

# Never too Old to Serve

What inspires a 72-year-old woman to sew her heart out ten months of the year, tirelessly hold fetes to raise funds, and then travel to the poorest communities in the world for the remaining two months? When most retirees are getting out their campervans or rocking chairs, Claire Green, a soon-to-be great-grandmother, has gathered herself a band of workers called 'Caring Hearts', who are intent on making a difference for children who are less fortunate.

It was the early 1990's and Claire says that she'd scrimped and saved to go on a cruise with a girlfriend. As the boat pulled back into Perth, she felt a deep dissatisfaction. As she later shared her heart with her daughter, her daughter responded, "Mum, you need to ask God to give you a job."

Taking her daughter's advice, Claire did just that.

Within eight days, a flier turned up in her letterbox calling for volunteers for the 'Love in a Shoe Box' program. Seeing it as a sign, she called them and started her first job for God. This work lasted for over 12 months before Claire got itchy feet to not only send but also deliver the goodies.

That was 15 years ago.

In the interim, Claire has supported three different works in Thailand including an orphanage for children with AIDS in Klong-Toiy, a leper colony and an orphanage in Khon-Kaen, a slum area of Bangkok.

"When you see their suffering, it does something to you," says Claire. "It makes you want to do something."

Claire vividly recalls working in the first AIDS orphanage in Khon Kean, where she recounts how helpers do everything for the children.

"We were allowed to play with them, help with school lessons, and feed the children. We could hug and cuddle them but were not permitted to bathe them because of their routines," says Claire.

Claire shares with a tear in her eye of the saddest incident she experienced in the orphanage, aside

from the death of the children, which was always heartbreaking.

"We had handed out balloons to all the orphans and they were having a wonderful time blowing them up and playing with them.

Then this little boy, no more than 4 years of age, came over to me with a deflated balloon in his hand. It had gone down and he was having trouble blowing it up. This little boy had full-blown AIDS. He wanted me to inflate the balloon for him. As I stood there, these little brown eyes were pleading with me. He couldn't speak English and I couldn't speak Thai, so I was unable to explain why I couldn't blow it up for him. I felt so sad and hopeless. Suffice to say, I always take a pocket full of balloons when I go now because I never want that to happen to me again."

In the mid 1990's, Claire reconnected with a nun named Sister Joan who had taught her daughter at school. She'd heard that Sister Joan was working in Thailand and decided to pay her a visit. It was inspirational.

The slum where Sister Joan lived housed approximately 350,000 people. She'd established a feeding program for the young mothers to ensure their babies had a good start to life through the provision of formula and clothing. She also had a goal to break the poverty cycle by educating the young children. She organised the provision of clothing, school materials and their school fees, as well as bussing them to school. Sister Joan also treated their ailments where possible.

"Sister Joan lives with the people

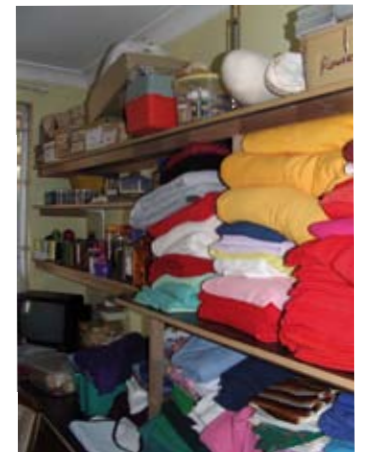
in the slums. She is an amazing woman. She's in her 70's and there she is, doing so much for these people. Her main role is educating the children so they can help their families," says Claire.

In 2001, 'Caring Hearts' raised \$1500 to help Sister Joan, which was enough for uniforms for 500 children.

Claire became involved with an orphanage and leper colony in Khon Kean around the same time as she visited Sister Joan.

"There were these two little boys that had been rescued from the slums by Pastor Hans, the overseer of the Orphanage, and they were very happy to have their daily needs met, to have shelter, clothing and the opportunity of an education," says Claire.

It was as they were praying they heard the sound of a woman crying outside the meeting room. Pastor Hans went to investigate and there was the grandmother of the two boys sobbing her heart out. She had fingers missing on both hands and with half of her feet eaten away by



One of the 'Caring Hearts' ladies sews 5000 knickers per year.



