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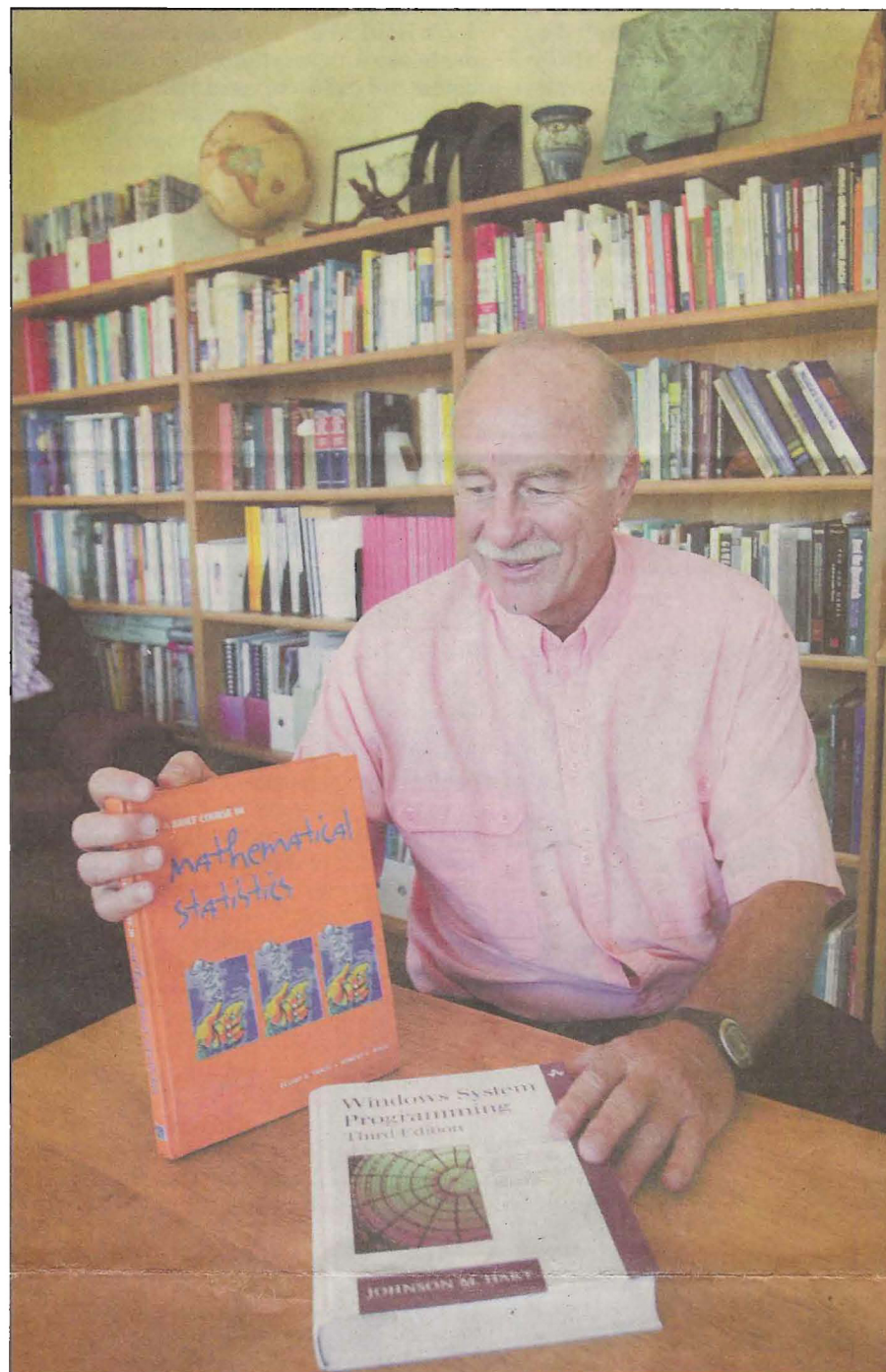
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SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

TUESDAY, MAY 15, 2007

Los Osos scholar collects books for Vietnam



'People are the same everywhere. When you see people who are excited and want to exchange ideas, it's not about politics.'

Ted Hill, a research scholar in residence at Cal Poly

Ted Hill with a couple of the books he will donate to the English-language International University in Vietnam.

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A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Ted Hill first visited Vietnam as a soldier in wartime; now, when the Los Osos man returns, it's to support a university and the students it strives to educate

BY LEAH ETTLING
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When Ted Hill left Vietnam at the conclusion of his tour of duty as a U.S. Army captain in 1969, he didn't expect to return.

Today, nearly 40 years later, the Los Osos resident and world-renowned mathematics researcher has made repeated trips to the country in an effort to support an innovative Vietnamese university.

Hill, who is in his second year as a research scholar in residence at Cal Poly, is collecting textbooks and research materials for the English-language International University, a state-run Vietnamese school that

opened in late 2003.

Quoting Albert Einstein, who said, "Equations are more important to me, because politics is for the present, but an equation is something for eternity," Hill views the quest as an apolitical one.

"This is something I feel strongly about," the 63-year-old said. "People are the same everywhere. When you see people who are excited and want to exchange ideas, it's not about politics."

Hill has already collected more than 200 pounds of textbooks on a variety of subjects through his Web site, www.booksforvietnam.org. But he has run into one hurdle: getting the books to Vietnam.

BOOKS

For details about what books are needed, visit
www.booksforvietnam.org.

Professors from Vietnam have made some specific requests.

To assist with shipping, e-mail
staff@booksforvietnam.org.

Shipping is expensive, so he is seeking partnerships with other nonprofit groups or a transportation company to help get the texts to students.

During a recent trip to International University, outside Ho Chi Minh City, he lectured in English to students that he described as enthusiastic and eager to learn.

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Vietnam

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"The students are really sharp," he said, "and their English skills are good, sometimes even better than their professors."

Since the university is in its infancy, with buildings under construction and no graduating class until next year, some resources are scarce, including textbooks. Students don't have their own books now; they share what few tomes are available from the small library.

Hill hopes to change that.

In addition to texts for the students, he's also collecting books that will assist the Vietnamese professors with their research.

Hill was first contacted by professor Nguyen Van Thu, who was fascinated by his groundbreaking work on probability theory and the fact

that Hill was a former soldier.

"I think that you and our university would become a concentration point of donation books and journals, and everything will be very useful to the development of science," Nguyen wrote to Hill in an e-mail early this year.

The Vietnamese professors are especially interested in applied mathematics, statistics and computer science as they participate in their country's improving economy.

Hill is known for having developed a mathematical proof of Benford's Law, a 125-year-old theory that predicts the occurrence of certain numbers in a given situation.

He's also worked on problems of fair division and optimal stopping theory in his career, which began as soon as he left the Army in 1970. Optimal stopping theory predicts when it is most beneficial to stop when selecting an option

at random from a group.

Having earned a master's degree in operations research at Stanford before the war, he later won a Fulbright scholarship to study in Germany and received his doctorate in mathematics from UC Berkeley.

His return trips to Vietnam have broadened his perspective on the country, he said. He learned that he loved Vietnamese food and that the people are warm and welcoming.

His division, the 65th Combat Engineers of the 25th Infantry, was stationed at Cuchi near Ho Chi Minh City and had virtually no contact with civilians during the war, he said.

Unlike the abrupt conclusion to his past experience in Vietnam, Hill said he expects the book project to have a long life.

"I hope it keeps growing and gets bigger than I can handle," he said. "I'll just keep going until I can turn it over to someone else."