

# BAAN UNRAK PROJECT BAAN UNRAK PROJECT



A Sanctuary for  
Destitute Children and  
Mothers (in Sangkhlaburi – Thailand)

*Updated: July 2006*

## What is Baan Unrak?

**Baan Unrak, "House of Joy" in Thai, is a project of the Neo-Humanist Foundation.**  
The project in Sangklaburi has several components.

- The largest part of the project is the Children's home which provides a safe and loving home to over 100 children.
- The Baan Unrak Primary School teaches over 200 students, is fully accredited and functions under its own budget.
- The women's project includes several enterprises including a weaving center, sewing center, a bakery, a shop and an internet café which provide employment as well as a small income to the home.
- Outreach program provides assistance to those who have dire medical conditions and have no resources to get the care that they need.

## Where is Baan Unrak?

Baan Unrak is located in Sangklaburi, in the Kanchanaburi province in western Thailand. It is about 7 hours by bus from Bangkok. Sangklaburi is a remote area, near a rainforest, where tourists like to ride elephants and have trips into the jungle. Because of its peacefulness, and the beautiful environment (mountain, lake and waterfall), the local tourist industry is expanding.

Sangklaburi is a remote area, near a rainforest, but is also ravaged by poverty and disease. In 1988, the government built a dam on the lake to bring electricity to Bangkok. This caused flooding of many lands. Then, the local community faced relocation and lost their jobs.

Sangklaburi is in a border area as it is only 22 kilometers from the Three Pagoda Pass which marks the border between Thailand and Burma. The border is quite porous, so it is easy to come into Thailand. After arriving, most of the migrants are kept in the border area as they cannot travel due to their illegal status.

An influx of refugees and immigrants, fleeing war and slavery in Burma, has added to the region's economic problems, including high unemployment statistics.

Most of the refugees in Sanklaburi area are from the Mon and Karen States which are targeted by the military's terror campaign led by the Burmese government. According to UNHCR, half of the displaced people are children, and 15% are under five years old.

## Our History and Mission

In 1986, Didi Ananda Devamala came to Thailand to work on an agricultural and environmental project. On arrival in Thailand, she opened a study center and worked as an English teacher for children in a slum.

Three years later, she went to Sangkhla Buri to start her agricultural project. Then, a woman who was abandoned by her husband asked Didi to help her take care of her child. Both mother and baby suffered from severe malnutrition and other sicknesses. So, she thought she could provide some temporary help.

Word got around that Didi could look after abandoned children and the villagers saw what she was doing with the children and trusted her. A peasant's wife died leaving six children. Her husband could not look after the children. Didi took in the youngest girl, who was six months old, and her four elder sisters (the oldest is now in University). At that point, Didi abandoned the agricultural project and only took care of children.

The number of children staying at the house increased every year. As of July 2006, there are about 110 children. The Home is managed by Didi Devamala, the school by Didi Aanuraga, both of whom are assisted by a local staff and volunteers from the around the world.

Between 2004 and 2006, the number of children increased dramatically. The home became crowded and we decided to buy some land and to build a bigger children's home. **In June 2006, children moved into the new building.** Now the project is able to properly take care of the new children.

**The mission has expanded to assist abandoned and destitute mothers.** A weaving and sewing center was established in 1996 to provide jobs to women in need as well as regular income for the women and children. We currently have 9 women working for us and we have a training program to give other women the skills they need to provide for their families.

Other business ventures include a **bakery**, established in 2003, which produces fresh baked goods, a **shop** to sell the woven goods we make, and an **internet cafe**.

In 2005 we established the **outreach program** in response to the need for medical care for those who could not get medical care in the area. Our full-time outreach coordinator provides:

- natural medicine (with the assistance of a volunteer physician)
- transportation to get medical care
- we assist with getting documents for those who need to travel for medical care
- we pay for life saving operations
- food and housing for convalescing women
- translation services for women who do not speak Thai
- checks on the condition of our patients on a weekly basis

## Why are there so many children in need?

The number of destitute children in this area is astonishing – particularly when you realize that Baan Unrak is not the only children's home working to meet the need. **Why are there so many?**

**Some children are truly orphaned**, both parents have died and there is nobody to care for them. **Other children have had one parent pass away and the other is not able to support the children.** In some instances, **the children are abused or neglected.** This is a particularly big problem for children whose parents have been divorced and remarried. In other instances, drug or alcohol abuse contributes to the abuse.

**This area is home to many refugees fleeing war and forced labor in Burma.** Leaving family and community behind has destroyed the support network for families and exacerbated the immense challenges they face when relocating to a foreign country and culture. In addition, many are weakened or injured when they arrive in Thailand. These problems, along with the lack of employment opportunities, put tremendous stress on families.

