

## **A visit to NongKhai Thailand 2016 by Helen McInerney**

For many years now Dennis and I have sponsored Ekkapong, a Thai child living out of NongKhai in northern Thailand through World Families. In 2015, our adopted daughter, Claire, spent 3 months volunteering in a babies home in Bangkok and it was during this time that she was able to visit Ekkapong and the wonderful staff at the Good Shepherd Sisters Home. Last year Dennis and I decided to incorporate a visit to see Ekkapong with a month's holiday in Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. I have to say that the 3 days we spent there was the highlight of our whole trip. Thanks to Kevin Lynch, we were able to make contact with the home and organise a day to visit Ekkapong. We were picked up on the first day by Parti and a driver and taken to the village where Ekkapong lived. It was holiday time hence the trip to the village as normally we would be taken to the school. We spent almost 2 hours with Ekkapong and his auntie with Parti doing some translation although Ekkapong wanted to try out his English on us. Ekkapong is nearing the end of his education, attending a form of TAFE college. He has done very well at school and is respected for being a leader within the college. We are hoping that we can sponsor him until his education is completed but have heard that his auntie would like him to get a job to help support the family. Jum, one the sponsorship team, is trying very hard to persuade the auntie to allow Ekkapong to finish his education. We enjoyed lunch with Parti and our driver who then took us back to our hotel. The next day they took us to visit 2 projects they run. The "Hands of Hope" project makes exquisite paper crafts. Mostly women with HIV, they produce some amazing items: mobiles, Christmas wreaths, magnets etc. Please check out the website to see their beautiful work. We left there with a variety of their products and were then taken to the "Garden of Friendship", a hospice for disabled and disadvantaged people. On arrival we observed a teacher speaking with a group of 20+ people. He invited us to speak to the group about ourselves which we did with the aid of his translations. The folk there then introduced themselves to us one at a time. From here we were taken back to the office

where we met many of the staff involved in the sponsorship program as well those dealing with child trafficking. We also met one of the delightful Thai nuns with whom we spoke for some time. We discussed the implications of the King's death. It was so nice to hear her say "The king was a good man. He will go to Heaven." We were then taken to lunch nearby and enjoyed some delicious food as well as a lot of conversation and laughs. During this time they asked us if we would like to join them the next day as they were bringing together some of the children to make their Christmas cards for their sponsors. Of course we said yes as this day became one of the most inspiring and memorable day of our holiday. There were 7 of us who drove out to a village about an hour from NongKhai. After a bumpy ride in parts we arrived and were greeted by 200+ children and some of their parents, many of whom had travelled from neighbouring villages. The meeting was held in a large structure with open sides. Our group came and set up all their gear they had brought ready for the children to make their cards. Using a portable microphone, they spoke to the assembled children about the program. Although it was all in Thai, it felt like a heart-warming speech as Parti quietly translated for us. We were asked to speak about ourselves with Parti again translating and were received with lots of smiles. Then the real work began. It seemed like organised chaos but the staff had everything running well. The children could choose to draw a card or take one and colour it in. The older children wrote in their cards as well but were sent back to do it again if it wasn't up to standard! I wish I could describe the scene better, looking out on this sea of children and adults all working on the tiled floor making their cards. Everything was supplied for them for a minimal cost of 20baht (About 80 cents).

An extra treat for us was Ekkapong arriving on a motorbike with 2 other friends to bring his cards he had made for us and Claire. They were quickly hidden from view! Some of the villagers gave fruit to the staff as we left. We were taken to lunch then in another village. Dennis and I insisted on paying for all. The cost was 280baht (\$12) for 8 delicious meals and drinks! This whole experience will last for a long time in our hearts and minds. It makes everything so meaningful now when we think of the dedication of the staff and the happiness of the children we sponsor.



**Translation**



**Card Making**



**Luncheon with friends**