



Adam Purcell

Adam's World

A day on 'The Milk Run' with Sister Joan Evans



Angel of the slums - Sister Joan Evans

This month the Ginger Jinx heads to Klong Toey to find out more about the remarkable Sister Joan Evans, a woman who devotes all of her time to improving the lives of Bangkok's slum dwellers

AT 7.10am Sister Joan Evans clammers out of her Nissan Frontier in a car park in Rong Muu on the edge of Klong Toey slum. "Sorry I'm late," she says, dabbing sweat from her brow with a hand towel. "I've had people at my door needing my help all morning."

She is only ten minutes behind schedule, but she's not apologizing to me. Stood in the car park are over 100 women from the slums who have come to collect a fortnightly package of baby milk powder. A project known as 'The Milk Run.'

Since 1992 Sister Joan, from the Western Australian Congregation of Presentation Sisters, has carried out this project, providing vital nutrition for babies whose mothers are too busy working - or too ill - to breastfeed, yet unable to afford suitable alternatives.

Sister Joan distributes the powder every other Friday with the help of volunteers in two locations. The first is in the car park in Rong Muu, where there are 116 recipients present. The second location is at Suan Ooy slum, where another thirty are expected.

Volunteers on The Milk Run include several Thai locals, and women from the Australian-New Zealand Women's Group (ANZWG). The volunteers are responsible for checking the photo-cards of the mothers



Sister Joan treats every baby as if it was her own

A born entertainer - this baby boy had everyone laughing



A young mother poses awkwardly for the camera - The Milk Run provides milk for mothers aged between 14 and 24

footballers' generous donation. Normally it costs between 30 – 35 thousand Baht every fortnight.”

Money for The Milk Run comes from supporters all over the world. But the milk powder bought is still not enough to feed the babies for the whole two weeks.

“This is only a supplement,” explains Sister Joan. “It’s important that the women know this. We only provide it for babies up until one year old, otherwise what we give would only last one or two days.

“I push on with this project even though it costs so much money because I want to put kids into school. If the babies don’t get this milk they will be fed water from the top of boiled rice, maybe with a bit of added sugar. This does not have the vital nutrition they need to grow healthy enough to attend school.

“I want to give them the best possible start in life.”

The Milk Run is only one of Sister Joan’s going concerns. The 76 year old former Perth school teacher is responsible for a wide range of projects focused on helping slum children break free from the shackles of poverty.

Among her other projects are ‘The Education Project,’ which supplies over 600 slum children with all the vital equipment they need to attend school - uniforms, stationery, school fees, books etc; ‘The Food and Fares Project,’ which provides children with sufficient funds to travel to school and buy lunch; and ‘The Family Food Project,’ which provides desperately poor families with emergency food packs.

As Sister Joan lives in the Rong Muu slum, every hour of the day she also has a constant flow of slum dwellers knocking on her door in need of help - the reason why she was late this morning.

and carers present, and also for signing up new mothers into the programme. Distribution of the milk powder requires the use of ID cards to ensure it goes to those who really need it.

Today, three footballers from Bangkok’s

Veterans League have also turned up to lend a hand and, more importantly, have arrived loaded with donated milk.

“The milk I bought yesterday cost 29,975 Baht,” says Sister Joan. “I bought two thirds of what I needed because of the

But what's it like to be constantly in demand?

Sister Joan laughs at this question. "Sometimes I wake up on a morning and think what on earth am I doing here. People are always at my door. Usually asking for money. My first question is whether or not their reasons for needing money are true.

"Money borrowing is very bad in the slums. People borrow from lenders at the illegal rate of 100 Baht to 20 Baht interest. That means if they borrow 10,000 Baht, in five weeks they owe 20,000 Baht. It's crippling. People get caught up in this because they need money to pay for things to prevent their families from getting sick.

"Borrowing money then becomes a game. They must pay back the principal and the interest, so they move from one lender to the next. Soon they are into huge debt. Many people are afraid to go home after dusk because they know they will be beaten. Many women from the slums end up in prison because to pay their debt they turn to selling drugs or prostitute themselves. It's sheer desperation."

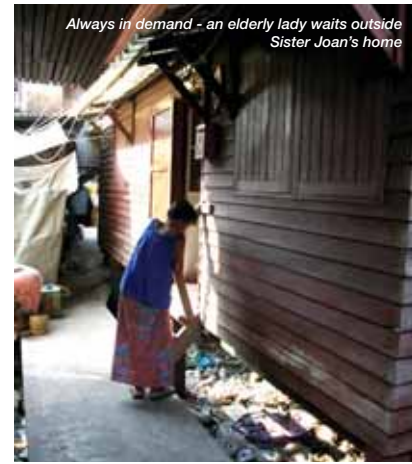
Distribution of the milk powder is now in full swing and the women with babies approach Sister Joan's vehicle one at a time to receive their packages.

Poverty has touched each of these women in different ways, and each one has their own story to tell.

I'm shocked to learn that one of the mothers is 17, even more so when I'm told some mothers that attend the milk run are only 14. "When the girls in the slums turn 14 they are pressured by their families to either find a job or find a man to support them," explains Sister Joan. Although there are organisations working in the slums who teach the youngsters about safe sex, such as Father Joe Maier's Human Development Foundation, many of these girls fall pregnant.

Another mother I meet has traveled over an hour from Samutprakarn Province. She used to live in the slums but dragged her family away in order to protect her eldest son from drugs. The use of amphetamines in the slums is rife, and many people will give up food to feed their habit.

There are many more stories of hardship, and Sister Joan listens attentively to them all.



While Sister Joan is busy I ask one of the mothers what she thinks of the milk run. "It's good. It helps me so much," she says. "I just hope it continues."

But does Sister Joan plan to remain in Thailand organizing The Milk Run for many more years?

"I'd like to, but I have to change the way I do things," she says. "I'm getting older; I'm slower. I'm starting later and finishing later."

What about anyone to take her place?

"I am lucky because I am supported by my religious organization who pay for my food. Anyone who overtakes me has the problem that they must support themselves."

After the milk powder has been distributed we make our way to Sister Joan's home down a narrow concrete path. On either side there is a thick swamp of rubbish.

Before we arrive volunteer Jill Whitelaw from the ANZWG tells me how Sister Joan's home is slowly sinking into this mess. "The lean is that bad, if you drop something on the floor you have to walk over to the other side of the

room to get it."

She isn't wrong. Sister Joan's home is built on stilts that are in desperate need of repair. But Sister Joan gives all of her money to helping others, and has no spare cash to pay for the work that is needed. Luckily some volunteers have agreed to fix it for her.

Inside she has a few home comforts, but she has little time to sit back and put her feet up. After we have a quick cup of coffee and a sandwich, Sister Joan and the volunteers must head to the next location.

But as we get up to leave it turns out Sister Joan can't go just yet. Sat on the doorstep is an elderly lady, a sad look worn on her face.

"I'll just be a minute," says Sister Joan as she invites the lady inside.

In the slums, Sister Joan's door is always open. And this remarkable lady gives up every minute of her day to help those in need.

For more information on Sister Joan's work, or to make a donation see www.sisterjoan.info