SAOMAI

VÌ NGƯỜI MÙ

25 YEARS OF INSPIRING CONFIDENCE

2001 – 2026



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25 YEARS OF INSPIRING CONFIDENCE

Sao Mai Center for the Blind (2001 – 2026)

OPENING MESSAGE



A quarter of a century ago, few could have imagined people with visual impairment writing software, testing digital accessibility, or arranging music on a computer. Over the past 25 years, from 2001 to 2026, the Sao Mai Center for the Blind has worked alongside people with visual impairment to open up these possibilities in learning, work, and everyday life.

I feel fortunate and proud to have been part of this work, from the two-year Bung Sang Computer Project to the Sao Mai Center's growth over the past 25 years. As we look back, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the teachers and mentors who made so much of this possible. Professor Carlo Pizzato and Professor Amedeo Pignatelli started the project, founded the Center, and guided its development with dedication. Our teacher and mentor, Mr. Dao Khanh Truong, taught and cared for us at Bung Sang Home as we grew up. Dr. Larry Campbell, a dedicated mentor, an encouraging colleague, and a dear friend, has worked tirelessly to expand educational opportunities for people with visual impairment in Vietnam.

Throughout these years, our work has been guided by a firm belief in the capabilities of people with visual impairment and their right to full and equal participation in society. As a nonprofit, we invest in people by supporting their education, expanding their opportunities for employment, and helping them live independently. This belief inspires us to keep learning, developing new ideas, sharing our experience, and working with others to make technology a means of opening up opportunities.

This anniversary book brings together the milestones in our history and the dedication, affection, and friendship that have made us the Sao Mai family. To all who have shared in our work over the years, and who will continue this journey with us, we express our deep appreciation and sincere thanks.

Dang Hoai Phúc
Executive Director, Sao Mai Center for the Blind



The teachers and mentors who laid the foundations for Sao Mai:
(1) Professor Carlo Pizzato helping students practice their computer skills;
(2) Professor Amedeo Pignatelli teaching a Bung Sang computer class;
(3) Dr. Larry Campbell speaking in Ho Chi Minh City;
(4) Mr. Dao Khanh Truong with his students during a music lesson.

MISSION STATEMENT

"The Sao Mai Center for the Blind works to remove barriers to information, empower people with visual impairment, and promote their rights. We pursue this mission through pioneering research, development, and use of assistive technology, along with skills training and career guidance. Our goal is to enable people with visual impairment to make effective use of technology, live independently, and participate fully and confidently in education and employment on an equal basis with others."

As we enter the age of artificial intelligence, Sao Mai remains committed to this mission. We continue working to ensure that advances in technology bring more opportunities for people with visual impairment to make their own choices, lead independent lives, and contribute to a more inclusive society.

A MESSAGE ON SAO MAI'S 25TH ANNIVERSARY



October 10, 2026

I am extremely happy and privileged to convey my warmest greetings to the Sao Mai Centre for the Blind, Vietnam, on the occasion of its 25th anniversary. Reaching a quarter of a century of uninterrupted service is a remarkable milestone. Establishing an institution to serve persons with visual impairment may be relatively easy; building it with a clear vision, sustaining its services, continuously responding to changing needs and maintaining its commitment for 25 years is a far greater achievement.

My association with Sao Mai began in 2008, when the Centre became a partner in the Higher Education Project implemented by the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI), with the support of The Nippon Foundation. I still remember with appreciation the vision of Dr. Larry Campbell, who recognized the tremendous potential of Sao Mai, particularly in the field of technology, and saw the value of partnering with the Centre in advancing opportunities for persons with visual impairment.

Sao Mai more than lived up to that confidence. Through its work in higher education, it encouraged hundreds of students with visual impairment to pursue university education and aspire to greater independence. Its close collaboration with the Vietnam Blind Association (VBA) also contributed significantly to creating role models and demonstrating what persons with visual impairment can achieve when opportunities, technology and appropriate support are made available.

An organization can realize its potential only when it has the right combination of vision, leadership and technical expertise. Sao Mai has been fortunate to have Mr. Dang Hoai Phúc as its Executive Director, under the overall guidance of the Sao Mai management. Phúc has demonstrated remarkable expertise in the use of technology for persons with visual impairment. More importantly, he has not remained merely a user of technology; he has become an innovator and creator of solutions that enable persons with visual impairment to access information and participate more independently.

One particularly noteworthy example is the text-to-speech engine developed for Myanmar, through a team of professionals led by Phúc in collaboration with a team in Myanmar. By developing an affordable technological solution, the initiative has helped thousands of persons with visual impairment in Myanmar access information and enhance their independence in learning. Equally important is the message behind this achievement: when technical expertise is shared across countries, solutions that might otherwise require substantial time and resources can be developed at an affordable cost. Such an approach has particular significance for developing countries, where accessible technology must be both effective and affordable.

Sao Mai's contribution has now expanded beyond education and technology into the important area of employment. With the support of The Nippon Foundation, the Centre is currently involved in the implementation of the Employment Project for facilitating employment opportunities for persons with visual impairment in Vietnam. It has developed a comprehensive Job Directory covering 50 potential areas in which persons with visual impairment can work and perform on par with others. The Centre has also undertaken extensive research to understand the factors contributing to successful employment and has organized employment forums that bring potential employers and jobseekers with visual impairment together. These initiatives have the potential to make a significant contribution to the long-term empowerment of persons with visual impairment.

Looking back over these 25 years, what impresses me most is the breadth of Sao Mai's contribution. Its work encompasses education, resource development, accessible technology, employment promotion, research, networking and documentation of good practices. These are not isolated activities; together they demonstrate a consistent commitment to discovering and developing the potential of persons with visual impairment.

To me personally, Sao Mai represents a model organization in building networks among persons with visual impairment and, more importantly, in demonstrating the hidden potential that can emerge when individuals are provided with the right opportunities and technological support. Its journey over the past 25 years is therefore not merely the story of an institution; it is also the story of the growing confidence, independence and aspirations of persons with visual impairment in Vietnam and beyond.