Claire's granny flat is full of fabrics, cottons and buttons ready to sew, with bags of garments ready to send.

Leprosy. She walked with a branch off a tree with great difficulty. She had come because she missed the boys who were too frightened to visit her because they thought they would be unable to return to the orphanage.

Claire still remembers clearly, as if it were yesterday, Pastor Hans kneeling in front of the old woman and looking up at Claire and saying, "What are we going to do for these people?"

Upon return to Perth, Claire pondered the idea to build them a nursing home, and a thought came to her, 'I can sell imaginary bricks!'

So began the current building project for the Leper Colony in Khon-Kean.

The vision has shifted to accommodate the wishes of the people. Instead of building a nursing home, which was a foreign and fearful concept to the lepers, they are now building a recreation centre where the lepers can meet together once a week for social interaction with friends and family. They will also use the building to prepare meals for the lepers, delivering them via a meals-on-wheels motorbike. In addition, they will help the lepers to fix up their shanties to make them safer, and once a month they hope to be able to run a clinic from the building for dental and medical checks.

'Caring Hearts' is now selling bricks at \$25 per brick, and offering

the opportunity for people to have their loved ones' names entered on a special plaque that will hang in the foyer as a memoriam. Through this project, Claire and her band of caring hearted people have raised over \$14,000 to date and the building is going up. Nevertheless, they still need more help to reach their goal of fitting out the building, hiring a delivery rider for their hot food motorbike and filling the cupboards and fridges with food and all things necessary to run a centre.

Claire's eyes twinkle as she tells of the lepers and orphans for whom she has a deep affection. As if they were her blood relatives, she fusses over fabrics and patterns, with each stitch a stitch of love. As she showed me around her granny flat that has been converted into a small sewing unit, I see shelves stacked with colourful rolls of fabric lining every wall. There are balls of cotton and tall tubes full of buttons of every colour imaginable. There are huge bags full of knickers she has sewn for the orphanages and the women's prisons. However, the most impressive thing I saw was the sewing machine and overlocker, sitting side by side, with a window that looked out over her tidy backyard. It was then that I caught a vision of the tiring hours of solitude that this nimble granny must spend pouring herself out over her sewing machines.

Of the poverty that is encountered in such a place, Claire says, "It is very distressing. It causes you a lot of heartache because they are so poor. The amazing thing is that they are so grateful for everything. They pray and thank God for everything!"

This is Claire's reward for her efforts. It is the twinkle in the eyes of the children as they receive their new clothes or a simple toy. It is in the appreciative hug of the older woman who knows what it is to do life tough and is so grateful for even the smallest kindness to her family. It is in the warmth of the smile of the young parent whose baby is now receiving formula, which will save it from malnutrition.

"I asked my friend why God had waited so long to give me a job," says Claire. "She responded, 'Its because you never asked him before'. The sad thing is she was right."

The centre is now almost complete, however, Claire needs your help to furnish, fill the fridge and pay the meals delivery person. Can you help Claire by donating resources?



Above: Like children, they enjoy playing with shaving cream.



Above: These steps lead up to the kitchen in the new recreation centre.



Above: The lepers gather together for a meeting. They are so thankful for everything they have and receive.

To contact Claire, email [caringhearts@pearlsmag.com](mailto:caringhearts@pearlsmag.com).



Left: Inside the kitchen of the building is the bench where they will serve people food.

Right background: The frame for the kitchen.



*Phetchabum Baby home  
for Orphans*

# *My Little Treasures*



*These two girls were very ill last year.  
Look at them now!*



*How it all started- 2001,  
all the toys  
I made for 'Love in a  
ShoeBox'*



*Self & Suk.  
she was found in the AIDS  
hospital and was the first baby  
at Khon Kaen. She came with  
5 boys. She was 4 (Sept 8th) She  
can't speak.  
Parents  
Unknown.*



*Gone- Has his sister with him.  
Both unwanted. No HIV*



Blue plate means  
no HIV or AIDS



A Leper lady-she's blind and has only half of both feet and one hand. We took her grandson into our Home. My inspiration for the new rec centre.



Net- was found on the church steps in the mountains. Her past is unknown.

the d Art- both parents died of AIDS. His father came to visit him ay before he died. After his visit little Art said, "my father is dying."



Leper village Children - 2005





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