

SISTER MERCY

Jim Pollard, Weekend Extra, The West Australian, 5 June 2004

Perth nun Sister Joan Evans has been living with the poor in the slums of Bangkok since 1991. Writer Jim Pollard and photographer Steve Sandford spent time with one of our greatest exports.

Sister Joan isn't hard to find in the Rong Muu slum. Hundreds of poor men and women dotted all round the Bangkok port know exactly where to go. And if you're a foreigner, the words "Sister Joan" are enough to get you pointed to the correct little alleyway. The problem is getting a free minute to talk to her.

Sister Joan Evans is much in demand. In fact, she lives in a virtual state of siege. The pleas for money and help from poor slum dwellers simply never cease.

Klong Toey has the biggest of Bangkok's 200 or so slum communities, and many of the poorest families know about this grey-haired woman with the just-passable Thai and slow thoughtful manner. Rong Muu means "place of the pig" and is named after the nearby abattoirs. It's a small Christian community in a country 95 per cent Buddhist.

Sister Joan, who has just turned 72, has devoted 14 years of her life to helping the needy here in one of Asia's biggest cities. The port is dirty and the slums are crowded. They've also been Bangkok's most notorious area for illegal drugs.

She looks like an Aussie grandmother - short, stout and wearing normal clothes with just a silver crucifix round her neck. But there's something very special about this nun: a core of determination, integrity and guts that has enabled her to endure some considerable trials.

Sit for a while in her home and you get the feeling she's like the neighbourhood loan shark - only most of her "clients" aren't asked to repay the money she gives them. It's a small gift from a loyal servant of God. The door of her wooden shack is always open to strangers in need.

Over the years she's got to know hundreds of poor Thais, their children, and the often wretched circumstances in which some are caught: widows, wives of men caught dealing drugs, single mothers, parents of AIDS victims struggling to bring up their grandchildren. People linger outside morning and night waiting for her to get up or return from her chores of the day - escorting an elderly person to hospital, or, lately, buying school uniforms for young children.

For much of last year her home, amid a cluster of spartan wooden shacks on a tributary of the Chao Phraya, seemed to be descending slowly into the tidal swamp below. But the recent erection of a barrier in the water in front of Rong Muu appears to have stopped homes from sinking into the rubbish and filthy black water that rises up when it floods. Her bedroom is still tilted on a small angle, but the threat of submerging into the slosh looks to have passed.

April was dreadfully hot, the height of summer before the wet. The first half of May is also the maddest time. That's because mid-May is the start of the new school year. For millions of poor families, it's a crisis, one of their major financial hurdles. About 10 million of Thailand's 63 million people earn less than about \$57 a month and are officially classed as poor. The fee for one child's schooling in Bangkok is about \$85, and that doesn't include uniforms, shoes, books, transport or food.

Poor slum dwellers know the Australian is most sympathetic to requests for help at this time. As a teacher for more than 30 years, 25 of them at Iona College in Mosman Park, Sister Joan believes education is vital for the children here. She first visited Thailand in 1988. Before that she'd never been past Rottneest.

"I was with a group of religious women that came here to the Slaughterhouse Slum," she recalled. "We had three days and three nights here - they called it an "immersion exposure experience" and it was very effective. It had a very big impact on me.

"My resolve was when I retired from school - if I was still well and strong - that I'd come back."

Sister Joan was an only child raised largely by her mother, a nurse. She grew up at Watermans and Cottesloe, a "strong-willed" girl who liked the beach and playing with boys. After being educated at Mercedes College, she joined the Presentation Sisters. She'd dreamt of being a missionary, but ended up teaching at Iona for 25 "happy years".

After retiring in 1990, she wrote to her superiors, asking if she could go to Thailand. "I said I wanted to come and live and work in the slums of Bangkok.

"They said yes."

By 1999, she was paying fees for 105 kids of all ages with money sent by a wide array of supporters in WA, Bangkok and elsewhere. Last year, more than 200 children were sponsored. This year, it's well over 200 again. In recent weeks she's spent about \$30,000 in funds and donations from supporters, "and it's not enough."

In the back of her diary are tallies from trips to the local supermarket. Up to the return to school, nearly \$6500 was outlaid in 11 days buying 427 children new uniforms, shoes and bags. The day before she'd bought clothes for 66 children, which she thinks is her one-day record.

"The shoe shop lady says she gives me the lowest possible price, and gave me 1000 baht (\$37) tambon (gift) the other day - but it's not a whole lot when you consider she's making sales of about 100,000 baht (\$3712)," she says, smiling.

There were two women with children and a pack of dogs outside her door when I arrived late in the afternoon, and a steady stream came for the next three hours. Sister Joan had been delayed by a funeral. The son of the woman living behind her was shot in the head several days earlier. Locals suspect the police did it, but the reasons are unclear.

Thailand promotes its beaches and other cultural attractions, which it's happy to share with millions of tourists every year, but it's also a country of vast wealth disparity, with minimal social welfare and a justice system that, by Western standards, is slow and open to abuse. Government services are widely viewed as inefficient, under-funded and corrupt.

