

## OVERCOMING ALL ODDS!

ONE VOICE AGAINST ABUSE - AN INCREDIBLE ACCOUNT OF COURAGE - BY SUSAN ALDOUS

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With a spirit of determination, against all odds, she made the choice to jump. With all the might she could muster, clutching her baby to her chest, she quickly leapt off the back of her captor's motorbike.

A sharp elbow, to her then pregnant ribs, on the same bike had tragically begun the tirade of abuse years back. Ironically, the day she finally jumped, an identical jab signaled that this was the moment of escape to end such abuses. She ran, heart pounding, fear exploding through every muscle in her body, her head aching over a life in disarray, down a one-way, noisy road. She ran, stumbling yet determined, leaving her tormentor & possessions alike, behind. Unable to pursue his victims through prohibitive traffic, he haughtily raised his fist & waved it furiously in the gentle Thai evening air. For a moment she stopped to catch her breath & glanced over her shoulder to assess the immediacy of the ensuing danger. The sight of his flying fist & vindictive stare startled her, so much so, she deliberately committed it to memory. Her tormentor's sadistic face, she knew, would serve to warn her of what would unfold if she ever dared return to him.

After successfully completing her art studies, bursting with dreams & creativity, M. launched into travel as many European young people do. She wanted to fulfill her idealistic desires and was thrilled when she secured a contract as an English teacher in Thailand. 'What could be better than getting paid to have the privilege of learning the wondrous ways of the East?' she reasoned. M. loved teaching. Soon however, it was the after work activities that provided a life blissful beyond all expectation. The devout study of Buddhism, meditation, the daily attendance of Zen-like rigorous martial arts classes & bamboo-stick dancing in ancient rhythmic patterns was exhilarating. In the evenings, she was also thrilled to be a part-time D.J. at a local radio station. It's hard to reconcile how she transformed from a strong independent, outgoing & confident woman to a person of little worth akin to a wretched dog, raised up only to be beaten down at will. As with many abusers, he was charming, talented & cleverly patient in the baiting of his victim. He acted as if nothing moved him; he had all the time in the world & was in control of self & life, appearing sturdy in all matters spiritual. Initially, he doled out innumerable kindhearted gestures to the peons beneath him, which did much to win her confidence. He proceeded to seduce her with spiritual 'truths', drawing her into his inner circle - the position of honored student. He a master, in all senses of the word, revered for his magic healing ways, & massage teaching skills, managed with a leach-like slyness to suck the life out of her. Bloodletting to soul-destroying levels, she eventually gave up on life, having been skillfully persuaded to sign over self-worth through

his diligent tutelage. Such exercises of abject selflessness were to take her to higher levels of spirituality & devotion, proving her love for him. This is how it's done for an acclaimed 'Ajarn of ajarns (Teacher of teachers). Those she respected, bestowed upon him the title of Grand Teacher, so who was she to question the inconsistencies she began to witness. Her increasing doubts, coupled with warnings from family & friends, were obliterated as she traveled as a pious, merit-making team with him to temples where she observed monks showing respect to the 'massage master'.

Once they'd become physically intimate, the master-ship began. Having tried to resist the first round of beatings unsuccessfully, she became adroit at avoiding further such explosive episodes. These short-lived reprieves ended abruptly as he became more violent. Warily, she resigned herself to the fact that this was her lot - a destiny-filled karma of sorts. If only she could be kinder, sweeter, more compliant, a better wife, perhaps even a Brahmin wife, then the threats, beatings & torture would perhaps stop. At the very least, she hoped to serve, please & placate in order to lessen the severity & recurrence of humiliating abuses. She was trapped, unhappy & confused in a fearful world. She tried to separate & even leave, but these futile efforts only left her feeling even more hopeless. Locked within the compound of his house, cut off from friends & family, pregnant, & then later, with his newborn baby, she struggled, attempting to create an impossible definition of family. In desperate attempts to secure help, she in vain begged his workers, neighbors, even the local police on two occasions, & hospital staff, to intercede as they stitched her up her wounds. But in his world & culture, he was the Abbot of his own home & she, a lowly creature, to be controlled & to serve. As such, not one soul, not even the law, came to her rescue. In turn, M. dejectedly clutched her baby closely to protect him as she received further beatings. She wondered when she, or worse yet, her son would die.

