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## WE CARE

### Healing the hurting

*Chutima Saisaengjan fulfils dreams by giving infected children a new lease on life and a chance at normality*

Story by PLOENPOTE ATTHAKOR



A young girl with an important note, a reminder that she needs to take anti-viral medicine.

If life is a journey, the life of Chutima "Kru Oui" Saisaengjan of We Understand Group, is a journey of dreams.

Her journey began in 2003 when she started working with children with HIV, with a dream to help them recover from trauma. With poor health, many were orphans, some living with old relatives, many dumped in shelters. Being rejected from society, they were lonely.

"Before 2003 we dealt basically with grown-ups with HIV," said Kru Oui. Before that, their children were still young and we did not see the problem until they started to grow.

Their parents' unusual death triggered suspicion and the trauma normally began when they entered school, as they faced strong discrimination from parents of other children who feared their children might catch the disease.

"We used to think that people learned more of HIV and became more understanding. We were wrong. It's true that they might no longer kick someone out of the community merely because of HIV. They could tolerate as long as that person was confined to his or her own place and cut off from the community."

But when it came to children with HIV, it's another story, she says.



A young HIV-infected boy and his drawing.



A group of HIV-infected youths at the end of a drama performance. Drama is one of the key media to help these children boost their sense of confidence.

"Other parents simply didn't want their children to go to the same school with those with HIV. There were parent protests in many places," she recalled.

This inflicted deep pain in the young hearts. Despite their better health due to the help of anti-viral medicine, these children were depressed and became reclusive. Some were even aggressive. Many thought of suicide as a way out.

The activists then looked closely at the problem, realising something needed to be done. That's when the first camp, We Understand, took place in October 2002. It was attended by 100 HIV children who were under care of three hospitals in Phetchaburi, Khon Kaen and Chiang Rai.

The camp was funded by Unicef, which eventually became the group's major sponsor. Art teachers were volunteers from Laemkom Art School who also helped provide workshop materials.

"Art can heal and we see the difference. At first the children were still afraid and reluctant to join. They were not sure if they would really be accepted. After a while, they became relaxed and bit by bit they started to smile. Some, whose families tried to hide them because of their HIV record, never had friends. But at the camp, they found friends and they knew they were safe. At the end of the camp, they all were just like ordinary children," she said.

After the camp, the group organised a painting exhibition for the children.

"They took great pride in it. They were showered with praises they had never received before. Some made money from the sales of works," she said. Besides, the children's stories are great campaign material.

"They reveal their problems. From despair, there were hopes."

It was followed by more camps and exhibitions. The last one was held early last month at SCB Park as part of a "More to Love" project by ArtAids.

Kru Oui says her group was formed after the first camp to ensure continuity of art activities. It was also named We Understand. There were two staff members, Kru Oui and her assistant.

"We don't need a big team. Nor do we need an office. We share working space with an Aids advocacy group. Our role is more like coordinators, working with social and health activists in the area and raising funds," she explained. From three hospitals, the network now includes the Thai Red Cross Society, while Hat Yai Hospital in Songkhla showed its interest to join.

The group has organised three to four camps a year, she says, adding now children from We Understand camp are ready to play the role of a coach to the youngsters.

"Continuity is important. It's no use to have just one camp and stop ... or the old problem will return when the children go back to their old environment. They need 'booster shots' to make them strong in dealing with problems. Art is one tool but it's not a cure-all medicine," she added.

Kru Oui noted these children are very attentive in class.

"They are always eager to learn, probably because they feel they have someone who really cares, someone who gives them attention they hardly get from their community," she said.

One thing that keeps the volunteer teachers to keep on working is they know they can make a difference, according to Kru Oui.

"At the end of the camp, the children are just like other people," she added.

"We know that it works, and the children will become lively and grow close. It's this kind of feeling that keeps us in this voluntary work."

Kru Oui says the camp does not stress much on art excellence.

"We want the children to be happy and have fun while painting. That's the ultimate goal of the camp," she said.

Apart from painting, the group has accommodated drama, music and documentary making workshops to respond better to the children's needs. Some children, Kru Oui says, do not enjoy painting. They like drama more.

They also get life skills from drama sessions, she says. "We have role play ... what to do or how to respond in situations.

They already gave a few public performances, which were themed on children and HIV.

"All children wear masks to hide their identity all through the play," she said, adding it's not convenient, and sometimes hurtful, but is the best possible choice - at least for now - as long as the children feel unsure.

