

Dear Family and Friends,

The best news this year is that after waiting for almost 2 years, we finally have official approval from the Lao Government to be here in Muang Sing and to continue our work helping the children and their families. Our work, the Muang Sing Outreach Project, is now a formal component of the Health Frontiers project agreement with the Ministry of Health. After being away from our home in Muang Sing for over a year, we returned in May.

Our home, empty since we left, was as we left it except for a thicker layer of dust and dirt. The next day when school ended, a group of children came to our door hoping that the Butterfly Children's Development Center activities would continue. We stopped our cleaning to bring out some games, puzzles and balls for them to play with. It was as if we were never away.

We started the 5-classroom primary school building project in our village. After many meetings everybody likes the design, the drawings are in process, and we will select a contractor next month. The school should be complete by the end of the school year in May. The school building will include the Butterfly Children's Development Center, and will be ready for the children to attend during the three-month school holiday.

I could share some new stories with you but instead want to update you on some of the stories you have heard before. These stories are becoming more difficult to share because they are converging and more interrelated.

You probably remember Mone from pictures or from our stories. About six years ago when her father took us inside his home to see her, she was hiding her face in a dark corner. We promised her that we would try to help, a promise that we never forgot, and a promise that took much effort. After three surgeries, her face is much nicer, however it is not perfect so people notice and ask questions. This year a friend of ours arranged for Mone to study at a disabled women's training center for four months. She is learning how to sew and make handicrafts. Before her surgeries, someone who happened to see her later approached me with money to help her. They have continued to support her, even though they have never met her. We will visit Mone and her family next month. On the way to her home, we will stop and visit the families of patients that we did all we could to help, but despite everyone's efforts they did not live.

This morning I spoke with our friends from Calgary. They offered to pay Mone's tuition at the disabled women's center, will buy her a sewing machine, and will donate four sewing

machines to the Butterfly Children's Development Center if Mone comes to teach sewing and crafts to the children in Muang Sing.

Right after they called, I ran downstairs and shared the news with a student from the Lao National University and Santa. The student is studying social work and happens to be here during his school holiday volunteering at the Butterfly Children's Development Center. They hope to return in June for three months to open and start up The Butterfly Children's Development Center when it moves from our home to the primary school in our village. Santa, who is also home for the school holiday, asked to stay with us instead of with his family in a nearby village. Santa was run over by a truck a few years ago. He lost one leg and was left with a damaged leg unable to support his weight. We helped him travel to Vientiane for surgery and a prosthetic leg. While at the National Rehabilitation Center to replace the prosthetic that he had outgrown, an employee offered to support Santa to attend primary school in Vientiane. Another friend of ours arranged for him to live with the extended family of the social work student. So Santa and the social work students returned to Muang Sing together. They stayed with us for one week planning and organizing activities for the children in our village. Now the student has returned to Vientiane, and Santa has returned to his village to be with his family. Tuseh, the deaf student we are sponsoring at the deaf school, has agreed to accompany Santa back to Vientiane when school begins in January. He has made the trip alone several times that even though he cannot hear or speak, he can read and write so traveling is no problem. The social work student plans to return in June for three months to open and initiate activities at the Butterfly Children's Development Center after it moves from our home for the primary school that we are building in our village.

I am afraid that if I continue with these stories, they will continue to get even more difficult to follow. However, I want to share one story that began 12 years ago when we first visited Laos. One day last week, I was at the market with Santa buying some oranges to take to his family. A woman walked up to me with her daughter. They were both wearing a towel around her shoulders trying to stay warm in the damp cold air. They shivered while the mother asked for a sweater for her daughter like the one Santa was wearing. Actually, Santa was wearing my sweater that I had given to him a couple days before. Sensalit's sister saw us. Sensalit and Santa went to Vientiane together for their first prosthetic legs and became friends at the National Rehabilitation Center. When Sensalit complained of pain in his chest we followed up, and unfortunately, he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He returned to his village and died while Santa was still at the National Rehabilitation Center learning how to use his leg. Sensalit's sister walked up to Santa,

kneeled down beside him, felt and then held Santa's prosthetic leg before standing up and walking away. After leaving Santa with his family, I returned to the market to buy jackets for the girl and her mother.

At the market, I went to a woman who spread a tarp on the ground from where she sold piles of clothes. I bought 10 jackets, all new, and some even with labels on them. I took them a few kilometers to the village to the home of the mother and daughter. I left the bag inside their home while I wandered around the village to find two other special people then returned to the house with a small group of people following me. I gave jackets to the mother and daughter that I saw at the market, to a young girl we helped with cleft-lip surgery, and to another young girl whose clubfeet were corrected with surgery and braces. I gave the rest of the jackets to other children who looked like they might need them. After the jackets were given away, the father brought out something wrapped in a large plastic bag. It was a picture of the mother and the daughter from my first visit to their village 12 years ago. They told me what a small baby she was. Today the girl is still small, stunted and probably developmentally disabled because of malnutrition. Before I left the home, her father proudly showed me their television and satellite dish that they use to watch programs in the Chinese language that they do not understand. He thanked me by giving me a broom that he had made. It would have been difficult to carry so he tied it to the back of my motorcycle. I gave it to Leila.

I left the village rewarded by the sight of these three girls wearing their jackets, smiling, standing, and waving goodbye. However, these feelings quickly turned into a search for the understanding of what I saw. Perhaps they are not optimistic about their future, or perhaps they have given up on the future. Do they believe there is no way out of their poverty so is it lack of optimism? It is the families or at least the father's choice, for them to walk several kilometers to the market in the freezing cold, sell some brooms, and return home to watch television.

Experts are constantly debating theories of poverty, and solutions to eliminate poverty. It is easy to say, "All you have to do is..." I cannot pick what I believe to be the best solution so I would have to say, "Everything you can do is good." If I narrow my focus to just these three girls, the problem becomes more defined and manageable. All you have to do increase the worth of the child, especially girls; to the family, the community, and the government. I guess we will be here for a while.

Health Frontiers has been very generous and supportive however, they do not have resources to help the children Muang Sing, and requested that we find our own funding. They remain dedicated to the training of Lao pediatricians and internal medicine doctors and we fully support and contribute to their efforts. Leila and I are paying all of our own expenses but we need your support to help others. This year we spent almost \$6,000 on medical, scholarship, and welfare expenses. We have \$1,906 cash, and a \$26,000 fund directed for the school construction. We are estimating that the school will cost \$35,000, we are committed to our existing scholarship students and willing to support more, and of course, we will continue supporting people with the most need. We estimate that we will spend about \$15,000 next year. So we are about \$22,000 short and hope that you can help.

\$25 will buy a bag of children's clothing. \$125 will pay for the bus transportation of a child and parent to the hospital in Vientiane. \$700 will support a scholarship student for one year.

Please visit www.healthfrontiers.org to donate online or mail a check to:

Please designate your donations for the Muang Sing Outreach program.

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We wish you a joyous holiday season and appreciate the opportunity to share our experiences with you.