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THE OFFICIAL CELTIC WEEKLY MAGAZINE  
 DECEMBER 17TH 2008, VOL.44 ISSUE 24 £2.95

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# A PARADISE IN PATTAYA

A chance discovery of an orphanage in Thailand has changed the lives of a Belfast couple as some passing charity work has become an all-consuming lifetime vocation

**T**HERE is a feeling in talking to Roisin Hall that she has always done good things in her life and will always continue to do so. Her football allegiance appears, on one level, irrelevant to how she lives her life. Yet, as she explains the journey that she and her husband have taken in the past three years, it seems to fit perfectly with the ethos of Celtic Football Club and goes to the very core of the club's *raison d'être*.

Brother Walfrid's founding words, that 'a football club will be formed for the maintenance of dinner tables for the children and unemployed', set charity at the very heart of Celtic.

That continues at the club to this day through Celtic Charity Fund, while individual supporters such as Roisin Hall have taken that philosophy to heart in their own lives.

The voice in unmistakably Belfast, the enthusiasm is instantly infectious though when she admits to being humbled by the interest in her project, the instant reaction is to disagree. The humbleness should be on the part of the listener.

The story begins three years ago when, having brought up their own children, Karen and Paul, in Belfast and then also cared for her parents before they passed away, Roisin and her husband, Andrew, found themselves at a crossroads in their lives.

Initially the plan was to take a year out – Roisin was a dental practice manager and Andrew a school teacher – and go travelling. They sold their house but rather than just indulge their wanderlust, the couple found themselves in Thailand, working with an orphanage in Pattaya run by the Redemptorist priests which had links to their own parish in Belfast, the Clonard Monastery.

"We realised almost immediately that this was an oasis, a template of how an orphanage should be run," Roisin explained, "but within a week or so we realised we couldn't really do any more to help."

Over the course of the year, that led to a frustration, particularly on Roisin's part; she wanted to do more but there wasn't the



need within the orphanage.

However, during those 12 months, she had also, albeit unwittingly, laid the groundwork for the work she and Andrew have subsequently been involved in.

"Most big cities around the world have red light districts, but Pattaya is a 'red light city'." Roisin explained, and throughout the year she had been working with some of the street kids in the area, also getting to know their families.

That had built up a trust amongst people more used to being used and abused by westerners.

"I met a lady in the street who lived in a shop front. Her husband had just died and she was wandering the streets, slightly dazed. The night before she had been raped by two men while her husband lay dying on the mattress beside her.

"She attached herself to me, not leaving until I'd made her safe. We got her a room with a lock and paid her rent so that she had somewhere to stay."

Yet, at the end of their time in Thailand, as Roisin and Andrew prepared to return to Belfast, they had decided their next port of call would be Uganda, where they would help build a community centre. It was a practical, tangible project which appealed to the couple.

But on the day the couple were leaving Pattaya, they walked out of their room and there were around 30 people from the slums who had gathered to say goodbye.

"There was a lot of crying," Roisin explained. "And they were there to say goodbye and also thanks because we had changed their lives, given them hope, even though a lot of times all I was doing was listening to them.



"I had been looking for the big thing, or a big change, and after a year I felt that I could do nothing. But because I had paid attention to each individual, giving them time and consideration, it had made a difference.

"And seeing them all together, we knew that we'd come back."

And they have returned on a number of occasions, though not to work in the Redemptorists' orphanage. Instead, they have set up their own charity, Kate's Project, which helps the poor, abandoned and helpless in Pattaya.

The Project, named in memory of Roisin's mother, Kathleen Hall, initially aimed to

educate 25 children from the worst slums in the city, to help them build a better future for themselves and their families. There are now 150 kids being helped.

"Education is the only long-term answer," Roisin explained. "School is compulsory, but the costs are way beyond the means of most people.

"So our project, which is very much family-orientated and we want to educate kids so that they will look after their own families.

"We now have a small flat in Belfast which we rent, and the money we earn from working here we send over to Thailand and we have a co-ordinator over in Pattaya,



Khun Noi, who runs our office.

"It's better for us to work here and visit Thailand two or three times a year because we can earn more money here which can be used to fund the Project.

"I have never seen such poverty before compared to what I've seen in Thailand," Roisin explained, "and I have to admit that I'm not happy going to Pattaya because I know what so many people are going there for and what is going on in the city.

"I have to focus on the charity and our work because it's the only way I can cope.

"It's everybody's duty – or it should be – to protect children, and that's what we're trying to do, by educating them and helping them to build a better future for themselves."

Kate's Project has already featured in a TV documentary, highlighting the work they do in trying to help people in Pattaya, many of whom are victims of the pernicious and obscene sex tourism industry which blights the city and the country.

And they have been in contact with Celtic Charity Fund to see what ways it could help.

Having sold their house and given up all their possessions ahead of their initial year-long trip to Thailand, Roisin and Andrew have also sacrificed regular trips to Celtic Park. Most of the money they earn goes into Kate's Project

"It's a luxury going to see Celtic play," Roisin admitted, though the occasional trips from Belfast to Glasgow are something she and her husband still enjoy. And who could begrudge them the occasional moment of self-indulgence.



After all, just about every moment of their lives is spent thinking of others and working for others.

Even in Thailand, Roisin's passion for the green and white Hoops is well known.

"One of our neighbours in Thailand knows I love Celtic and will slip little notes under the door telling when Celtic are playing and that it's on TV," she explained, "even though it's on at four o'clock in the morning."

Roisin Hall continues to do good things in her life. Working back at the dental practice in Belfast where she was

previously employed, has allowed her to continue financing Kate's Project in Pattaya.

She may be humbled by the attention but it is attention that she and her husband deserve. After all, the oxygen of publicity will hopefully help to nourish their charity. And their work does sit easily alongside Celtic's charitable origins. Brother Walfrid would be proud.

**For more information on Kate's Project and how you could help, check out their website [www.katesproject.co.nr](http://www.katesproject.co.nr)**