What gives a woman the courage to leave such control? What finally forces her to believe it's enough? Having little will to fight for herself, her wake-up call came through her 16-month-old boy. Normally, observing his mother beaten, her traumatized son would wail inconsolably. After many such sessions, his young mind became indifferent to the brutality. After an extremely rage-filled beating she instantaneously realized that her son didn't respond as normal. He didn't scream. He didn't react at all. As mom lay in a crumpled, bruised, sobbing heap, he eventually toddled over & hugged her with the nonchalance of a wee one whose world was fine. With that she knew. A deep conviction came over her - no matter what, the danger; her child didn't deserve to be a daily ringside attendee to such shameful horror, nor should he face the risk of being harmed, or ultimately learn to beat other women in turn. With that one small crucial choice, one small

prayer was offered, 'If there is anything good, holy or light-filled, save me, save my son, get us out!' Within days, she persuaded her husband to help her take their sick son to the doctor. As they rode with child wedged between them, something insignificant raised his ire & he elbowed her, barely missing the son. Holding true to her promise, she put feet to her prayers & took the biggest leap of her life, jumping off the bike & fleeing the unending abuse.

I've known her for 18 months. We met in a shelter for abused women & children where I do regular projects. She was very happy to speak English with another Caucasian. We soon became friends as we'd natter, cry, laugh. I'd get angry over her accounts of the abuse she'd suffered. I felt privileged to know this woman of courage who slowly opened up to share her deepest, darkest, secret pain. Having been privy to her many emotional growth-filled changes, I witnessed personal transformations rarely achieved by women who've suffered so greatly. Through much grief, honesty, facing her fears, she became a warrior. As she began to reclaim a healthy future for both herself & her son, she discovered she had power to make changes to help others as well. She decided to demand her rights be taken seriously, by applying a new, almost unused, family law, which was

She made a stand for other women & children by taking the risk to challenge the odds, even the System itself. In the process, she became an even better version of herself.

passed only last year in parliament. By so doing, she hoped to gain justice, protection & make an impact upon a system, which has kept women silently suffering abuse for years. The law states essentially that men cannot use violence, including rape, on their family members. She pressed charges in both the family & criminal court. Over the period of a year-&-a-half, she was forced to face down huge giants of fear & hopelessness.. However, she courageously soldiered on desperately seeking out her voice. Upon discovering it, she used it with gusto, confronting prejudiced, difficult lawyers, police & authorities. While language & cultural barriers weighed heavily against her in the male-dominated arena of society, the most unexpected obstacle was other women's attitudes. We were horrified, at one point, when a women's rights lawyer, assigned to her case, actually felt it culturally unjust to prosecute a husband/father & vocalized this in court before all. We literally had to force her to shut up. I say 'we' as I'd long been conscripted to the position of friend/court translator -cum-advisor. It was hard work throughout! We ensconced ourselves in a room for ten days, ..... cont'd page 4

# Hilltribe highlights



Look what Mommy made! Hmong girls show off their handmade, beaded tribal dresses.



School of Life: a melting pot of six different tribes



## Reaching into Remote rural schools:

Aeng had never been that close to a foreigner before! Coming from the Karen tribe, Aeng's parents had fled the hardships of persecution in their homeland of Myanmar and are now thankfully living in peace far in the remote plains of Saiyoke in Kanchanaburi. On this bright Tuesday morning, Aeng and his friends were pleasantly surprised when Teacher said that they were all to gather in the canteen of their school. The excited bustle of the children was quickly hushed when Peter introduced himself and went around greeting the kids personally. Many blushed and nervously giggled as they had to shake hands with the big white man! Then the BWM (Big White Man!) asked for a volunteer. Nobody moved. Suddenly, much to Aeng's surprise, BWM was right next to him coaxing him to come up the stage with him. Aeng smiled and nervously followed BWM. But in the next few minutes, Aeng found himself having a lot of fun laughing as BWM acted out a skit with him based on the Thai and Western greeting. Aeng found BWM to be a gentle giant, warming up the room with his funny antics and humour. Right after this ice-breaker, Sunny took the mike and got the adrenalin pumping with a couple of language games, teaching prepositions with ball-play in teams as well as identifying emotions with a charade/Freeze game for all. All part of child-centered learning, the games and songs we teach focus on kinetic learning and the use of many of the human senses as possible. As a result, the children are often so engaged in the fun of the learning process, they don't realize how much they are imbibing through these exercises.



In the province of Kanchanaburi, we conducted these programs at these schools: Ban Poo Muang-Poo Pong, Ban Bang Tee Lang, Ban Lung Kang, & Ban Chong Kaep .

