

## **SLUM SISTER**

Jim Pollard, The Nation, 6 December 2001

It's 7 o'clock in the morning and a small group of women are milling round Sister Joan Evan's old blue van.

We're at the back of a grimy parking lot packed full of huge lorries in Klong Toei. The trucks are waiting to ferry cargo from the port to destinations across Thailand. The women - young mothers or grandmothers minding babies - are waiting for Sister Joan's fortnightly handout: a big packet of baby formula milk. Most of these mums are too busy working to breastfeed. This is vital nutrition for babies under 12 months. The back of her van is up and Sister Joan is checking names and faces with photos on ID cards in her binder.

Joan Evans is a small, stout woman, now 69. For 25 years she taught maths and geography, and was boarding mistress, at Iona, one of top girls' schools in Perth, Western Australia. She has a master's degree in education and was also principal of the Stella Maris College in Geraldton, north of Perth.

But that was many years ago, in the first half of her life - another country, another language.

Today, she is speaking Thai to needy women and their children on what she calls "the milk run".

The photos were a good idea. "I can't remember their faces otherwise," she confides. "And I find it helps me to get to know them also." It's understandable - she helps so many.

At an age when most Aussies retire, Sister Joan, from the small Catholic Order of Presentation Sisters, flew out of Perth and walked quietly into a world of hardship and social trauma, to live with the poor in one of Bangkok's dirty, crowded corners. Klong Toei is, surely, the complete opposite of clean and comfortable Perth.

Yet it was a well-considered and long-planned move. And one that has begun to pay big dividends for hundreds of poor slum-dwellers.

Sister Joan has no great flair for languages, but her strong will and discipline have got her through. That was 1991, the first of her 10 years here.

Like those huddled around her, she is a slum dweller, although she knows full well she'll never fully fit in "because I'm not Thai and I've not grown up in the slums".

The women watch as she jots a few details on her cards in Thai. Before she hands each packet over, she cuts a corner open with scissors, so the milk is used by the recipient - not sold on to others. The women are very grateful, each giving a wai to show their appreciation.

Before we leave she gives a bag of rice to an elderly woman, explaining that the lady's grandson, aged about 30, has Aids "and she's looking after the children". Sister Joan's philosophy centres on the simple Christian desire to 'love thy neighbour'. "For me the expression of it is care for the poor. For me, the living out of that is to be with the poor. Other people see it differently."

Her theory on how to best help those in the slums of Bangkok would hardly surprise any of her thousands of her former Iona and Stella Maris pupils. "I believe that the way I can best help them is to assist children to go to school," she said. "If these children are not educated, they will not break out of the [poverty] cycle. They will not have a chance. "Education is going to be the one thing allowing them to break out. There are too many families out there desperately in need and most want education for their children."

In 1999 she sponsored education for 105 children with money sent by a wide array of supporters

in Perth, Bangkok and elsewhere. Last year, over 200 children were sponsored.

"I buy uniforms, books, pay lunch money, pay whatever they need to stay in school. And if I run out of money you'll find me begging around the businesses.

"Support comes from very ordinary Australians at home: The [Presentation] Sisters, old school friends, schools - I visit schools and talk to the students, teachers - and my home parish at Cottesloe."

In Bangkok, the American Women's Club, plus the Australian and New Zealand Women's Group support her work. She has taken women from both groups for tours through the slums in Klong Toei. The Pattana International School and the Ladies Mission Aid group from the Ruam Rudee church also give her funds.

In the first of two semesters of 1999 she spent Bt179,000 on education expenses. Plus, her 'milk run' costs almost Bt20,000 a month. In 1999 she spent almost Bt700,000 on all her programmes. Last year, it was more, but she has yet to tally it up. "My congregation provides me with a living allowance and a personal budget. So none of my expenses are taken out of funds for the projects," she said. Supporters are seeking to buy her a better van, but living in the slum, most of her costs are cheap.

Later, we visited her home, down a narrow, winding concrete path. Off the sides, a metre below the wooden shacks, is a thick black soup of accumulated rubbish - a real mess when it floods.

There are children playing at her front step, but inside she has a few comforts - phone/fax, TV, fridge, microwave and an old computer.

This is her fourth year living in the slum. But, with need all around, she leads a hectic life. One of her main 'chores' is ferrying the sick to hospital - and paying for their healthcare.

"They come to the door," she said. "It's fairly constant if I come in around 5pm, up till 7pm. Then I get the occasional emergency after that. If it's a medical emergency they'll come to me, because they haven't got money to pay their way."

A trip to hospital, with x-rays, blood-tests and examination by a doctor could set them back Bt700 to 900 - up to nine days' wages for a labourer, policeman or bus driver.

When she first visited Bangkok in 1988, she'd never been outside Australia. But she'd harboured an ambition "to go on missions" since her own schooldays. "My resolve was when I retired from school - if I was still well and strong - that I'd come back."

Two years after her introduction to Klong Toei, she returned to learn more about Thailand and see if she could manage the language. Then she linked up with Father Joe Maier, the American priest who has worked in the Klong Toei slums for three decades. His Human Development Centre, where Sister Joan lived for her first years here, has set up at least 30 schools in the area.

Father Joe lives across the walkway from Sister Joan. Their styles are poles apart, but he greatly respects her endeavours. "For many of the ladies in the slum - the poorest of the poor, the worthy and the unworthy - Sister Joan is the wind beneath their wings," he said.

"Women are the backbone of the world in the slums. This is a matriarchal society and women are the ones who hold it all together. And she's answering the basic needs of the women here, feeding their babies with powdered milk ... holding and playing with Aids babies and telling them that they're loved."