

2011 Newsletter No 8, Part 1: Cambodia and Myanmar: Lots of Emotions

September 2011. **Hello Everyone!** Here is the first part of this year's newsletter. We have done a lot this year and are proud of our little foundation! I have put lots of pictures for those of you who wish to skim through...

In Cambodia, I had the great good fortune of being invited to stay with Stav Zotalis who is the country director for CARE (which is doing a lot towards coordinating smaller organizations). It was such a joy to walk early morning, drink coffee and meet her friends. Maybe it is because Cambodia is so welcoming (visas not difficult, a French-influenced cuisine, beautiful culture, much poverty and many problems) that there are many foreigners in the country and many are curious/interested/involved in Buddhism. The result was that I led 3 separate mini-retreats: one with Beth's staff (left) (caring for AIDS patients mainly), one with Stav (the Sunday Meditation Group) and one with Manuel. It felt good to be useful and a joy to find so many people asking questions and thinking about life and values. If you go to Phnom Penh, please try out the new vegetarian restaurants The Vegetarian and Treez.



Anyway, I arrived and was soon off to visit Wat Opot where there are currently 56 children, a third of whom are HIV positive. I spent three days there and learnt a lot! Wayne, the founder and director, has worked hard for many years to establish a new approach to those diagnosed HIV positive and he and his staff are very proud to show that children are children, whether with HIV or not. In many homes for orphans (including extremely poor, only one parent, violent homes, rescued sex trafficked) the HIV children are segregated from the others and so sleep and eat in totally separate places. Wayne enjoys asking the many visitors to pick out the HIV children from a group; they find it impossible.



We were told that bread or buns are the one thing they love and so we arrived

are the one with



something for everyone.

That evening, after the meditation, the children dug in. It was wonderful to see how much they enjoyed the treat and how carefully, almost lovingly they ate it!

Then to our offering: the new volunteers rooms. The little building is beside a lake (actually a

pond dug out to farm fish) in one corner of the compound. I was delighted to find how well it had been built, carefully planned and executed. Almost immediately the corridor in front has become a major meeting place!!! We spent many hours connecting with each other in the sinking evening sun. Now the many, many volunteers who go to Wat Opot will have a place to stay.





(That's Wayne and Melinda on the far left. Melinda Lies is the friend we have been helping to stay and work at Wat Opot.)



(Left is a Goodbye Picture of the children with things we brought for them.)

they need including soap and tea and a towel, a little money and so on. The dying patients are suffering from TB and, because they are poor, they are placed in a building where hardly anyone ever goes. It was a very moving and humbling experience. I came away with so much respect for Beth's staff who go and spend hours every day doing Reiki, singing and chanting with the patients. In those circumstances, one realizes one's limitations...



And off to lovely Myanmar. I do love that country. The people are so varied and the culture so beautiful. Myanmar is on the brink of extreme change and though it is as it should be, i am sure they will feel nostalgia for the days gone by, days of simple living and simple joys. But change is natural and healthy...

The jobs envisaged were the full opening of the building at the Twantay orphanage, distribution of simple things (last year was too labor intensive with our package making and carrying) and visiting the building for old people on the Delta, if permitted.

September 23 was the preparation day. We shopped (mostly at wholesalers now by telephone but we did go and get sweets and stuff) and then Father Carolus (the head of the community where we built a place for the old men) came to meet me. We talked and then he went to ask permission for me to go to the Delta, a journey that was expected to be refused after all the chaos of Nargis in 2008. Surprise, surprise, permission was granted and we planned to leave on September 29. Unusually, this year the rainy season is late and heavy and so problems were expected. Little did i know what awaited me...

The opening at Twantay was great, the head monk as fine as ever. Actually he has acquired quite some renown as his 640 children (up from the previous 450!!) are neat, well disciplined (but not too much so) and he is very well organized. I enjoyed the discipline laced with fun and watching the kids fooling around in between periods of control.



First of all the ceremony. The certificate of offering of the building was given to the monk, a few words were spoken, the ribbon cut (above Nge-nge -- in orange and her wonderful boss, Madame Win Le-Le in red) and then the main event: the throwing of carefully folded "Lucky Money" to the children and staff. This is a Myanmar custom which they all enjoyed but i could not help but feel sorry for those that were not quick enough! However everyone received a lollipop and sweets, some compensation.



