

SEEING THE GOOD

After learning about medical work being done in developing countries, filmmaker Lara Damiani was there to capture the life-changing moments of children having their eyesight restored

About three years ago, I read a story about Dr James Muecke, founder of not-for-profit organisation Sight For All, and the amazing work he and his team were doing in Myanmar. I was very intrigued by this local guy - we are both based in Adelaide - who was doing this work in developing countries because that is very much a passion of mine.

I got in touch with James and we decided that on one of the next trips, I would follow him and see what story we could find. We were in Hanoi, in Vietnam, and on the third day there, I was with James in the operating theatre filming a three-month-old baby having an eye removed. It was very confronting. It was the first time I had filmed in an operating theatre in a developing country with children. I remember just standing there with the camera thinking, "Keep shooting. Keep shooting."

When I was in university, I was always very socially aware. Then I got caught up in the world and I had this really bizarre career. At the age of 23, I was the youngest female executive officer in the Australian fishing industry. I was thrown into this corporate, male-dominated world, and it wasn't a very nice world at all.

One morning I woke up and thought, "What am I doing? I am not happy." I thought back to my university days and the issues I cared

about then, and I knew I wanted to become a documentary filmmaker.

I wanted to find a medium that could connect with people, where I could tell the sorts of stories I thought were really important. My biggest motivator is to shine a spotlight on these issues and show the Western world how lucky and fortunate we are. The reality of life for so many people out there is very different - which is why that first trip with James and his team in Hanoi was so important.

I met Bang, a young girl from a South-East Asian ethnic minority group called the Hmong. I started filming her and following her story

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for my documentary, *Little Bang's New Eye*. She already had an artificial eye, due to retinoblastoma, a deadly form of eye cancer, and doctors were worried it would spread to her other eye. There was also a chance her sister could have the hereditary disease too.

Bang lived in a remote area of Vietnam, which made it hard to access medical services. Her father, a young



24-year-old, travelled with Bang and her sister all the way from their village to the hospital on his own; his wife didn't speak English. My first visit to their village was a 10-hour overnight bus trip followed by a motorbike ride, driven by Bang's relatives. It is literally the only way we could get there.

Later, I was able to shoot this amazing scene of the doctor examining both Bang and her sister; they ended up having 20/20 vision with no evidence of cancer in their eyes. We had this really lovely moment when Bang's father picks her up, and just looks at her, and they smile so widely at each other. It was a wonderful ending. ★