

OUR LADY OF THE SLUMS



DELIVERING hope ... Sister Joan Evans makes her way through the backblocks of Bangkok.
Picture: Russell Shakespeare

By Leisa Scott

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The hungry dogs of the Slaughterhouse slum slink about on their early morning scavenger, sniffing at rotting plastic bags and every woman arriving to join the queue.

The women barely notice them, shifting their babies from one hip to the other and focusing on the gold four-wheel-drive parked 30 metres away.

Mangy dogs, opium addicts sprawled on the concrete, the stink of sewage and monsoonal rains are part of daily life in these slums. But the boot of the gold truck is only revealed once a fortnight.

The truck's owner is moving about at the top of the line, her attitude reflected in her no-nonsense outfit: garden variety short-sleeved shirt, black skirt, sturdy shoes and a small silver cross around her neck. Sister Joan Evans welcomes the women Thai-style, putting her hands together at her chest and bending her stout body forward. "Sawasdee-ka," she says to the line of mothers and grandmothers.

Their tense faces break into smiles. Life is tough in the slums of Bangkok, home to one-fifth of the city's six million residents, but this Catholic nun offers a small helping hand in the hard slog of survival. Every second Friday morning, at the edge of the dirt and gravel road, there are kind words from Sister Joan (even if the Australian expatriate gives the Thai language a mangling) and about \$A1000 worth of milk formula in the back of her 4WD.

Breast may be best, but not when the mother has HIV, is too malnourished to produce milk or has to go to work straight after childbirth to put food on the table. In those cases, a newborn in the slums is lucky to be fed the foamy water in which rice has been boiled. Sister Joan recognised this years ago and started walking to the homes of a few new mums and giving them milk powder. Today, they come to her - all 100-odd of them.

Such a big operation requires a few hands and that's why, along with the line of Thai mums, a smaller gathering of farang (foreign) women is forming. A card table has been erected in the dirt, just below a mass of impossibly jumbled electrical wires, and the farang women are sorting through a set of homemade photo ID cards. Sister Joan makes a card for every mother who collects milk, the expiry date of the 12-month handout clearly marked.

"This woman's been receiving milk but we haven't seen the birth certificate yet," Karen Gray calls to her colleagues as she checks off the details. Gray called Brisbane home until six years ago when her husband's work took her and their two children on a South-East Asian adventure. Now she's the president of Thailand's long-running Australian-New Zealand Women's Group, which raises money for a range of charitable organisations and routinely helps out at Sister Joan's milk run.

Gray admits her motivation to join ANZWG was less about hands-on welfare work and more about producing Bangkok Guide, a fundraising tome that has been explaining the city to expats, tourists and even some locals for 50 years. Now she finds her time with Sister Joan more rewarding. "It just gets you in. Working with Sister Joan, once you start, it just amazes."

The bare bones of Sister Joan's story are amazing enough. A three-day study trip to Bangkok in 1988 recast the life plan of the Presentation Sister, an only child raised in Perth. She felt a deep need - a calling - to help the city's poorest people, particularly the women. So in 1991, after 40 years of teaching maths and geography - the latter 25 of them in the pleasant and ordered surrounds of Perth's prestigious Iona Presentation College for girls - she arrived in Bangkok's slums. She was 60.

And here she stands, nudging 75, still healthy and quick-witted, listening in Thai to the woes of all-comers. As Gray and her friends supply the mothers with milk, wave after wave of needy locals arrive, seeking Sister Joan's help. This exhausted-looking man wiping his face with a dirty white cloth is a chronic asthmatic without money to get into hospital; this woman's main breadwinner died two days ago and hasn't been buried yet. There's no food for the children. And here's a heroin addict whose diabetic father is having a leg amputated in a hospital that doesn't supply incontinence pads. "When he's at home," translates Sister Joan, "he just gets from one room to the toilet area and they hose him down. No problem. But when he's in hospital, it is a problem."

A few packs of pads are arranged, a bit of money for the woman, a plan made to escort the asthmatic to hospital.

"This is what it's like for the poor - they're tossed from pillar to post," says Sister Joan, moving into the shade of a dilapidated roadside store as the tropical sun kicks in. "And then there are

rogues as well, like this woman, the supposed grandmother, who came to join the milk run today without the right identification, and I said, 'I'll just give you milk for now'. And she's gone off in a huff."

The "grandmother" had produced a baby's birth certificate and her own government ID card. No baby, no mother. Milk is like gold in Thailand, and over the years Sister Joan has heard her share of bogus baby stories. The long queue to the truck was instituted after mothers started creating diversions while others stole milk. Sister Joan doesn't blame them - "If we were in their position, we'd do the same" - but she wants her finite resources to go to the most needy.

Which is why her helpers are also snipping the corners off the cartons of milk so that they're not resold at roadside stores. "These old ladies, they've been here a long while," she says. So they're fairly wily? "Oh yes." Then she points to herself. "But I've been here a while now, too."

By "here" she means not just Bangkok, or Thailand. She means here, in the Slaughterhouse part of the massive Khlong Toey slum. Just down the concrete path, past the opium addict who's being cajoled inside by his mother, beyond the shop with three cats sleeping in an empty display cabinet, and left at the chicken feet hanging from a corner post is where you'll find Sister Joan's home.

