



# VOICES of COMPASSION



SPRING 2007

NEWSLETTER OF THE MARYKNOLL LAY MISSIONERS

## ■ CIVIL & HUMAN RIGHTS

### To Grow a Wildflower

The ingredients... a mixture of sunlight, nutrients, and a safe environment. It need not be perfect—the formula is forgiving.

At the Wildflower Home in Chiang Mai, Thailand, Elizabeth and Michael Thaibinh apply this formula to promote the healthy growth of more than 20 women and children. The Thaibinh have been living in and managing the home since they became MKLM missionaries in 2003.

The Wildflower Home is a former apartment building that has been converted into a school and

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## Spotlight:

### Thailand

*The sight of towering coconut palms.*

*The sweet aroma*

*of jasmine flowers.*

*The whizzing sound of motorcycles.*

*You are in Asia.*



### Thailand

is a country of contradictions. One is consistently met with the dissonance of chaotic energy and contemplative serenity. Gleaming skyscrapers vie for space alongside squatters' shacks. The delicate scent of jasmine competes with the stench of raw sewage. A crowded city street is filled with honking horns and the smells of pollution, yet the Buddhist temple of the same

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## Asia's Cry for Help

This issue of Voices of Compassion focuses on MKLM ministries in Thailand. People of this country suffer generally from harsh government rule, political conflict, tremendous socio-economic strife, disenfranchisement from their homes, and a high proportion of physical disability.



In Thailand, nine MKLM missionaries apply their skills and knowledge to respond to basic needs, raise the quality of life, and restore hope, by making sustainable improvements in healthcare, the environment, education, civil and human rights, economic development, and pastoral guidance.

Also in this issue, read about two MKLM alumni missionaries that had served previously in Thailand. And, on page 2, MKLM Executive Director, Kevin Mestrich, offers his reflection on his recent visit to this area of the world and Maryknoll Lay Missioners' challenge to meet similar needs around the world.

If you wish to learn more about our organization, or the missionaries we send and support in mission, please call us at **1.800.867.2980**, visit us at **[www.mkmlm.org](http://www.mkmlm.org)**, or write us:

Maryknoll Lay Missioners, P.O. Box 307, Maryknoll, NY 10545-0307

## LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

### **Dear Friends,**

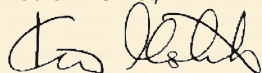
**T**his past summer, I had the opportunity to visit Maryknoll Lay Missioners' ministries in several Southeast Asian countries... some of which you'll read about in this issue of *Voices of Compassion*. Invariably, the mission activities were relevant and inspirational. Included among my many stops was a home for children with AIDS, a massage therapy training center for the blind, and a center to receive and combat the trafficking of women and girls. In every case, I was reminded what a privilege it is to offer practical assistance while demonstrating faith, hope, and love in Jesus' name.

This privileged service continues the Maryknoll tradition of meaningful mission service designed to meet immediate needs, while providing community benefits that continue into the future. As the newest of the Maryknoll entities, (we were established in 1974), we have learned an enormous amount from the Maryknoll Fathers & Brothers and Maryknoll Sisters, and whenever possible we continue to working side-by-side with them in service to the world's poor and disenfranchised.

Yet, with each passing year it becomes clearer that the U.S. Church's lay people are being called upon to shoulder an increasing responsibility. With more than 120 Maryknoll Lay Missioners at work in 17 countries, we're doing our best to answer this call. However, as an independently funded lay mission organization, we simply can't afford to train and support all those aspiring missionaries desiring to serve overseas. In fact, one of our greatest challenges is securing the financial support needed to train, send and sustain our missionaries around the world.

As you read about the work of our Maryknoll Lay Missioners and the good work being done in Thailand, I ask that you take a moment to reflect on needs that we are meeting as well as all those that continue to cry out for our attention. Remember also that our work can only continue and grow through partnership with those who share our mission spirit. Please support Maryknoll Lay Missioners in any way that you can... through encouragement, through prayer, through financial gifts. Then, every time you read a future edition of *Voices of Compassion*, you'll know that one of those voices is yours.

Yours in Christ,



Kevin Mestrich

*Executive Director*

Maryknoll Lay Missioners



## Thailand

*(Cont'd. from Cover)*

street is filled with peaceful quiet and the rich, heady aroma of incense. You can visit a vibrant market in rural Thailand where live eel and fish and frogs are for sale, or walk through the crowded night market of Bangkok where, tragically, women are on display for tourists and locals alike.

