

AUST'S "PRIDE AND JOY" HELPING SLUM FAMILIES IN BANGKOK

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Reporter: Peter Lloyd

MAXINE McKEW: At 71, most people have their eye on retirement. But for one remarkable Perth woman, settling in for the quiet life is about the last thing on her mind.

Joan Evans is a retired schoolteacher who is devoting her golden years to helping slum families in Bangkok break out of the vicious cycle of poverty. South-East Asia correspondent Peter Lloyd reports.

SISTER JOAN EVANS: I've been a sister for over 40 years, a secondary school teacher. When I first came I had no language. So I spent time, the most part of '91, struggling to learn the language. After eight months of language study, there was not much coming out of the mouth.

PETER LLOYD: After so many years as teacher, Sister Joan Evans found herself in the role of pupil when she went to live in one of Bangkok's dirty, crowded corners.

SISTER JOAN EVANS: They still correct me. They still tell me I'm saying things back-to-front or upside-down.

PETER LLOYD: Not that anyone here minds very much, for amidst the boardwalk's tin shacks and filthy floodwater Sister Joan puts meaning to that old saying, "Charity begins at home."

SISTER JOAN (TRANSLATION FROM THAI): Baby milk, two packets.

MAN (TRANSLATION): Thank you.

WOMAN (TRANSLATION): My baby has a bad stomach.

SISTER JOAN: How old is the baby?

WOMAN: 11 months.

PETER LLOYD: In the Sister's case, home and office are in the centre of Bangkok's Slaughterhouse slum. Every fortnight she dispenses milk formula from her doorstep to mothers simply too poor to provide the best nutrition for their babies. Any other outsider would be known simply as the foreigner. But to this community Sister Joan is no stranger. Her reputation for having a big heart is legend.

SISTER JOAN EVANS: If it's food, then they need food, there's no question. I'll get them rice. I won't put money into their hand, but I will - we buy rice, we buy rice regularly - oil, fish sauce, eggs and sardines.

FATHER JOE MAIER: There's a tremendous amount of poverty in the slums. And there's a lot of women who have nothing to eat and who don't have their own breast milk and who have nothing to feed their children, literally - have no milk for the children. So she saves lives. She literally saves lives.

PETER LLOYD: Father Joe Maier has worked in the Bangkok slum for three decades and has never come across someone so committed to charity work as Sr Joan.

FATHER JOE MAIER: She's the epitome of what a great saint, Vincent de Paul said about 300 years ago - Joan Kylie Evans, if you want, you must love the poor very much so that they will forgive you for helping them.

PETER LLOYD: But ask Joan Evans and she'll tell you why she's more sinner than saint.

SISTER JOAN EVANS: I'm pretty impatient. I'm tired. I've come to a point where I've got to shut the door. And there are times where I say, "I can't think Thai" - I tell them - "I cannot think Thai anymore."

PETER LLOYD: She's tough on herself and sometimes is just as tough on those she helps.

SISTER JOAN EVANS: The more you do for them, the more they are ready to use you. So I'm balancing it all the time, or trying to. And trying to judge whether they're just being rogues and lazy or whether they're really genuine.

PETER LLOYD: The needs of some are beyond question, like the HIV positive children orphaned by the death of both parents from AIDS.

SISTER JOAN EVANS: The thing we've got to remember with all of these is that we will give them diseases before they will give us their disease.

PETER LLOYD: Such as?

SISTER JOAN EVANS: Just a bad cold. If I go in there with a bad cold, I can kill them with pneumonia.

PETER LLOYD: Originally meant for adults, the slum hospice is instead caring for more and more children, and right now there are 28 AIDS orphans.

SISTER JOAN EVANS: The children may have a longer lifespan than they did four or five years ago. Most of the children that die from here are, say, eight, 10, 11, 12 years, 13 years old, whereas a few years ago they were three, four, five, six.

PETER LLOYD: Sr Joan's one-woman charity machine enables healthy children like these to attend school because she pays the fees.

SISTER JOAN EVANS: With that they get their books and, if the responses from outside is like the response of this particular school, they may even get uniform and sports outfits free.

PETER LLOYD: So a little bit of money goes a long way?

SISTER JOAN EVANS: A little bit of money goes a very long way.

PETER LLOYD: And that is the heart of Sr Joan's basic philosophy - a little bit of money plus an education. It's making a difference, one child at a time.

SISTER JOAN EVANS: If I get a child to school and I can keep that child in school for today, I've gained a point. Tomorrow, good. So it's a day-by-day thing. That's the only way I can operate. Otherwise it's too overwhelming.

FATHER MAIER: She's Australia's pride and joy. She's truly Miss Australia.