She lives in a place where rubbish and stagnant water lie under every pole-raised shack, where drug deals are done and where residents live with the risk of fire engulfing their wood and fibro homes because of the mass of open cooking fires and the absurd electrical set-up. For the first five years in Bangkok, Sister Joan lived with the Infant Jesus Sisters and at a shelter for girls run by the non-denominational Human Development Foundation, before deciding "to live where the poor live".

"I just had that belief that if you are going to work among the slum people and know more about their lives and the problems of their lives, you need to actually live with them," she says. "They will never see me as a slum woman, they certainly don't see me as anywhere near Thai, but living among them I'm more in touch with the grassroots and I understand what they go through. You are a part of it."



THIS is home ... the Khlong Toey slum where Sister Joan lives and works.
Picture: Russell Shakespeare

THE GOLD 4WD ZIPS THROUGH THE STREETS OF Bangkok, Sister Joan at the wheel, negotiating the traffic. She's got to get to the bank before it closes to withdraw enough money for her Fares and Food program, aimed at getting slum children to school and keeping them there. She shows no fear as she pushes her way through a chaotic intersection; after all, this is the woman who's been known to ride side-saddle through the mayhem on a motorcycle taxi.

Typical, then, is her explanation for why she decided to come to the slums when most retirees are tossing up between a sea or tree change. "I never felt old," she says. "I still don't feel old. I'm not old." She's certainly not slowing down. Yesterday she collected and gave out packets of rice, noodles, cooking oil and fish sauce to scores of people who are part of her Family Food Project; the day before was spent at various hospitals making sure the slum people received treatment. Tomorrow she's got an appointment with some women who need money to rebuild their homes. Every year, she supplies scores of students with uniforms and school books. And every day, she can count on people knocking on her door or stopping her in the alleyways, seeking help.

Her 4WD, living expenses and two trips to Australia a year are paid for by the Presentation Sisters, allowing all donations from charitable organisations like ANZWG, business groups such as the Australian-Thai Chamber of Commerce and private citizens to go to her projects. Like her order's founder, the Irishwoman Nano Nagle, Sister Joan believes education for the poor is paramount, which is why she began her Fares and Food program. She was sick of seeing kids she'd kitted out in uniforms at the start of the year missing school because their parents couldn't feed them or pay their bus fares. "Education is the key. Every bit of education they receive, they've got another choice," she says.

She admits to times of questioning how much good comes from her work. But despite the daily grind of watching injustice after injustice, she says her faith has never been tested. It has been heavily drawn on, though. "How else sometimes do you do what you need to do if you haven't got something else to draw on? I mean, I talk to the Lord a fair bit and it's not the fancy prayers we say in church."

She finds reward in the small things, like the sight that greets her as she passes the chicken feet and rounds the corner to her little hut, money from the bank in hand. A bunch of students, most dressed in clean school uniforms, is waiting. They're half an hour early for this Wednesday afternoon meeting, keen to ensure they have the means to get to school this fortnight.

"Sawasdee-ka," says Sister Joan as she makes her way towards them, fiddling with the key to the padlock on her door. Inside, the home she calls "Nano's Place" is not much bigger than a caravan, but it's as neat as a pin. There are all the mod cons - stove, fridge and a few fans. Miraculously, it is devoid of the pungent smells just outside.

On her fridge is a photograph of a young woman. She's with her father on the day she graduated from university, the first of Sister Joan's charges to get a degree. It's a source of pride for Sister Joan, but she cautions that graduates from the slums have to fight to get a start in their chosen profession because "daddy hasn't got the name or doesn't know the right people". Still, there's a

woman across the way who's a graphic artist and another next door who works in an office, all because they received an education.

And that's why she's setting up the card table at the doorway and putting a tiny plastic chair behind it, ready to help out the next generation of students. She takes her seat, cushion behind her back, opens up her cash strongbox, refers to another set of homemade ID cards and calls out a name.

A young man walks up and takes a seat. She explains that he is going to university and is here for his 400 Thai baht (\$A14) allowance. That's fine, but he is also seeking reimbursement for a term payment, worth 4750 baht, or about \$165. Sister Joan is not impressed. He knows she likes to pay such large sums directly, not just be presented with a receipt. "I've told him that, let him know not to do it again," she says. He retreats, bowing, with 5150 baht in his hand.

Another card is pulled out, another name called. One after another they come, a seemingly unending line of people who quietly stand outside, waiting for their names to be called. It's been going on about an hour when Sister Joan gets to her feet to search out some more money. As long as they keep going to school, she'll keep helping them, she says.

She might not feel old, but she looks weary. How long can she go on, at what point will she pack up and head home to Australia? The pragmatic Sister Joan has, of course, considered this carefully. "I will not stay here if I am ill and can see myself becoming a burden on the Thai people," she says. After all, her order of nuns has kept up her Australian medical insurance. But if she's able, she'll keep on working and living in the slums until she just doesn't wake up one day. "Then they bury me here," she says. "I see no reason for sending a body or ashes home. I mean, we're dead, it doesn't matter where our remains are."

The sun is falling, and students keep arriving. She won't close the door until at least 6pm, maybe later. Tired, grubby and worn down by the sights and sounds of the slums, we take our leave. Sister Joan interrupts her work, leans out the door and waves goodbye. She's calling out another student's name by the time we reach the chicken feet.