In this past month, we also hosted such programs in the hills of Chiang Mai at the School of Life, Ban Toon Pong, Ban Bang Hai and Ban Bo Hin. One of the highlights was visiting the School Of Life – Nestled deep in the forest of mountains of Doi Saket, the School of Life is a haven for some 120 children of various hill-tribes comprising the Muser, Tai Yai, Ahka, Lisaw, Hmong and Karen. The social makeup of the children include:

- AIDS orphans without relatives or with relatives below the poverty line;
- Tsunami orphans and survivors;
- Orphans whose parents died, e.g. as victims in the "drug-war";
- Children without access to their parents, e.g. parents sentenced to life imprisonment;
- Children who were forced into child-labour;
- Children from mountain tribes without access to formal education.

Not listed on the official list of schools in the area, we would have missed this community school if it wasn't for our bird-watching project manager, Peter offered to drive us all up to the Huai Hong Krai Research Station where he wanted to see some peafowls. We ventured along, with the added attractions of seeing the sun bear, samba deer and a variety of native mammals.

At Ban Bo Hin, the children wear the traditional northern Thai-style uniforms. Sunny leads the kids in an expressive 'emotions' charade.

We passed a sign directing us to School for Life (3km further into the forests, it indicated). Curiosity rang a bell and we made the long detour down the windy, unpaved forest pathway. Finally, we reached a clearing, and caught sight of a building. On finding out there were these 120 children, we gladly offered to do a program the next morning. This turned out to be a great experience with very responsive students!

After that, we made it down the mountain again to another appointment at BAN BO HIN. When we arrived, we found the WHOLE school sitting outside (as they have no big hall) waiting for us and the anticipated activities. The level of excitement was high and the children responded readily to every instruction which made the whole event fun and engaging for all.



Children from the Hmong village school with their set of 10 VCDs of bilingual Thai-English educational programs



On another trip to the Mae Rim district of Chiang Mai, we were referred to visit a Hmong school BAN BANG HAI "not far up this mountain road" we were told. We drove....and drove.....and drove.....but didn't see any signs of a school. In doubt, we even turned back and see if we missed any signs or a turning. But some locals told us to just keep going up the hill. We must have driven about 11 kilometres till we finally heaved a sigh of relief upon finding a sign indicating a Hmong village. There were a total of 90 kids in the school so we agreed to take them all in for the activity. The next question was where? Many of these poor schools have nothing more than the classrooms, and a canteen. The canteen was the only option . We cleared the tables and benches, to make space for all the children.

Overall, we concluded that hilltribe children have a charming warmth, purity and cheerful responsiveness. Along with their beautiful hand-made beaded costumes, these adorable kids had us mesmerized.



A local school BAN TOONG PONG in Mae Rim which caters to Thai as well as Hilltribe kids from the Tai Yai, Karen and Lisu peoples.



School of Life: Learning English is as easy as doing a jig!



A picture portraying Thai perspectives: The predominant significance of the King & the Buddhist religion in Thai society even for the non-Thais –like this migrant Karen boy or another foreigner like Peter in this country.

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Up to 10 hours at a time, documenting, for police & prosecutor, details to be used as evidence. Several expensive trips had to be made in order to appear in court & into frustratingly, fruitless negotiations. Besides these, there were weeks of typing, printing, seeking out evidence & testimony. A dear friend tried to get help from The Thai Bar Association, who in turn informed him that no male lawyer would defend such a cause. Thankfully, we discovered one exception—a former prison guard, who hating the cruelty & injustices, left his job & studied law in order to defend those who needed such help.. The cases required two lawyers, one female to facilitate the delicate female & family aspects, & the other a male, in order for the judges to begin to take the charges or us seriously. One such judge informed us that M. was selfish to demand a divorce & full custody. Another wanted to bring the child to court for a family visit—as if we were going on picnic. Finally, a legal team was assembled. Yet they, in pride, refused to work well together. Much time & energy was wasted, attempting to keep the peace instead of uniting to wage war against the real enemies of injustice & abuse. Without any headway gained, there came an ultimately bigger & more frustrating blow. We were assaulted on all sides by endless harbingers of bad news informing us she'd lose & it'd take up to six or seven years to complete the criminal case. During this time, the support of family, friends & even complete strangers was heartening. Thankfully, after a year, she obtained a good teaching job at a school. While this made life a lot better, we still felt exhausted as paperwork & red tape threatened to overwhelm us. Unexpectedly, through a series of incredible, miraculous events, the tide of battle shifted. Her husband was held in remand prison for 14 days, waiting his bond to be posted—this greatly softened his stance. Soon after, we were summoned to the criminal court to witness his plea as well & the court's decision as to whether they would continue to hear the case or not. Defendant, complainant, lawyers, prosecutor

