

A place to call home

Disadvantaged Thai, Burmese and hilltribe children and their mothers get an education and nurturing at Kanchanaburi's Baan Unrak orphanage

Published on January 13, 2008

An eruption of laughter from a bouncy, six-year-old Mon girl silences the clickety-clack of weaving looms. The weavers, all formerly destitute mothers, turn to look at Anipo, whose own mum is dead and whose father is too feeble to take care of her.

Stricken by thalassaemia, which affects red-blood cells and haemoglobin, Anipo had a successful spinal operation last year in Bangkok, sponsored by a caring Singaporean. She's since gained weight and is recovering from the hereditary disease, though her battle to live has left her noticeably shorter than other girls her age.

She's one of the lucky ones at the Baan Unrak Children's Centre, which sits just outside the town of Sangkhla Buri in Kanchanaburi, close to the Burmese border.

"Look at me!" Anipo cries from the swing in the playground, where other youngsters play on the slide and merry-go-round. Most of the 140 children at the centre are under 12. About half come from Thailand, and the rest, like Anipo, from Burma.

Included in both groups are ethnic hilltribe children - Karen and Mon - says Didi Anada Devamala, an Italian expat who is the centre's founder and manager.

Corruption in the Thai bureaucracy, which hinders her efforts to get the kids the right documentation, is just one of the challenges she deals with every day that make her look tired beyond her 50 years.

"I wanted to serve humanity," she says by way of explaining how the project began. "Sometimes the babies die if they don't come here, or they end up being sold for as little as Bt500."

In 1991, Didi was a volunteer doing environmental work in Kanchanaburi when she found out about a baby in need. She took the child into her care, and an orphanage was born.

Unlike other orphanages, Baan Unrak doesn't put its children up for adoption. The idea is to keep the hope alive that mothers and their children will stay together.

"I don't want to be a train station," says Didi.

The orphanage - known as "the Home of Joy" in English - does its best not to turn away anyone in need, but funding is a problem. Individual donations are the biggest source of income, while a bit trickles in through its bakery and the Sewing and Weaving Centre in Sangkhla Buri.

The monthly budget is Bt500,000 to pay for food, clothing, medical care and school fees.

Only a very few children at the centre are in fact orphans. As for the rest, either their parents simply can't afford to take care of them or there's some family difficulty or legal problems with nationality.

"When a woman wants to drop off a child here because she has nowhere else to go, we tell her we have a weaving and a sewing centre," says Didi. There they can learn to use a loom and sell what they make to tourists. "I don't want to take away the parents' responsibility."

In 2005, Didi opened the Baan Unrak Primary School in Sangkhla Buri, where her young charges study alongside other kids.

The centre's eight mothers with younger children live in simple bamboo huts on stilts. Most of the other children are housed in a newer multilevel concrete structure, sleeping six or seven to a room under the watch of a housemother.

Morae is a 37-year-old Karen who came to Thailand 10 years ago and has been at the orphanage for four years. While spinning cotton for her loom, she unspools her sad story, typical of the mums who live here.

"My husband found a new girlfriend and left me with twins," she says. "After that I had a hard life working on a rubber plantation. It's more comfortable here. Now Baan Unrak is like a home to me. I'm very close to the children and I love them all."

Baan Unrak strives to provide holistic aid - a better body, mind and spirit - through a "neo-humanist approach" that its website defines as "love and care for all beings in the universe".

"I don't want just their survival," Didi says of the children. "I want to build a future for them."

There are mango, banana and jackfruit trees on the grounds and a vegetable garden, all helping to reduce food expenses. All meals are vegetarian. Children wash their own clothes. Trash is separated for recycling. Basic healthcare takes the form of herbal and ayurvedic treatments and natural Burmese medicine.

Yoga classes are held, and the youngsters meditate twice a day and repeat the mantra Baba nam kevalam, which means "Love is all there is". Didi says this is the centre's "secret" for promoting love and kindness for oneself and others and a sense of family within the facility. There is no shortage of hugs and soothing words for the younger and more fragile members of this family.

There are setbacks, of course. Some mothers who drop off their kids at the centre dip into what Didi calls "immoral activities" to earn money - prostitution, drugs or smuggling. But her greatest joy is seeing the children grow into full-fledged individuals with unique personalities, ready to give back to society.

Didi's selflessness has inspired some to stay on at the centre. Sopa, 20, a Karen, is now a sophomore studying law at North Chiang Mai University. When she felt her quest for proper documentation was becoming too cumbersome for the centre, she took on the job herself.

"I love Baan Unrak because it provided me with an education, friends and love," Sopa says. "Most importantly, it taught me to open my mind to other human beings. When I graduate I want to come back here and help Didi run the place. Sometimes I worry about getting my Thai ID, but when I see other young kids suffering more, I don't want to just sit around feeling sorry for myself."

Carleton Cole,

Sutamom Lertmanorat

The Nation