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SUBHEADLINE: For 10 years the International Support Group has been helping those who need it most \_ and shows no sign of slowing down

BYLINE: Story by WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA Pictures by TAWEECHAI TAWATPAKORN

They came limping, crawling or carried in someone's arms. The lucky few arrived in wheelchairs. Minutes later, they drove away in three-wheeled vehicles, beaming as they gathered for a group picture.

What happened? Something magical and unhoped-for: the donation, by the International Support Group (ISG), of 41 tricycles for the use of people with disabilities in various provinces around Bangkok.

The scene took place at the Nanthamuni Bamrung School in Pathum Thani recently, in the presence of provincial governor Poochong Rung-Rote and a long list of dignitaries and presidents of clubs for people with disabilities.

This highly significant moment in the life of these disabled people, aged from 15 to 71, was the outcome of several factors, all set in motion by the generosity and dynamism of a handful of volunteers, the 50 or so members of the International Support Group, a non-profit charity organisation set up in 1988 to help alleviate the plight of disadvantaged people in Thailand.

`` I am so glad to be among the recipients. I will be able to make a better living by selling goods and thus not be a burden on society," said Yupa, 38, from Saraburi province, who suffers from polio.

`` The tricycle will allow me to travel in a radius of two to three kilometres \_ that will make a huge difference in my work as a tailor," said Tongsaporn, from Pathum Thani.

The electric-blue tricycles, made at the Thai Wheel Factory, have also meant a fantastic change in the life of Sayan, a mother of two from Saraburi province, who has been disabled since the late stage of her second pregnancy.

`` In my seventh or eighth month of pregnancy, I started to suffer from severe pain in my legs. At nine months, I couldn't walk any more. The doctor told me I would be able to walk again after giving birth, but I could not \_ and that was seven years ago. I sought advice from numerous doctors in various hospitals but nothing helped," she says.

`` I would break my arm just by trying to lift myself up, moving around the house. Ultimately my two kids and I had to go back to live with my mother. My husband had left us.

`` I used to work in a beauty parlour but now I do embroidery for collars, earning about 40 baht apiece. Usually I can do about two pieces a day. With this tricycle I will be able to make extra income by selling lottery tickets. I told my two boys to teach themselves to ride bicycles so we could all go out together."

These types of donations, which can make a tremendous difference in the lives of those at a disadvantage, are the mission of the International Support Group, whose members can recount many such stories.

Take blankets, for example. In the mountainous regions of northern Thailand, where the temperature can flirt with zero degree Celsius during the cold season, the offer of a soft, warm blanket can be more than heart-warming.

``You always wish you could do more \_ a blanket is not such a big deal, although I guess without one, it must be very difficult," said Cynthia Leverenz, president of the ISG, which distributes some 2,000 blankets a year in remote regions of northern Thailand.

``It is one of our most popular projects. It's a trip any of our members can join provided they pay for the cost out of their own pocket. We set it up each year around the month of October and go as a group of 10 to 15 people to tiny little places and villages to give away the blankets," she said, recalling past trips down dirt tracks and coming round bends to discover lines of people waiting for them.

For both these projects \_ wheelchairs and blankets, initiated in 1990 and 1993, respectively \_ the International Support Group has set up a very clever network and distribution scheme.

For the wheelchair programme, the ISG secured the help of the Thais with Disabilities Foundation, and since last year has been purchasing wheelchairs produced by disabled workers at the Pak Kret-based Thai Wheel Factory.

``We are joining hands to help people with disabilities. The Thai Wheel Factory is one of our many activities. What the ISG is doing is great \_ it's like two blessings in one," said Terayudth Sukonthavit, president of the Thais With Disabilities Foundation, himself moving about in a wheelchair.

``The initial screening of potential recipients is done by a network of disabled people. Then we decide in terms of urgency \_ who needs the item the most. Unfortunately, we can never satisfy all the demand."

Application forms have to be filled out by candidates stating personal information such as income and number of dependents. The foundation then decides who should receive what \_ a tricycle, a regular wheelchair or a small vehicle designed for children.