On this memorable occasion, I extend my heartfelt congratulations to the entire Sao Mai management and team, and in particular to Mr. Dang Hoai Phúc and his colleagues, for the professionalism, commitment and innovation they have demonstrated through their work. An organization that has built such a strong foundation over 25 years is well positioned for excellent growth and greater contributions in the years ahead.

May Sao Mai march confidently towards its Golden Jubilee and beyond, expanding its contribution not only in Vietnam but across Southeast Asia, and continuing to inspire institutions and individuals working for the empowerment of persons with visual impairment.

Dr. M. N. G. Mani
Former CEO, International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI)
Consultant, TNF-MNF Employment Project

SAO MAI'S ROLE IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION



Dr. Tran Thi Thu speaking at a conference

Hanoi, October 6, 2026

Twenty-five years is a significant milestone, reflecting an organization's lasting commitment to its values. As a researcher in special and inclusive education, I have had the opportunity to work with the Sao Mai Center for the Blind on many initiatives. On this 25th anniversary, I offer my heartfelt congratulations and sincere appreciation to the entire Sao Mai team.

A Trusted Partner to the Education Sector

I would first like to recognize Sao Mai's role as a trusted partner to the education sector. Its contribution goes beyond developing useful tools. The Center also helps build the foundations for accessible education for students with visual impairment:

Braille music notation: The system of Braille music symbols compiled by Sao Mai contributed to the music notation section of the National Standards for Braille codes.

Training in accessible materials production: As part of this project, Sao Mai works with the Institute to provide technical training for staff producing accessible digital books.

Accessible e-textbooks: Sao Mai is a key partner in a project to convert standard textbooks into accessible electronic formats and develop an accessible online library. The project is implemented by UNDP in collaboration with the Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences (VNIES) and the Vietnam Blind Association.

Support for university students: The Center also carries out projects that directly support students with visual impairment attending university.

Assistive Technology and Inclusive Education

These activities reflect Sao Mai's partnership with the education sector, while its use of technology to remove barriers remains central to its work. The Center has established 26 computer labs at blind associations, schools, and centers for children with visual impairment across the country. Through its training-of-trainers program, Sao Mai has equipped IT instructors to train others, while also teaching computer skills directly to generations of students with visual impairment. These labs and instructors help bring

technology skills to underserved communities where access to training and resources is limited.

Alongside its investment in computer labs and training, Sao Mai develops software that many people with visual impairment in Vietnam use every day. These tools include Sao Mai VNVoice, the first Vietnamese text-to-speech synthesizer for people with visual impairment in Vietnam; Sao Mai Braille, for creating documents and translating them into Braille; SM Music Reader, which builds on the Center's work in Braille music notation to make musical scores accessible; and SM Readmate, an accessible e-book reader. Each tool meets a practical need and helps people read, write, listen, and learn on an equal basis with others.

The significance of this work extends beyond Sao Mai itself. It helps people with disabilities exercise their rights to education and information, as affirmed in Vietnamese law and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). It also helps turn the goals of inclusive education into everyday practice, a central concern of educational research and policymaking.

Continuing Our Partnership for Students with Visual Impairment

From its first computer labs to today's smartphone apps, Sao Mai's work over the past 25 years has shown that, with accessible tools, people with visual impairment can study, work, and contribute to society. These achievements reflect the dedication of generations of leaders, staff, teachers, and volunteers, many of whom have visual impairment themselves.

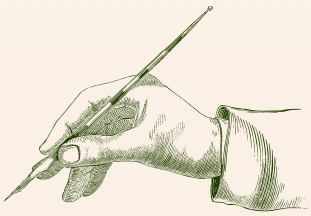
I warmly congratulate the entire Sao Mai team on this anniversary. I look forward to continued collaboration between Sao Mai and the Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences in research, training, and the development of accessible materials, so that more students with visual impairment have equal access to quality, inclusive education.

May Sao Mai continue to shine as a guiding star!

Dr. Tran Thi Thu
Head of the Special Education Research Department
Center for Equity and Inclusive Education Research
Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences

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SAO MAI – A COMPANION ON THE JOURNEY TO KNOWLEDGE AND INCLUSION





October 10, 2026

I first learned about the Sao Mai Center for the Blind in my early years of high school. As a student with visual impairment, I found new opportunities through the Center, even as I faced the challenges of learning to use technology. With its lessons in MP3 format, I gradually became familiar with computers and learned to use basic office applications to complete assignments and submit them to my teachers. I was the only student with visual impairment at my high school, and those skills helped me study alongside my classmates.

Looking back, I remain deeply grateful to Sao Mai for connecting me with the information and tools I needed to learn. That support also helped me become more independent, take part more fully in society, and gain confidence in pursuing my goals.

Only later did I realize that my experience was one small part of Sao Mai's wider mission. Vietnam was among the pioneers in integrating Vietnamese speech synthesizers with the JAWS screen reader. Sao Mai's work in technology and education has since reached tens of thousands of people with visual impairment. The Center has also helped other Asian countries develop text-to-speech software in their own languages. These efforts have opened up opportunities to study, work, access information, and participate in society.

Throughout my education and career, Sao Mai has remained a trusted companion. Whenever I had difficulties with screen readers, Vietnamese speech synthesizers, or compatibility between assistive tools and other software, I turned to the guides on the Center's website or asked friends and colleagues at Sao Mai for advice. I have always valued their technical knowledge, patience, and willingness to help. Sometimes, timely advice or the right technical solution was enough to overcome a problem that had seemed impossible to resolve.

In 2019, I reached an important milestone when I joined the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). I also faced a technical problem unlike any I had encountered before: the laptop UNDP provided could not run Sao Mai's Vietnamese speech synthesizers. This was more than a software problem. It prevented me from completing nearly half of my work, which involved processing Vietnamese-language documents.

Sao Mai's experts and UNDP's IT staff worked together and resolved the issue after a week of research and troubleshooting. I still remember their help with deep appreciation. It allowed me to continue working and reminded me that an inclusive workplace depends on more than individual effort. It also requires people to listen to one another, work together, and commit to removing barriers.

