

HEADLINE: Motherly love

SUBHEADLINE: Miss SuperClean wins people's hearts and takes the Most Outstanding Volunteer 2000 Award \_ but for her, it's all in a day's work

BYLINE: Story and pictures by WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

Like tiny ants working silently and without anybody knowing it, volunteers throughout the country accomplish titanic volumes of work, off in the wings of society. One such person is Supharp Sakhran, recently elected as one of Thailand's two Most Outstanding Village Health Volunteers by the Ministry of Health.

This story could have borrowed its title from the children's fable of the goose that lays the golden eggs. It gathers the popular tale's main components: a very conscientious, dedicated and busy mother hen (although not so feathery), eggs (real, fresh ones, straight from the hen) and elements of wealth and prominence.

But in this latest adaptation, the mother hen is played by Supharp, 48 years old, a native of Phetchaburi province. A modest seller of duck and chicken eggs, Supharp is also a volunteer health worker. Nine years of unconditional dedication to her community \_ Phranakorn Khiri, where she has lived since her birth \_ recently won her the title of Thailand's Most Outstanding Volunteer for the Year 2000, granted by the Ministry of Health as part of the development of its primary health care programme.

As in all gripping stories, the ending is not just the obvious outcome of the beginning, a certainty right from the start.

Indeed, when little Supharp was born to a low-income family a few decades ago, nothing augured that she was later to experience fame and media exposure. Yet, the guidance received from her parents was remarkable and definite: ``Help others, help society, the underprivileged, no matter what."

A little less than half a century later, the generous advice endures. ``I love to give. It is heart-warming, and the source of so much joy. Some days, there is nothing in your bag that you can give away, but it's a pleasant feeling to think that this will not last," comments a smiling Supharp, surrounded by a flock of little kids, ``the mini health volunteers", all following proudly in her footsteps.

A graduate from Phetchaburi Teachers' College, Supharp promptly gave up her teaching career, with the feeling that it didn't give her enough freedom. Setting up a small business with her two sisters, selling duck and chicken eggs and earning a meagre but satisfactory monthly income of 4,000 to 6,000 baht, Supharp soon had full liberty to devote herself to others.

Her field of interest and activity; the improvement of health and sanitation in Phranakorn Khiri, which has some 2,250 inhabitants.

``My favourite saying is that prevention is better than cure. It is really my motivation," explained Supharp, who started by getting elected as a member of the community council. Strengthened by the training provided by the Ministry of Health to the 700,000 or so health volunteers throughout the country, in coordination in this instance with Phrachomklao Hospital and the municipality of Phetchaburi, the dynamic Supharp soon held all the cards to campaign for better health and greater self-reliance for rural villagers.

The first project Supharp initiated was the improvement of her community's basic health centre, located in the neighbourhood of a cemetery which was a haven for drug addicts. Copses of flowers and greenery were used to embellish the surroundings, while a range of services were set up and run by volunteers to attract visitors: a beauty parlour, first aid services, public telephones, astrological services, drinks, sales of low-priced rice, etc, with all the profits going to the community fund.

This dynamism and renewal of life in the community didn't go unnoticed. Many idle teenagers and children enjoyed taking part in the renovation of the building.

`` Many children helped us restore the centre, getting on well with people from the village. The government works hand in hand with volunteers, and in turn, we also don't mind getting some help," explained Supharp, who thus established the unique ``mini" health volunteer training.

`` Through my upbringing, I have been made aware that one should always help society and preserve good values. I thought that there was no reason why young children would not be able to think on those lines," she commented.

A few years after swelling the ranks of Thailand's health volunteers, Supharp started sharing her knowledge and health and sanitation skills with a handful of school children, during meetings she held every Saturday at the community health centre.

Helping their parents, collecting and separating garbage according to whether it's biodegradable or not, campaigning for a better environment by avoiding the use of polystyrene packaging, and basic hygienic practices (such as using serving spoons, washing one's hands before every meal and not allowing flies to contaminate food), the 25 ``mini" health volunteers, aged five to 12, made a ``maxi" impact.

