

# GIFT OF HAPPINESS FOUNDATION REPORT

## PROJECT VISIT TO MAE SOT, TAK 23-26 DECEMBER, 2014

In December the Gift of Happiness headed for the cool hills and valleys of Mae Sot, in Tak, for a 4-day project visiting several learning centres and institutions over the Christmas period. Persons participating in this month's trip were:

- Gift of Happiness Foundation founder and director, Eddie Haworth (aka Clown Eckie);
- Project photographer, Simon Balmer;
- Foundation assistant, Khun Amarin; and
- Project Treasurer, Gary White.

The focus of the project was to deliver both much needed goods to the children at the various centres, as well as a little dollop of happiness arising from shows put on by Clown Eckie.

### **Day 1: 23<sup>rd</sup> December**

After packing two vans for the trip – the Clown Eckie van plus a carry boy container van – we set off mid-morning for Mae Sot, arriving at around 6pm. Checked in at the Ponnargun Hotel, had dinner at Bai Fern Café, and then retired for the real business the next day.

Gary spent a few hours sorting out several bags and boxes of donated hygienic goods, new toys, educational supplies and new children's clothes into lots for various institutions to be visited over the next two days. Other goods in the vans included a large stock of bedding and towels from a Bangkok hotel, second hand toys and used clothing.

### **Day 2: 24<sup>th</sup> December**

Our first engagement for the day was at 9am, when Eh Thwa Bor came to the hotel to meet up with us. Eh Thwa used to be a manager at the Mao Tao Clinic, and still ha slinks there. But she recently left and is now doing work for the Community Schools Programme, which helps students **and** their families. We gave her several bags of adult clothing plus some medical supplies, which she will split 50/50 with the Clinic and the CSP.

Local Gift of Happiness volunteers, Khun Krit and Khun Mae, then joined us and guided by Htoo Paw from Migrant Education we set off to Ban Mae Pa Neua School. This is a Thai government school, although around 75% of its 126 students are of Burman ethnicity. Here Clown Eckie performed a show for the students. The school was very well maintained, with immaculate grounds.

Next was a brief stop at Sauch Kha Hong Sar Learning Centre to inspect the generator donated to it on the last project and funded by the Rotary Club of Bangkok South. We took some photos of the generator on-site and Gift of Happiness contributed THB 2,000 to fuel and maintenance for it (it costs about THB 1,000 per month to run).

After a quick lunch, our next port of call was the Social Action for Women (SAW) Secondary Learning Centre – and what a stark contrast to the morning's government school it was. No immaculate grounds or substantial buildings here – it was all wooden poles, open sides, thatch and tin roofs, and a small dusty area for the kids to play in. But kids are kids, and they all love

a clown (even if they've never seen one before!), and these ones certainly loved Clown Eckie when he put on a show for them. We left several bags of both new and used, clothing, bedding, toys and educational supplies at the Learning Centre.

Our final port of call for the day was the Grace Home shelter. This shelter, is managed and funded by charities registered in Canada, the USA and Thailand, and founded by a Canadian, Alan Brown, which assists abused, abandoned or otherwise disadvantaged children. The Home is a refuge for children born into prison or brought into that environment with their mothers. It comprises two houses, one for girls and one for boys. Most of these children had seen the show at the SAW Secondary Centre, so there was no new show here. Instead we left toys, clothes and underwear, bedding and towels, sets of uniforms, hygienic goods and educational items for each of the home's residents.

Later that evening we met again with Eh Thwa, from the Community Schools Programme, and a colleague of hers from the Mae Tao Clinic, for dinner. She will also join us on 25<sup>th</sup> at Agape Home.

The Community Schools' Programme strives to provide education at primary and middle school levels (4-17 years) to students in internally and externally displaced learning centres, as well as assistance to their families where appropriate and feasible. The programme supports 27 primary schools, 5 middle schools and 1 high school with a total of over 3,000 students and 180 teachers. It was established in 2001.

### **Day 3: 25<sup>th</sup> December**

We set off around 9am and picked up Eh Thwa on our way to the Agape Home, a home for children as well as a Learning Centre on the northern edge of Mae Sot. The home has around 60 residents, with another 130 or so children coming in to school. As this is a Christian centre, the school was closed for Christmas Day and the non-residents were not there, just the live-in children.

We'd had a bit of trouble confirming the appointment here, but risked turning up as the centre was not very far from town. On arrival we found several volunteers from the Suan Mitr Foundation giving a warm-up session of songs and games for the kids. They were led by a singer with guitar, plus one female volunteer (a teacher in Mae Sot) and another male one (a university student who hails from Mae Sot but is studying in Bangkok and who had travelled up here by overnight bus!).

This being Christmas, we set up a donated Christmas tree and surrounded it with toys, and gifts of clothes, bedding, towels and educational/hygiene supplies. Clown Eckie then descended from his sleigh, dispensing goodwill and cheer to all in his show full of madcap antics.

After a quick lunch our next and final port of call was to have been a Learning Centre some way out of town on the local garbage dump. However, we had been unable to make any contact with that centre to confirm the appointment, and it was a bit too risky to trek out there in those circumstances (in terms of wasted time and no opportunity to go to an alternate venue if the garbage dump did not work out – Eh Thwa said she had been trying for days to contact anyone there). So, on Eh Thwa's recommendation, we went instead to The Children's Development Centre (CDC) Dormitory back in town. This is a shelter for around 170 mostly

older boys and girls (about 100 girls and 70 boys) in two separate but adjacent hostels (one for boys, the other for girls). We set up in the girls' section and some of the boys came over to join the audience. Clown Eckie again dispensed fun, laughs and cheer, and we finally emptied the vans of the last of the bags of clothes, toys, bedding, towels and the like, along with a basket of bikkies and lollies that went down a treat!

A learning centre linked to the girls' dormitory serves both boys and girls from the hostel, which is associated with the Mae Tao Clinic – whence it was known to Eh Thwa.

#### **Day 4: 26<sup>th</sup> December**

The next day we set out early and returned to Bangkok.

And that finished the Gift of Happiness December 2104 Christmas giving project. From a personal perspective, I must say that this was one of the nicest Christmases I had ever spent, and that doing something like this, at this time of year, is the nicest way to celebrate Christmas. It is, after all, touted as the “season of giving” and how better to do that than by “giving” not only material help but a good dollop of joy and happiness to those whose lives are nowhere near as blessed as our own.

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