

# Local man overcomes polio, culture to win college award

By Anna L. Griffin  
CORRESPONDENT

## LEOMINSTER

LEOMINSTER — Tuan Hoang Nguyen remembers the day when he overheard one of his neighbors saying that they would not allow him into their home because it was thought that he would bring them bad luck.

He was living in Vietnam and struggling with the effects of polio that hit him when he was 3 years old. The disease left him physically devastated — he was only able to walk in a seated position using his hands to move along.

He recalled that as he was growing up, many people treated him badly in his native country simply because they had no understanding of the disease. "Some people thought I was cursed," he said.

Mr. Nguyen explained the reaction was cultural. "Some people believe that my parents must have done something wrong to someone and now they have to pay back by the sickness of their children."

But all of that was wiped away eight years ago, when he came to this country.

"I have a wonderful life," Mr. Nguyen said. "Coming to this country was the best thing that could have happened to me. I still can't believe it at times, but it is all real."

Mr. Nguyen, 25, was recently named Student Government Association member-of-the-year at Franklin Pierce University, Rindge, N.H. The Johnson Street resident is a junior at the university, majoring in biology and is treasurer of the school's SGA.

Things changed for Mr. Nguyen when he met Joseph Bodanza, the founder of Child Medical Connection Inc.

Mr. Bodanza started Child Medical Connection Inc. in 1995, while on a business trip to Vietnam. He had heard about a child who was being

forced to leave school because he couldn't afford the fees. Further contact indicated that the child, Mr. Nguyen, suffered from a severe curvature of the spine as the result of polio.

Having been a victim of polio himself, Mr. Bodanza investigated treatment options and came upon the work of the Shriners Hospitals.

All of the children treated at Shriners Hospitals receive free care. Mr. Bodanza served as Mr. Nguyen's guardian while he was hospitalized.

Mr. Bodanza estimates that it costs an average of \$5,000 to cover airfare and living expenses while a child is in the United States. Initially started with his own funds, Child Medical Connection gained tax-exempt nonprofit status and raises money to help bring children to the United States for treatment.

The program has a growing waiting list of children who suffer from polio, scoliosis, burns and other crippling disorders, but resources are limited.

In addition to financial assistance, the program also relies on volunteers to act as host families and to help transport children to and from medical treatment as well as provide social experiences.

Since its founding, Child Medical Connection Inc. has helped several dozen children.

When he arrived in the United States in March 2000, Mr. Nguyen was fitted with braces and was able to walk upright using crutches. Physical therapy and other medical treatments followed. He was able to attend school and graduated from Fitchburg's St. Bernard's Central Catholic High School in 2002.

Mr. Nguyen said he felt he needed to enhance his English



ANNA GRIFFIN

Franklin Pierce University student Tuan Hoang Nguyen shown with his Student Government Association member-of-the-year award.

skills, so he attended Mount Wachusett Community College, Gardner, graduating in 2006. While at the school he was named as the school's student trustee.

After graduating from the Mount, he went to Franklin Pierce.

"It's a wonderful place," Mr. Nguyen said. "I fit in. Everyone has been very kind to me."

He said the award was presented to him during an informal, get-together of the Student Government Association.

"It was a total surprise," he said. "It did make me very happy because this is something the SGA votes on."

Mr. Nguyen has one year

before he graduates from Franklin Pierce. He said he would like to attend medical school. "I want to be an orthopedic surgeon," he said. "I have an understanding of that field of medicine that comes from my own history."

"I know there are many more children like me in Vietnam and other countries who could benefit from medical assistance," he said. "That's what I would like to do — help those children."

He said he doesn't know what his life would be like had he not come to this country. "I don't want to think about it, really. But it couldn't be as great as what I have here."