Supharp and her gang (which also includes adults), their excellent coordination and team work, supported by the municipality, turned Phranakorn Khiri community little by little into ``the most outstanding village in health care", as it was labelled recently by the Ministry of Health.

`` This is the result of consistent efforts, good communication and organisation between the different units. And it is especially promising to see the younger generation rising as models for society," commented Yuttaphon Ankinandana, deputy mayor of Phetchaburi municipality. Jeth Sirathranont, director of Phrachomkiao Hospital, added, `` In the development of awareness of communicable diseases, the role of volunteers, working in coordination with other units, is essential. There are many people working very hard in the same way as Khun Supharp, but they often remain unnoticed."

In the small wooded garden laid out by the community, a few metres away from Pranom temple, the mini health volunteers receive some instructions: `` Each of you; throw your bag on the floor! Now, imagine all these bags are garbage. Do you think that it is a lot of garbage? But now, imagine, each person in Phetchaburi is throwing at least one or two bags of rubbish a day, 365 days a year. That means a huge amount of garbage, just in our province..." The young children nod their approval to Supharp's thought process, staring wide-eyed at the repulsive picture of a mountain of smelly garbage.

That is the way ``Miss SuperClean", as she is called by her colleagues, works: with simple means, innovative ideas and an above-average amount of conviction. Not to mention her total dedication to the cause and very good coordination with other workers.

`` I go to sleep at 8 pm, wake up at two in the morning and start thinking of how I can solve such and such a problem. But this rhythm has nothing to do with the fact that I have been

awarded some prizes," explains Supharp, who earlier this year was named the most outstanding health volunteer in her province, district, and region, before reaching the national level.

`` Besides, I don't much like the idea of putting myself forward. I got involved into this selection process on the initiative of Buppha Angkinantana. For the last nine years, I have dedicated myself fully to this work, giving the best of myself but without expecting anything in return. I am quite indifferent to these awards; I work in the same way as usual, getting tired as usual but maybe, with a little more pride. It is nice to have been completely accepted and respected by others."

Although her concerns and favourite themes keep on changing according to society's needs and problems, Miss SuperClean steadfastly addressed the huge problem of Aids.

`` Many people still don't understand fully what Aids is all about. People are succumbing to the disease and falling like leaves from the trees," she commented.

One of the volunteers' activities in full swing at the moment is a quiz related to knowledge on the communicable disease. If every member of a household gives 10 correct answers, the family wins an electric fan. Previously intended for individuals, the game received such a response that the requirements were extended to include entire families.

Distributing eggs in exchange for recyclable waste, creating garbage disposal units, composing educational songs (like Or Sor Mor Khon Dee, or Good Village Health Volunteer, and Rieak Pi Dai Mai, Can You Call Your Brother), growing chemical-free vegetables, stressing physical fitness in order to prevent drug addiction, boosting the earnings of housewives, and generally helping out in times of need, are just a few of the thousand and one activities in which Pranakorn Khiri health volunteers are involved.

`` Supharp is a super model for society. Everyone agrees on that. She spares no effort to help others and doesn't quite understand why everybody is not doing the same. She knows how to speak to people, grab their interest and convince them," comments Wanphen Achayuth, a merchant and one of the 24 adult volunteers working for Phranakorn Khiri village.

`` By joining the mini health volunteer team, I do some good for the society, as well as for my family. I am taught to take part in household chores, like cleaning up the house and sweeping the floor," says timid four year-old, Angkana Boonrod, knee-high to a grasshopper and the youngest of the team.

Like all her little friends, Angkana goes to school and fills in her complaints-diary where she is supposed to report any misdeed she might witness. For Angkana, this writing task is rather limited but she still attends the Saturday meetings and swells the ranks of Miss SuperClean supporters.

So it is clear that such mother hens do exist, and not only in children's story books.