

Father Ray Foundation Newsletter



March 2018

2018 – THE YEAR OF CHANGE

Derek Franklin

From Center to School

The Father Ray Center for Children with Special Needs was officially opened in January 2016 by HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, the Crown Princess of Thailand. Just over two years later it has been recognised by the Royal Thai Ministry of Education and has been renamed the Father Ray School for Children with Special Needs. What does this mean for our children? Well, we will have to follow a set curriculum, also set by the Ministry, and have formal classes teaching the children with autism, Downs Syndrome and learning disabilities similar subjects that are taught in schools throughout the Kingdom.



Our hope is that we can educate our children to such a level that they will eventually enter our vocational training programme at the School and eventually find suitable employment.

From School to College

In 1984 the Redemptorist Vocational School for People with Disabilities opened with just four students. Since then more than three thousand young adults living with a disability have graduated and are now, in the words of Father Ray, 'earning their own rice'.

However, when this school year comes to an end in late March, the Redemptorist Vocational School for People with Disabilities will close for good.

In its place will open the Pattaya Redemptorist Technological College for People with Disabilities.

Just as the Royal Thai Ministry of Education upgraded the Special Needs School, they have also accepted our application to become a college which meant our students will now graduate with a college diploma rather than a school certificate.

It will mean that we have to follow the curriculum set for technological colleges by the Ministry and so, apart from learning their chosen subjects, Electronics, Computer Science or Computer Business, our students will also have to study Maths, English, Science and Thai History.

But not all our students have the ability to complete a college course, so we will continue to offer our elementary education courses for those who have had little or no basic education. Once they have completed these basic courses they will then have the option to graduate with a certificate or go on to study for a college diploma.

This is great news for our students. For all the people who told them they could never achieve much in life, they'll be proven wrong as students will leave us with a college diploma recognised by the Royal Thai Ministry of Education.



No More Drop-In

In February 2004 I attended the opening ceremony of the Father Ray Drop-In Center, which we opened to offer support to the many street kids of Pattaya.

Within days of opening we had many youngsters arrive, mostly teenagers, mostly boys and almost all were runaways from poverty, neglect and in many cases abuse.



I can remember on many nights there being almost forty young teenagers either staying at the Center or dropping in for advice, medical help or just in need of a meal.

But Thailand has changed a lot since the Drop-In Center opened, and in recent years the number of these runaway street kids, has decreased.

Most of the children who have turned up in the last couple of years



have arrived with their parents, who are usually too poor to provide for their children. Others have arrived with social workers and so the number of children arriving from 'the streets' is very few.

So, on the 28th of December last year, thirteen years and 10 months after it opened, the Father Ray Drop-In Center closed and all the children moved into the Home or the Village, their new 'forever homes'; though an office remains open and available to anyone who needs help.

But before they left we had a party; a chocolate party; the cake was chocolate, so was the ice-cream, the chocolate chip chocolate cookies, the chocolate wafers and even the strawberries were dipped in chocolate.

A huge success

The Half-Way House, which was on the same complex as the Drop-In Center, was used by older teenagers, it was somewhere they lived semi-independently, and also closed, but it has been a great success.

Over the years more than thirty young men, and two young ladies, all teenagers, lived in the Half-Way House until they were ready to live on their own. That may not seem a lot, but you have to realise where these young people came from and what they were capable of; very little.

I still see a few of them around town; they're all working, and all getting on with their lives, which may have been a very different story if the Half-Way House hadn't been there.



Being part of the family

For the past twenty eight years the Children's Home has provided a safe place to live for hundreds of children.

It was originally known as the Home for Street Kids, and that's what they were, kids rescued from the streets of Pattaya.

They came from poverty, lived with life's basics and that is all they knew. When they came to live with us at the Home their days were spent going to school, coming home and helping on the farm, watching local TV and playing outside with friends; they were back living a normal life.



They slept in large dormitories and ate simple home-cooked food, most of it they grew themselves, and that was their life.

But society has changed over the years and while we in the past may have provided basic accommodation to our children, we now believe that it is no longer acceptable for children to be living full time in large dormitories, such as we currently have at the Children's Home.

We don't want our children to become institutionalized; we want them to have what they know other children are having. We could see how happy the younger children were living at the Children's Village

and so we thought if it's good enough for them then why not for the older children?

This year we plan to start construction of several new houses at the Children's Village, eight in total. Once construction is complete we will then move children from the Children's Home to their new home.