At first glance, Thailand lives up to its status as one of the "Asian Tigers," quickly developing and industrializing itself. Yet, those who do not enjoy the benefits of Thailand's wealth include rural villagers growing cash crops, refugees from Myanmar (formerly Burma), and migrant workers in booming industrial cities, as well as Hill Tribe children without access to education.

Thailand's first National Economic and Social Development plan of 1961 greatly transformed the historically agrarian society to an industrial society. Presently, agriculture makes up 9.9% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), yet 49% of the labor force is in agriculture. Industry by contrast makes up 44.1% of the GDP with only 14% of

the labor force.

Many families or heads of families looking for work in factories migrate to the quickly industrializing cities of Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Migrant workers, beckoned by rapid industrialization, live in constant threat of deportation, have limited protection granted by labor laws, and have virtually no access to medical care, education, or government social services. They are vulnerable to exploitation, have few resources to care for their basic needs, and have encountered much suffering in their daily



lives. In addition, for more than ten years, refugees have been streaming over the border from Myanmar to escape the constant war, oppression, and political turmoil of its ruling military regime. Hill Tribe people from the high mountain areas along the border of Myanmar continue to

fight for recognition as Thai citizens in order to gain better access to healthcare and education.

The wealth and development of Thailand hides the reality of these people's lives. It is these people whom MKLM missionaries in Thailand are called to serve.

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## Trans-Border: Thailand-based missionary is Myanmar journalist

As reported in some of the other articles in this magazine, many people of Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, have fled to surrounding regions. Perhaps the best way to understand the present realities of these refugees, and their reasons for fleeing, is to briefly glimpse their past and the history of their once majestic homeland.

### ***From the Royalty of Burma to the Reality of Myanmar***

Myanmar had long been a monarchy ruled by

various dynasties. Then, in the late nineteenth century, the land was colonized by the British. In 1948, Myanmar gained its independence from Britain, and became a parliamentary based democracy. In 1962, the political movement, the "Burmese Way to Socialism," and its leader Ne Win, seized power, converting Myanmar to a socialist-type government. Now, Myanmar is an authoritarian state whose power is enforced by the military, or Tatmadaw, through the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and its chairman, Senior General Than Shwe.

### ***The Free World Responds***

On the global landscape, Myanmar is suffering from great political and economic repudiation. The governments of several other countries have imposed consumer boycotts and sanctions

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The Thaibinh family

shelter. It serves single adolescents and women—some of whom are pregnant, some who have small children. Many are Myanmar (formerly Burma) refugees without citizens' rights.

At The Wildflower Home, residents receive training in basic healthcare, child rearing, literacy, money management, and vocational skills. Each day is structured with meditation time, class time, and work time for the women. The children receive schooling in a different project operated on the same property, providing stability and security that has often been lacking in their lives. The living environment provides a safe, loving atmosphere for the women and their children.

Residents stay at the home for one year before they move on to a job that Elizabeth and Michael have helped them secure for their venture into sustainable independence.

The Thaibinh family understand, first-hand, the importance of raising children in this type of safe and loving environment. They, too, are raising their children at the Wildflower Home. Andrew, Katrina, and Michaela are 12, 10, and 6 years old, respectively.

Elizabeth came to MKLM with experience in campus and youth ministry activities, and as a teacher and coordinator of religious education. Michael is trained as a design engineer and architect. Born and raised in Vietnam, he fled to Indonesia as a refugee for eight months before coming to the United States. Michael has continued his involvement with Vietnam as an active member of the Vietnamese Laity Movement and has served as editor of that organization's magazine. He has also served with Habitat for Humanity and tutored at a women's prison in North Carolina.

## Connecting Faith

Many countries in South and Southeast Asia experience ongoing conflict or are in post-conflict stages of recovery. Although each country and each conflict is unique, many of the conflicts are religious in nature. And, as is generally true in all countries and conflicts – there is fear of the unfamiliar and unknown. In Thailand, where there are almost 27,000 temples, nearly 95% of the people are Buddhist. In contrast, only 4% of the population is Muslim. (Christians compose approximately 0.7%, and Hindus less than 0.1%, of the population.) Often, Muslim peoples are perceived as terrorists and extremists.

