

Fun days

It's one of the most uplifting and healthy environments I've ever seen," says Kellahan of the orphanage. "The children are, without exception, kept clean, well fed and nurtured by their many 'mothers'."



Lost and found

Orphanages are sometimes sad, gloomy institutions, bereft of laughter and love. But Kristie Kellahan found just the opposite when she arrived as a volunteer at a home for Thai orphans in Chiang Mai



For me, it was a love affair that began with a case of mistaken identity. For two years, I volunteered at the Ban Kingkaew orphanage in northern Thailand, caring for up to 60 children who had been abandoned, removed from their parents or were placed in care while their parents served jail terms. I met children like Song, a sweet and affectionate little baby boy whose mother had been sentenced to 23 years in prison for her part in a major methamphetamine ring. As she was unwilling to relinquish her parental rights, which would make him available for adoption, he would remain in institutionalised care until he was legally an adult. I held baby Mee while he screamed and cried for attention, no doubt grieving the birth mother who had abandoned him on a dusty street.

But first, let me explain how I came to be there. For as long as I can remember, I have dreamt of working in an orphanage. My favourite books as a child all featured lovable, plucky orphans. *Anne of Green Gables* and *Annie* were on high rotation on my video player. The thought of caring for a gaggle of babies and children who had been abandoned by their parents was, quite simply, my idea of bliss. Some people dream of being rock stars, I dreamt of dirty nappies.

In 2001, when I could no longer bear to hear myself yabbering on about an ambition I'd get around to "one day", I booked a two-week reconnaissance mission to Thailand. In searing 40-degree heat, I hopped in and out of tuktuks in Bangkok and the northern city of Chiang Mai,

visiting the list of orphanages I had compiled from my search on the internet. After a depressing week of doors closing in my face – this orphanage didn't want foreign help, that orphanage only wanted volunteer doctors and nurses, another place was evangelical in its Christian teachings in a way I wasn't comfortable with – I was starting to think maybe this wasn't meant to be.

Resigned to heading back to Australia, I set out on the second last day of my trip to deliver some medicine and toiletries I had purchased for the children at the Christian orphanage in Chiang Mai. I had asked Coin, the receptionist at the hostel where I was staying, to write out the address in Thai, knowing that my comic sign language wouldn't cut it with the local tuktuk drivers. Despite her handwritten directions, 15 minutes later, the driver pulled into the driveway of an unfamiliar building.

"You've brought me to the wrong place," I complained.

"Go in, go in," insisted the driver.

"But it's not where I'm meant to be," I replied.

"Just go in," he said.

It's funny how five minutes can change your life. That's how long it took me to realise the "wrong" place was most definitely the right place for me. Sweet-smelling babies in white terry cloth romper suits reached out from their cots to be hugged. Serene-looking nannies in lilac uniforms welcomed me into their domain. I knew without a doubt that this was where I wanted to be, needed to be. You might call it fate, divine intervention, or simply a language breakdown that made Coin translate the name of the Ban Kingkaew orphanage in place of the name I had handed her. All I know is I am eternally grateful for her error.

Ban Kingkaew is a Buddhist orphanage that opened in 1966, thanks to the generosity of local resident Miss Kingkaew Wiboolsanti, who bequeathed her home, land and a sum of money in her will for the purpose of creating a foundation for children in need.

These days, the orphanage also receives financial support from various government welfare departments, as well as gifts and bequests from numerous private donors. A team of dedicated Thai female nannies, nurses and teachers are employed to care for the children under the spiritual supervision of two Buddhist nuns who live at the home. A group of respected local women volunteer their time to act as a steering committee, while key organisational decisions need to be approved by the directors of Ban Viengping, the state-run main orphanage in the Chiang Mai province.

Ban Kingkaew has a capacity for up to 60 children and babies – at the time of writing, there were 43 – aged from one month to six years old.

"We cannot receive the babies from Ban Viengping before the age of one month because we don't know yet if the baby is healthy," explains Srisawat Suwan, the dynamic and capable 33-year-old administrator who oversees the



paperwork of all her charges. She also sends homemade birthday and Christmas cards to every single child who has passed through her care in the 12 years she has been employed by Ban Kingkaew.

"If the police find an abandoned baby in the streets, they will take them straight to hospital for a check-up. The next step is to have an announcement in the newspaper and radio to see if anyone will claim this baby. If no one does, they go to Ban Viengping after one month, and then they are brought here to us where they can stay until the age of six if they are not adopted."

When the children turn six, they are transferred to the larger Ban Viengping (with a capacity for over 200 children). It's a rude awakening for many of the children to move from the peaceful, nurturing environment of Ban Kingkaew to a massive structure where young children are housed with teenagers, and everyone – no matter how young – is expected to wash their own clothes. Here they will receive basic schooling and care until they are either reunited with their parents, fostered out to a local

family (this is uncommon, as Thai people in general are disinclined to foster or adopt non-related children) or leave freely as independent young adults at the ripe old age of 16.

The reasons the children end up in institutionalised care are many and varied. Each story seems sadder than the next. Some are abandoned on the streets by desperate, young or poor mothers. More than half are in care because their mothers are in jail (almost always for trafficking small amounts of methamphetamine pills). The remaining children have been removed from their parents due to neglect or abuse.