My relationship with Sao Mai grew through our work together to improve access to digital information for people with print disabilities. In partnership with UNDP, Sao Mai has converted and distributed accessible EPUB e-books for students with visual impairment, provided training and technical support to organizations producing accessible books, promoted digital accessibility standards, developed digital libraries for people with print disabilities, and created an Android e-book reader with a Vietnamese interface. This work has expanded access to learning materials and laid the technical groundwork for producing, distributing, and using accessible digital materials more widely and sustainably in Vietnam.

Thank You Sao Mai for Being Part of My Journey

From my days as a student with visual impairment learning to use a computer through MP3 lessons to my work as a development professional promoting education and digital accessibility for people with disabilities, Sao Mai has been a quiet but steady source of support. Looking back, I have come to understand that the value of technology lies in more than a program's features or an app's design. It lies in the opportunities it opens up for people who have too often been left behind.

This anniversary marks 25 years of sharing knowledge, encouraging new ideas, and developing practical assistive technology. Behind that work are enthusiasm, careful research, and a generous commitment to others. Sao Mai has helped turn advances in technology into opportunities for people with visual impairment to overcome barriers, access knowledge, make their own choices, find work, and help build a more inclusive society.

The digital era brings new opportunities, along with new accessibility challenges. I hope Sao Mai, the "Morning Star," will continue to shine as a trusted companion, helping bridge the digital divide between people with visual impairment and the wider community. With many experts with visual impairment on its team, the Center also shows how people with visual impairment can contribute their knowledge and talents to inclusive development in Vietnam and internationally.

On this 25th anniversary, I offer my warmest congratulations and sincere thanks to Sao Mai's leadership, specialists, staff, volunteers, and everyone who contributes to its work. May the Center continue to learn, innovate, and bring assistive technology to more people across Vietnam, especially in remote areas where access to technology and learning resources is limited. I also hope its ideas and partnerships will continue to reach communities around the world.

Happy 25th anniversary, Sao Mai! May you continue to share knowledge, technology, and opportunity, reach more people, and inspire others for many years to come!

Dao Thu Huong
Disability Inclusion Officer
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Vietnam

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CHAPTER 1

MILESTONES ALONG THE WAY

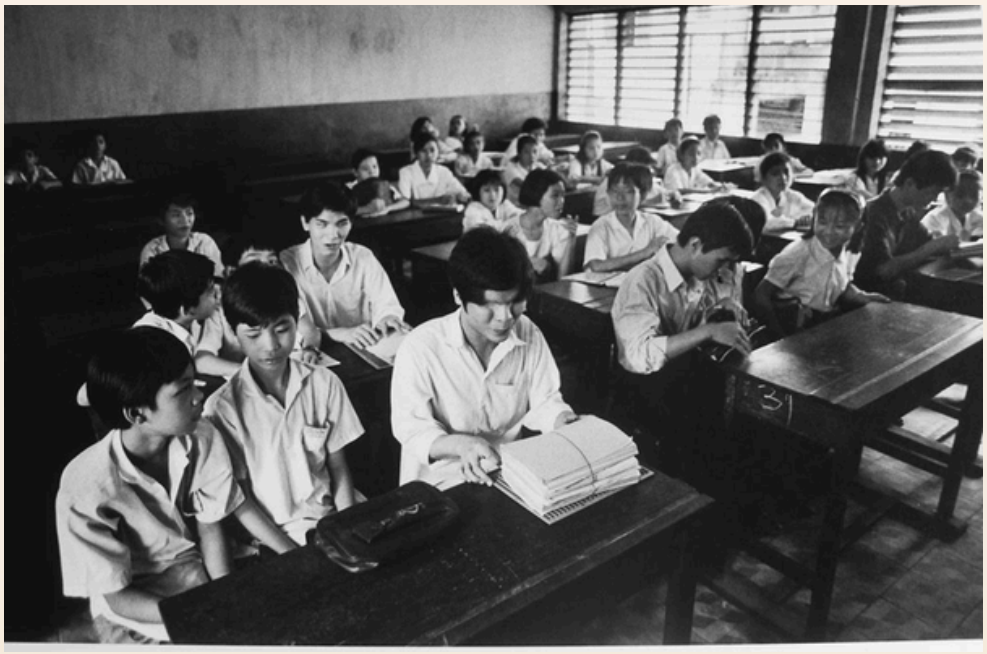
1994–2001 – WHERE THE DREAM BEGAN



The first computer at Bung Sang Home

Our First Computer

(As recalled by Duong Chi Hung, one of Sao Mai's first instructors trained to teach others)



A Braille class

“When I was six, my mother took me by the hand and brought me to Bung Sang Home, where she entrusted me to Mr. Dao Khanh Truong. Her wish was simple: she hoped I could learn a trade and one day earn my own living. We studied school subjects, music, and foreign languages. We read Braille on paper and wrote with a slate and stylus or a basic Perkins brailler.

“Then, during a chance visit in 1994, Professor Carlo Pizzato stood quietly watching us read, our fingers moving across the dots. As he watched, he began to think about how a computer might help.

“He soon brought in his own computer, along with a magnifier and a Perkins brailler with speech output. In 1999, the Bung Sang Computer Project officially began under the leadership of Professor Carlo and Professor Amedeo Pignatelli.

“At first, using a computer keyboard felt completely unfamiliar. But before long, we felt a wonderful sense of pride. As blind children, we could now type our own assignments and hand them in to our teachers. We learned to print documents, record ourselves playing instruments, and explore the internet. We even began to discover what we could do with computer programming.

“We have many memories of those early classes. Some moments were frustrating at the time, but make us smile now. Both Italian teachers taught the classes themselves, so we needed to know English. We also faced another challenge: we could not use a mouse, and our sighted teachers did not yet know how to teach us to use keyboard shortcuts. Sometimes we had to pause a lesson so that we could work it out together.

“After two years of hard work, from 1999 to 2001, the project came to a successful close. Nine of us were selected to receive training so that we, in turn, could teach others.”