Generally, Buddhist Thais consider the practice of any religion to be good because, they believe, it contributes to a higher morality in society. And, all Thais, regardless of religion, have traditionally lived peacefully and respectfully with one another. However, since 2004, there has been escalating violence between Muslim separatists and Thai authorities resulting in hundreds of deaths. Most Muslim Thais



## ***Their Light Shines On... In Thailand***

*Jules Mueller and Mike Hayes met when they became MKLM missionaries in 1986. They were both assigned to Thailand where they worked for eight years. Jules served in a program advancing AIDS education and awareness. At the bishop's request, she and Mike also worked in a program for developmentally delayed children. Jules served as an occupational therapist and Mike used his physical therapist skills. While helping to expand the program, Jules and Mike fell in love and were married in 1991.*

*The couple returned to the U.S. in 1995 and currently live in Grand Ledge, Michigan with their two daughters Lisa (9) and Andrea (6). Jules is a foster-home recruitment specialist and Mike is a home health physical therapist. Both are very active in St. Michael's Parish, serving on the Peace and Justice Committee and the Parish Council. They are also primary organizers for St. Michael's "Just Faith" program, an effort designed to help Catholics deepen their Gospel commitment.*

live in the southern region of the country, thus adding geography to the exacerbation of the Buddhist-Muslim divide.

Although there are numerous efforts to respond to these conflicts, the Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN) is one of the few efforts that works directly with communities to address these issues on a community-based, grassroots level. AMAN is a network of progressive Muslims and other-faith collaborators in Asia, which seeks to respond to some of the interfaith challenges that Asians face. AMAN addresses issues of elite corruption, mate-

rialistic life styles, increasing ethnic tension, violence against women and children, and environmental degradation.

Cecilia "Cece" Aguilar-Ortiz, an MKLM missionary since 1999, works with AMAN as an advocate. Through this collaboration, Cece is directly involved in developing the Youth for Peace Network. This initiative involves Asian youth responding to issues of violence, human rights abuses, as well as religious, cultural and economic marginalization. "Inter-religious dialogue and peace efforts are extremely important, especially from within the Muslim community," she says.

Cece, pictured left, and her husband Dan have lived and worked in Thailand since they joined MKLM. Originally from Tucson, Arizona, Cece had lived in Houston, Texas before becoming an MKLM missionary. In Texas, she and Dan were involved in St. Joseph's Parish, Diocese of Galveston-Houston. Read about Dan's ministry on page 10.



# Heaven's Gifts

*"Heaven's gifts." This is what Amy Braun and Billy and Kathleen Doerner call the 70-plus children of the Phonsawan Child Development Center (PCDC). The word Phonsawan means "heaven's gifts" in Thai and is a very significant phrase for Thai people. It has also become a significant phrase for these three MKLM missionaries.*

PCDC is located in the quickly industrializing province of Chiang Mai. Like Bangkok, Chiang Mai has become host and home to many Hill Tribe migrants and Myanmar refugees. The various tribes from the outskirting hills of Thailand include Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Akha, Mien, H'tin, Lisu, Lua, Khamu, and Mlabri. Of the 1.6 million residents of Chiang Mai, 13.4% speak one of the various Hill Tribe languages and 38% of people aged 6-24 do not attend school.

In 2005, a law was passed stating that all children within Thailand, regardless of citizenship status, had a right to an education. Thus, in theory, schools can no longer reject tribal or migrant children on the basis of insufficient docu-

mentation. But racial discrimination is common and some schools have more subtle ways of keeping non-Thai children out. There is also a lack of resources, and little desire to accommodate non-Thai speaking students. Very few tribal families can afford to send their children to high school. Most of the children stop attending school after grade six unless they receive outside financial support.

Hill Tribe children travel into the city of Chiang Mai with their parents who are in search of work and a better life. The parents of these children work as unskilled day laborers or hawk items such as flowers or trinkets in the night market. Some of the children are left home unsupervised until their parents return. Others join their parents and grandparents selling flowers at night. Still others beg, or do whatever they can, to find money to help their families. They lead poor and desperate lives trying to make ends meet. In addition, many Hill Tribe families must stay mobile to search for money and housing. The constant mobility, coupled with the lack of resources and Thai-lan-



Billy Doerner teaches in a PCDC schoolroom.



guage skills, makes it very difficult for the children to attend school consistently.