**HIV/AIDS is also a significant problem** as many men travel to find work in urban areas where they visit prostitutes. When they return to this area, they carry the disease with them and transmit it to their wives and unborn children. Women are often forced into prostitution due to lack of employment prospects making them more likely to contract the disease.

**Poverty is also a factor among both the Thai population and refugees.** Some parents are simply not able to feed their children, let alone pay the school fees that would allow their kids to gain an education and break the cycle of poverty. Many parents are also forced to move frequently to find seasonal work and are unable to provide a stable home for their children.

Not all children living at Baan Unrak are orphans. **Some children have mothers living with them at the home.** Some children are sick and their parents bring them to Baan Unrak because they don't have the resources or capability to provide care. Baan Unrak tries to work with parents and children to meet the needs of their individual situations. Priority is placed on the safety of the children. If the safety of the children is not at risk, Baan Unrak attempts to provide the support necessary to keep families together.

## Yoga and Meditation - A therapy

Children are yoga and meditation, which helps to ensure their psychological and physical well-being. Group meditation sessions are held every morning and evening in the home. It provides moments of peace. Kesala Insa, aged 12, said that yoga has improved her health. *`` I got sick very often, but after learning yoga, my health has improved and my mind is more peaceful '``*

## BAAN UNRAK SCHOOL

For several years, Baan Unrak's children tried to go to Thai government schools but they faced many barriers such as language (most of the children do not speak Thai when they arrive at Baan Unrak), or a turbulent personal history which makes it difficult. Moreover, we found out that the government schools were overcrowded and provided our children with a poor quality education.

To further our mission, in 2004, a school was opened to welcome Baan Unrak's children. Beyond providing education to the children, the goal was to build an environment where students can develop all layers of their minds and become active learners.

The education is based on the ideas of Neo-Humanism. This focus, combined with small class sizes, allows the teachers to provide individual attention for all students especially those with special needs. Every few month we provide teacher training to increase the understanding of the problems of parentless children.

Many volunteers from around the world come to teach English as children should be fluent in Thai and English to ensure their future integration in the society. We try to give each child an opportunity to continue his/her study in high-level school, in Bangkok or in Kanchanaburi. Baan Unrak school includes a nursery and kindergarten to care for the youngest children and to give their mothers, who come to us in emotional distress, an opportunity to rest.

Baan Unrak school also welcomes children from the surrounding area who face difficulties integrating into the government schools (especially migrants and hill tribes' children as they are often not registered) or who wish to integrate our curriculum. In 2006, Baan Unrak school was providing education to 180 children, more than 100 of these children came from the outside community.

## THE SINGLE MOTHER PROJECT

This area is home to many refugees fleeing war and forced labor in Burma. Leaving family and community behind has destroyed the support network for families and exacerbated the immense challenges they face when relocating to a foreign country and culture. These problems, along with the lack of employment opportunities, put tremendous stress on families.

Rampant alcohol and drug abuse are problems in our community. Tolerance of spousal abuse is also common in this area. Abandonment of children born in prior relationships is a routine occurrence the region. Poverty in general exacerbates these problems.

Husbands abandon their wives, who become single mothers. It is very difficult for a woman to survive alone here and almost impossible if she has a small child because there are few jobs for mothers with small children or pregnant women. Single mothers are viewed as a social burden.

Taking care of abandoned children is good but we also think that it is also very important to address the mother's needs as it might prevent the child from being abandon.

Mothers who want to give away their child are usually depressed, they lost hope and it is our duty to restore it. We decided to help them to cope with their own problems.

To address this issue, Baan Unrak provides mothers whose husbands have abandoned their families with rice, milk and temporary shelter. While providing for the basic needs of the mother, we encourage mothers to care for their children and we help them to build a better relationship with their children. Sometimes we let them stay with us until they are stronger. Mothers that intended to give their children away slowly change their mind while they are staying at Baan Unrak.

The goal is also to help them to become self sufficient, as they will not remain here all their life. We provide them opportunity to learn new skills and to become active members of the project.

## ACTIVITIES IN THE COMMUNITY

### Health Programs

Diseases, such as malaria, typhoid and dysentery, and health problems related to poor sanitation, scourge of the Sangkhlaburi area. Sangkhlaburi's hospital does not adequately cover the area. Villagers in the rainforest often die before they reach the hospital. Health centers in the rainforest often cannot help villagers.

Migrants and hill tribes' people don't have access to health facilities because they are unregistered. Most of the time, hospitals will not accept them or they will not have enough money to buy the medicines.

