



Fard, 78, on his special bicycle donated by the Rachapracha Samasai Foundation.



Arkorn, 72, has lived in this leprosarium since 1991.

INFO FOR Donations

◆ **Name of organisation:** The Phud Hong Leper Foundation
 ◆ **Address:** c/o Bangkok Post 136 Na Ranong Road, Klong Toey, Bangkok 10110
 ◆ **Tel:** 08-1900-4922 or 02-240-3700.
 ◆ **Bank transfer:** To "Phud Hong Leper Foundation", Account No. 218-0-13367-6, Bangkok Bank, Sunthorn Kosa Branch, Klong Toey, Bangkok.
 Cheque: Please send cheque payable to Phud Hong Leper Foundation, attn: Kusuma Bekenn, Phud Hong Leper Foundation, Bangkok Post Building, 136 Na Ranong, Klong Toey, Bangkok 10110

Please fax pay-in or transfer slip with donor's address and telephone contact to fax number 02-240-3665, attention Kusuma Bekenn, Phud Hong Leper Foundation, for receipts. The donation is tax-deductible.

NO-MAN'S-LAND

WE CARE

Lepers may lose their arms, legs or sight, but they should never be deprived of their right to live with dignity and hope

Story by KUSUMA MINTAKHIN and NAPAMON ROONGWITOO

Arkorn is now 72 years old. While modern health care allows many men his age to live healthy, play golf, have fun with grandchildren or enjoy their hard-earned retirement, Arkorn has no family, no idea what the world looks like due to his blindness and no happy past to look back on.

Living in a leper colony since 1991, the past 20 years may have been better than his life before. Blind since childhood because of leprosy, Arkorn was not given much choice in life. Like many lepers, he was abandoned by his family and shunned by society, and his condition led him to a life in an enclosed community for lepers.

His neighbour in the leprosarium is Fard, who has been suffering from leprosy since his teens. Fard, 78, was born with functional limbs, but his legs and fingers had to be amputated because of the disease. He has been living in the leper colony since 1954.

Arkorn and Fard are not alone on this path. There are more than 100 people whom they call friends and neighbours under the care of the Phud Hong Leper Foundation, which cares for lepers at the leprosarium in the Ron Phibun district of Nakhon Si Thammarat. Many of them have to spend their lives there because they were abandoned by their families.

Founded in 1956 by the Ministry of Public Health, this leper colony sits on a 100-rai (16-hectare) plot of land. By 1974, there were 255 lepers and dependents living there. But life was harsh and depressing. The state food allowance was cut to 5 baht a day, meaning there was not enough food to go round. People were dying from starvation.

The *Bangkok Post* reporter Sumit Hemastol was appalled by what he saw. His heart-rending account of the depressing situation, the sick and dying, and the children's bleak future triggered overwhelming public sympathy. As donations poured in, the *Bangkok Post* decided to set up a foundation to manage funds and coordinate with state agencies



Father Lorenzo of Don Bosco Centre in Nakhon Si Thammarat gives educational support to the children and grandchildren of leprosy patients.

and charity organisations in order to ensure long-term, systematic help for lepers and their children. The Phud Hong Leper Foundation was born, with *Bangkok Post* honorary life president Prasit Lulitanon as chairman.

Apart from saving the lepers and their dependents from starvation, readers' donations were used to provide sufficient food, build kindergartens, repair an old

hospital building and build two new ones. The foundation also coordinated with other agencies to provide the colony with clean water, hygienic toilets, electricity, vocational training and educational support for the children.

Now there are more than 100 lepers, between the ages of 40 and 80 in the colony. About 70 of them are looked after by their children with the income

that they earn. The Phud Hong Foundation, meanwhile, looks after about 50 to 60 lepers who have been abandoned by their families. About 12 of them are very weak and severely handicapped. They are helpless from being blind, or having had their hands, fingers or legs amputated due to the disease. Some even suffer from HIV. This group of patients lives in a quarter donated by the Rachapracha Samasai Foundation.

The biggest cause of suffering, however, is not the physical disabilities. Although leprosy is treatable today, most of them are not physically strong to be treated. They are simply spending the last months or years of their lives in a place where they feel they belong, as opposed to the outside world full of people who do not welcome them.

Before, and even after, the discovery of its biological cause, leprosy patients were shunned or even considered outcasts, mostly because of the obvious physical symptoms of the disease. They were, and still are, isolated from society because most people are afraid that leprosy is contagious. Today, although leprosy is curable, lack of awareness about the disease leads people to falsely think that it is highly contagious and incurable, and that lepers can't coexist with normal people.

The children of leprosy sufferers lead healthy, normal lives, just like the children beyond the leprosarium's gate. They work outside the leper colony and earn a sufficient income — enough to build new homes on the foundation's grounds to replace the old wooden houses originally provided by the government.

The colony is home to some 20 healthy children and grandchildren of leprosy patients who still need support.

The children receive free education at the kindergarten run by St Dominic Centre near the leper colony, managed by an Italian Catholic priest Father Lorenzo, who has been in charge of the Don Bosco Centre in Nakhon Si Thammarat since the early 1960s.

Once they are old enough to go to

primary school they will go to nearby public schools. Educational support is given to the children by the Don Bosco Centre. Some have finished university education and returned to the colony to help out.

One prime example would be Boonyuen Aroonrueng, 34. He education was supported by the Don Bosco Centre fund, and he has since graduated from Rajabhat University in Nakhon Si Thammarat with a degree in electrical engineering.

Although his parents have a history of leprosy, he is healthy, and so are his children. He now teaches at the Don Bosco Skill Centre.

Apart from children's classes, Father Lorenzo also runs a few other classes for the patients, like electrical, carpentry and metal technician skills workshops. For the women, there are sewing courses. These are free of charge for those living in the colony. The patients look after themselves and each other, and the

children are taught simple skills to help the patients.

To take care of some 100 lepers, the Phud Hong Foundation now operates from occasional donations and with regular support from the Mater Dei School. With dwindling donations, however, there is just enough to get by from day by day.

The school buildings, together with the children's shelter, built during the former chairman's tenure, have been abandoned and are run down. Many houses and buildings are in bad shape. Renovation or reconstruction is simply out of the question, due to the lack of money.

To the patients, however, this colony is their home, regardless of the condition of their houses. What matters to them, the patients whose days are numbered, is to feel a sense of belonging at the place they call home and the people they interact with without feeling they are treated with reluctance or inequality.



Needing urgent help, these elderly and handicapped lepers were abandoned by their families.



There are some 20 healthy children at the kindergarten at Phud Hong leper colony.

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