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# In Vietnam, a CEO tackles a 'terrible wrong'

- Article by: [JACKIE CROSBY](#) , Star Tribune
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A health plan's leader lost her husband, possibly to aftereffects of Agent Orange exposure. Now she seeks to help others in Vietnam.



Bob and Nancy Feldman met at an ice-skating party in Green Bay when they were 15 and became high school sweethearts.

They married at a time when opposition to the Vietnam War was hitting full stride in America -- and in their own lives. They talked of moving to Canada when Bob's draft card came, but he ultimately headed off to an air base near Saigon.

Decades later, after the legacy of the Vietnam War cut their love story bitterly short, Nancy Feldman looked to Southeast Asia as an unlikely salve. She established a small charity to help Vietnamese families still facing insidious effects of exposure to Agent Orange, the toxic herbicide that doctors said likely was linked to Bob's death from cancer at age 59.

It was an unconventional step, known only to family and a few close friends. As CEO of the Minneapolis health plan UCare, Nancy Feldman viewed it as a modest act of reparation and a supremely private homage to her late husband.

But the U.S. government is taking its first significant steps to clean up the environmental damage caused by spraying defoliants in the Vietnamese jungles, and the antiwar activist in Nancy Feldman has been reignited. After six years of quietly building the fund, she is ready to talk about the work as she prepares to meet the families for the first time.

"The point was never to make it big," said Feldman, 66. "We wanted to remember Bob by trying to do our bit to help right a terrible wrong."

The Bob Feldman Fund is said to be one of the first and largest American charities to give direct aid to Vietnamese people still living in the former war zones. Nancy established it in 2006, the same year Bob died of lymphoma, using \$40,000 in government disability payments tied to his illness. She has continued to contribute her monthly widow's check of \$1,185, providing the bulk of the funding, with additional donations coming from a small number of family and friends.

The fund has raised about \$100,000 to date and helped more than 300 rural families through the War Legacies Project, a Vermont-based charity.

## Toxic spills

Bob Feldman was 23 when he arrived at the base in Biên Hòa in the spring of 1970 to serve with the U.S. Army Signal Corps. Like other major military hubs in Southeast Asia, Biên Hòa was a storage facility for Agent Orange. Army documents show that just months before Feldman arrived, the base was the site of several spills of the dioxin-laced herbicide.

"Bob was behind the lines for the most part, and his day-to-day life was considered 'safe,' " Nancy said. "What he didn't know was that he was washing, drinking and eating Agent Orange."

Agent Orange was a cocktail of herbicides sometimes mixed at 50 times the strength used in farming at the time. American soldiers sprayed nearly 20 million gallons of defoliants across Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia between 1961 and 1971 in a campaign to destroy jungles that provided cover to the enemy.

Pushed for decades by veterans, activists and scientists, the Department of Veterans Affairs has since linked Agent Orange and other herbicides to increased risk of birth defects and more than a dozen diseases, including several forms of cancer and Parkinson's.

As many as 3 million people in Southeast Asia are disabled or have health problems related to Agent Orange, according to the Red Cross of Vietnam. That figure is controversial and outdated, say those tracking the issue, and the true impact is impossible to quantify.

After years of deflecting pleas from Vietnam, the U.S. government in August launched a \$43 million, four-year program to clean up two dozen "hot spots" of environmental contamination, starting at an air strip in Da Nang, which still lacks vegetation.

The United States also earmarked \$11.4 million to help people with disabilities, though that money is not directly tied to Agent Orange.

The Feldman Fund aims to improve the standard of living, often in simple ways. Working with the Vietnamese Red Cross, the fund gives grants of \$200 to \$250 to about 50 families each year who have children with disabilities and live on less than \$30 a month.

It has helped families put on a roof, add a bathroom or dig a well. It has helped pay travel expenses for children to get medical care and provided supplemental income to keep children in school.

"It really touches people that the money is coming from the family of an American veteran who has been affected by Agent Orange," said Susan Hammond, who oversees the Feldman Fund as director of the War Legacies Project.

Twin brothers Hoài Phú and Hoài Phi, born with severely deformed limbs, sent a photo-filled letter of thanks, saying they have been "reborn with legs" after the fund provided electric wheelchairs and computers to help them continue tutoring children in their area.

"We are free to go wherever we want in our own home, we can go outside whenever we want, to play with our nephew, to feel the breeze, to enjoy the moonlight," they wrote.

Charles Bailey, one of the nation's top advocates for cleaning up Agent Orange, credits the Feldman Fund for drawing attention to the needs of the Vietnamese people.

"Early money makes the cake rise," said Bailey, who ran the Ford Foundation for a decade and is director of the Agent Orange project for the New York-based Aspen Institute.

Bailey is not connected with the Feldman Fund, but he knows many of the families and has seen the results.

His favorite example is a mother of a disabled child who turned down an offer of pigs. What she needed was fresh water, she told the Red Cross, so that she wouldn't have to walk half a mile to the pump and leave her son alone.

The fund got her a well, and soon a neighbor paid for an electric pump so both families could benefit.

"The \$100 gave her a valuable asset, raised her position in the community and improved the lives of both families," Bailey said. "It's a real case of social cooperation."

### **Creating a memorial**

Bob and Nancy married young -- he was 21, she was 22. Nancy described their relationship as "tempestuous, intense, wonderful," in thoughts shared at Bob's funeral, saying they spent their final 20 years together "perfecting what we knew was the right relationship."

Bob was an engineer, a long-distance runner and a stay-at-home dad until their daughter, Sara, turned 3. He loved sports cars, golf and music. Through the decades he and Nancy took bike trips together, toured the world and restored their midcentury home.

The day before he died, Bob asked Nancy how they ever could repay what everyone had done for them as he battled chronic lymphocytic leukemia, diagnosed four years earlier, and then lymphoma.

"I'll spend the rest of my life working on it," Nancy said she told him.

The fund is part of that pledge, she said.

As leader of a \$2.3 billion nonprofit health insurance company, Feldman is no stranger to the spotlight. She has testified before Congress and state lawmakers and serves on several nonprofit boards. Yet she seems circumspect about going public with the work of the fund and its intimate history. She talked about it with UCare employees for the first time in August in a company blog.

While she has seen the photos and read the letters of gratitude, she has never met any of the families. She and daughter Sara, now 35, plan to go to Vietnam in February to visit some recipients and tour the Biên Hòa base.

For Nancy Feldman, making her own restitution is part of the deal she made with Bob.

"There's not a lot that can be done about what happened," she said. "But this, we can do."