

PublicationDate: 23-10-2001
PAGE: 01
Foundation, child abuse

PUBLICATION: BANGKOK POST
KEYWORD: Child Protection

HEADLINE: REFUGE OF LAST RESORT

SUBHEADLINE: A Bangkok-based charity appeals for funds to build a rural retreat where abused children can be nursed back to health

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If, as they say, the eyes mirror the soul, Ann's _ huge, dark and almond-shaped _ reflect a severely traumatised inner being. Barely four years old, this slim, frail little girl from Phetchaburi province has already had her fair share of knocks in life.

Her stomach ripped open by repeated kicks from her father, she is now recovering from her physical injuries. The psychological damage will take much longer to mend. Ann's beloved baby sister is unlikely ever to regain full health. The two-year-old was violently thrown to the ground, head first, by the girls' drunken father and for the past few weeks has been unconscious at a Bangkok hospital. The toddler suffered severe head injuries as a result of the assault and doctors have already had to remove a portion of the right side of her brain.

At a time when other children her age are preparing for primary school, making their first crude attempts to form letters and brim-full of innocent enquiries about the world around them, Ann has to deal with profound grief and a huge emotional vacuum.

In the modest but cosy setting of the Child Protection Foundation home in Bang Kapi district she is licking her wounds, surrounded by scores of other children who have endured similarly painful experiences.

Three weeks after arriving at the home, Ann's body language still speaks of deep despair, fearfulness and passivity. Hunched over as if her small shoulders are bearing the full weight of her terrible burden, protecting an

open wound that refuses to heal.

She remains mute when addressed, staring out with blank, mournful eyes which seem to ask the question: Why? Why did this happen to me?

``We're waiting for your little sister to get better then we'll go and fetch her,'' one of the care-takers tells her in a reassuring, motherly tone of voice. Ann nods her understanding before returning with halting steps to the group of children and teenagers killing time in front of a roaring TV screen.

``She's strong, very strong. She's willing to fight. She hasn't cried at all during the past few weeks ... nor even asked once about her parents,'' explains Senator Montri Sintawichai, secretary-general of the Foundation.

``If, later on, she gets the chance to grow up in a sane environment — perhaps upcountry and close to nature — she may turn out perfectly fine. I'm sure she'll bear up better than the average kid because she's already gone through so much suffering.''

Montri, a founder member of the foundation, has been caring for child victims of cruelty, sexual abuse and other injustices for the past 20 years. He has great hopes for his charges, most of whom have been molested, beaten or neglected in some way by their own parents.

``I have a dream that some of these children may, in later years, decide to pursue this line of work. I'd like them to expand this type of social activity and set up similar centres throughout the country.''

He admits, however, to feeling overwhelmed sometimes when he thinks of the size and scope of the problem in contemporary Thailand.

``I'm beginning to wonder whether this society of ours really does love children and is genuinely concerned about their well-being. I fear that people are mostly indifferent to this issue. The proportion of adults who harm children is growing and the number of people willing to help is very small — and decreasing.

``People have to realise that the problem is getting more and more serious, that children are being abused at an ever younger age and in an increasingly

violent manner. On top of that, these crimes are being kept secret for longer and longer periods. Offenders are getting more sly; they make the children believe that what is being done to them is perfectly normal.'

And, as has been documented in other countries, these juvenile victims are more at risk of growing up with severe psychological problems. ``When people have been abused in childhood, it is not rare for them to want to treat kids in a similar fashion; some even end up as prostitutes ...''

Set up in 1993, the foundation does what it can to raise public awareness about the extent of child abuse. Its pamphlet lists some truly horrific case-history summaries:

A three-year-old girl was punished by her father and mother by being whipped until her skin broke and then forced to run around in the hot sun. When she was too tired to run any more, her father kicked her and threw a heavy metal object at her head;

Two sisters from a middle-class family, aged three and five, were repeatedly raped for two years by their own father. The man, a business proprietor, raped the girls in his car, at home and in shopping complexes. When their mother took the children away, he tracked them down and the rapes continued;

A seven-year-old girl who was repeatedly raped by a relative sought help from another family member, only to be preyed upon by two other men. Alerted to the situation, her mother asked two male friends for assistance; they, in turn, raped the girl.

