

Flourishing Women of WA

Flourish Magazine, No. 5, Autumn 2007

Once a geography and mathematics teacher, **Sister Joan Evans** is now a woman on a mission in Bangkok.

by Lesonne Kerr



Sister Joan and friends.

FOR more than thirty years Sister Joan taught in Western Australian schools and never travelled further than Rottnest Island. She retired in 1991 and found herself in Thailand, not holidaying as most retirees might, but working tirelessly to assist the local "children of today, to help themselves tomorrow." Her aim is to provide support and encouragement to the slum communities through a variety of programmes, including food donations and finance for education. It's not an easy task however it seems that nothing is impossible for Sister Joan; especially with the generous support she receives from the 'wonderful people' of Australia and Thailand.

Now in her mid 70s, Sister Joan's typical day is one that would make much younger women pull the covers back over their heads. Yet as the sun rises at 5.30am, Sister Joan is beginning her day with the gusto of a thirty year old. Sister Joan Evans may not be a name you are familiar with, but her name and her remarkable story will stay etched in your memory.

The air is hot and sticky; beads of sweat dripping from the forehead, clothes are

sticking to the skin and the foul stench of waste lingers in the air. Walk down a winding, concrete path and at the end you will find a wooden shack on stilts and a gumbo of thick, black sludgy soup at the bottom. The smell alone would send most of us packing, yet this is where Sister Joan has requested to live. To the families and children of one of the worst slums in Bangkok, Klong Toey, this shack on stilts shines as a beacon of hope. This is where that strong, tough, yet gentle woman resides; the woman in the white shirt and grey skirt who can provide them with the chance of a better life and most importantly, with hope.

Sister Joan supports over 500 children, providing money for lunches or milk from the 'milk run' programme - supplying mothers with powdered milk every fortnight so as they may feed their children. Many mothers work 16 hours a day and are unable to feed their babies or toddlers, let alone study.



Klong Toey slums.

Sunee, a mother of two is one of those Sister Joan helps. Sunee is now 39 with two grown children but because of the support of Sister Joan she is able to continue her education. It will be a long time before she graduates - two years before she gains a pass out of grade six. Due to work commitments, Sunee is only able to attend one day out of a weekend to go to school. She is returning to finish her education and has encouraged her daughter to do the same.

As with a magnificent tapestry, every stitch of Sister Joan's dedication to this community is sewn by an individual who is unaware of the beauty they are creating on the other side: every stitch counts.

Sister Joan Evans is living testament that education is a lifelong process. And ... that age is also no barrier.

Sister Joan walks home a little worse for wear after a long and tiring day. There on her doorstep will be waiting up to ten people. Some have already travelled for five hours. Before seeing these patient, needy souls, Joan Evans politely excuses herself and retires for a short while.

"I have to confess I can get very grumpy when I'm tired, I'm not perfect you know", she confides.



Sister Joan outside her home.

So she closes the screen door and takes a break. "It may be a cup of tea or coffee, even better a hot chocolate. That gives me oomph!" she laughs. She'll then have a quick bite to eat, say a prayer and if time permits have a quick shower. The people outside patiently sit and wait.

They are waiting to ask for money for shoes, school uniforms and bags. For some if they don't have these items they don't have any hope of attending school. Sister Joan will then take them in one by one, take down their names and needs and tell them when to return, at which time she will have found the necessary items. It is often almost

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midnight before her head hits the pillow. She falls asleep to the sound of scratching rats and scurrying cockroaches.

At dawn the next morning the new day begins for Sister Joan: "You know I don't read articles about sleep deprivation being linked to Alzheimer's," she jokes, displaying the keen sense of humour that helps her through such devastatingly difficult work.

"Sometimes I just want to run away and hide. Have a break." she says almost guiltily. In October last year she came back to Perth for a month's holiday.

Sister Joan understands how important it is to have a break and be able to stand back and assess the obstacles in your way.

Tiredness is one of those obstacles. "It can kill, you know! But after that break I come back with renewed energy," she says.

Her job is also made a little easier because of an enormous capacity to love. She knows she has to be careful; she may think of all of these children as her own and many emotions of love are invested in families and children. She knows that some emotional distance is essential. "It can't be that way," she states simply.

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Sister Joan Evans is living testament that education is a lifelong process. And, having learned to speak Thai in her retirement years, that age is also no barrier. As a writer, one meets many interesting people, but it's rare when the stomach churns and palms become sweaty. For me this was an important meeting. The intelligence, vigor and gentleness of this small woman had me mesmerised and inspired.

Sister Joan relies upon the generosity of people like me and you to be able to continue her work. Details of where to post donations are listed below.

Sister Joan Evans PBVM
Presentation Slums Mission Bangkok
PO Box 28, Klai Nam Thai PO
Bangkok Thailand 10115.

www.flourishmagazine.com.au