Professor Carlo and Professor Amedeo wanted to establish a technology center that would serve blind people for years to come. In October 2001, they founded the Sao Mai Computer Center for the Blind. Five instructors stayed on to help get the Center up and running: Duong Chi Hung, Nguyen Thanh Son, Nguyen Hoang Bao Vu, Lam Thanh Binh, and Dang Hoai Phúc.



Members of the first group of instructors teaching a class

2002–2013 – BRINGING COMPUTER SKILLS TO THE COMMUNITY



One of Sao Mai's early computer classes

At a time when assistive software from overseas was still too expensive for many users, Sao Mai decided to develop its own Vietnamese-language software and establish a nationwide computer training network.

Dang Hoai Phúc, one of the five instructors who helped establish Sao Mai and who went on to become its Director, recalls his early experiences with technology: "Our teacher told us that a computer was just a piece of metal, there to serve people. Back then, I didn't quite understand what he meant."

Yet that "piece of metal" would open up a world of possibilities for a whole generation. To make computers easier for blind people to use, Sao Mai developed its first Vietnamese-language assistive software:

- **Sao Mai VNVoice**: Vietnamese text-to-speech software that helped blind people in Vietnam begin using computers and reading documents in their own language.
- **NetTalk**: A standalone talking web browser that opened up access to information from around the world.
- **Sao Mai Word & DictTalk**: A standalone talking word processor and a talking dictionary.
- **Sao Mai CalTalk**: A talking calculator.
- **NVDA in Vietnamese**: A Vietnamese version of the most widely used open-source screen reader.

Phúc was also concerned about people with visual impairment living in underserved remote areas. "If we only teach people in person, how long will they have to wait for their turn?" he asked. Sao Mai responded by developing a network for remote computer training, running training-of-trainers courses, and helping local organizations establish computer labs. Over the years, these efforts brought computer skills and accessible information to more people, both in Vietnam and across Southeast Asia:

- **A nationwide training network:** Sao Mai helped establish 26 computer labs across 23 provinces and cities, provided computer training for more than 1,500 learners, and trained more than 300 instructors and technicians to support and expand this work.
- **Sharing expertise across the region**: Advanced training was provided for nine instructors from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand in 2007, and for 12 instructors from Myanmar in 2013. These instructors would, in turn, train others in their own countries.
- **More accessible reading materials**: Sao Mai launched an accessible online library and converted and uploaded ***more than 3,200 titles*** in web, audio, and DAISY formats. Ninety percent of these materials support learning from primary school through university.
- **A student network:** In December 2012, Sao Mai established the Vietnam Network of Students with Visual Impairment. The network brought students together to address four major barriers to access to higher education: learning materials, attitudes, learning environments, and employment opportunities.



A computer lab in Da Nang



A computer lab in Ben Tre



Locations of computer labs established with support from Sao Mai

2014–2026 – BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS AT HOME AND ABROAD

From 2014 onward, Sao Mai began moving beyond basic assistive technology tools to develop more specialized solutions for users in Vietnam and other countries. Alongside this work, the Center expanded its collection of accessible learning materials, connected job seekers with employers, and contributed to policy advocacy. These efforts shared a common purpose: to support people with visual impairment in learning, working, and living independently.

2014–2019 – GROWING PARTNERSHIPS AND DEVELOPING SPECIALIZED SOLUTIONS

In 2014, Sao Mai localized DoudouLinux into Vietnamese, developed teaching materials, and taught children how to use it. This child-friendly Linux operating system provides a safe environment for learning, playing, and exploring computers.



Left: Sao Mai staff working on the Vietnamese version of DoudouLinux; Right: A Sao Mai staff member showing children at the Long Hai Child Welfare Center how to use DoudouLinux

During this period, Sao Mai worked with the Myanmar Association of the Blind to develop Burmese text-to-speech software. This enabled thousands of people with visual impairment in Myanmar to use computers and access information in their own language. In June 2018, the Center released Sao Mai Braille, supporting more than 60 Braille translation tables. The SM Music Reader app followed on Android in late 2019.



Phúc speaking at the launch of the Burmese text-to-speech software in Yangon



Representatives from Vien May Tinh meeting with blind job applicants at Sao Mai

Alongside its software development, Sao Mai converted 3,433 titles for its online accessible library. The Center also helped 18 people with visual impairment find employment. For the first time, the Center helped blind software engineers find employment at mainstream companies such as FPT and Vien May Tinh, opening up new career paths for people with visual impairment.

2020–2023 – ADAPTING AND MOVING FORWARD



Adecco Vietnam interviewing a blind job applicant

When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted everyday life, Sao Mai expanded its online services and supported remote learning and working to keep its programs running.

Between 2020 and 2023, the Center added 2,770 accessible titles to its library, bringing its collection to more than 9,000 titles. It also launched an accessible music library with more than 20,000 scores in MusicXML format.

Sao Mai provided training for more than 600 learners and helped another 22 people find employment at mainstream companies such as Prudential Vietnam, Vina Cacao, and Adecco Vietnam.

Vietnam joined the Marrakesh Treaty in December 2022, and the Treaty entered into force in the country in March 2023. This followed years of sustained advocacy by many organizations and individuals, an effort Sao Mai was honored to be part of. The Treaty provides an important legal framework for improving access to published works, making reading materials more readily available to people with print disabilities.



A conference with the Copyright Office of Vietnam

2024–2026 – EXPLORING AI AND EXPANDING EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT

During this period, Sao Mai increased its use of artificial intelligence and developed more specialized software.

In 2024, the Center released Sao Mai Graphics, a tool for designing tactile graphics and converting images into tactile form.

QR code to download SM BungSang

QR code to download SM Readmate

This was followed by SM BungSang for reading and translating Braille music on macOS, and SM Readmate, an e-book reader available across multiple platforms. The Center also completed work on a unified workflow in Sao Mai Braille for creating and translating documents containing text, mathematics, graphics, and music.