Since the start of the ISG project more than 10 years ago, and in recognition of the fact that Thailand has more than four million persons with disabilities, the group has purchased 150 to 200 wheelchairs a year for distribution to those in need. The cost of a vehicle is about 4,000 baht, or 4,500 baht for a tricycle.

Over the past years, the Rotary Club of Bangkok has been a consistent contributor to the effort. In return, their donors have the satisfaction of seeing a plaque with their name affixed to the vehicle.

It is a similar scenario for the blanket programme. The ISG purchases blankets from young women involved in self-help projects in various regions of Thailand, such as the New Life Project, established to provide employment for women in rural villages.

It also works closely with the Thai Department of Public Welfare in order to identify the most needy regions of the country. Two hundred blankets a month are ordered at a price of 200 baht each.

``It's gainful employment for these women and we know it is indeed very significant for them in terms of income \_ hopefully extra income," said Lim Su See, the group's public relations officer and its Newsletter editor.

`` The blanket programme took a new turn a few years ago when Thailand went through an extremely cold winter, when prison inmates were dying of cold. At that time we had a private donor from Germany who helped us order a large amount of blankets," Cynthia said.

` These two projects are unique in the sense that they employ needy people and distribute items free of charge among other people in need. Actually it makes sense \_ it was a natural progression for us," she said.

`` In this way, we are helping people to help themselves. It is like we are teaching them how to fish, which, as the saying goes, is better than giving them fish," Lim added.

There are new projects in the works for the ISG, such as its latest collaboration, inaugurated a few days ago, with cosmetic giant L'Oreal. This project will train girls from Welfare House and other homes for runaways and victims of abuse and prostitution, in the art of make-up and hair dressing.

Funded entirely by donations from local and overseas sponsors and run by expatriates and Thais of both sexes, the non-profit charity organisation has a list of about 15 projects and as many committees to oversee them, including an eyeglass bank for rural people; a dental clinic project for the Pak Kret Home for children; help for the HIV/AIDS Parents Project; and help for the Thailand Hilltribe Education Project.

The ISG holds its monthly meetings every third Monday at the Capital Club on Sukhumvit Soi 24. To help raise funds, the group stages an annual gala ball in June \_ this year's event raised about one million baht to help finance its various ongoing projects.

The Pattani Home for Girls participated in this year's ball, producing a cross-stitch painting that was auctioned off for 45,000 baht, which went to help the girls pay for university entrance classes.

According to the president of the group, the education committee has the biggest task: more than 650 children from all over Thailand are under the ISG sponsorship programme, receiving 3,500 baht a year. The programme requires a lot of paperwork, especially in terms of translation of letters for and from foreign sponsors.

The organisation also supports vocational and high school students, providing scholarships of 5,000 to 20,000 baht a year.

`` We make it a commitment that as long as the kids remain in school, we will support them," Cynthia said.

The group is currently applying for registration as a Thai charity foundation, and is waiting for its application to be processed.

The group was founded in 1988 by Micheline Hollaus, who, seeking to adopt a Thai child, discovered for herself the many hardships that many Thais endure. Though she has long since returned to the US, she must be pleased to know that her act of kindness has continued to bear much good fruit.

u`` We care" is a fortnightly series honouring people who believe in giving. In addition to supporting these causes, you can let us know about people who unselfishly help others so we can make more people aware of their efforts. Fax `` We care" on 240-3668 or call 240-3700 ext 3208 or 3212.

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Info for donations:

uName of organisation: International Support Group to the Department of Public Welfare

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uContact person: Cynthia Leverenz or Lim Su See

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uBank information:

Account type: savings

Account name: International Support Group to DPW

Account number: 009-307-4123

Bank: Siam Commercial Bank, 9 Ratchadapisek Road, Chatuchak, Bangkok, Thailand.

Or send a cheque payable to the Post Publishing Plc. Address it to Kusuma Mintakhin, Editorial Manager, ATTN: International Support Group, 136 Na Ranong Road, off Sunthorn Kosa, Klong Toey, Bangkok 10110. Her telephone number is 02-240-3700 ext 3224/5.

Please include your name and address with your cheque so we can send you a receipt. Please specify that your donation is for the ``International Support Group''.