

KATE'S PROJECT AND FOOD DROPS



by Eva Johnson

"Bringing a little sunshine into the darkness," is the slogan of **Kate's Project** and the emblem they have chosen is that of a sun coming out of a cloud. It makes me think of a Buddhist saying I heard: "The sun is always there even if it is covered by clouds, just as happiness is always there. You only have to see past the unhappiness."

A three year-old tugs at her shirt and makes faces at us.



It all sounds so good and so easy, but how is life really, honestly, if you are a kid living in the Pattaya slums? What are your chances of finding a better life than that of your parents? What are your needs and how does the charity of those who are more fortunate reach me?

When I talk about this with **Noi**, the coordinator of Kate's Project - an organization founded by the Irish couple **Roisin Hall** and **Andrew McCarroll** in 2006 and focused on helping the poorest and most abandoned in the slums of Pattaya - I soon get the feeling that the problem is far more complex and difficult than the often sunny descriptions given in

pamphlets and on websites.

"It is difficult to change people", says Noi, not one time, but again and again. "That is why we try to focus on the children. Through education they will get new and different values and skills that can enable them to break the patterns of their parents."

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Not that the project never tries to help the whole family: Kate's Project has relocated families to rented rooms with running water and sewer, donated materials to start micro businesses, built water tanks and helped to develop skills and crafts that can provide income.

"Sometimes it works," says Noi, "but many times it doesn't. Being successful in business is hard; not all people can manage it, even if they really want to and the enterprise is small. That is why our main focus is on the children. Our aim is to break that heritage."



In January 2009 Kate's Project was able to, through various donations, acquire a house on Soi Siam (East Pattaya) and to open The Centre of Hope, a focal point for the poorest families to meet and receive advice, health care and education. Also, Noi makes regular visits to the 70 or so families in the area that are part of the project, inquiring about their needs.



Grandpa Prasert knows that the future lies with Ta.

"Right now (early April) the needs are enormous, as schools will start again in May and everyone has to have uniforms and school equipment for the next term."

Noi makes notes of all requirements and then allocates the funds she has (of which the **PILC** donates 50,000 baht every year). Around 150 children are awarded scholarships, which include all costs for attending school as well as lunch each day.

Kate's Project also works with the Fountain of Life and the PILC on the joint Food Drops Project: PILC donates the money (9000 baht/month) and does the shopping, the children at the FOL then pack the 40 food bags containing rice, noodles, canned fish, oil, soy, fish sauce, and finally Kate's Project distributes them. Each month 15 families are chosen on a rotating basis to come to the project and pick up a bag. The rest of the food bags are given to the Child Protection Centre (10 bags) and the Bahn Pak Rak Peun AIDS Home (12 bags).

Food, education, health care; those are the pillars of Kate's Project.

"It is hard to do much more," says Noi as we are driving towards one of the slum areas she often visits. "We try, but it is really hard."

In case you have missed it, let me repeat again that I am quite new here in Thailand (6 months soon). Yet I have travelled all over the world and lived in many countries other than my own and what always puzzles me when I am confronted with real poverty is why on earth don't they tidy up a little around themselves, why this mess? I know this might sound blunt and that it might not be politically correct, but the empty bottles scattered on the ground, the trash, the heaps of garbage, the rotting mattresses, all of this - not the shacks built of gathered wood and corrugated steel - is for me the most significant image of poverty. Not only here, but anywhere, in any country. There is nothing romantic about poverty. It doesn't make people better or more noble and less complicated. Let's face it. Poverty is just not nice. It is an ugly, awful thing. It is a hard, tough life. And children grow up with it. All the time.

Okay, so this said, the area Noi has taken me to consists of six houses. As in many of the slums the residents' main income is from recycling plastics, paper and cans, as well as collecting wood and burning it to charcoal. Two of the families have children.

When we arrive a smiling young woman immediately shows Noi the navel of her infant child. It has finally, after months of infection, begun to heal. A three year-old tugs at her shirt and makes faces at us. She tells us that she is originally from Surin, near the Cambodian border, but that, like many others, they came to Pattaya "because this is where the money is." Inside the house lies her husband on a mattress on the floor, sleeping (it off). It is eleven o'clock in the morning and most of the other residents are around.

"Sometimes they have jobs, sometimes they don't," says Noi and shows me the two water tanks that Kate's Project has built. "They are not in use anymore," she tells me and, I am sorry to say, it never became quite clear to me why, only that after the owner of the land levelled the shacks to the ground - which tends to happen about once a year - the people rebuilt their houses in slightly different places and the water tanks were no longer used.

"Now they go and get water and bring it here," says Noi, "or use the water in the stream nearby, which is about the most unhealthy thing they can do. It is hard to change people. But we try."

Grandpa Prasert is sixty and he and his wife have a problem they want to discuss with Noi. Their 7-year-old grandson Ta still does not have his identity papers, and even though he has been allowed to begin school anyway the head office will soon demand the necessary paperwork.

Ta is such a good student, his grandpa tells us, the school wanted to give him a scholarship, but then they couldn't because of his non-existing papers. What should they do? Can Noi help them? The boy's father is dead and his mother ran off with another man just after Ta was born.

"Can I adopt him?" asks Grandpa Prasert. "I really want to."

Noi tells him she will make the necessary enquiries and get back.

"But it is difficult," she says to me. "It takes time and costs money, especially if you make a DNA-test to prove family ties, which would be the best way for Ta to get his identity established."

On the up-side Ta is able to attend school, for now. He is a good student and he makes his grandfather very proud.

"I would like to take him home to our village in the Kamphangphet Province over Songkran," he says. "I don't know if we will have the money for the bus, but I will burn a lot of charcoal and then we will see. I want to show him where he really stems from. He has never been up there."

I think Grandpa Prasert knows that the future lies with Ta. He speaks of him as if he really is set on helping his grandchild to a better life. As is Kate's Project, which works to give children like Ta education and visions of how to shape and change their destiny.

A destiny different from their parents.

The sun is always there, say the wise. Yes, of course. But if by that one means the possibility of the young to have a better life, they sometimes need help to disperse the clouds.



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