PCDC addresses the basic and educational needs of poor tribal migrant children. Since PCDC was founded 5 years ago, it has grown from a single bamboo room into a large center and boarding house. During the day, approximately 30 children ages 4-10 attend pre-school in which they receive lessons in the spoken and written Thai language, preparing them for an education in the Thai school system. The children also learn basic math, health education, social skills, and arts and crafts. An additional 40 children live in PCDC's boarding home and study in grades 1-6 at the local Thai school. These children are at the boarding house because they have no one to look after them or

because they would be unable to attend school if they stayed at home.

In addition to food, lodging, and education, PCDC provides school supplies and uniforms, school lunches, and means for medical care, as well as training in life-skills development. The caregivers teach lessons and supervise homework. More importantly, they provide the children with a sense of safety, stability, love, and hope for a better future.

Billy, an MKLM missionary, provides organizational and administrative skills to the team that directs the project. Kathleen, also an MKLM missionary and Billy's wife, serves as a teacher and supervisor of the teaching team and is incorporating a new component into the children's curriculum which focuses on child protection. Her goal is to ensure that



Lahu children of the PCDC and MKLM missionary Amy Braun.

teachers and students are better prepared to prevent sexual abuse of children. This component of the program is vital due to the high rate of sex-trafficking in Chiang Mai.

Amy, an MKLM missionary since 2003, spearheads the PCDC Outreach Team. She, along with a Thai social worker and an Ursuline sister, visits the families of the children in PCDC's care with the goal of creating a partnership with the families. The Outreach Team assists family members by helping them obtain birth certificates and house registration forms that their children need to attend school.

In addition, the presence of the Outreach Team pro-

*(More...page 8)*

# Heaven's Gifts

(Cont'd. from page 7)

Kathleen and Billy Doerner with their children.



vides a pastoral ministry to the families with which the team works. Many of the migrants are living in the slums of Chiang Mai. They feel isolated and displaced. They often do not have an opportunity to share their stories and experiences with people outside their neighborhood. By listening to their stories, and understanding their hardships, the PCDC Outreach Team is able to provide counsel and support for the migrants.

Billy and Kathleen joined MKLM in 1993 with their daughters Sarah and Rosemary, who were ages four and one at the time. Billy is originally from Oklahoma, but the couple came to Maryknoll Lay Missioners from Portland, Oregon. Billy has degrees from

Oklahoma State University and Oregon State University. Amy is originally from Indianapolis, Indiana, but comes to MKLM by way of Yakima, Washington. In Yakima, Amy served with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps where she worked as a medical assistant and coordinator for the Reach Out and Read program. She taught English and worked with AIDS patients in Cambodia in 2001 as part of the Summer Service Learning Program from Notre Dame. In 2002 she spent six weeks living in a Taiwanese Buddhist monastery as part of the International Buddhist Monastic Life Program. In 2002 she also spent a week in El Salvador studying Liberation Theology.

## Trans-Border

(Cont'd. from page 3)

against the Tatmadaw. "Free Burma" activists have successfully persuaded many western corporations to cease transactions with and within Myanmar. As part of the "Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003," the United States government banned all imports from Myanmar.

But, as with all products of large-government action, there are by-products. With the best intentions to show disdain and disapproval for the ruling party of Myanmar, the United States and other western democracies may have unintentionally created additional issues for citizens of Myanmar. The adverse effect of the U.S.-led sanctions has been the exacerbation of a poor economy shouldered by the already destitute Myanmar poor. However, the leader of Myanmar's National League for Democracy and 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi, credits the actions of western democracies for pressuring the ruling military regime.

In addition to suffering from lack of basic human rights, Myanmar citizens have no independent judiciary and no freedom of speech. Internet access is filtered by state-owned and oper-



**Jim Campion receives gratitude while on assignment.**

ated software, restricting access to free email services, free web hosting, political opposition and pro-democracy pages, and other information that may give the Myanmar audience a broader knowledge-base regarding their country's situation.

