

House of Hope

Angela Savage

Ying's mother died in the night holding Ying in her arms. It wasn't until Ying's father came home from work the following morning that they were found, the crying baby clinging to her mother's lifeless body.

'When they first came here, Ying was quiet and would hold on to people as if afraid to let them go,' says Antonia Symonds, an Australian woman working with the Good Shepherd Sisters in Nong Khai in Thailand's northeast. 'But she has blossomed at the Centre.'

Antonia is referring to the Friendship Centre, a place where people infected with and affected by HIV/AIDS gather for information, support, companionship and hope.

The Friendship Centre is the brainchild of Sr Pranee Sitti, Director of the Village Vocational Training Centre (VVTC), one of several projects run by the Good Shepherd Sisters that provide training, employment and income generation activities to local villagers to both alleviate poverty and prevent trafficking.

But the area is one of Thailand's poorest. Unemployment is high and many people are forced to migrate for work. Through the Village Outreach program of which she is also director, Sr Pranee observed more and more villagers were returning from the towns and cities infected with HIV.

This was before life-saving anti-retroviral therapy (ART) was widely available in rural Thailand, and people were terrified of hospitals, which were seen as places of death. The Village Outreach visited the sick in their homes, sometimes providing transport to health facilities, sometimes assisting families to care for the dying at home.

'The staff are trained to see the dignity of people,' says Sr Pranee, 'to respect everyone as a human being.'

'Just today they were helping with the cleaning of a patient [with AIDS], who is suffering a lot. We want him to be clean, comfortable, make him feel someone cares, comfort the family.'

'We do this service with love,' she said, 'to help people carry their suffering.'

Even with access to ART, ignorance, shame and fear of stigmatisation mean some people still do not receive the help they need in time to prolong their lives.

For others, the life-saving treatment brings a new set of challenges. Although their health improves, many people are unable to return to the work they did before they got sick, but still need to provide for themselves and their families.

The Village Outreach group identified this need for income generation for people living with HIV. At first people would come into the Isan Pottery training project, housed in the grounds of the VVCT, learn to make a product and then go home to

produce it. But this was isolating, and the pottery centre did not cater specifically to the social, emotional and physical needs of people living with HIV.

And so the Friendship Centre was established in 2001 as a place where people living with HIV and their families could meet for practical and emotional support.

Income-generation opportunities are provided through the Hands of Hope Card Project. On the day I visit the Centre, despite it being the end of the Thai New Year holiday, about 30 people are busy producing exquisite hand-made cards and other paper products. The production coordinator, Nam Fon ('Rain') who previously received support caring for her two young nephews, orphaned by AIDS, now contributes to the running of the place.

'We see that people who've received help can reach out to others,' says Sr Pranee.

The Sisters' development projects have an outstanding track record in this regard. The Child Sponsorship Program is coordinated by two women who were formerly sponsored children themselves, and another who trained as a nurse now works on the Outreach Team.

Two former patients, Ms Bootsaba and Mr Manop, work as a hospital liaison officer and driver respectively. The two act as role models to inspire others, living proof that diagnosis with HIV does not have to be a death sentence.

As for Ying, her father looks after the grounds at the VVTC and in exchange boards at the Friendship Centre. The women there help him care for Ying, who plays alongside their children.

'We don't believe in orphanages,' Sr Pranee says. 'If people are supported to take care of their own children, they want to live for their children. It makes them strong, gives them hope.'

But Pranee continues, 'Deep in their hearts, they still worry.'

Knowing the community will care for their child if anything should happen to them enables parents like Ying's father to find peace of mind.

'I believe it's as much the social contact as the medicine (ART) that transforms people,' Sr Pranee says.

Sadly, members of the Friendship Centre—who can number up to 170 on family days—still experience discrimination in access to housing and employment. To meet these needs, the Sisters are establishing the Garden of Friendship to provide homes for families and a small hospice, together with rice fields, orchards, vegetable gardens and fish ponds for people to produce food for themselves and for other programs.

They borrowed money to buy the land and have received support for the buildings, water supply and gardens, but still need to raise funds for other components, including a wall, electricity and repayment of the loan.

Sr Pranee believes the clients at the Friendship Centre are discriminated against not just because they have HIV but also because they are poor.

‘When children with AIDS first come here, they cannot meet your gaze,’ Sr Pranee says, ‘not until they feel secure. They carry the stigma.’

For information on how to support any of the Good Shepherd Sisters programs in northeast Thailand or to order craft from any of their income generating projects, contact: Good Shepherd Sisters, 916 Prachak Rd, Nong Khai 43000, Thailand.
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