The Center's developers also contributed their expertise to international open-source projects. For MuseScore Studio, they developed a module that allows users to enter music using six-key Braille input and displays the corresponding Braille music notation in real time. They also developed Braille translation tables for Vietnamese, Khmer, and Burmese for Liblouis, along with Vietnamese speech and Braille rules for presenting mathematical expressions in MathCAT.



A workshop on using AI in Bac Ninh

Sao Mai also integrated AI tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and Mathpix into its software to process data, recognize content, describe images, and format documents. Working with partner organizations, the Center used these tools to speed up the production of accessible books, generating descriptions for more than 5,000 images and converting an additional 2,424 titles into accessible formats, including many books on technical subjects and mathematics.

In 2024 and 2025, Sao Mai trained 332 staff members from 63 public libraries, nine universities, and the Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences to produce accessible materials. The Center shared the tools and guided participants through the full production process so that their organizations could carry on the work independently.



Sao Mai instructors conducting a workshop on accessible book production for public libraries in Phu Quoc

Alongside these advances in technology, Sao Mai gradually expanded its employment support program beyond entry-level jobs to include fields requiring more advanced skills. Drawing on its experience in training, career guidance, and working with employers, the Center developed programs closely aligned with labor market needs. These programs bring together training in professional skills, technology, and independent living, while also preparing participants to work alongside sighted colleagues.

The aim is to help people with visual impairment find work, build their careers, improve their incomes, and participate as equal members of society. To support these goals, Sao Mai has researched employment opportunities and barriers for people with visual impairment in Vietnam, provided essential skills training for job seekers, helped partner organizations strengthen their job placement services, connected with employers, and raised awareness of inclusive hiring. Through these efforts, the Center is gradually building a network of partner organizations and employers working together to expand lasting employment opportunities for people with visual impairment in Vietnam.

The Joy Behind the Code



Sao Mai's software development team at the CSUN Assistive Technology Conference in the United States

From his early days as one of Sao Mai's first five instructors to his current role as Director, Dang Hoai Phúc has worked alongside his colleagues for more than two decades to make technology more accessible to people with visual impairment. Sao Mai's software now reaches users around the world, but for Phúc, the greatest joy still comes from seeing the difference it makes in each learner's life.

"I have always believed in Sao Mai's mission. What brings me the most joy is seeing our learners use technology to live independently, take part in their communities, have jobs, and start families of their own. That means more to me than any award," Phúc says.

That simple joy keeps Sao Mai committed to developing tools that help people with visual impairment learn more easily, do their jobs well, and make their own choices with confidence.

CHAPTER 2

TECHNOLOGY THAT CHANGES LIVES



For 25 years, the Sao Mai Center for the Blind has developed technology and helped people with visual impairment use it in their everyday lives. This work goes beyond creating software. It is about making information easier to access, opening up opportunities to learn and work, and enabling people to live independently and make their own choices with confidence.

TOOLS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

SAO MAI VNVOICE – USING COMPUTERS IN VIETNAMESE

To understand what Sao Mai VNVoice meant to its users, we need to look back to the early 2000s. At the time, people with visual impairment in Vietnam used the JAWS screen reader to access computers, but it could not read content in Vietnamese. Sao Mai VNVoice converts text on the screen into Vietnamese speech, allowing users to write documents, look up information, and read books and newspapers without help from a sighted person.



A computer class at Sao Mai

Phan Thuy Phuong, a blind woman from An Giang, recalls those early days: "Before 2003, I spent most of my time at home and felt very shy around other people. When I came to Sao Mai, I used a computer keyboard for the first time. Hearing the computer speak each time I pressed a key was exciting, but a little frightening too."

With VNVoice, Phuong discovered a whole new world of information. "At the time, Sao Mai VNVoice gave me access to what felt like an almost unlimited amount of information. It was such a joy to explore it on my own by using clear and accurate Vietnamese speech software."

QR code to download SM VNVoice

SM MYANMAR TTS – A VOICE THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

The success of Sao Mai VNVoice strengthened partners' confidence in Sao Mai's work and laid the groundwork for further collaboration. Between 2017 and 2019, the Center worked with ICEVI, ON–NET (Overbrook-Nippon Network on Educational Technology), and the Myanmar Association of the Blind, with funding from The Nippon Foundation, to develop **SM Myanmar TTS,** the first Burmese text-to-speech software for Android and Windows.



The principal of a school for the blind learning to use the Burmese text-to-speech software



Aye Chan Aung (Alice), a freelance translator with visual impairment from Southern Shan State in Myanmar, recalls: *"I always had to wait for someone who could see to read Burmese documents aloud and record them so I could do my work. With SM Myanmar TTS, I can now read and work with these documents on my own. This gives me greater independence and more opportunities to develop my career."*



Yel Htet Naing, a history student in Myanmar, and **Than Htike**, a massage therapist in Yangon, share a similar view. For them, Sao Mai's text-to-speech software has opened up a world of possibilities for people with visual impairment in Myanmar, helping them overcome language and technology barriers and connect with the wider world through computers and the internet.

QR code to download SM Myanmar TTS

SAO MAI BRAILLE – KNOWLEDGE THROUGH RAISED DOTS



A workshop on producing Braille books with Sao Mai Braille in Hanoi

Since its first release in June 2018, Sao Mai Braille (SMB) has grown into a single tool for creating documents and translating text, mathematics, graphics, and music into Braille. As of 2026, SMB supports 225 Braille translation tables and has been downloaded by more than 18,000 users in 108 countries.

Nguyen Quyet Thang, a blind mathematics teacher at Nguyen Dinh Chieu School for the Blind in Ho Chi Minh City, had long struggled with the high cost of software from overseas and its lack of support for Vietnam's Braille mathematics standard.



"*Sao Mai Braille was exactly what we needed,*" Thang says. "*It is currently the only software that accurately translates printed mathematics into Vietnamese Braille in accordance with the Braille standard issued by the Ministry of Education and Training. It is completely free and makes preparing lessons and studying much easier for teachers and students*."

