



The Mercy Centre, Klong Toey

By Alan Surrey

Photographs by John Hulme

Pong was 9 years old when he ran away from home in the north of Thailand. He drifted aimlessly and eventually ended up as a 'street kid' in Klong Toey. Klong Toey is an urban slum along the mosquito-infested field waters of Bangkok's main seaport. It is a community of 70,000 people who live in government built, two-roomed concrete-block houses or unsafe, corrugated-iron, makeshift dwellings. They endure on a daily basis, illegal dumps, gambling dens, drug trafficking, prostitution, HIV/AIDS, rats and open-air sewers.

Klong Toey is a neighbourhood with an unsavoury reputation and even hardened, Bangkok taxi drivers are reluctant to go there after nightfall. Many of the residents work as day-labourers in the port which is now largely containerized. Those who can afford the Bht50 a day it costs for an 'official pass' into the port, sell rice, curry and fruit to the port employees. Others, primarily young women, work in the nearby shrimp processing plant or as 'sex workers' in Bangkok's Patpong red light district.

The life of a 'street kid' in Klong Toey is as low as it gets. There is not much time for the joys of childhood pastimes. Orphaned, abandoned by destitute parents or runaways like Pong, they endlessly search garbage cans looking for empty bottles and other rubbish which they can sell to a recycling centre for a few baht each day, enough to keep them alive - or they steal and drift into a life of crime. Pong was fortunate. His life was taking the familiar, urban slum path towards drugs, gangs, prison and possibly an



Klong Toey.

early death when he was taken off the streets and given a place to sleep, food, health care and a rudimentary education at the Mercy Centre.

The Mercy Centre is run by The Human Development Foundation (HDF), a Catholic NGO which was founded by Father Joe Maeir in 1973. I first visited the Mercy Centre in the summer of 1998 with documentary photographer John Hulme and Janejinda Pawadee, a human rights worker for the Peace and Justice Section of the Social Development & Services Department (SDSD), an NGO that operates the Klong Toey Community Centre.

The nurse on duty that day agreed to show us around the hospice facility. There were 30 patients each in the late stages of full-blown AIDS. There were 27 men and 3 women. The ward was quiet except for the sound of the overhead fans and muted background noise coming from a TV in an adjacent room.

As we entered the ward, a man was sitting up in bed nearest the door. His physical condition was emaciated with little muscle tissue left on his arms or legs. His eyes appeared to have sunk into the recess of his skull. I felt as if our sudden appearance was intrusive but he gave a weak smile as we approached. His name was Daeng, he was 29 and he would not live to see his 30th birthday. The nurse took us over to another patient. He appeared to be in his early 30s and his legs were

covered with open lesions. The nurse told us the lesions were herpes simplex. His immune system could no longer defend itself from the physical effects of the common STD. He told us that he had only discovered he had AIDS 3 months previously after suffering from back pain.

Two other men were lying on their sides with boils about 8 inches in diameter on their exposed hips. The nurse told us that many of the men contracted AIDS when they were younger through regular visits to 'sex workers.' Many of them passed it on to their wives. I asked why there were only 3 women in the ward. The nurse said that the women were ashamed to come to the hospice for help and often died at home. In September 1995, official Thai Government statistics set the number of HIV positive people at 800,000 nation-wide and the number with AIDS at 29,000. (SDSD Annual Report).



Klong Toey 'street kids' – gambling.

At the time, (1998) Pong was adjusting well, attending school full-time and enjoying the security of his new family and friends at the Mercy Centre.

From its modest beginnings with a one-room preschool in the slaughterhouse district of Klong Toey, the Human Development Foundation now operates four orphanages, a home for mothers and children with HIV/AIDS and a 500-pupil kindergarten. In 2000, the Mercy Centre was rebuilt after the



A young girl sniffing glue – Klong Toey

Foundation received a generous donation from the United States. 220 children who have been abandoned, abused or orphaned now call the Mercy Centre home. Over 50 children living with HIV are resident at the Centre. A HIV/AIDS homecare program reaches out to hundreds more poor families and their children throughout Bangkok. Education about HIV/AIDS not only teaches prevention but also tolerance and compassion to those suffering with the disease. The social isolation and stigma attached to infection can be as devastating as the disease itself.

Klong Toey has produced 5 national Muay Thai champions and whereas the ancient Thai martial art is one ticket out of the slum for those young men willing to train 5-6 hours a day, the only answer for the majority is education. The HDF has over 4,100 students enrolled in the organizations 30 preschools throughout Bangkok. Over 35,000 children have graduated from its schools. Several of the brightest and most academically motivated children are attending colleges and universities in Thailand, the U.S., Canada, Norway and Singapore - all on full scholarship. Others are attending international schools in Bangkok.

The HDF now employ 310 staff, including teachers, house mothers and fathers, social workers, nurses, cooks, and drivers - almost all are from the slums themselves, living and working where they grew up, striving to

become part of the solution instead of the problem.

The HDF receives funding from several sources including individuals, corporations, international aid organizations and foundations, and Catholic and faith-based charities. In addition, the foundation's activities are supported by several Thai government agencies, especially those responsible for health, education, community, and children's welfare.

Since it was founded in 1973, the Mercy Centre has had a significant impact upon thousands of lives that would otherwise have suffered the uncertainty and indignity of life in Bangkok's most notorious slum. Father Joe Maier has received a Life-Time Achievement Award from the Queen of Thailand and the centre has been visited by none-other than George W. Bush.

Ten years on, what became of Pong? He quit his formal education when he was 16 and took a job as a crewman on a Thai merchant vessel. The good news is, he eventually reconciled with his family and sends part of his Bht30,000 (\$880.00) a year wages home to support his ailing mother.



Father Joe Maier, CSSR, is the founder and director of the Human Development Foundation in Klong Toey. To contact him, visit <http://www.mercycentre.org/> or phone 02-671-5313.

See photographer John Hulme's website at www.johnhulme.net