.

“It’s a miracle that he sur-

vived,” she adds, “but it’s a mira-

cle that he is the child he is, to be
so loving and trusting.” For
more on his compelling story, see

Matthew C. Wiencke

SIGHT FOR SORE EYES: Over 100 Dartmouth medical students
volunteered at 14 area nonprofit organizations on DMS’s fourth
annual Common Good Day in October—doing school vision tests,
cleaning trails, singing at a local senior home, and much more.

Jennifer Ames, left, checks on Phung
Thien Nhan before his DHMC surgery,
as the boy’s adoptive father holds him.