charges and possible imprisonment. They ordered papers be drawn to ensure both sides to sort this matter out within a week at the family court, instructing them to return the following Monday, so the case could be closed. It seemed the criminal court didn't relish trying this case. But with such an outcome, both her & son would have security, rights restored & be able to move on with their lives. Seems like this would have been the simple end but unfortunately, M. fought through another nightmarish week of problems.. Armed with prayer & tears, completely overcome with desperation, we almost held an office of government officers & her two lawyers hostage until they worked to produce what she needed. A case of the devil's ink, even at the last second with nitpicking, bigoted & stubborn bureaucratic details. They were going to deny us the victory because of one missing vowel marking on the child's name – a mistake previously made by that office! However, through some desperate prayers and a

It once again proved to me, when we fight for what is right, with true dedication there can be extraordinary victories. .

tremendous miracle, this bureaucratic "can't be done" resistance crumbled as the officers scrambled to do what was needed so they could go home! Justice prevailed! Rejoicing, we frantically rushed out of the local municipal office a few moments before 7.00 p.m. to board our 7:35 plane for Bangkok late Friday night, hours after such offices & courts are usually closed. One woman & one son saved, women's rights defended; our sanity nearly lost in the process, but well worth the struggle...

I truly believe that, as was demonstrated through this case, one small choice & one small prayer that head us in the right direction can change the entire course of one's personal history. This experience was such a lesson in the power of overcoming, especially

through exhaustingly, impossible battles. So often it seems right or easier to give up, but that's when we need to fight the hardest. This account is therefore, a tribute to my friend & her courage. Truly, she put herself out there, raw & bleeding in order to right a wrong against herself & her son. She made a stand for other women & children by taking the risk to challenge the odds, even the System itself. She became an even better version of herself through the process This is newsletter is also dedicated to all the women who have endured suffering at the hands of those who are larger & intolerant enough to feel they have the right to force their will upon them. During the time at trial, we saw women unfairly lose their children to dangerous men on numerous occasions. It was heartbreaking.

**My prayer? That we can all keep the vision to do our part for others, especially those who can't defend themselves & thereby keep making a difference!**

## Making a Difference

Central Thailand Mission is one of the selected humanitarian aid projects working in partnership with the American human service agency – *Family Care Foundation* – which is an American, tax-exempt, non-profit, IRS-approved 501 (c)(3) public charity.

Based in Bangkok for the last 20 years, CTM works to help the disadvantaged in many ways.

- ♥Being the bridge between people with the needs & those with the resources
- ♥Supply of basic essentials of food, water, clothes as well for destitute communities
- ♥Initiating the sponsorship of major needs & projects eg. Building a water supply for a school, education seminars & AV materials for schools
- ♥Counseling & Encouragement for the handicapped, the terminally-ill (death coaching/grief counseling), AIDs patients, abused women & children
- ♥Services include: preparing orphans for adoption, laughing yoga at hospitals, therapy for abused women & teens
- ♥Providing assistance to international volunteers who want to give of their time, talents or resources to help others.
- ♥Giving God's love, spiritual strength & comfort to those who need & seek a purpose & direction for a meaningful life.

"...one small choice & one small prayer that head us in the right direction can change the entire course of one's personal history."

& myself were summoned forward to appear before two judges. As western women we were instantly thrust into the limelight, a rare sight & a welcome distraction.. After ascertaining defendant & complainant, the senior judge declared. *'We may not try this case. There seems not enough physical evidence to do so'* Hubby smiled at his lawyer, who gleefully nodded. Fumbling through case files, the prosecutor weakly rejoined that he was ready to prosecute.. We held our breath. Then suddenly, the miracle we prayed for took place. Our male lawyer interjected an irrelevant point to what was being discussed, "Your honor, if this man really loves his child, he'd always be the father, but out of love, he'd give his son the opportunity to be raised abroad & to receive a wonderful education for free". Suddenly, the judges executed a swift turn around as they found a diplomatic way out of a lengthy debacle. They flew in formation with us as we all nodded agreeably that hubby should indeed comply. They recommended hubby 'choose' divorce & give complete custody as a father who loved his child would, or else face the criminal charges & possible imprisonment. They then ordered papers be drawn to ensure both sides sort this matter out within a week at the family court, instructing them to return with the aforementioned agreement the following

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