

Suffer the children



Father Joe's Mercy Center offers a safe haven for Bangkok's street children.

Story and photos by Kevin Clarke

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Walking through the open-air halls of Bangkok's Mercy Center, its resident guardian angel Father Joe Maier launches into a litany of casually referenced sorrows, passing mercifully quickly, like a child's smile, because otherwise they would be too much to bear.

Here is a young girl, giggling with a friend after an exuberant greeting to Maier, a Redemptorist priest who cofounded Mercy and the related Human Development Foundation (HDF) in 1974. "Her father was a street person, murdered by another street person," he says.

Here is a young man with Down's Syndrome who had been abandoned to the streets and living little better than an animal when Maier found him.

Here is a lively little boy, mugging for the camera, "probably 2," says Maier. He can't say what has become of this boy's father, but he knows his mother passed away. The toddler is HIV-positive.

A young woman comes by with a smile and offering a *wai*, the traditional Thai greeting of pressed palms that resembles a quickly offered prayer. "There's a neat lady," Maier stops and regards the woman disappearing down the hall. "She's got AIDS," he says.

Mercy Center serves as the focal point of Maier's 30-year campaign to bring some decency and compassion to the suffering that swirls around him in the Klong Toey slum of Bangkok. It is one ministry of the larger HDF, now at work in over 30 other slum communities in Bangkok with neighborhood schools, HIV/AIDS prevention outreach, and a variety of other social services. The Mercy Center itself includes four orphanages, a shelter for street children, a home for mothers and children with HIV/AIDS, and a primary school for neighborhood children. The foundation manages the largest free AIDS hospice and homecare system in Bangkok.

Pressed between a modern superhighway and a deep-water port, swampy Klong Toey remains one of Thailand's forgotten communities. The nearly 100,000 people who call Klong Toey some kind of home—few have actual legal claim to these tin-and-wood shanties—are stalked by the twin horsemen of poverty and drug addiction, plagued by poor infrastructure and sanitation, and overcrowded with people and wooden shacks shifting on stilts just above land choked with garbage and drainage. The residents here are the city's industrial workers and domestic servants, street cleaners and garbage collectors, every dirty job in Bangkok. They

Right: Bangkok's HIV/AIDS crisis begins on the streets and massage parlors of its "entertainment" districts and ends among the HIV-infected children at the Mercy Center.

Below: Klong Toey kids at Mercy's parochial school mug for the camera.

may earn as little as a few U.S. dollars a day. A good number of Klong Toey's newest residents are undocumented Burmese migrant workers, easily exploited by their employers, police, or corrupt government bureaucrats.

AIDS is everywhere

Thailand has made major strides in reducing the rate of HIV transmission and the number of new infections in recent years. Still, almost 600,000 Thais are known to be infected with HIV. Almost 500,000 have died since the first case was reported in 1984. "AIDS is everywhere," Maier says matter-of-factly. It is indeed depressingly commonplace among Thailand's most vulnerable children. Almost one third of Thailand's 1.05 million orphans have lost their parents to AIDS.

Thailand had been widely praised because of an unflinching response to the epidemic in the 1990s. Then massive public awareness campaigns reduced new annual infections from a high of 143,000 in 1991 to 19,000 in 2003. Despite that effort, the epidemic has become the leading cause of death among young Thai adults, with 53,000 people dying of AIDS in 2003. A 2004 U.N. report warns that Thailand is losing momentum in its fight against HIV/AIDS, in danger now of unraveling much of the good work that has been accomplished in prevention and treatment.

In spite of media campaigns promoting condom use, many Thai men still maintain a "cultural" indifference to condoms, and even extremely low-income working men who call the tiny wooden shacks and warrens of Klong Toey home often visit prostitutes. Many drug users persist in sharing needles. As much as 40 percent of the nation's IV drug users are infected with HIV.

But a new—and in many ways more vulnerable—population has emerged as the latest casualty of the epidemic in Thailand. Now half of the newly identified HIV infections are occurring among the wives and girlfriends of infected men, and when the women of Klong Toey become infected, they often pass the virus on to their children in utero, during childbirth, or in mother's milk. According to UNICEF, more than 30,000 Thai children have contracted HIV from their mothers, a figure that grows by



more than 2,000 mother-to-child transmissions each year.

Fifty-three of the 227 kids living at the Mercy Center are infected with HIV. They live here because few other places would have them. Even here the HIV-infected children can expect to be left behind when day outings give the other children a welcome respite from the orphanage. These children are not welcome in Thai society.



Left: More than 30,000 Thai children have contracted AIDS from their mothers.

Below: "Despite all they've been through, they're still so full of happiness," one volunteer says of the kids at Mercy Center.

A joyful place

Of the AIDS-orphaned children who now call Mercy Center their home and this life their childhood, few will make it past 12 or 13 years of age, Maier says. That's not too bad, he explains. At least these kids have been able to receive HIV antiviral drugs, albeit an older, slightly less effective version of the famed chemical cocktail. In previous years Mercy had nothing to offer its HIV-positive patients. More than 1,000 of them passed away at the center. But despite the pain of watching such lives pass too quickly and with too much suffering, Mercy Center is a surprisingly joyful place.

"It's totally different than what I thought it would be," says Emily Praeger, a 17-year-old from Munich volunteering at the center through her high school, United World College



in Singapore. Praeger was prepared for much doom and gloom when she signed on to work with HIV-positive children. Now that she's here: "What amazes me is the kids," she says. Despite all they have been through, "they're still so full of happiness and life, still willing to trust people."

