

HEADLINE: Alive and kicking

SUBHEADLINE: At the Niwattana New Life Project for boys, the drug war is being fought one soul _ and body _ at a time

BYLINE: WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

In the remote countryside of southern Chumphon province, among the forests, coffee plants, rubber trees and ponds which comprise the 39 hectares of the Duang Prateep Foundation's rehabilitation centre, a handful of boys, mostly about 16 years old, are engaged in the titanic struggle to overcome their drug addictions.

They are battling mostly in silence and without gradual drying-out periods or chemical substitutes or medicines, operating on the strength of will with the help of peers, tutors and Mother Nature: a rural environment, fresh water and physical exercise.

The battle is being fought with their own bodies and souls, which have been thoroughly enslaved to narcotic substances, mostly amphetamines, sometimes for years on end.

``I keep thinking about it. This feeling of being under the influence of drugs is haunting me," said Somkiat, 18 years old, a handsome face with sad brown eyes.

``This feeling can be very stressful sometimes. I try and overcome it by going a bit overboard, doing everything full tilt, speaking very loudly, exercising like mad. It's very difficult to forget it."

Somkiat's main concern is to get rid of his amphetamine addiction in order to support his family: a little sister, an ageing mother who farms for a living, and a paralysed father.

``Those who have never had to deal with this problem are lucky. But for those who are fighting drug addiction like me, I want to tell them to always forge ahead, to never lose hope. I want them to know that drugs are destroying their future and putting their lives in danger."

Like Somkiat, a native of Uttaradit province and a resident at the centre for the last one-and-a-half years, some 90 teenagers from all over Thailand are currently involved in the Duang Prateep Foundation's Niwattana New Life Project for boys, established in 1986.

Each of them has a tragic story to share of the slow descent into the hell of drug addiction: ``I had a weakness for having fun," said one; ``my heart is my soft spot," said another; ``I am too emotionally unstable," or ``I wanted to have the energy to study in the daytime and work at night," or ``I wanted to stay awake later at night" _ each offered their reasons for becoming addicted.

The young boys are enrolled in the project for a minimum of three years, the time needed to cut short all kinds of bad habits and addictions and, in short, start a new life. If the parents can afford it, the monthly fee is 3,000 baht; if not, the foundation calls on private donations to cover expenses, or the Ministry of Non-Formal Education, various schools and the local community.

During the three-year period, the young boys may attend the local school on a regular basis, and if not much academically inclined they can undertake a programme which contains vocational training and agricultural work mixed with a bit of conventional schooling.

The recovering addicts also have the opportunity to build links with the local community by taking part in construction projects and various other projects under way in the neighbouring village.

Their daily routine includes self-development activities, group activities such as language studies, computer studies, and optional educational studies as well as practical agriculture and sports. Supplementary activities such as meditation, watching videos, training and discussions are also on the agenda. They also help with the upkeep of the centre itself.

The success rate of the Niwattana New Life Project, according to the residents, seems to be about 70 to 80 percent, which ranks this rehabilitation centre amongst the most efficient and sought-after programmes in the country. Indeed, there is a waiting-list of around 400.

For many of these young boys, this was the end of the road: many said they fared badly in other rehabilitation centres, hospitals and temples.

“I have undergone treatment for drug addiction in numerous places, but unsuccessfully _ four times at Thanyarak Hospital, once for a one-month treatment programme at Tham Krabok temple some 10 years ago, costing 3,000 baht, plus another course of 21 days somewhere else. Each time I felt it was too short, and I tended to get addicted to the other drugs I was given as a substitute,” explains Wanchai, a 24-year-old from Samut Sakhon, a former heroin addict who is now a teacher's assistant at the Chumphon centre.

“The good thing about this project is that there are plenty of activities, things to do. Many gain confidence and self-esteem by learning new skills, doing things themselves, mending things, doing physical exercise,” said Wanchai, wearing a loose white T-shirt with the word “Nirvana” in big letters.

“I want this project to be an example for the government to follow. They should support community work all the more since people have begun to realise that other types of rehabilitation programmes don't work,” said Khru Prateep, now known as Senator Prateep Ungsongtham Hata, the famous figure behind the Duang Prateep Foundation.

While driving down the bumpy road leading to the rehabilitation centre, she said, “This type of programme, with links to the local community, is a more appropriate way of dealing with drug addiction. It is also much more economical _ our government is spending billions of baht on drug-related issues.”

Senator Prateep enumerated, at length, the various budget items related to the drug scourge.

One thing is certain: the curse of drugs is spreading through all sectors of society, affecting more than 1 million people (casual users and addicts) in Thailand, according to a study commissioned by the Narcotics Control Board.

Another recent study on this multibillion-baht business showed that over 70 percent of drug addicts in Thailand are no longer from broken families as before, and the drug of choice is amphetamine, claiming 90 percent of total addictions.

The Duang Prateep Foundation had a ringside seat for the turn of the tide. Conceived at first as a way to rescue children from the Khlong Toey slum communities, the New Life Project residents coming from slum communities now number less than 15 percent, about 10 of the 90 current residents. The majority are now from middle and upper class families.

“The kids are all sent by their parents. Sometimes the parents had even sworn they would only send them here as a last resort. But other methods failed, and they would sometimes

come to me with tears in their eyes, hopeless. We have kids from all over Thailand, and all types of communities, even the Muslim community."

The senator added: ``For sure, many middle-class families are suffering. Sometimes parents put too much pressure on their children and have too many expectations. The kids might not feel up to handling those expectations and may become frustrated for not being appreciated. It might also happen that because of over-protection, kids feel they can never think for themselves and make their own decisions, leading to poor self-esteem. Gathered in the centre's main hall on that rainy day late last month with Senator Prateep were other honourable guests such as Dr Sandro Calvani, a representative from the United Nations International Drug Control Programme, and Nanda Krairiksh and Kayoko Mizuta from United Nations Economic and Social Commission for the Asia and the Pacific. The gathering offered the recovering addicts a rare opportunity to try and make sense of the big picture.

At the request of some of the youths, Dr Calvani painted a broad picture of the situation in the region, explaining, for example, that Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia had, to a certain extent, eliminated the circulation of heroin and amphetamines in their countries, but had much to do regarding the consumption of marijuana. The situation in Burma, ranked the second largest producer of opium in the world as well as the number one producer of amphetamines, is extremely serious.

``People within communities have to change \_ they have to realise that drugs are destroying our young people," Dr Calvani said. ``We need mobilisation within civil society, as if we had decided to stage a revolution, or as Thai people did to bring about the new constitution _ all joining hands together. Drugs are not just the problem of the government, or of the Prateep Foundation alone. It's much more than that.

``Drugs are a symptom of a sick society, where only money, sex and power rule," he added. ``We need to rebuild values and learn how to earn happiness by serving, giving to others, rebuilding people's self-respect."

The young listeners could only agree with such elevated words and goals, but still dared to make a few small requests: less crowded rooms, divided bathrooms, better sports equipment, an electrical generator and some means of transportation ...

Whatever one might say, it is first and foremost on their young shoulders that this gigantic struggle against drugs is being