The faces of Thailand's "winners" fill the social pages. Those who line up at Sister Joan's door are the ones who have lost or missed out. Photos of dozens of people's faces are pinned on a board beside her kitchen table - it helps her remember. She invites some in or makes appointments for others who'll have to come back later.

One man has brought his 11-year-old son, a plump lad with a bare brown chest. The man, in his 40s, has five children. He's unemployed and wants help with his son's fees, but he's brought no papers. Sister tells him to come back with the school documents, and he's happy to do that.

A stocky woman with tinted brown hair and a young baby in her arm sits at the table. Sister takes notes and tries to get the gist of her problem. She has files to help keep track of people and her card on this woman dates to March last year. The baby is given a small carton of milk from one of two large fridges, but the mother only gets \$3.50, a tenth of what she asked for. "She's a nice lady, but I don't know what she's up to. I hope she's not gambling," she confides after the woman is gone.

A youth at the door wants \$245 to go to business college for another year. She paid a similar fee

for the lad last year. "I will get him in for an appointment to explain himself. I'm happy to assist if I can - if they're happy to work hard. Let's keep pushing them through, that's my philosophy. One more with know-how. But if they don't work hard, then let them go."

Next in is an old woman from the Lock 4 slum, who, Sister Joan says, lost her husband in November - "a really good man" - who had abdominal cancer. The woman is going blind very quickly, she says. Sister Joan gives her \$70 for the latest medical bill and the woman gives a wai of thanks. Her card gets a date stamp. She is also paying school fees for the woman's daughter, plus \$2 a day for her fares to and from school. Another lady from the Lock 6 slum comes to get back a receipt but Sister is unable to find it - it's been sent to her accounts lady Yvonne Ziegler. To make matters worse, the dogs outside have run off with one of the woman's sandals, but it's quickly found amid a pile of litter.

The sun is down now, but still people come. "These are the desperates, coming when it's late," she says softly. "Often they're more poor, more depressed, oppressed and more shy - people who've been knocked back so many times that it's hard to come, particularly to a foreign woman."

At times, she just goes on gut feeling. Those whose claims seem bogus are asked to come back in a couple of weeks. Often, she'll ask for receipts to verify that bills are genuine and have been paid. And occasionally, people are asked to pay money back, but there's no interest or hassle about the repayment.

She thinks AIDS - now the leading cause of death in Thailand, with at least a million people infected over the past 15 years, a third of whom have already died - is one reason she's had so many old women asking for help lately. "Many parents have died and children are left with the grandparents," she said. "This year for the first time, I've had grandparents coming with a child, or children."

"There's many with AIDS, but unless I visit the homes I won't know. They might come and see me and I'll take them to the doctor. They have a particular look and gradually get thinner and thinner. I frequently take people to the doctor, particularly elderly Thais. A great number suffer from high-blood pressure and diabetes."

Another big problem is drugs. About 90,000 people live in the 44 slum communities in Klong Toey. The many escape routes and fact that strangers are easy to spot have long made it a key distribution point for methamphetamines.

Last year the Thaksin Government launched a highly controversial War on Drugs in a bid to radically reduce the problem, which had become so widespread school children were undergoing urine tests to identify users. Within three months about 3000 dealers were killed all round the country. The government said most of those slain were dealers "silenced" by colleagues who could identify them, but critics claim most of the murders were extrajudicial killings by police and army hitmen. Police said leaders of three of the seven drug gangs in Klong Toey were arrested. Police seized assets worth more than \$20 million.

"I met an old woman who found this woman shot with four bullets in her stomach and bleeding profusely," Sister Joan said.

"That was all she could talk about - the blood. There must have been a lot of it.

"Now, they carry guns in the slums. I've seen it twice - a chap loading a magazine (of a gun) while on his motorcycle outside the Mercy Centre (AIDS hospice). And another fellow with a gun tucked into his pants."

While a distraction, nothing can keep her from her work with the poor.

Every second Friday, Sister Joan does her "milk run", giving out powdered milk formula to the parents of young babies. The main beneficiaries are mothers usually too busy to stay at home caring for their babies because they work at the canning factory near Rong Muu or have other jobs. This project is very popular, but there was a hiccup in March, when thieves stole a load of milk cartons out of her van.

Things were back to normal when we attended a recent 7am handout to women queued at her van. She gets help from a small team of supporters - expatriate wives from the Australian and New Zealand Women's Group linked to the embassy. They cut the corners of the boxes open so the mothers, most still in their pyjamas, don't sell the milk powder to the local shop (like the thieves did).

Nearly 100 women came, many clutching babies in their arms and ID cards, made by Sister Joan's helpers, containing photos of the women and their bubs, stamped with the date of the next handout.

There used to be a big car park here full of trucks hauling cargo from the port, but the government is building about 100 low-priced homes now. It's part of a major construction project by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's administration, which has vowed to rid the country of slums and lift Thais out of poverty by 2010.

The economy is humming along at close to 7%, propelled in part by fast-growing trade with China.

Regardless of the overall financial optimism, Sister Joan recalled that shortly after she arrived in Bangkok, a friend urged her to go to Cambodia.

"I prayed a lot, but feel this is where I'm called to," she said.