

The secret life of me

Kristie Kellahan was the kid who always wanted to help look after her baby cousins. Now, she puts into practise what most people only talk or dream about doing: she travels to Thailand and helps out in an orphanage. In doing so, she discovers more of herself and adds to her working life as an editor.

Who: Kristie Kellahan
From: Editor, *Virgin Blue Voyeur*
Secret: Helps out every year at Thai orphanage Ban Kingkaew

B&T: What is your secret life?

KK: During a sabbatical in 2001, I volunteered at a Buddhist orphanage in Chiang Mai, Thailand's northern city. It was an amazing time and now I get back there as often as possible. I've made the trip about seven times now!

B&T: What made you want to work in an orphanage?

KK: It was something I've wanted to do ever since I found out there were orphans in the world. I was the kid who always wanted to help look after my baby cousins and the younger kids next door. Orphaned children are very easy to love and help, because I feel deep compassion for their courage and dignity in facing the world alone.

B&T: Were you inspired by childhood movies such as *Oliver!*, *Anne of Green Gables* or *Annie*?

KK: *Anne of Green Gables* was my favourite movie growing up (though it was on Beta video in those days). I knew every word by heart. And funnily enough, the other volunteers and I sing some of the *Annie* songs to the babies now. Who doesn't love a rousing chorus of "the sun'll come out tomorrow"?

B&T: How often do you help in orphanages?

KK: I lived in Chiang Mai for most of 2001-02 to work at Ban Kingkaew. For the past four years, I've been employed full-time as the editor of *Virgin Blue Voyeur* magazine, so I've spent lots of quality time at the orphanage during one glorious month a year.

B&T: How did you discover Ban Kingkaew?

KK: It was a very lucky misunderstanding, or fate, if you believe in that. I went on a reconnaissance mission to Thailand in

2001 and had been checking out a list of orphanages, but hadn't found the right one for me (some were very religious, some only needed medically trained volunteers, etc). I was feeling a bit dejected, but resigned to the thought it wasn't meant to be. I asked a taxi driver to take me back to one of the orphanages I had previously visited. He pulled up in front of Ban Kingkaew. I'm saying to him, "No, you've taken me to the wrong place!" He was saying, "Go in, go in." Well thank you, Mr Taxi Driver, it turned out to be the right place for me after all.

B&T: What are some of the reasons children are placed in institutionalised care in Thailand?

KK: Most of the children at Ban Kingkaew have been abandoned, released for adoption, or removed from their parents/guardians due to abuse and neglect. In addition, many are the children of men and women serving jail sentences.

B&T: How long, on average, do children spend at Ban Kingkaew?

KK: For the kids who have parents in jail, it depends on the jail term—it might be a few months or up to 15 years. Ban Kingkaew only caters for children up to the age of six, so after that they'll be transferred to a larger state-run facility that offers schooling and vocational training.

B&T: What is the most amazing thing about the children you spent time with?

KK: Where do I start? They are just a joy to be around. Some of them have endured horrible abuse and yet they remain open, loving, brave and they sure know how to have fun. They have given me far more than I could ever offer them.

B&T: What does a day helping at an orphanage entail?

KK: We do whatever is required. That might mean helping to change and bathe the babies, entertain a roomful of energetic toddlers, supervise the older kids on the monkey bars or create fabulous hairstyles for style-conscious six-year-olds who know exactly how they want their plaits done. We also spend time with the Buddhist nuns who live at the



Kristie lived in Chiang Mai between 2001 and 2002, volunteering at Ban Kingkaew. Since then, she's spent "one glorious month a year" back in Thailand helping out at the orphanage.



orphanage and the nannies who work there each day. I've made some lifelong Thai friends through this work. In fact, I'm currently taking Thai lessons in Sydney with two of the other volunteers, Juanita and Philip.

B&T: The stereotype of an orphanage is that the matrons are strict, and the children unhappy. Do you think this is the case?

KK: Definitely not at Ban Kingkaew. It really is a wonderful environment for the children to grow up in. They're surrounded by 60 "brothers and sisters", loving carers, safety, security and consistency. For children who have grown up in chaos and uncertainty, this must be a huge improvement.

B&T: Has working in an orphanage helped your role as an editor?

KK: I think a good editor brings life experience and perspective to the role, so yes, my time at the orphanage has definitely given me that. I also think it's important to have an outside interest or hobby to keep you balanced as working on a magazine can be all-consuming. I also come up with some of my best ideas when I'm in Thailand.

B&T: Are there any similarities between working in an orphanage and for *Virgin Blue Voyeur*?

KK: It's about the values we share. What's great about *Virgin Blue* is they believe in working with passion and commitment but also taking the time to have fun. They've been very supportive of my work with the kids and show their commitment to corporate philanthropy through endeavours such as the *Virgin Blue Black Tie Hangar Ball* to be held on August 5

in Brisbane (Sir Richard Branson will be there).

B&T: Have you ever wanted to bring some of the children back to Australia?

KK: If I didn't think I would be arrested for kidnapping and splashed across the front page of *The Sydney Morning Herald* there's no doubt I would have brought a few of the Ban Kingkaew kids home by now. When you form such a bond with them, it really is heartbreaking to say goodbye. If I wanted to adopt a child from Thailand, I would have to apply through the Department of Community Services and there would be no guarantee of being matched with one of the children I already know.

B&T: What advice do you have for others wanting to help out?

KK: Get involved! Volunteering can provide the sense of "something more" that most of us are looking for. Whether your passion is helping underprivileged kids, abandoned animals or the environment, there will be an organisation that would like to hear from you. Currently, Ban Kingkaew is not accepting foreign volunteers. Contact Australian Volunteers International for information on their programs around the world. I'm part of a committee raising money to build an extension to Ban Kingkaew so that the children are not forced to leave after the age of six. To make a donation, kindly direct credit ANZ Bank, BSB 012 140, account number 5208 91409, attention Ban Kingkaew. Thank you.

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