

Phud Hong Leper Foundation

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The Phud Hong Story



The story of the Phud Hong Leper Foundation began back in 1974, on a hot, arid day in October when veteran Bangkok Post reporter Sumitr Hemastol started off on the dusty road from Ron Pibul District in Nakhon Si Thammarat. His destination was the little-known leper colony of Phud Hong in the village of the same name.

The colony had been established by the Thai Government in 1956. On the day that Sumitr arrived, some 255 lepers and their dependents were slowly dying of starvation. They simply had no food to eat. The Department of Health which in January of 1974 had cut their food allowance down to a meagre five baht a day had now decided to cut off even this paltry amount. There was simply no more money left for food.

In the colony's offices, Sumitr found an air of neglect. The dusty office was deserted. The dispirited officials had left after signing their attendance record. There was no one left to mind the shop.

Sumitr returned to Bangkok and wrote a heart-rending account of what he had seen in that run-down place without a future. He wrote about the lepers, and even more importantly, he wrote about their children who were facing a bleak future without outside help.

Public response

The story was run in the Sunday Post of July 12, 1974. Its impact on the reading public was immense and offers of help poured in from all sides the Bangkok Post held a hasty meeting and decided to establish a fund to handle all the donations. Honorary Life President Prasit Lulitanond agreed to accept the job as chairman of the fund.

When the establishment of the Phud Hong Fund was announced, the response was overwhelming. Over 90,000 baht was collected on the first day alone. Mr Prachuab Bhirombhakdi of Boonrawd Brewery alone donated 50,000 baht. Other first day donors included Mr Soji Robert of Temple Pucicity, Mr Nukul Prachuabmoh and the United Press International.

The next day Toyota Motors staff collected 5,355 baht while the Toyota Company added 10,000 baht to the sum. The Order of St Camillo donated 5,000 baht, the late Mrs Misiem Yip In Tsoi 2,000 baht while the JUSMAG medical relief services unit donated medicine and supplies worth 50,000 baht

By the third day of the appeal, the cash contribution had reached 102,335 baht plus the 50,000 baht worth of supplies. The response was so spontaneous and generous it surprised even the Bangkok Post. itself. Even a massage parlour, the Plaza Onzen in Patpong Road, donated 260 towels and 260 bags of soap.

By August 1 the cash level had passed the 200,000 baht mark and then on August 4 the World Medical Relief donated drugs worth 70,000 baht.

The story of the suffering touched the heart of little Joy Robert who donated her money box containing all her life's savings. When counted, the collection came to a grand total of 343 baht, no mean sum for a 12-year-old girl.



The lepers of Phud Hong and their dependence were saved.

The fund grew and grew, Chairman Prasit and his committee taking meticulous care to see that every baht donated was put to the best possible use the Bangkok Post itself extended generous help where possible, lending facilities and personnel and covering extra expenses to allow as much of the donation money as possible to go directly to the lepers and their families.

A team was sent down to Phud Hong to study the situation and talk to the Phud Hong authorities. The groups returned to Bangkok with a number of recommendations including.

- Installation of a permanent supply of water, including pumps and pipes.
- A system for the collection of rainwater from the roof of wards and houses.
- Provision of an electricity supply by moving a transformer near the colony and providing one light for each cottage.
- Repairing leaky roofs.
- Ten beds complete with mattresses for a new hospital ward.
- Monthly distribution of rice for each family, along with essential supplies such as fish sauce, detergent, sugar, fruits as well as sweets and toys for children.

A major step came on August 27 of the same year when Her Majesty Queen Rambhai Barni agreed to become patron of the fund. Khun Prasit was able to tell her that the total collected so far was in excess of 320,000 baht and some of the fund was being used to install water, electricity, more beds and to provide a nursery for the leper's children.



By September 1974 a play ground was opened for the hundred or so children in the colony, complete with swings and see-saws. By October, a new transformer was purchased and installed to provide electricity to the colony. Broken down water pumps were also repaired.

In April 1975 a decision was made to build a nursery school to take care of the colony's 84 children under the age of five. It was decided that the provision of a nursery will free parents from the burden of looking after their young children, thus allowing them to go out and do some work to bring income to make them more self-supporting.

With the fund growing steadily, it was decided to register the fund as a foundation, and the Phud Hong Leper Foundation Under the Royal Patronage of Her Majesty Queen Rambhai Barni was established in 1983.

Extra care was taken of the children to make sure that they do not enter the future with a

handicap.

A kindergarten was established while a run-down primary school was repaired. A vocational training centre was established with the help of Catholic nuns. A water reservoir was constructed by the Irrigation department to guarantee water supply all the year through. A water treatment unit was built to ensure clean drinking water.