Kru Oui recalls a heartfelt moment when a boy suddenly reveals his identity to the audience.

"We had a small discussion after the play. It's an exchange between the audience and the young actors. At one point, a woman in the audience was so touched she wept, and the boy was so overwhelmed with her understanding. When she expressed her wish to embrace him, he threw away his mask, threw himself into her arms," she said.

According to Kru Oui, preparations are under way for an even bigger event next year, titled Journey of Dreams.

"We dream to have a painting exhibition, a play, a concert and a screening of documentary films."

The group is braced for a big change in 2010, when Unicef will end its sponsorship, which will force the group to look for support elsewhere.

Unicef will, however, allocate seed money to the group to manage before the sponsorship comes to an end.

The group will talk with children on how to manage the seed money, which accounts for less than 100,000 baht.

"The children need a regular income. Now they are growing up and have to fulfil their family's expectations. They also need money for studies. The sales of paintings alone aren't enough. We are thinking of works that can sell easier like decorative items. We may hold a workshop and train them on new techniques, including marketing."

Kru Oui insists she doesn't want people to buy the products out of pity (simply because these items are made by children with HIV/Aids).

"People should buy them because they want to have them and believe it's worth their money," she said.

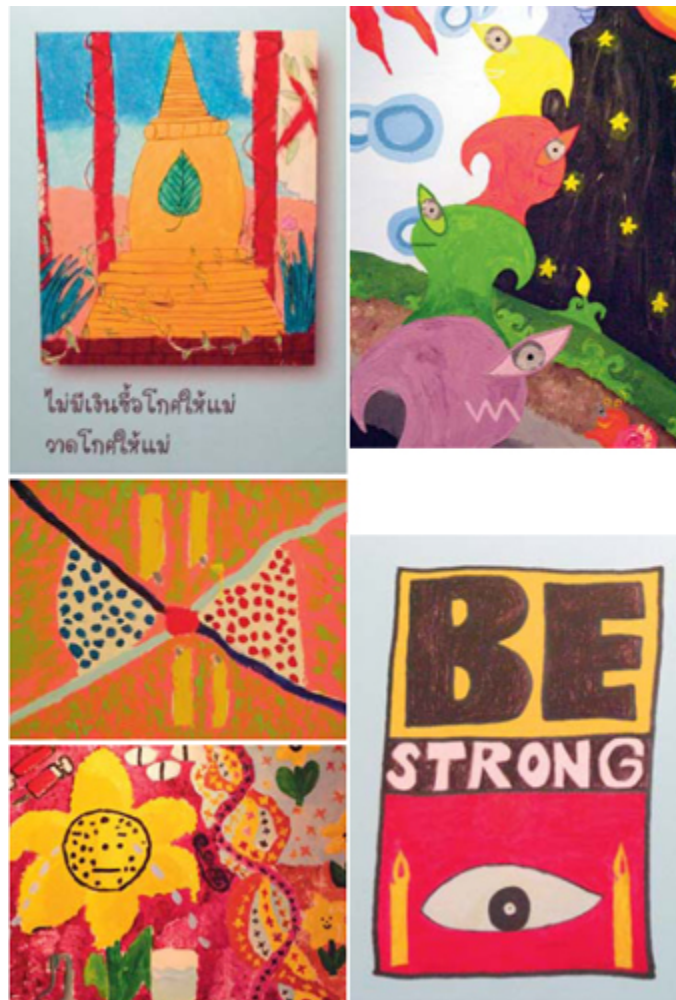
But this depends on the children, whether and how they want to do it.

"But we definitely don't want it to be a sweatshop. The children's happiness is most important. It must be a fun and learning experience for them."

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### INFO FOR Donations

- Name of organisation: We Understand Group
- Address: 494 Soi Nakhon Thai 11, Lat Phrao 101, Bang Kapi, Bangkok, 10240
- Telephone: 02-377-5065
- Web site: [www.thaipositivekids.com/](http://www.thaipositivekids.com/)
- Bank info: Thai Military Bank Public Company Limited; Lat Phrao 103 branch; Savings account no. 108-2-10930-5



Art as a medium for hope: Some examples of the paintings by the youths reveal their dreams, agonies and determination to overcome their ordeal. They were put on display at an exhibition, as part of More to Love art project by ArtAids in collaboration of We Understand Group.