Hundreds of such cases, one more alarming than the next, end up in the hands of the 10 staff members at the foundation. Each year, this NGO deals with an average of 200 new requests for intervention, often going to court to have custody of a child taken away from unfit parents. It currently supervises, directly or indirectly, the care of some 230 children, aged one to 17 years. Of these, 65 are residents at the foundation's shelter on Lat Phrao Soi 106. Another 54 kids are enrolled in boarding schools in the provinces and a

further 110 have been placed with foster families to whom the foundation sends a monthly contribution of 600 to 1,200 baht. A few are still in hospital recovering from their injuries and a handful of rescued toddlers are now in the hands of trusted families.

Two thirds of the foundation's charges are female. Nearly 70 percent of the total are victims of sexual abuse. The rest have been physically or mentally abused, forced to sell drugs or prostitute themselves. And what most worries Montri is that the very institution which is suppose to nurture children is often the breeding ground for a host of unspeakable atrocities against them.

``One needs to be aware that the family is increasingly the starting point for these crimes. Children become prostitutes not because they have been lured into the sex trade themselves but often because their own parents force them into it to earn money. Even worse, statistics show that, more and more frequently, it is under the family's own roof that assaults on children are taking place.

``But what saddens me most ... and what I find really frightening ... is that neighbours who know what is going on rarely take action. The people who notify us are usually doctors or teachers; postmen, even. If the neighbours won't react even when they know that a child is in danger, how can one expect people living in the same house to do anything? Our society doesn't have the same guard rails any more.''

Many are in no doubt that these crimes against children are symptomatic of a sick society. Montri has noticed that the widespread obsession with making money has already been transmitted to many of his young charges.

``One of the toughest challenges we face here when rehabilitating children is the issue of money. They tend to think that money is of the ultimate importance; that it can give them everything they want in life. It's a real struggle to convince that that this is not necessarily so. If, on top of that, they've never experienced parental affection and love, it's really difficult to handle them,' ' says Montri, ``especially when they've been

rescued from depraved environments in which violence, sex and various forms of vice are prevalent.'

Despite all these hurdles, the foundation is doing the best it can with limited resources. After a few weeks in its care, most children settle in and get their first taste of a normal existence. They are encouraged to take an interest in reading and participate in extra-curricular activities taught by outside teachers like yoga, meditation and music.

''We do constructive work with them on activities that suit their individual needs and interest,'' reads the foundation pamphlet. ''This distracts them from their problems and they become preoccupied with something productive.''

In Montri's opinion, activities of this sort are as, or even more, important for the kids than visits to the doctor or psychologist.

Staff also spend a lot of time talking to the children, helping them distinguish between proper and improper behaviour, telling them _ and showing them _ that, despite what has happened, there are people who love and care for them. (The foundation's motto is ''love is the answer and it is love that heals all wounds''.)

''When we go to rescue children _ who are often confused as to whom they can really trust _ we let them understand at once that we are 100 percent on their side. Actually most of them are very ready to believe us since this is precisely what they have been longing for,'' Montri explains.

Despite the sterling work done by the foundation and a handful of similar organisations in the Kingdom, a lot more needs to be done. Montri wants to see the government substantially increase its funding for child-support programmes and says there is an urgent need to bring in specific legislation to give greater protection to children.

In the meantime he and his colleagues are pushing ahead with a plan to build a children's refuge in Samut Songkhram. Thanks to private donations the Foundation has been able to purchase a plot of land in this tiny neighbouring province. But a good deal more money is now needed to cover the cost of constructing and equipping the home.

``My plan is to build a house which will be as close as possible to that imagined by the children,'' says Montri. ``If you ask a child to draw his dream house, he usually locates it in a natural setting with plenty of flowers, trees and a river. I want this home to be as far as possible from air and noise pollution and from things like supermarkets. Ideally it should be full of joy, music and art.

``Home is a place where everyone wants to go when they feel down. And everyone needs parents to talk to when things go wrong. But what about all those children who have neither of these things?''

Info for donations:

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Contact person: Montri Sintawichai. Tel: 02-538-6227 or 02-539-4041

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