An enormous amount of help was given to the foundation by people and establishments which are too numerous to name. Foremost among them include the Irrigation Department which agreed to build a reservoir to ensure year-round water supply, the Catholic Foundation of Surat Thani which donated land for a vocational training centre as well as providing training, the Rotary Club of Dhonburi among others which donated substantial funds for various projects, the Rajthani Lioness Club of Bangkok, the Thai-Japan Association, the Japanese Association, the Royal Bangkok Sports Club, the Princess Mother Charity Foundation, the United Kingdom Committee for Thai Charities.

The Phud Hong Foundation has come a long way since its establishment, but there is still a long way to go. Although leprosy is slowly being wiped out in the world, the ravages it left behind is still being felt by those afflicted by the debilitating disease and their families alike.

It is the aim of the Phud Hong Leper Foundation to continue to give help and encouragement to these patients and their families, to help them help themselves and to make positive contributions to society rather than become a burden to the country.



But the Phud Hong Leper Foundation is little more than a co-ordinating centre. The foundation can only pass along the generosity of donors, collecting the funds and managing them the the best possible way to ensure that those who most needed help will get the necessary assistance in the most cost-effective way possible.

It is the generosity of our sponsors and donors which makes our effort over the past 20 years possible, and it will be the same generosity which will see that our efforts go from strength to strength so that the unfortunate people of Phud Hong can look forward to a future-a future where they will have a fighting chance, a future in which they are able to stand proudly and say honestly that they have made it in life, on their own, with assistance from understanding donors and sponsors.

Re-building self respect

Sadly, many lepers have lost not only their hands and fingers but also their self-respect as human beings. This attitude has affected enormously not only the leper victims themselves but also their own children and the whole leper community.

In order to bring back the lepers' self-esteem, the Phud Hong Leper Foundation has initiated the Phud Hong Family Life Programme, which is designed especially for lepers.

Several years ago, the foundation erected a kindergarten school in the Phud Hong Leper Colony.

Realising that education starts at home and educating children without parents' participation would have very little success, the foundation initiated the above-mentioned programme to educate parents.

This continuous educational programme is developed along with separate programmes for



the youth and for children. It is hoped that these programmes will cause a gradual change in attitude among lepers and lead to a deeper sense of self-appreciation and therefore allow motivations for the whole community to be more self-reliant and productive.

In the implementation of the programme for parents, children have been used as key to get into the target. Organisers of the programme pay visits to the families of children in the kindergarten school, and urge them to attend the quarterly meeting at the school building.

Persons from various fields are invited to provide separate activities for the young and the old. Topics discussed include family health care with emphasis on herbal medicine; responsible parenthood with emphasis on spacing of children; husband and wife relationship with emphasis on the art of communication, and the child's stages of development with emphasis on understanding child psychology.

Extending a helping hand to make this programme a success are the Phud Hong Leper Foundation which provides facilities and daily food supply to the children, and the Holy Childhood Fund which gives medicine for the children while the Thai Government takes care of the lepers' medicine and daily allowance.

Three volunteer Sisters of Charity from the Philippines came to work at Phud Hong through the request and assistance of the Very Rev Pete Caretto, SDB, bishop of the Diocese of Surat Thani, who manages the organisation and supervision of the programme. The sisters make home visitations and hospital referrals, and conduct group meetings and follow-up activities in collaboration with the officers of the Phud Hong Leper Foundation.

The inmates of the colony are encouraged and motivated to participate so that one day they can proudly stand up and live in society without being discriminated as outcasts any more.

Father to a colony

I was helping to feed one of the children at lunchtime, then I noticed that the next child was looking at me, so I fed her too. At this point, the third burst into tears, so I ended up having to feed most of the children at the table!

Chairman and founder of the Phud Hong Leper Foundation Prasit Lulitanond told the above story with a chuckle and with the ever-present twinkle in his eyes. However, the story graphically illustrates the deep affection the children of the Phud Hong Leper colony held for the man who has come to be known as Khun Por or Father at the colony he had been supporting for the past 20 years.



Right up till his passing away in 1997, Khun Prasit always made a point of trying to make the 800-kilometre trip to Phud Hong at least once every three months to keep an eye on progress and to check on the needs of the patients and their families.

Once at the colony he mixed freely with patients and their dependents alike, but he seemed most happy when surrounded by the children, handing out exercise books and pencils or doling out packets of instant noodles, or even 10-baht notes from his own pocket.

Largely confined to a wheelchair in the latter stage of his life, such personal trips could no longer be made so often, but he nevertheless made sure that a representative made regular

visits to see that things continue in the way he had planned.

From the start, it always had been Khun Prasit's great charisma and enormous prestige which helped draw regular and generous contributions to the Phud Hong Leper Foundation. His close relationship with the Rotary Club of Dhonburi and the Thai-Japan Association is undeniable and hugely profitable for the foundation for which he had worked untiringly for 20 long years.

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