For ten years, Khanh H. Nguyen, MD, Chief of Pediatric Cardiothoracic Surgery, has taken time away from his busy schedule as a pediatric cardiothoracic surgeon to volunteer in underserved countries, including China, Honduras, and Romania. This year, Dr. Nguyen returned to his birthplace, Vietnam, where he is building a partnership with The Hue Central Hospital in the city of Hue.

“I left Vietnam when I was a teenager and still have memories of Saigon, where I grew up,” says Dr. Nguyen, who was educated in the United States and United Kingdom. “Medical missions like these can have a dramatic impact on the lives of children in underserved countries where treatment of congenital heart disease is not available. Without treatment, children with congenital heart disease will have significantly shorter life spans and reduced quality of life.”

Accompanying Dr. Nguyen on the trip was David H. Adams, MD, the Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis Professor and Chairman of the Department of Cardiothoracic Surgery. After obtaining a list of patients from local hospitals near Hue, Drs. Nguyen and Adams rolled up their sleeves and went to work with a clinical team that included anesthesiologists, echocardiographers, intensivists, perfusionists, and nurses from Mount Sinai and other hospitals around the United States. “It was particularly meaningful to be there working with Dr. Nguyen, who has already brought so much back to the very hospital where he was born,” notes Dr. Adams.

One of the most common conditions that they treated was Tetralogy of Fallot, a congenital defect in which there is a hole between the pumping chambers of the heart. Several young patients also underwent complex valve repair procedures. In total, 15 operations were performed over a five-day period.

The other goal was to train local surgeons how to perform these procedures. Dr. Nguyen has worked before with The Hue Central Hospital to help develop its pediatric cardiothoracic surgery program. The Hospital opened a Cardiovascular Center in 2007, a year after Dr. Nguyen’s last trip to Vietnam.

“There is a shortage of specialized cardiac surgeons in Vietnam and especially of congenital cardiac surgeons who perform surgery on newborns or small infants,” says Dr. Nguyen. “There is also a lack of experience in performing highly complex operations. We’re not going to go there, do a few surgeries, and leave. We go there to help them grow. My goal is to work with them until they become a full-fledged congenital heart center.”

Dr. Nguyen envisions the Cardiovascular Center becoming a resource throughout central Vietnam and eventually Laos and Cambodia. He says the partnership will only continue to grow. “Perhaps we can help them organize a heart transplantation program,” says Dr. Nguyen. “They are very enthusiastic about becoming a full-service heart center.”