By April 2019 we aim for completion and by the time the Thai New Year holiday of Songkran arrives we will all be celebrating at one place at the same time. For the older children who live with us, their new home will be a small house where they will live with other children, young and old, boys and girls and all living together as a family.

They will live in an environment which is comfortable, homely and where each and every single child, no matter how old or how young, will receive the individual care and attention they need.

Having a house parent, male or female, taking care of a small group of teenagers will allow them to identify any problems they may have, which is something that can



be easily missed when there are so many residents all living together in one dormitory.

Living in a small family like environment can only be better than living in a large dormitory.

We want all our children to know what it is like to be part of a family.

We want them to learn the importance of 'family' and we want them to learn all they will need to know when they eventually have children and a family of their own. We also want them to learn what it is like to have neighbours and be part of a bigger community.



But nothing in this world is free. We have worked with an architect and each house will have four bedrooms, three for the children with three beds and a bathroom in each, as well as a private room for the house mother or house father.

There will also be a dining room and kitchen as well as a living area with room to watch TV and tables where they can do their homework.

I am sure I've mentioned this to you in the past, but when we were planning the Special Needs Center, or School as it is now known, I wasn't really in favour of it as it would cost too much money, but we built it because there was a need.

Today there is a need for us to build eight houses and give our children, all of them, not just the young ones, the chance to live as part of a family, where their individual needs and problems can be dealt with and a home where they can be safe.

I thought there would be opposition from our staff and also the children who have lived at the Home for many years, but even our tough teenage boys are looking forward to having a new home and being part of a family.

You never know what is going to happen

Over the years I have kept you updated on a little boy who arrived here at the Foundation at the age of three. Condo is his name and he had a terrible start to life. He was thrown on a bonfire for making too much noise at a party which was being hosted by his alcoholic father.

He arrived at our Drop-In Center, and then went to live in the Children's Village. As he got older he moved into the Children's Home and it was here that he asked to go to live in a monastery and be ordained as a Buddhist monk.

In April last year I visited him at the temple as it was his 13th birthday and I took him his favourite foods, including a punnet of strawberries.

Not long after that he left the temple and returned to us, and started back at school; he came back to us as we are the only family he knows

Unfortunately he ran away until several weeks later he returned to us, and then just before Christmas we received a very unusual phone call....



The lady on the other end of the phone told us that she thinks we may have her nephew living with us she had recognised his name on Facebook. She told us that his name was Condo, and when we asked for more proof she gave his full name, and sent a copy of his birth certificate and his mother's ID.

Two days later this lady, Condo's aunt, traveled down to Pattaya with his uncle, her husband, and her two sons, both of whom remembered playing with Condo when they were much younger.

If you had asked me the question, which of all our children who live here with us will never go back to live with their family? I would have said Condo, for sure.

But two hours after meeting his long lost family, and wiping away a lot of tears, this young thirteen year old packed his bags, said his farewells, climbed into the back of the pick-up and waved us all goodbye.

We are in regular contact with Condo and he is loving life with his new family in rural Surin province, and he's even agreed to go back to school. We are all very happy for him, and I remember the day he arrived as a three year old, scared and in shock, and I will miss him for sure.

Working here in Pattaya you just never know what's going to happen next!



Heavyweight visitor

Former world heavyweight boxing champion, Frank Bruno, recently visited Pattaya on a promotional tour for his new autobiography. During the time he was in the city he hosted a charity dinner event to raise funds for us as well as another local charity. Our boys from the Children's Home were invited to give an exhibition of Muay Thai, the local Thai boxing, but the restaurant was far too crowded for them to perform; Mr. Bruno is a very popular man.

I took the boys into the restaurant and we all met the former champ, and I can't describe how excited they all were. Then I invited Frank Bruno outside for a quick photo with the boys, but instead of just having his picture taken he signed all their boxing gloves and then sat watching them as they performed their boxing routine, as all the paying guests were patiently waiting for him back inside. What a gentleman!



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Whenever I write these newsletters I'm always thinking, and hoping, that you the reader enjoys reading them as much as I enjoy living them and writing them.

As you have read we have a lot of changes taking place this year, and if you want any more information about the changes at our schools, or you would like information about the construction that will be taking place, just send me an email to **info@fr-ray.org**. If you would like to cover the costs of one of the houses that will be constructed then please let me know – we'll even name it after you! *Derek Franklin*

we never turn a needy child away