



Erika's Sponsors Letter # 4 – September 2011

Dear Friends,

At the beginning of August, we had a much needed five day retreat outside of the city. We stayed at a Franciscan retreat house about 40km northeast of Bangkok (a 3 hour trek via bus to a point close enough to find a willing taxi driver). Father Peter, a priest with Heart's Home who lives in India, was here to direct our retreat--three days of silence, teachings on the encyclical letter Spe Salvi about Christian hope, and evenings spent seeing pictures from Heart's Home in the Phillipines, India, Brazil, and El Salvador, learning about a photographer from Brazil/France (Sebastiao Salgado--fantastic work in black and whites, a lot of work in Latin America) and watching a beautiful film about the people of Cambodia, which I highly recommend! (*Dogora*)

Katie will be ending her mission in five weeks! Making plans for her to return to Chicago, we are preparing to welcome another American, Nathalie, who will arrive the end of October. In the meantime, we are trying to fix the house--we have some rotten boards in our floor, electrical outlets to fix, two windows to replace... a few more small but important repairs to make in the middle of the rainy season!



Photo: Katie with some of the kids on our Tiaw!

My Birthday!

To celebrate the 4th of July here as an expatriate, Gloria, one of our American friends, treated me to a cheeseburger and fries, complete with an A&W Soda at the US Embassy! As my birthday fell on a Tuesday, Gloria kindly hosted me for my day of rest, and provided all I needed for a DOUBLE batch of chocolate chip cookies (from Mom's old Betty Crocker recipe). As a community, the girls and I celebrated at the house with a few of the kiddos, with a small cake and the most wonderful birthday card EVER—a drawing of me and Jesus with the perfect cup of coffee! My preference for a well pulled espresso shot has the girls always joking about my love for coffee. I did enjoy the frozen Milky Ways Mom sent months ago as well--and yes, I shared!

A Little Mother & Friend of the Children

Fr. Thierry has written that to describe Heart's Home is difficult--how does one describe a presence? How does one describe the heart of a mother? As I read this, I connected my experiences here to that of being a little mother : Kan comes to play checkers during dinner, Ploy and Biw want to "suat duaj" (pray too!) so Marie reads them a story about a saint in Thai during Adoration; kids run into the house and plop onto my lap, or come in for a hug, often hugging my legs; we sometimes need to tell the kids "klap baan" (go home), 'pick up the toys'; 'don't eat while we pray', 'don't hit each other'... At one time or another, these kids play, hit, sleep, eat, pray,

celebrate birthdays, and even stay still for us to comb lice out of their hair.... Thus we are a friend in caring about them and playing with them, a mother in opening our arms to them when they come running into the house!

Ohn, about 10 years old, refused to go home one night. Ohn comes almost every day, and loves animals. She has brought in her kitten, bunny, fish, snake, mouse, and snake egg to show us in the past months. This particular night, she was dancing around our room after we finished supper. It was around 8:30 pm, and her older sister and niece were standing outside waiting for her to come. Ohn's body became stiff, her face was dark, and she tried not to cry—she finally said her mom hits her and she doesn't want to go. For Katie, Marie, and I, there is nothing we can do but to comfort her, try to say it won't be so bad, and to help her to go with her sister.



Biw, age 9, is still the new kid on the block after 8 months or so, and is a little slow for his age, still wetting his pants. He doesn't have so many friends his age, and his older brothers are hanging around trying to be the 'cool kids'. Some days he is super sweet, just wanting to give and receive hugs. Other days, he's completely a mess. One night he was obviously hurting as he sat on the floor, throwing books one by one, refusing to talk, slapping away our arms, and trying not to cry. Another night he came in during supper, and fell asleep on my lap. I sat there with him sleeping, stroking his hair, thinking, "*What does he find so comforting here?*" He knows we love him—even when we send him home for being naughty, and he slams the door shut or throws another child's shoes in the dirty klong, he comes back.

I have only a small glimpse in my life here of what a mother suffers and offers for her children, especially when exhausted and feeling totally empty, but continually being asked to give of herself. For us as a community, it is a challenge to love like this, and for me, it is a suffering to walk with the children, only guessing what happens at home some nights.

Photos: Above: On our way to the museum on the rot song teow-- a truck with two benches in the back.

