

IN BANGKOK, THE MILK RUN OF HUMAN KINDNESS

Linda Morris, Sydney Morning Herald, 2 November 2002

The cardinal rule of aid work is never get emotionally involved. "It's the way I'm made," Sister Joan Evans says, striding down a grimy, hairpin alley dressed in her trademark white pressed blouse and blue skirt, blotting beads of perspiration with a white handkerchief. "I seem to be able to let people go when the time comes."

Yet there she is, not half an hour later, the good sister breaking her personal code. The boy with the big saucer eyes, dirty smudged cheeks and impish smile squeezes into a nook in her arms. Long ago he found a place in her heart. "Isn't he just beautiful," she coos, confessing to feeling a little maternal, even at age 69.

"He's very special to her," says a friend, Yvonne Martinez, about Thawatchai, an abandoned child of Bangkok's slums. "He is a toddler in whom Sister sees a survival spirit."

Methamphetamines - cheaply bought speed - are the curse of the slums. So are AIDS, poverty and disease. Barely 17 months old, Thawatchai is far too young to comprehend the poor hand fate has dealt him. Abandoned by his mother, brought up by his elderly grandmother, Thawatchai cannot shake recurring bouts of pneumonia and diarrhoea. A diet of sweetened evaporated milk has stunted his growth and calcified his baby teeth.

For 10 years Sister Joan has been ministering to the mothers of the slums through her "milk run", a fortnightly distribution of baby formula milk and full-cream powdered milk.

Breast milk may be best, but most of the mothers who queue for the packs distributed from Sister Joan's purple van are too busy working to breastfeed. Their toddlers are often under-sized, have difficulty eating rice and suffer digestive problems or calcium deficiencies.

The milk run feeds 106 babies, but in the breathless heat of this Thai summer it is not Sister Joan's only priority. One of her main chores today is ferrying Thawatchai to hospital for yet another liver function test. Another is making house calls to two slum families who have asked her to help get their children into school and out of the slums.

In a darkened room simply furnished with a foam sleeping mat, Sister Joan takes down the names and ages of four cousins whose mothers are in prison, caught supplying drugs trafficked by their fathers. The fathers, now the children's prime carers, look fierce with their bodies covered in tattooed talismans. But they offer fruit and water to Sister Joan and *wai* in deferential respect.

"I don't make judgements," she says. A quietly religious West Australian, who wears a silver crucifix around her neck and draws strength from her faith, she never preaches, preferring to lead by example. "These men have four children to look after."

In 2000 she sponsored education for more than 200 children with donations from supporters in Australia and Bangkok. This year, she says, there has been no time to count the number of children she has taken to be measured for school uniforms, shoes and bags.

"Without a uniform these children can't go to school, it's as simple as that," she says. "There is no guarantee the kids will attend but, in my book, one day at school is better than none at all."

Megan Payne, her volunteer assistant, says Sister Joan sees education as a way of helping Thai children to help themselves. "She says no to no one. She helps every child she can in the slums."