But HIV/AIDS is only one of the outbreaks afflicting Klong Toey. The community also endures rampant methamphetamine abuse and the violence associated with its trafficking—and the sometimes greater violence of police efforts to curtail the industry. And simple poverty itself proves to be a great destroyer of lives and families.

On Mercy's second floor, past the dispensary where large plastic bins of medicine are each marked with a child's name—the kids consume a daily HIV drug regimen that keeps most of them alive—two young mothers sit up in bed playing with their infant children. The women are wan but smiling, gracious to a visitor who intrudes on what little privacy the open ward offers. The children are greedy for attention and compete to offer a *wai*—an almost imperceptible bow, their infant palms pressed together in front of their tiny faces. The mothers smile approvingly and laugh with each successful gesture. They barely rise from the beds themselves. They are not strong enough.

The women are in the final stages of their illness. They will never see their children grow any older. The babies seem blessedly oblivious to their mothers' condition. "Isn't it nice," Maier says, "that these mothers can spend their last months caring for their children. What a great gift that is for them."

Lined up with the other children one steamy afternoon waiting for an official visit from the governor of Bangkok, the triplets are something of Mercy's pride and joy. The identical siblings are mischievous and adorable, whispering and prodding each other in that self-contained, conspiratorial way of identical siblings. It sets them off from the rest of the kids around them, despite how much they have in common with the other children who have landed here, taken off Bangkok's streets and delivered into Father Joe's hands. Some kids are dropped off by the authorities; some are brought by AIDS-stricken mothers in their final agonies, most by relatives of parents who have died or who have simply abandoned their kids to their drug or alcohol addictions. The triplets?

"Their mother's dying; their father's in prison," Maier says with a shrug. "They were living with their grandparents. Grandpa's a drunk. He sold the rice cooker, he sold the



Left: The neighborhood of Klong Toey is in jeopardy not only from AIDS and poverty, but now from real estate developers.

furniture, and he sold the girls to me for a case of Mekong Whiskey.

“No, two cases,” he corrects himself after a moment. Maier makes no apologies for this unorthodox acquisition. “Good God, look at them” Maier says, gesturing to the bright and attractive 8-year-olds, “If I hadn’t gotten those kids away from him, he would have sold them to the sex traders and then God knows what would have happened to them.”

The 36 saints

Miles from the center of Bangkok, Mercy is even further away from any controversy about how best to contain the HIV/AIDS crisis. Maier doesn’t think much of the church’s position against the use of condoms to control the virus. Not that he thinks his opinion, or any Westerner’s, matters much among the alleys of Klong Toey. Who is going to listen to a Catholic priest about condom use in this overwhelmingly Buddhist nation? “Use all the latex you want, use all the pills you want—it’s not going to stop the AIDS crisis,” says Maier, “but it is part of the solution.

“Of course, I’m in favor of condoms; I’m in favor of abstinence... I’m in favor of anything that will work,” he says in some exasperation. “Go ask this girl [in the hospice] who was raped and is dying of AIDS what she thinks [of the debate],” Maier suggests.

“They’re the real victims,” he adds, nodding toward some of the children at the center. “The kids who got AIDS from

their mommas who got AIDS from their husbands.

“AIDS is going to be with us for a thousand years. We’re going to have to live with it.” The kids at the Mercy Center can show the rest of us how, Maier says. “They can be our teachers. They’re the ‘enlightened ones,’ as the Buddhists would say... We’ve got one kid from the streets, 7 years old, who was taking care of three little brothers and sisters when we got him in here.” These children, he says, “teach us every day about community and suffering and sacrifice.”

There’s a story out of the Jewish tradition of the 36 saints who hold up the world, Maier says. If one of them grows tired and walks away from his burden, the whole world comes crashing down. “So who are the 36 saints?” Maier asks.

One, he says, pointing to a young man joking with a group of residents, is an ex-Bangkok prostitute who now works at Mercy as a counselor for other HIV-positive people. “He got sick, and now he is well, and he’s spending the rest of his life helping people with AIDS.

“Now, I can’t hold up the whole world,” Maier says. “But I’ll try to help for a minute or so.” Fortunately the only thing Maier will be asked to hold up by the end of this humid afternoon is a chubby, gurgling baby, a little boy beginning life not alone and not abandoned at the Mercy Center.

The future for Maier’s foundation is always uncertain, dependent as it is on government and private support to keep its door open. The children here with HIV also face a difficult path ahead, dependent on a reliable supply of the donated drugs that are keeping them alive. Likewise uncertain is the future of Klong Toey itself. Bangkok is enjoying the same explosive growth that is fueling rising real estate values and sudden dislocations in urban centers around the world.

Now developers and city officials have turned their eyes onto the once desolate swamps where Klong Toey’s people built a community. The riverfront property has suddenly become desirable, and new condos and hotels—a new “entertainment district”—are being blueprinted atop the alleys and streets and homes of Klong Toey. The people here have dubious or nonexistent legal claim to their property. Maier’s fight to bring dignity and mercy to Klong Toey may end before too long in a battle simply to save the community itself.

“Klong Toey is a sacred place,” Maier says, “as I have tried with reasonable success to teach the people. If the people stay, then, of course, we stay. If they raze this whole area, then, of course, we have to go also. We will go with the people.

“All of this is in the hands of God and I am not worried really. The Lord will take care of us and point us always in the proper direction.” **USC**