



as possible. Without the dryer, the children's clothes, and eventually the children, would be exposed to germs present in the humid atmosphere. Although the dryer was an expensive addition to the orphanage, the organization believed that the children's health could not be compromised.

Dr. Vicharn then showed us the four bedrooms and another bathroom located on the second floor. One of the rooms was reserved for the nurse and nannies, and the other three were for the children.

Each room was painted in a different color while maintaining the same motif as downstairs. Only two children were assigned to each room. Although this arrangement, like the dryer, seemed extravagant, it was critical in preventing the children from infecting each other with communicable diseases.

When I left the orphanage, I felt a little better knowing that there were efforts being made to help these HIV-infected children.

Later that week, Ohm and I accompanied two social workers of the Support the Children Foundation to an isolated village located an hour away from Chiang Mai. The road that we took was so bumpy and poorly constructed that it reminded me why this was an underdeveloped country.

Our first stop was at a preschool where we distributed food and supplies. The one-room schoolhouse was sparsely furnished with a few tables and chairs, and the wooden floor was barely distinguishable from the dirt that covered it. The school was so destitute that I was half expecting Sally Struthers to come in with a camera crew at anytime.

The room didn't seem like it could contain twenty kids, but there were at least that many running around. The school had only one teacher.

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To keep the children busy while she was stocking the supplies, the teacher distributed small pieces of Play-Doh to the children. This made the kids go completely wild. They began pounding the Play-Doh on the floor and stomping on it with their bare feet.

I never knew that Play-Doh could have such an effect. In a way it was pitiful to see them have so much fun with so little when in America kids play with much more elaborate toys that these children will never get a chance to see.

Our second stop was at the home of one of the preschooler's mother. Apparently, she had contracted HIV from her husband. The social workers had to interview her and take some pictures of her home for the organization's records so that the family could receive assistance.

Unfortunately, her case was not unique. I learned that women in Thailand were becoming innocent victims of AIDS.

Thai society accepts a man's privilege to indulge in sexual desires outside of marriage. This leaves Thai women with little control over their husbands' or boyfriends' sexual activities..



So although Thai women may practice monogamy, it is the promiscuous men who get infected with HIV and transmit the virus to their wives and girlfriends. By the end of the day, I had gained a new perspective on AIDS, women and Thailand.

After all these experiences, my brother and I decided to conduct a research study to evaluate the extent of AIDS education in the Chiang Mai area. We hoped that the results of our study could help AIDS educators see weaknesses in their existing program and better inform the public about AIDS prevention.

One of the population groups that we studied was the people in the marketplace. This particular group gave us the most trouble.

Crowded, "chaotic" and "dirty" are three words that best describe the open-air markets of Thailand. Other than swatting at the mosquitoes and flies and dodging all the stray dogs in the marketplace, our main problem was getting the people to cooperate and fill out our surveys.

Several of the people that we approached shunned us once we mentioned the word "AIDS." They were absolutely terrified of the subject. It was so difficult for us to collect a sufficient survey sample that I even considered excluding them from the study. It was all very discouraging, not to mention frustrating.

But that was when I noticed an emaciated child sitting miserably along one of the walkways. Although there were many other beggars around, and some were in physically worse shape, this boy had a small empty bowl and a sign placed in front of him.

The sign read, "Please give money. My mom has AIDS." Passersby were clearly avoiding him. Some would not even dare to go down the same walkway.

The sight of this child moved me. I knew that our research could prevent situations like this from happening. So I continued distributing surveys to individuals who cared to help and tried my hardest not to lose my temper when so many others refused.

By the end of our research, I easily understood why heterosexual behavior is the most dominant mode of transmission of the AIDS virus in Thailand. The spread of AIDS has been effectively propagated by Thailand's sex industry.

While prostitution is officially illegal in Thailand, I didn't have to search long or hard to find evidence of this age-old trade. I discovered that commercial sex workers could be found in certain coffee houses, cafes, massage parlors, beauty salons, karaoke bars and night clubs that were disguised whorehouses.

During my last weeks in Thailand, I had a chance to visit one of these "cafes" in Bangkok

at 3 a.m. Various female singers dressed in brightly colored sequined gowns performed on a small stage in a dimly lit, smoky room as the audience, consisting mostly of Thai businessmen, ordered and ate their very late dinner.

The cafe served delicious food, but I later realized that the food was not the cafe's main attraction. Apparently, a customer could select his favorite singer after she had finished her performance.

To my surprise, not only did the cafe cater to a customer's palate, but also to one's sexual orientation. During my meal a woman accosted me and attempted to make some conversation. But realizing that I had no interest in her, she quickly left my table.

Soon afterwards, a waiter sat down next to me, and his approach was more direct. He bluntly offered me his services. I won't mention how much he said he charged. Even though I didn't take him up on his offer, that was definitely one meal that I will never forget.

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I had come to Thailand expecting to see AIDS patients and overcrowded hospital wards. But while learning about the AIDS situation in this country, I saw much more than that.

A scarcely furnished school house in a village in northern Thailand. Filthy open markets crowded with haggling people, stray dogs and crippled beggars. A Bangkok cafe that wasn't really a cafe. These were some of the scenes that had made up my summer.

I have to admit that I was somewhat relieved as I left Thailand.

Returning to the United States meant that I wouldn't have to see the agonizing faces that had haunted me during the rounds I had made in the hospital. It would be the end of the sight of AIDS babies suffering in the pediatric ward. I would never have to see another dirty and crippled child begging for money on a sidewalk.

But these images were already engraved in my mind. How could I easily forget them? And yet at the same time, I felt that I should remember them. My memories are only a glimpse of reality in the disheartening world of AIDS. For the images that I saw in a summer, some have seen all their lives.\*

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