

Surrogate supermum

She's raising and educating 37 children on a farm in Chiang Mai. She's been asked to take in 20 more. Now Neen Worrawittayakurn needs your help

Story by CHOMPOO TRAKULLERTSATHIEN Pictures by SOMKID CHAJITVANIT

Seven-year-old Artchi's sunny smile belies his inner torment. His blind mother is dying from kidney disease. He dreams of a miracle that would save her.

Wow's family lives on the street somewhere. They left her behind in the village. Now 10, Wow used to get up very early in the morning to make the long trek across the hills to school. Exhausted, she'd often fall asleep in class. She dreams of becoming a musician.

Mod's father contracted Aids and died when he was two. His mother, devastated to learn that she too was infected, ran away and hasn't been seen since. Mod used to stay with his grandmother who eked out a living selling brooms. But she got too old to take care of him properly. Mod is now 9. When he grows up he wants to be a soldier.

Joe used to live in a small hut in the forest with his grandmother. His father developed Aids and died when he was three. Since his granny was too old to take care of all his needs he would often go foraging for food in the woods. He wants to be either a tour guide or a soccer player.

These kids used to think their dreams were just that _ dreams. Now, thanks to School for Life, the threat of hunger is behind them and they are growing up together in a natural, loving environment where they are learning skills that will enable them to stand on their own two feet and, hopefully, realise those dreams of theirs.

"We're giving them a second home," said Neen Worrawittayakurn, a businesswoman and farmer who is the children's surrogate mother at the School for Life. "So that they'll have the strength to soldier on, we also try to make them believe that what they hope for will eventually happen."

There are currently 37 children at the school which is on a 13-rai farm in Chiang Mai called Suan Suoi Sai _ which translates as "beautiful garden beneath a bright sky". Close to the mountain of Doi Saket and nestled in verdant woodland, the school was established in 2000 to help disadvantaged children grow up in a natural, educational environment. "Learning by doing" is the school's motto.

"Wisdom can never be communicated; it has to be experienced," Neen stated matter of factly.

Some of the children at the school were abandoned by their parents. Some are Aids orphans. Some are from ethnic minorities like the Akha, Lisu, Karen and Hmong.

To support the school, Neen also runs Joy's House, a family business promoting culturally sensitive tourism. Her guests are invited to actively participate in the children's education by passing on a little from their field of expertise, everything from botany to history.

In March 2002, at the International Tourism Fair in Berlin, Joy's House was voted one of the seven best projects for socially responsible tourism in the world. That same year it also received the Outstanding Travel and Service Award from the Thai government.

So how did these kids, from so many different backgrounds, find their way to the farm?

Neen said some were found abandoned in the jungle. Some were taken from the sides of dying mothers or fathers. Some were found begging for food in their village. Some, badly injured by violent parents or relatives, were sent to the school by the authorities.

They all called her Mae (mother) Joy.

Ten year ago, while guiding tourists around the rustic charms of Pongkum village and its environs, Neen noticed the hardships some children there had to endure. Many had to go without lunch because neither their parents nor the local school could afford to provide one. So Neen donated money and rice to the school. Later she learned from its principal that some of the students, orphaned by Aids, were being cared for by grandparents who were getting too old to cope. That was when Neen started thinking about adoption.

"At the time I was feeling lonely living here all alone on this large farm. My daughter would only come to stay occasionally. So I went ahead and adopted these kids."

At first the headmaster selected seven kids who needed urgent help to go live with her. Some have adapted well but others are still haunted by their past. While Neen is concentrating her efforts on nursing them back to health so that they can enjoy a normal childhood she is aware that psychological rehabilitation can take a long time.

When news about Neen's charity spread, people would turn up at the farm asking her to take in their children. At first, she accepted all the youngsters. But she soon realised it was impossible to continue in this fashion. Now she only takes in the most serious and urgent of cases. Kids from violent backgrounds she sends to her aunt and uncle who have a lot more experience in healing emotionally wounded children.

All the kids at the farm go to nearby schools. Each has a different duty on the farm, ranging from watering the plants to cooking and cleaning. They all help grow organic vegetables and rice.

"We're a big family so everybody has to chip in and follow the rules of the house," Neen said. "The older kids have to take care of the younger ones. Everyone has to learn how to be self-reliant."

Some of her young charges are more difficult than others. "The teenage years can be a trying period. But you can reach them by having sincere chats with them. You really have to be very patient, though."

Four years ago Neen got the idea of opening an international school on her farm. She receives help and educational support from Dr Jurgen Zimmer, a professor at Freie University in Berlin and a deputy director for international affairs at the Rural and Social Management Institute (Rasmi).

The idea arose from a need to tackle the persistent problems her charges were having at their local schools. Some of the kids couldn't adjust to the system, others couldn't catch up. Some had short concentration spans which makes learning difficult but their classes are too big for them to get the individual attention they needed. "So I decided to run my own school," Neen said.

The School for Life consists of two main sectors. One, called "Family", is run by Neen herself. The other, "Education", is Dr Zimmer's responsibility. Thai teachers and foreign volunteers take turns conducting classes and supervising outdoor activities.

In Dr Zimmer's opinion, the School for Life encourages children with few resources to develop an entrepreneurial spirit _ to come up with ideas that will work in the marketplace while being both ecologically friendly and socially caring. Learning areas include organic farming, tourism, nutrition, body and soul, culture and development, applied natural sciences, communication, international education, building and living.

In organic farming, the children grow vegetables as well as doing related experiments in the school laboratories. In tourism, they take tourists around and teach them about the local way of life. In nutrition, the children learn the art of local cuisine. In body and soul classes, they learn the importance of psychological and physical development while in art they get in touch with their roots through traditional dance and making handicrafts.

Learning by doing in a bilingual setting, the children have themselves become bilingual. To make them feel connected to the local community and to expand their social network, Neen often takes them to villages in the area. She also takes them on visits to bookstores to nourish the reading habit.

The kids are clearly grateful for the maternal care they'd long yearned for.

"I really love Mae Joy," said 14-year-old Rattikarn Tangsawadiwongse. "Before I worked as a waitress and had to pay for my own schooling. But she took me in and has done so much to make me and other kids happy again."

In January this year, the principal of nearby Pongkum School informed Neen that 20 more children needed help. But to take them in School for Life will need some serious financial support. At present, part of the funding comes from Neen's own pocket. The school also get financial support from Rasmi and the Foundation for Thailand Rural Reconstruction Movement, which is responsible for the administrative side of the facility. Neen is currently busy establishing a new two-storey school for the children.

It's now a common sight in Chiang Mai city: a lone woman shepherding a horde of children _ Neen now cares for 37 _ through the fresh-produce market or helping them select books in one of the local stores.

"Market vendors sometimes look at me and ask 'are all those kids yours?' It'd take a long time to tell the whole story so I just say 'yes, they're all mine'.

"That answer always astonishes them. Anyway, I couldn't say 'no' because I really feel that these are my children even though I didn't give birth to them. I want to see them growing up beautifully so that they can help other underprivileged kids at a later stage."

Info for donations:

- Name of organisation: School for Life.
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- Fax: 053-248-960
- Web site: www.joyhouse.net <<http://www.joyhouse.net>>
- Bank: Bangkok Bank, Chang Puak branch
- Account name: Sanit Hanfaifa and Chokchai Punudom
- Account number: 390-4-23804-9