Ly Hoang, who coordinates the production of accessible materials for the Higher Education Support Project for Students with Visual Impairment in Vietnam, explains: "*Expensive commercial software often handles only one type of material at a time. SMB brings text, mathematics, tactile graphics, and music translation together in one tool. That saves our education project a great deal of time, money, and staff effort.*"



Hu Haipeng, a blind musician and Braille music transcriber in China, is the founder of the Open Braille Project and a technical consultant for the DAISY Music Braille project.

He says: "SMB is the most powerful Braille music translation software in the world today. It can translate everything from simple songs like 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star' to major works such as Mahler's Symphony No. 8 and Wagner's opera cycle 'Der Ring des Nibelungen.' It delivers highly accurate results and has cut the time I spend transcribing Braille music by more than half. Before 2020, I could only dream of this. Sao Mai helped make it a reality!"

Lorrie Barboza, Head of the Braille Department at Resource for the Blind in the Philippines, and **Silatul Rahim Bin Dahman**, founder and former CEO of the Malaysian Foundation for the Blind, also express their appreciation. Both affirm that *Sao Mai's software has helped remove barriers to education for thousands of people with visual impairment across Southeast Asia.*

QR code to download SMB

SM MUSIC READER – BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER THROUGH MUSIC

SM Music Reader gives people with visual impairment access to musical scores and a shared platform for working with sighted teachers and fellow musicians. Available free on Android and iOS, the app displays scores, plays MIDI audio, reads music aloud, converts it into Braille, and connects users to Sao Mai's library of more than 20,000 scores.



Tran Ba Thien, a blind musician, playing the guitar with SM Music Reader

In Vietnam, Ha Chuong, a blind singer and composer, shares: "With SM Music Reader, I can now learn and play new pieces on my own. I can also share scores and discuss music with my sighted colleagues confidently and independently."

From Italy, Gabriele writes: "Thank you so much for everything you've done and continue to do. SM Music Reader is a wonderful, helpful app. I'm so glad there are people like you working hard to make music accessible to everyone."

In the United States, Betina Vega, a blind piano teacher, says enthusiastically: "I use this app every day, both for myself and with my students. I can't wait to download more scores!"

QR code to download SM Music Reader

Le Anh Tuan – Dedication Behind Every Product



Known to many people with visual impairment in Vietnam for his Vietnamese text-to-speech software, VNSpeak, software engineer Le Anh Tuan has worked with Sao Mai over the years to develop SM Myanmar TTS, SM Music Reader, SM Readmate, and the SM BungSang Braille music translation software library. For him, developing these tools is a way to help people with visual impairment pursue their education and careers.

"The determination of the people with visual impairment I work with, together with Dang Hoai Phúc's high standards, has taught me the importance of attention to detail and accuracy," Tuan says. "In the age of artificial intelligence, people with visual impairment are fully capable of programming and working on an equal basis with others. We are doing more than developing software. Together, we are creating opportunities for people to participate fully in society."

EDUCATION FOR WOMEN WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT IN RURAL PROVINCES



Women with visual impairment from rural areas attending some of Sao Mai's early computer classes

Women with visual impairment in rural provinces faced barriers related to their disability, as well as gender prejudice and limited financial resources. Recognizing these challenges, Sao Mai's co-founders, Amedeo Pignatelli and Carlo Pizzato, established the Education Fund for Women with Visual Impairment. The fund provided scholarships for women to attend computer and leadership training at Sao Mai. Between 2003 and 2011, the program awarded 41 full scholarships for this training, along with 298 scholarships for short courses in basic computer skills at local schools and centers.

When funding ended in 2011, Sao Mai continued to support women with visual impairment through training-of-trainers courses, soft skills training, scholarships for students in higher education, and job placement services. Phan Thuy Phuong was among the women who received a scholarship through the program.

In 2003, Phuong left her home in An Giang for Ho Chi Minh City to begin her training. Everything was new to her, and she initially found it difficult to keep up with the lessons. She spent her lunch breaks and evenings reviewing and practicing what she had learned. At times, she felt so exhausted that she wanted to give up. "But Sao Mai's managing board, teachers, and staff, together with Carlo and Amedeo, were always there to encourage me and help me keep going," she recalls.

Phuong went on to use the skills she learned at Sao Mai to teach children with disabilities in An Giang. She also fondly remembers Ms. Khuyen, a fellow scholarship recipient from Binh Duong who began learning computer skills in her mid-forties and continued using them until retirement. "Even now, she calls me every year on November 20, Vietnamese Teachers' Day, to thank me. It means so much to me."

Phuong shares a heartfelt message with other women with visual impairment: "Stay strong and keep learning technology skills, even when it is difficult. They can open doors to opportunities you never thought possible."



Phuong teaching blind children at An Giang School for Children with Disabilities

TECHNOLOGY AND KNOWLEDGE – A FOUNDATION FOR INDEPENDENCE



A computer class in Hanoi



A training workshop on producing accessible books in Hanoi

Over the past 25 years, Sao Mai has helped thousands of people with visual impairment build their knowledge and skills through technology training, assistive software, and accessible learning materials. The Center has also trained hundreds of specialists and instructors to share their expertise with others. Its accessible reading materials have been accessed hundreds of thousands of times.

Looking back, we are proud not only of the numbers and achievements, but also of the opportunities people have gained to learn, work, and live independently.

CHAPTER 3
A BRIDGE TO EMPLOYMENT

FROM LEARNING TO WORK



The Employment Without Limits panel discussion in Ho Chi Minh City (2024)

Funded by The Nippon Foundation, Sao Mai's 2024–2026 employment program aims to empower people with visual impairment by helping them find suitable jobs, earn a decent income, and develop their careers. Opportunities are opening up in fields such as digital marketing, programming, accessibility testing, interpreting, and music production.

People turn to Sao Mai for support at different stages of their careers. Some have just graduated, others are looking for new opportunities, and some are unsure where to begin. Sao Mai offers career guidance to help each person identify their goals, recognize their strengths, and understand job requirements. Working with employers and partner organizations, the Center helps them prepare for work, find suitable jobs, and settle into the workplace. The Center continues to support them once they are in work.