"When mothers go to jail, they sometimes don't understand what will happen to their children and think they are losing them forever," explains Suwan. "They cry and cry. We try to explain it's good for children – they'll be safe, well-fed, have playmates. Often when we get the children, they have so many



(below) All over Chiang Mai people wear traditional Friday denim 'work clothes' as an homage to the traditional northern workwear; (top right) Kellahan with three-year-old Mee, who was abandoned.

SWEET SMELLING BABIES IN WHITE ROMPER SUITS REACHED OUT TO BE HUGGED

Play time

"They form incredibly close bonds with their brothers and sisters of circumstance," says Kellahan of the children at the orphanage. (right and far right) Afternoon playtime in the outdoor playground.



(left) Christmas 2001: "We bought presents and arranged a visit from Santa," says Kellahan, of one of her annual visits to the Ban Kingkaew orphanage. (right) Three of the kids enjoy a snack of lychees.



problems, like scabies, infections, bad behaviour. It takes a long time for the children to improve." But improve they do.

People often ask me if it's a terribly sad place and I can honestly tell them it's one of the most uplifting and healthy environments I've ever seen. The children are, without exception, kept clean, well-fed and nurtured by their many "mothers" – the nannies, teachers and nurses – while they form incredibly close bonds with their brothers and sisters of circumstance. They're not spoiled or overly pampered, but they do receive just about everything they need, apart from the love of their very own parent figures.

There's a rhythm and routine to their days – breakfast at 7am, midday nap, playtime in the afternoon and lights out at 8pm – that does wonders for the children who have been raised in chaos and uncertainty. For the children who are adopted each year (on average, between five and 10 children from Ban Kingkaew will find homes in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Europe) it prepares them for life with a stable family.

Heather Rae and Chris Reus-Smit from Canberra would attest to the high level of care given to the children at Ban Kingkaew. Eighteen months ago, they arrived at the orphanage to meet their new son Bok (now called Sam), after an application process that took almost three years.

"We could tell straightaway that he'd had his needs met," explains Heather. "We are so grateful – our son already knew how to give and receive love, and as a result he didn't have the usual attachment problems you are told to expect."

As with all inter-country adoptions, Heather and Chris applied through the government welfare department in their state (in NSW, it's the Department of Community Services and in Victoria, the Department of Human Services). Although I met many desperate people who fronted up at the orphanage hoping to be given a baby, this is never allowed. In fact, private arrangements such as this are illegal in Australia and result in the adopted child being refused an entry visa to Australia.

Heather and Chris were extensively screened and assessed for suitability as adoptive parents, before receiving rigorous training and education sessions. Eventually, they were informed that a son awaited their collection in Chiang Mai (foreigners are not permitted to choose a particular child at the orphanage, they may only make a request regarding the age and gender of the child). The Australian Department of Immigration then assisted the couple to obtain a passport for Sam so that he could return with them from Thailand.

"It's been absolutely fantastic," says Chris. "Sam is the most wonderful kid and we love him to bits." The experience has been so positive for the couple, they now intend to adopt a little girl. However, this time around they will notice the fees charged by the Australian government have significantly increased. The Minister for Community Services, Carmel Tebbutt, explained to Parliament recently that the fees for overseas adoption had been fixed for 10 years and were not reflective of cost recovery for the department. "People who embark upon this process know that it will involve a considerable sum of money," she said.

To cover the department's costs, it was "not inappropriate to seek a greater contribution" from people who were already aware they would need to spend a "substantial amount" to adopt a child from overseas. In return for increased fees, the department has promised a better, quicker service.

Back at the orphanage, things like passports and government fees are of no significance to one-year-old Song. With little chance of his mother's 23-year sentence being reduced, he'll live within the orphanage system until he turns 16. His only ongoing contact with his mother during the next 15 years will be supervised quarterly visits to the prison. When he ventures out into the world on his own, it will be without the safety net so many of us take for granted. No 18th birthday party or Schoolies holiday for this kid. It's ironic to think that the most support he will ever receive will be during the first six years of his life, from a dedicated band of carers at a little Buddhist orphanage.

"I always tell the nannies to give the children everything they can while they are at Ban Kingkaew," says Suwan, "because it will probably be the happiest time of their life." ■

**Currently, the Ban Viengping and Ban Kingkaew orphanages in Thailand are not accepting foreign volunteers. To find out more about volunteering abroad, contact Australian Volunteers International on 1800 331 292 or visit www.ozvol.org.au*

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF KRISTIE KELLAHAN



MAKING A DIFFERENCE Many people feel the need to "do something" to help the world's poor and disadvantaged populations, yet few act on their good intentions. Whether it's a case of the problem seeming too big or simply a lack of time to volunteer, the best that most people can manage is an occasional donation to a worthwhile cause. That's where Australian women Kylie Taylor and Valerie Khoo are different. After a 2002 visit to Cambodia opened their eyes to the abject poverty at the state-run Angkor Orphanage in Siem Reap, the dynamic pair were determined to help. Aware that there was a limit to the personal financial contributions they could make, the two women searched for a long-term solution that could generate income for the impoverished orphanage without their day-to-day, ongoing involvement. Their plan was to establish a fashion and homewares label called Taylor & Khoo to produce men's and women's clothing, bedspreads, cushions and bags. Almost all of the products are made out of Cambodian silk, by disadvantaged groups who really need the work. The goods are then sold online, during regular special event sales and from the label's temporary Sydney premises. And the best part? Every dollar of the profits goes to support the Angkor Orphanage. For more information about products and sales, visit the online shop at www.taylorandkhoo.com.