

## SPOTLIGHT ON SISTER JOAN EVANS

# Fighting Poverty in Bangkok's Slums

By Edward Dever

Sitting in Sister Joan's home on a Wednesday afternoon is an eye-opening insight into human need. One by one, children, teenagers, mothers and fathers line up at her door in the Klong Toey slums. She gives them fifty baht here, one hundred baht there – for bus fares or lunch money or medical expenses. By the time she closes her door, perhaps dozens have been helped, sometimes more. And this is just two hours out of her week.

Sister Joan Evans is a familiar name to many expats in Bangkok. Some know her through her "milk run", which provides new mothers with milk powder each fortnight; others through her educational projects, which put slum children through school. And yet these represent a fraction of myriad tasks she might need to accomplish on any given day.

You might find her ferrying a sick slum resident to hospital, helping a recently retrenched Port worker find employment, or visiting someone whose house has been demolished. The range of social issues she deals with is extraordinary. Her days are long and exhausting, but after she returns home her door is still always open.

With need all around her, it's not easy to decide whom to help. Students are a priority but everyone's case is judged on its merits. Sister Joan asks for receipts and other documentation to establish the legitimacy of a request and sometimes she'll ask the person to return when she has more time to deal with their problem.



At times Sister Joan's approach may seem tough. She's willing to help students get into university and pay their tuition providing they work hard. If they don't, then let them go – there are others who are eager to take their place. Those who try to con Sister Joan are less likely to be helped, with her decision often being based on her gut feeling. Yet, she greets each request with the same degree of fairness and compassion. And when she doesn't have the money to help, she'll try to find it.

Her core mission is to help slum dwell-

ers break out of the poverty cycle. It's a vital effort. By assisting the unemployed to find work, she gives them a chance to support themselves and their families. Without her help, there is often very little alternative. For slum residents, there's no safety net - no unemployment benefits or severance pay and, quite often, no extended family to provide support.

The most important part of this mission, in her eyes, is educating the slum children – the surest long-term path to self-sufficiency. Before each school year, Sister Joan can be found at the local market bargaining over school uniforms, shoes, bags and books. With over 300 children relying on her this year, every baht counts. But enrolling children into school is only the first step. Keeping them there can be a constant battle against family needs, financial pressures and a multitude of social obstacles. Many drop by the wayside;

but still more continue. Those that persevere are often at the top of their class, some continuing on to university.

Helping just one slum resident break out of the poverty cycle is a victory. But it is a victory achieved in small increments, on many fronts, at critical points in time. It is Sister Joan who provides support at those critical times. Whether it's paying for a uniform so a young man can start his cleaning job, buying a Skytrain pass so a young girl can get to school or giving rice to someone who has none, Sister Joan makes a difference. 🙏

### How you can help

Sister Joan's donation philosophy is simple – a little bit of money goes a very long way. You may have more to give than you know: if you are moving, please think about donating unwanted items which can either be sold or used by those in need. That accumulation of one-baht and

satang coins we all seem to have can provide months of lunch money for a poor student.

Money donations are always welcome, and can be made online (subject to a small PayPal fee) or by direct bank deposit – see [www.sisterjoan.info](http://www.sisterjoan.info) for details.

Offers of help are also welcome. Sister Joan's fortnightly milk run operates with

the support and assistance of The Australian – New Zealand Women's Group - see [www.arzwgonline.org](http://www.arzwgonline.org) for details.

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