PREPARING FOR WORK



A workshop on preparing job applications

Sao Mai works with partner organizations to provide training in soft skills, independent living, and technology to help people with visual impairment prepare for employment. Courses take place in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, and Hue, where many young people with visual impairment are pursuing higher education and employers are interested in hiring people with disabilities.

SOFT SKILLS – WORKING WITH CONFIDENCE



A "Communicate Well, Work Effectively" training session in Hanoi

Practical activities in career planning, writing job applications, interviewing, and communication help participants understand their strengths, the skills they need to develop, and what they want from their careers. They practice describing their abilities with specific examples, discussing the support they need at work, and handling situations that may arise during a probationary period.

The "Communicate Well, Work Effectively" workshop series helps participants strengthen their communication skills, recognize the value they bring, and develop professional work habits. Ms. Nghiem Thu Loan notes one particularly encouraging change: many participants have begun asking themselves, "What can I contribute to an employer?" This gives them a clearer sense of direction and encourages them to develop the skills they need.



A "Communicate Well, Work Effectively" workshop in Hanoi

The Center also emphasizes independent living skills, including orientation and mobility and managing everyday tasks. These skills help people with visual impairment travel to work independently, manage their schedules, and adapt to new surroundings.



An instructor guiding participants through orientation and mobility practice at Sao Mai



A group presentation during a soft skills workshop

Between 2024 and 2026, Sao Mai and its partners held 31 soft skills training sessions for 235 young people with visual impairment.

TECHNOLOGY SKILLS – WORKING INDEPENDENTLY

From writing documents and communicating with colleagues to managing data and using specialized software, technology is part of almost every field of work. Being able to use it effectively is essential for people with visual impairment to work confidently and develop their careers.

They also need to know how to use and customize assistive tools such as screen readers and magnification software. These skills help them work around accessibility barriers in internal company software and workplace equipment.

Since 2024, using artificial intelligence has also been a core part of the Center's technology training.



AI training sessions in Ho Chi Minh City, Bac Ninh, and Hanoi

Sao Mai's Technology Guide initiative encourages people to learn together and share their technology skills and experience with others. Launched in 2025, it has brought together 33 contributors who have produced more than 300 articles and short videos offering practical guidance on using technology.

Between 2024 and 2026, Sao Mai held 28 short technology training courses for 252 young people with visual impairment.

CONNECTING EMPLOYERS AND PEOPLE WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

Having the right skills is an important first step, but people with visual impairment also need opportunities to enter the workplace. Many employers are open to hiring them but are unsure what roles they can take on, how they will work with sighted colleagues, or where to find suitable candidates. Sao Mai helps address these questions and brings job seekers and employers together to find a suitable match.

Employment forums give both sides a chance to discuss their expectations and concerns. Organizations offering career guidance and job placement services share their experience and introduce support programs for job seekers and employers. Policymakers and government representatives explain regulations on employing people with disabilities and the rights and benefits available to both sides. Job fairs build on these discussions by giving candidates and employers opportunities to meet directly and discuss available jobs.

To help both sides prepare, Sao Mai provides skills training for job seekers and advises employers on interviews and workplace accessibility. The Center works with companies to find practical solutions that use existing tools and minimize the cost of adjustments. This helps make recruitment and the transition into work easier for everyone involved.



The recruitment area at the 2025 employment forum and job fair

Support continues after recruitment. Sao Mai listens to employees and employers and helps them resolve difficulties as they arise, so that employees can settle into their jobs and employers feel confident in their hiring decisions. Positive experiences with one employee can open doors for others. Over time, Sao Mai hopes that hiring people with visual impairment will become a regular part of companies' recruitment policies and practices.

Employers also learn from one another. Companies that already employ people with visual impairment can share practical advice, answer questions, and show others how to get started. Hearing about a successful workplace adjustment or taking part in a work activity alongside an employee with visual impairment can give other employers the confidence to offer similar opportunities.

The "Seeing Through Touch" video series offers another way to see these abilities in practice. It features people with visual impairment performing a variety of tasks, such as making handicrafts, taking laptops apart and reassembling them, checking circuit boards, and replacing components. These examples help employers and the wider community better understand their capabilities, while encouraging people with visual impairment to develop their skills and explore new types of work.

Between 2024 and 2026, Sao Mai and its project partners helped arrange 48 job placements at 19 companies and organizations, as well as internships and trial work opportunities for young people with visual impairment. The roles included customer service, sales, content writing, interpreting, web development, programming, and software accessibility testing. Behind these numbers are the joy and growing confidence of both employees and employers. Their experiences motivate Sao Mai to continue connecting people and creating opportunities for employment.

QR code to watch the "Seeing Through Touch" videos.



Three employees with visual impairment working in different departments at Vina Cacao

STORIES THAT OPEN DOORS



A suitable job offers the chance to live independently and the satisfaction of putting one's skills to use. For people with visual impairment who have taken part in Sao Mai's programs, that journey may begin with a course, an assistive tool, or a chance to meet an employer.

After graduating in Vietnamese language and literature from Ho Chi Minh City University of Pedagogy, Nguyen Minh Tam joined Prudential Vietnam as a customer service consultant through Sao Mai's job placement program in 2022. Technology courses and training in writing job applications and preparing for interviews helped Tam develop her personal strengths and feel more confident at work.

Looking back, Tam says: "*Without these programs, I believe it would have been much harder for me to find and keep a job. Sao Mai's support has meant a great deal to me. It has helped me achieve my career goals and live more independently*."



Nguyen Hoang Giang's decision to study computer science initially worried his family and friends. Reading course materials and creating diagrams presented challenges during his studies. Alongside his own efforts and support from lecturers, Sao Mai's Vietnamese text-to-speech software, accessible academic library, and soft skills courses helped him with his coursework.

While still in his final year at university, Giang secured a position as an Android engineer at Grab in Singapore. He now works as a software engineer at Apple. "Sao Mai has truly inspired me and helped me believe that people with visual impairment can succeed," Giang says.

Nguyen Van Thanh Nghia found his career path in music. Visual information, such as audio waveforms displayed in recording software and on equipment screens, was difficult to access, but Sao Mai's courses and assistive tools helped him overcome these obstacles.