Below: Min (pink dress) and other kids from the expressway trying to hug Marie, all at the same time!

Living ith My Heart

Sunday, July 24, on my way back home, I crossed the street under the expressway and heard kids yelling "*Phii! Phii!*" I looked and about 50 meters away I saw six kids by a pillar under the expressway, near the old cars. I approached to say hello and discovered 15 kids! They were standing on a railing and jumping on an old spring mattress.

One girl started counting in English, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight..." and another said, "Good afternoon teacher." I was thinking, "Wow, counting past five, and wait, I'm not a teacher," when two boys on the railing fell off and the older boy started hitting the younger boy. I had to separate the two, and I asked their names. Then they asked, "*Phii chyy araj?*" *What's your name?* and then, "*Juu*



thii naj?" *Where do you live?* I answered, 70 Rai.

Kids come every day and play at our house. Without thinking, I asked, "Do you want to see?" "YES!" So we started walking—all FIFTEEN followed! One held my hand, until I carried Min, who had no shoes. We passed all our usual friends, single file through the maze of the crowded *soi*. I kept looking, unsure all 15 would seriously come the whole way.



*The little boy from the expressway
with whom I played checkers*

We stopped at our door. I put Min down and said, "We are here! Soi 17. We are five *farang* volunteers, and kids come every day at 3:00. Play nice or go home, Okay?" Katie, just finished sweeping the floor, having just said goodbye to nine of our French friends who visited and the twenty kids had all gone home, looked up and said, "Whoa! Where did all the kids come from?!" I found them under the expressway.

They came into the house and just *looked* at the toys in awe. We looked at the clock--5:30. Do we let them play? Sure! So they played--more respectfully than any of the regular kids. I played dominoes with Faa, a ten year old girl, and then I taught the little boy who got picked on how to play checkers. A half hour later, we gave them water, picked up the toys, took some pictures, and sent them home, saying to come back on Wednesday.

I was so happy to have listened and followed that shout: Phii! Phii! They called and I answered instinctively--and what joy it brought! I walked home with them so proud and full of joy in being a Friend to the Children! In my efforts to make my heart available to God, I am discovering how to live with my heart. I'm beginning to see the answer is almost paradoxical—to live with and from my heart, I must forget myself and turn more to loving God and others. It seems so natural for some people to drown out the cacophony of the world and listen within, but for me it's always been a bit of a struggle--maybe not to hear, but to fight the doubt that enters. This particular experience was a triumph for me in that I didn't even have to think about it--I just obeyed the inclination of my heart!

How is my mission?

One of the most common, and, at the same time my least favorite, question is, "How is your mission going?" I know, it's quite logical and even considerate to ask, but in these first five months I am continually stumped. I begin to answer, thinking, "Am I really telling the truth?" Any answer seems inadequate. It only grazes the surface of this experience. Fr. Thierry speaks of this mission being dangerous for us as young people. It is a year of formation which can be life changing. Going deeper than that, as my spiritual director put it, this is not simply a mission to a country, a trip, a cultural awakening--this is a mission to parts of my soul. I am being formed by the friends I meet and by each encounter I have. God has blessed me with the time



*At our neighbor's house for her birthday: Me, Phaa Oht, Thuy, Kanompang,
her mother, and Ploy*

to be filled with His love so I am able to love every day--even though I do a poor job most days.

Thank you for your support and for helping me to be here, and to stay here. If it weren't for you, I would have started swimming home in my first month of mission! But I wouldn't know what to say except that I was uncomfortable--and that didn't seem right. It's taken time to feel at home here, but now I do. But continue praying--there are still rough days, even amidst all the joy!

Please pray for me, that I may open my heart each day to love.

Pray for our community, that we may be led more deeply into mission, and learn how to forgive immediately and to love one another.

Pray for the children--for those who are longing for love and searching for it in the wrong places; for those who are hurting, that they may be consoled.

Pray for the grandmothers and all those who are lonely, that they may be given love by someone who cares that they exist.

Pray for our expatriate friends, that they may see a chance to live compassion in their own lives.

You are in my prayers every day.

In Him,

Erika Deniger-Hagman, *Phii Pan*

PS: I have more stories to share, but want to keep this short! You can read more on my blog!

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Biw eating dragonfruit--my new favorite fruit!



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