### **MKLM Responds**

Jim Campion became an MKLM missionary in 1983, serving in Hong Kong and in the United States. In 1993, Jim moved to Chiang Mai, Thailand. Living less than 100 miles from the Thai-Myanmar border, and equipped with years of experience as a professional writer and journalist, it was only fitting that Jim would choose to join efforts with Burma News International (BNI) as his ministry and work as a writer and editor for the collaboration.

### **Burma News International (BNI)**

To help the world gain a better understanding of the realities of the Myanmar state, BNI was established in 2002. Nine independent Myanmar (Burma) media and news organizations from the western border of Myanmar, India, Bangladesh, Thailand, and the Thai-Myanmar border joined together to promote Myanmar related news and reports in South Asia and Southeast Asia. BNI serves as a bridge for mutual understanding, as well as sharing experiences, expertise, resources, and cooperation among the Independent Burma Media Organizations. Present members include: Mizzima News, Narinjara News, Kaladan Press, Khonumthung News, Network Media Group,

Independent Mon News Agency, Shan Herald Agency for News, Kao Wao News, and Kantarawaddy Times.

BNI's vision is "To become a leading multi-media enterprise that presents a comprehensive picture of Burma and plays a role in promoting an understanding of the country." Its mission is "catering daily reliable, accurate and balanced news from different parts of the country to the local, regional and international community, presenting Burma as a nation of diverse peoples. [BNI helps] to create knowledge and understanding about the different ethnic nationalities and regions of Burma."

BNI provides a rare opportunity for professionally trained journalists from traditionally independent tribal groups to collaborate and assist one another in getting and communicating accurate information. The journalists include Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims engaged in inter-religious dialogue and encouraging collaboration.

To visit BNI's online component, go to [www.bnionline.net](http://www.bnionline.net). To learn more about Jim and other MKLM missionaries in Thailand, visit [www.mkmlm.org](http://www.mkmlm.org).

# The Mon of Wat Prok

What might one expect to find within the ornate encasement of a Buddhist Temple? Might you be lured in by the welcoming fragrance of incense? Awed by the innate sense of wisdom in the steady gaze of the Buddha? Might you be willfully blinded by the vibrant colors and rich golds? And, might you be snap-quick jostled awake from this dreamy state by schoolchildren laughing and playing in these majestic halls!?... You may be — if you were in the Buddhist temple of Wat Prok.

Wat Prok is currently home and school-house to approximately 40 Mon refugee children. The Mon are an indigenous people of Myanmar (formerly Burma). For more than ten years, thousands of refugees have been streaming over the border from Myanmar to escape war, oppression, and political strife. In addition, many of these refugees have traveled to industrialized Bangkok, where the temple is located, in search of work.

Refugee families cannot afford to feed, house, and clothe their children. Because of their non-citizenship status, the refugees lack rights, which, until recently, included the right to an education. The educational situation for children has improved since a law was passed in 2005 stating that all children within Thailand, regardless of citizenship status, had a right to an education. But, racial discrimination is still common, and there is a lack of resources and desire in Thai schools to accommodate non-Thai speaking students. The children of the Mon refugee families often feel the impact of their migration. And, they often cannot



Dan and Cece Aguilar Ortiz talk with Wat Prok children.

enjoy childhood. Wat Prok provides for their needs, including their need to be children. And, MKLM missionary Daniel Ortiz sees to it.

Dan was moved by the plight of the very young children and inspired by the opportunities afforded them in Wat Prok. Until recently, the children were learning only Pali chants and the Mon language. Daniel has worked to enhance their education and challenge their curious minds by adding to their de facto curriculum. He teaches them English, math, science and art. In addition, he and a Thai volunteer are providing sports and other recreational activities.

Dan, a graduate of Notre Dame, joined MKLM in 1999. Before becoming an MKLM missionary, Dan worked in the Galveston-Houston, Texas area at an inner city elementary school as its Communities in Schools Project Manager. He built parental involvement by teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) and citizenship classes. He also worked with Catholic Charities as a teacher. Dan's teaching experience, combined with his talent for working with children, make him a valuable addition to the MKLM ministry at Wat Prok Temple.

Read about Dan's wife Cece and her ministry on page 4.

**KIDS!** Thai Children's Games are available  
at [www.mkmlm.org](http://www.mkmlm.org)! Visit the **kids only** section!

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**INSIDE**  
**Read the stories of**  
**MKLM missionaries**  
**in Thailand!**

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