"The greatest barrier for people with visual impairment is not our eyesight, but society's preconceptions," he says. "The knowledge I gained and the technology I learned to use at Sao Mai gave me the tools to make my own way. With that foundation, I felt confident enough to open my own recording studio in District 9, produce music independently, and earn the trust of sighted partners and clients."

At an employment forum and job fair organized by Sao Mai, Ms. Cherry Thuan Nguyen, representing Reborn Musculoskeletal Clinic, interviewed candidates and offered jobs to several of them. As well as thanking Sao Mai, she shared: "Congratulations to those who have received good job offers, and congratulations to our company too! We're delighted to welcome such promising candidates." Her message to job seekers with visual impairment was simple: "When you meet an employer, be confident. That is what we really want to see."



An employer interviewing a candidate with visual impairment at the 2025 job fair

BUILDING BRIDGES TOGETHER

Sao Mai's employment support follows three main steps: helping people prepare for work, connecting them with employers, and continuing to support them once they start their jobs. People with visual impairment and employers are the main partners in this process. Lasting results also depend on close collaboration with families, educational institutions, social organizations, and government agencies.

Families offer encouragement and support, helping people with visual impairment build confidence and live independently. Schools and vocational training providers offer accessible learning environments and practical experience, equipping learners with the knowledge, skills, and professional habits they need for work. Policymakers and relevant government agencies help raise awareness of policies, support their implementation, and resolve administrative difficulties so that employers and people with disabilities can exercise their rights and receive the benefits available to them without unnecessary delays. Social organizations provide training in assistive technology and soft skills, along with career guidance and job placement services.

Building on 25 years of experience, Sao Mai remains committed to bringing people and resources together, strengthening partnerships, and working with others to create lasting employment opportunities for people with visual impairment in Vietnam.



A workshop on employment policy in Hue

CLOSING

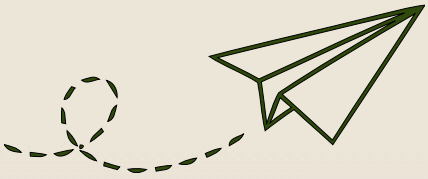
MOVING AHEAD WITH CONFIDENCE

After 25 years of inspiring confidence, Sao Mai moves forward with new goals and a continuing commitment to supporting people with visual impairment in learning, working, and living independently. Over the next five years, the Center will focus on three priorities:

- Establish an Assistive AI Center, expand and improve its existing tools and services, and help people with visual impairment across Vietnam learn to use AI effectively. The aim is to ensure that students at all levels of education have learning materials in accessible formats when they need them and to reduce barriers to understanding visual content. These efforts will also help people develop skills for work and greater independence in everyday life.
- Develop a nationwide online employment database and support network where job seekers, employers, training providers, social organizations, and government agencies can share information, connect people with opportunities, and coordinate their support.
- Strengthen partnerships in Vietnam and internationally, bringing organizations, specialists, and communities together to share knowledge and resources and work toward greater inclusion.

The next five years will bring opportunities and challenges that we cannot yet fully foresee. Our belief in people will remain the foundation of everything we do.

With a willingness to learn, innovate, share, and work alongside others, Sao Mai moves ahead with confidence. Together, we can create more opportunities for people with visual impairment to learn, work, and live independently.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Every step in Sao Mai's 25-year journey has been made possible by the kindness, dedication, and commitment of the people who have worked alongside us. From the early days of the Bung Sang Computer Project to the technology we now share with users around the world, our work has grown through the contributions of generations of friends and partners.

We are deeply grateful to our founders, **Professor Carlo Pizzato** and **Professor Amedeo Pignatelli**, and to our teacher and mentor, **Mr. Dao Khanh Truong**, head of Bung Sang Home. Their vision and guidance laid the foundation for Sao Mai.

With warmth and deep respect, we thank **Dr. Larry Campbell**, former President of the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment and former Director of the Overbrook International Program. He has been a dedicated mentor, an encouraging colleague, and a dear friend to Sao Mai.

We also express our heartfelt gratitude to those who guided the Center in its early years: **Mr. Nguyen Van Chi**, President of the Ho Chi Minh City Association for the Support of Children with Disabilities; **Dr. Tran Ha Nam**, Sao Mai's first Director; **Mr. Nguyen Khue**, its second Director; and **Mr. Tran Ba Thien**, its first Vice Director. Their leadership helped Sao Mai overcome the many challenges of getting established.

To the following sponsors, we offer our sincere thanks for believing in Sao Mai's work and supporting it so generously over the years:



















Het Lot Foundation

Your support has brought lasting benefits to people with visual impairment in Vietnam and helped us share practical ideas, solutions, and assistive tools with communities in other countries.

Our thanks also go to:

- **Our international partners,** UNDP Vietnam and UNESCAP in Bangkok, for helping us strengthen and extend our work.
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- **Our project partners:** the Vietnam Blind Association and its provincial and municipal branches; homes, centers, and schools for children with visual impairment; universities; and businesses that have worked alongside us on our projects.

These pages cannot name everyone who has been part of Sao Mai's journey. To all the generous supporters, specialists, volunteers, and friends who have quietly contributed over the past 25 years, we offer our heartfelt thanks.

To the people with visual impairment who have shared this journey with us, thank you for the opportunity to learn and work together and to help build a society where everyone can participate fully.

We look forward to your continued trust, friendship, and partnership in the years ahead.



THE SAO MAI FAMILY – 2026



Dang Hoai Phúc



Nguyen Thanh Son



Nguyen Manh Hung



Hoang Xuan Linh



Pham Trang



Le Anh Tuan



Nguyen Thi Thu Uyen



Dang Manh Cuong



Ly Van Hoang



Phung Tien Duong



Dang Thi My Tien



Dao Thi Le Xuan



Do Thi Huyen

25 YEARS OF INSPIRING CONFIDENCE

Sao Mai Center for the Blind (2001–2026)

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WITH THANKS

To our partners, colleagues, and friends with visual impairment for sharing their stories in this anniversary book.

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