All the staff of the Grand Mee Ya Hta Hotel helped in the preparation and offering of a fine lunch including desert (grass jelly drink). (To the left: the cook, the egg curry, Nge-nge separating the rice.)



Here are the boys...



And the girls....



The head monk lives in a corner of the main hall



And then i revisited Bagan, of over 4,000 pagodas after 20 years....



The 29th was soon here and early in the morning we set off for the Delta, near Wakema, a place called Kanazogone. Missionaries established a beautiful compound in 1924 and now many of the people, mostly Karan, are Catholic. I asked Father Carolus why and if his fore fathers had His answer was very interesting. today, they lived with the people making schools and offering as they grew closer, the people Catholicism and that for many of Myanmar, Christianity has discussed many subjects and very excited that, in spite of the potholes, no more asphalt only would soon arrive, a motor cycle the next 3 kilometers were impossible and that we would have to go back.



asked Father Carolus insisted on conversion. He replied that , just like and cared for them, medical help. In this way, wanted to embrace the minorities in become their identity. We just as he was getting poor roads (= terrible stones in places) we came up and told us that



Father Carolus started to think and decided that we could take a boat as there are canals and the delta river right up to the village. The first boat was huge and someone scuttled off to find a smaller boat. And so after a long wait we set off. Can you see the man in the middle of the picture to the left? Well he is continually bailing out the boat. As i could see everyone doing that, i thought it was normal. However after a couple of hours, it was evident that the boat had some serious leaks and the motor was not working properly

and so we moved to boat No. 2 -- which had a roof -- a welcomed addition when the rain started pouring down...

Anyway the journey took 10 1/2 hours instead of 6 and the return was just 8 hours.

And we even had to pass through a lock... And so we reached the village. The project was introduced by Percy Vatsaloo, a friend from Singapore who creates beautiful silk.). Every year he does some social work. His father was nursed by a Myanmar man, Simon, who lives in the village of Kanazogone and who knew that they need a building for the old men who can no longer be



cared for by their families. Percy asked us, we could help and the rest is history (except that because of the rain the building has not been painted yet...)





And so now the dedicated and loving Mary Magdalene cares for her group of five women and four men in such a way that all i could hope for is that i finish up in similar circumstances. The picture left is of the inspiration (a woman who started visiting the elderly all on her own) on the left, Mary Magdalene and Father Carolus standing in the entrance of the Douglas A Campbell Foundation building for old men. (By the way, the new building is shadier and so the women have prevailed in insisting on moving to it. And so it is not for old men after all...)

Here is the kitchen and the happy cook.



And here is the old building = bamboo...

They hope to house about 20 people as the connecting building is going soon to be finished (foundation left .)



Father Carolus forgot extra toilets and the corrugated iron roofs are too hot and so we need ceilings and so and so on.... All in good time...

Newsletter 2011 Part 2: Yangon, Vientiane, Rangamati

Yangon: The visit to Kanazogone was amazing. The journey back by boat and car was



less eventful in that the boat did not begin to sink!! The next two days were spent in visiting different orphanages and monasteries. This time we had decided to give out 2,000 exercise books as the children

need many for school and they are a problem for each institution. With the books we gave pens and also in many places offered a meal -- cooked by us -- or paid for. The first nuns' temple had 340 members (all dressed in pink as is the custom in Myanmar) and the second had 270! You may be surprised by the numbers... Well, at the moment, many young girls are apparently being kidnapped for sex and work especially from the border areas. So those that want to become nuns, where mothers might have been unwilling in the past, are being happily

sent to the monasteries. (Of course they can leave whenever they want to, as is the Buddhist custom.) Curiosity inspired me to ask, through Nge-nge, some of them why they had come to live in the temple. Even the littlest ones seemed to be very clear!



And then we went to a huge orphanage, one we had been to last year. Left is the monk with the mountain of exercise books. he has over 500 children and, though he seems to be well supported in many ways, the children are packed in to dormitories and sleep on two story-beds with just enough space between them to squeeze by! I felt very sorry to see someone working so hard and still having problems. Maybe we try to help him in the future...