To address this issue a mobile medical unit was established in 2003 at Baan Unrak. We provide the community with medical care. We focus our work on HIV patients. We provide mental support by visiting them regularly and giving them a monthly therapy.

### Relief activities

Baan Unrak has organized relief programs in the surrounding villages and refugees camps, distributing food and clothing. Baan Unrak has a full time staff member who organizes these activities along with some of the teenagers at our home.

#### **The Tsunami's relief action**

During the Tsunami, some of the oldest children went in the affected area to help the victims. During the relief, migrant's people were neglected by both the authorities and the NGO's because of the language barrier. As most of our children have the skills of speaking three languages: Thai, English and Burmese (and in some cases Mon or Karen as well), they could sometime help the vulnerable people more effectively than the professionals.

Children have to be involved in solidarity actions as it is a part of their education. We believe that helping others in need is always helping oneself. This kind of action make them proud of themselves, give them confidence but in a good way (improve their self esteem but not their selfishness)

## Connecting Generations

In 2006, we started a project in partnership with *Generation Journey*, a UK based organization. Our children are visiting old people around the community and providing them with care and attention. We are also developing a project where children have to interview old people about their roots and their personal history. The aim is to pass down the knowledge of the elder community and to keep it through editing a book.

## TRAINING CENTER

### Sewing and weaving center

A sewing and weaving centre was set up in 1995 to provide employment and to empower local women. The centre produces scarves, textiles and ready-to-wear clothing.

The weaving centre also provides training to the mothers of our project who are interested in learning new skills. After being trained, some are going to work outside and some continue to work for the centre. Currently, 9 women produce traditional fabrics (local hill tribes design) and sew them into scarves, blankets, bags and clothing at the Baan Unrak weaving centre. Baan Unrak children are involved in finishing the products and sewing simple items such as money purse.

Through the years, products have increased in quality and gotten more opportunities to be exported in the western countries. Some products are sold by a fair-trade organization (Commercio Alternativo) in Italy because they meet the agreed standards.

We opened a small shop to sell our handicrafts to the visitors and to the community in Sangklaburi.

In 2003, we have opened a bakery and an internet café. Tourists as well as local people are welcome to enjoy pure vegetarian products while accessing their email.

In the bakery, children learn how to cook different kinds of food. Mothers are also taught how to cook properly for their children. Some of the eldest children also work in the internet café where they can practice their English with the tourists and they also learn computer skills.

Baan Unrak has designed a project based on sustainable development. This area is also a place to experiment with various activities such as producing herbal medicine for our sick children, producing compost, bricks, selecting garbage, planting seeds and organic spices, producing tofu and gluten in a natural way.

## ORGANIZATION INFORMATION

### What is Neo-Humanism?

**Neo-Humanism is a philosophy** (not a religion) developed by the Indian philosopher Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar. The practice of Neo-Humanism follows a set of principles based on the ethic of universal love. This includes respect for all beings including plants and animals. It works towards the creation of a healthy human society where everyone will be able to meet their basic physical needs and develop all aspects of their personality.

The children at our home follow the philosophy by not eating meat and meditating twice daily. The children continue to follow their own religion (mostly Buddhism).

**The women who founded and run Baan Unrak are called Didi's.** They are similar to nuns in that they are full-time volunteers who have devoted their lives to service.

## How to help us?

Baan Unrak project needs a lot of money to cover the running expenses of the children home. Food, clothes, medical care and school fee represent the main expenses.

The children's home by itself needs around 450,000 baht each month (this does not include the other projects).

Our main income comes from **individual sponsorship** for children. The sponsors give money regularly and it provides reliable funding. But the number of children has increased and we still need to find individual sponsors, especially to sponsor the education of our growing children.

**Punctual donations** help us to develop our project, improve our facilities and develop new activities. We have set up a way to donate automatically each month on line.

We also encourage **companies** to donate various products such as rice, milk, soap, medicines, etc...

**Volunteers** from all the world are welcome to help Baan Unrak school in teaching the children or to work in the office.

### **Baan Unrak**

36 moo 3, Nonglu

Sangklaburi, Kanchanaburi 71240

Thailand

Tel/Fax (66) 034 595428

E-mail: [information@baanunrak.org](mailto:information@baanunrak.org)

Website: [www.baanunrak.org](http://www.baanunrak.org)

If you wish to help us now, you can send money on the following account.

**Ac/name:** Neo Humanist Foundation

**Bank name:** Siam Commercial Bank

**Ac/Number:** 6792062584 Sangklaburi

**Tel:** 0-9936-2426, 0-9206-0193

Or you can donate through our website [baanunrak.org](http://baanunrak.org)