Kim Le shouldn't be in Nha Trang.

She was among the luckier of the boat people -- refugees from southern Vietnam who survived desperate seaborne escapes after the end of their country's long war. After fleeing in 1980, Ms. Le made her way to Canada, where she got an education and established a career.

But a temporary return to her native city has lasted nearly seven years, largely because she has been waging her own war against the Western pedophiles who cruise its streets, looking for sex with penniless young boys.

"I have enough money to do anything I want, and these kids have nothing," says Ms. Le, 43, by way of explanation. "I want to do something."

Ms. Le is the owner of the Crazy Kim Bar, a popular watering hole for tourists in the seaside fishing-and-tourism city of about 300,000. Residents dubbed her Crazy Kim in 1996, when a chance meeting with an abused Vietnamese boy spurred her to begin single-handedly tracking down the pedophiles by coaxing details out of their underaged victims, then handing the information to police.

"She just goes in there headfirst and locks horns," said her former boss at another Nha Trang bar, who asked that his name not be published.

Since opening her own pub in 1999, Ms. Le has used it both to provide lunches for needy children and to finance the manufacture and distribution of printed flyers and thousands of T-shirts bearing the slogan "Hands Off the Kids!"

"I'm trying to educate the kids not to do it," she said, but the message makes its way to the abusers as well.

It is her spacious yet bustling bar that best shows the influence of her 12 years in Canada. The converted three-bedroom house dwarfs most hole-in-the-wall Vietnamese pubs, and contains several signs marking her as a Vietkieu (expatriate Vietnamese) -- an antismoking poster (rare in the developing world) and an array of Canadian and Vietnamese flags of equal prominence. A visitor half expects a hockey game on the pub television as Ms. Le begins to tell her story.

Her family, wealthy by the country's standards, fled Vietnam by boat more than two decades ago. Picked up by a Dutch ship, they were taken to a refugee camp in Singapore, and then to the Netherlands. She moved to Canada after enjoying a holiday there and studied computer science at Concordia University in Montreal. Ultimately, she landed a financial-services desk job at Ottawa's National Capital Commission, where she worked for six years.

She went back to Nha Trang in 1996, to take up a two-year teaching post at a university. A month after arriving, she met the boy.

Ms. Le and her boyfriend were visiting a Buddhist pagoda when they stopped to chat with one of the many children who sell trinkets to tourists. After a few minutes, it emerged that a foreign man had paid the boy for sex. Ms. Le was shocked, having imagined that such depravity was confined to bigger,worse cities such as Ho Chi Minh City (the former Saigon) in the south. And her crusade was under way.

The details of Ms. Le's subsequent discoveries are grim.

Most of the victims are boys between 10 and 12, invariably from dirt-poor families. The pedophiles are typically middle-aged or older. They cruise Nha Trang's popular but notorious beaches, pockets of which are littered with used syringes and condoms, to look for children; the predation typically begins with an offer of lunch.

One man kept a meticulous journal of his exploits -- Ms. Le says it contained 150 names of his victims. And many videotapes their sex acts.

Ms. Le acknowledges that the results of her detective work have been mixed. She has supplied information to Vietnamese and foreign police, including Interpol, but so far only two of the pedophiles have been convicted, both in Germany. (Many Western countries have introduced laws against child-sex offences committed overseas. Canada did so in 1996.)

The walls she runs into are numerous, Ms. Le said. The children are scared and confused. Some hotel staff are reluctant to share information when tourists bring boys back to their rooms, for fear of losing business.

The police co-operate with foreign law enforcement, but no Western pedophiles have been prosecuted domestically. Nha Trang residents who might have information often fear getting involved. "There's never enough proof," Ms. Le said.

Her campaign has also taken a personal toll. She sells some of the T-shirts to tourists, but loses money over all because she gives more of them away to children. Her boyfriend left her "because I was so busy with this problem." And she fears retribution from offenders. "Many people scare me," Ms. Le said. "But so far, no one has come to get me yet."

But although convictions have been few, Ms. Le says the pedophilia problem in Nha Trang has subsided somewhat. The children say would-be offenders have been scared off the beach by the attention Ms. Le's T-shirt campaign has brought to the issue. And the problem is certainly not as great as that in neighbouring Cambodia, Thailand and the Philippines.

Nevertheless, Ms. Le's return to Canada remains on hold -- she has been unable to persuade the Vietnamese government to help finance a safe house for the children, and her bar is prospering. She does not miss Canadian winters. And the tourists remain.

"I think I will stay for a while," she said. "There are still so many pedophiles in town. I see them everywhere. I know it will take time."

BY David Marsh, NHA TRANG, VIETNAM

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This article was published more than 10 years ago. Some information in it may no longer be current.

[*Back to the beginning of Crazy Kim’s English school.*](https://www.worlds.no/crazykims/index.htm)