Bye-bye Nge-nge (left)! Thank you for all your help!



Vientiane: Next it was back to Bangkok and then off to Udon Thani (northern Thailand) to meet Percy (left). He was organizing our trip to visit the school we had made the floor of in Laos; i wondered how the roads would be...



Percy Vatsaloo has a silk weaving village where he creates sublime shawls, in particular, as well as other things which are sold from his shop (www.isangallery.com.sg) in Singapore. That evening we had a party with all of the members from the village. Of course mujin was a huge nuisance as vegetarian food is unknown in Thailand -- or at least almost 00 but they looked after me so well.

The next day we set off. Car to Friendship bridge, bus through no-man's land, another bus to Vientiane. There we met up with Madame Manola. an amazing person who was

able to show me a lot of Laotian culture just through her being. She put me together with an old friend and off we went to visit temples. Then Madame Manola very kindly lent us a 4-wheel drive car and driver to take us to the school (THANK YOU!).



We drove due north along the Mekong River; the road was incredibly bad in places but good in others.

After a long drive (was it 3 or 4 hours?) we arrived at the little village and walked through the mud to the school. Here it is below left from the path. I was rather disappointed by the state it was in and decided not to do such a



half job in future. The cement bricks were punctured and the floor uneven in places. We gave sweets and gifts to the kids on leaving the village.

Back to Vientiane and Percy left me to stay a few days longer during which i not only visited lots of temples but also found a way to leave the mark of the Douglas A Campbell Foundation behind me.



Madame Manola took me to a school for children who don't go to school. "Who are they," i asked. "Well, they are children whom the parents won't let go to school or who don't know how to. We send a bus to collect them each day and then they come. The problem is that we have to

supply everything and at present we are very badly off and the school ground is flooded," the head teacher replied.



As the school was well known to Madame Manola, after the tour, out of the blue, i was able to give her money. Here is the teacher receiving the money with Madame Manola standing behind.



Here (left) is a graphic advertisement to try to stop people using the bushes instead of the toilets -- still a problem in Laos. Laotian life (right).

And so my lovely days in Vientiane came to an end and it was back to Udon Thani and then to Bangkok and on to Bangladesh, a country i was visiting for the first time.



Rangamati: Wow! Dhaka! I found Bangladesh to be like India was in my memory in the 1970s with technology added = nothing short of chaos! However, our goal was Rangamati in the southern hills, the home of many of the Hill Tribes of Bangladesh, and so we set off the next day.. The drive was amazing and goes highly recommended as an experience to avoid (better fly to Chittagong from there you have at least 2 hours experience of driving!). Left is our reception at the school gate.



Next day was a tour of the place, a magnificent compound. You may wonder why these people are called hill tribes as opposed to mountain tribes. Well, basically they live in the

hills, little hills, they spend their lives going up and down. "Wow, healthy," i thought, "but tiring." Thus is the school compound: hills with little ponds in between. Our computers were well installed and in full use and there is even a plan to do some outsourcing typing to make money for the school! The school has been through some rough times and so has many plans for attaining self-sufficiency = Laudable...



As we went around, i noticed that there was garbage everywhere and the children were throwing everything everywhere as well. This was partly due to a lack of rubbish bins but also a lack of conscience. So the suggestion of making rubbish

collection day was made. Anyway one thing led to another and we decided to have a whole day program during my stay. October 18 was born.



7:30 am children were put into groups and assigned an area

9:30 am garbage was brought to the main place of the event

10:00 Clean-up



followed by a drawing competition -- designs for posters to teach people to put rubbish in bins. Everyone doubted whether we could have a competition with about 600 kids. But it worked and the atmosphere

of the children drawing was marvelous = the buzz of busy, creative minds. Then came lunch.



After lunch there was the prize giving:
For most garbage + cleanest area;

for best pictures.



And a cultural show.



Finally we designed and ordered 30 garbage cans, dust bins or rubbish bins, whatever you wish to call them (below). They are extremely hardy and will be decorated by the



children with metal paint!!! Some more bright colors for Moanoghar.

So if you are bored or at a loose end, do visit some of these places, they would love to see you!
May you all be well and happy -- until next time!
mujin