

November 2006

MY LAO EXPERIENCE

After accepting an invitation from Dr Leila and her husband Bryan Watt to visit them in Muang Sing, a district of Luang Nam Tha, I began wondering what life must be like for them in such a quiet and faraway place. As I soon came to realize, Leila's description of "Never a dull moment" was truly an understatement! Leila and Bryan epitomize the real meaning of humanitarians. As I write, I'm still trying to put this extraordinary experience into perspective.

As many of you may be aware, Dr Leila is a Pediatrician and her husband Bryan is a Humanitarian Photographer. They are volunteers with Health Frontiers and live in Muang Sing. While Leila works in her capacity as doctor and facilitator, Bryan is her backup and acting social worker. They are a truly amazing couple, sharing the same goal to outreach and help the people that need them so much. Their days are never planned, only determined by who knocks on their door asking for help, or what village they are invited to. This usually means that someone in the village needs some medical attention or advice and reassurance. Often they ferry a patient to the local hospital for treatment, or send them on a two-hour drive in a songtao to Luang Nam Tha Hospital. They act swiftly, often foregoing other necessary activities or meal times to give the people their full attention with a holistic approach.

The Wigs involvement with Leila and Bryan comes through the intervention with the patients they send to the many Hospitals in Vientiane. Nadine, Rosemarie and I have been caring for and supervising the treatment of these patients having operations in our local hospitals. I'm sure that Nadine and Rosemarie would agree that it has been a very rewarding and worthwhile experience. Even the visit from a familiar face helps these patients get through their day easier in a strange place.

After stepping off the plane in Luang Nam Tha, and meeting Bryan, there was a round of errands to run and people to see. Leila took me to the Luang Nam Tha Hospital to investigate the possibility of the Interplast Team visiting next year. A near new hospital, very well run and kept. Also very helpful and friendly staff. It was here

that we picked up a small boy and his parents, as they were able to return home. Their home was a twenty-four hour walk through mountains from Muang Sing. After some shopping it was on our way to Muang Sing, a two-hour drive through rugged, mostly untouched mountains and greenery. It was absolutely beautiful scenery, and it was then I realized why Leila and Bryan love this place so much.

On the way, we stopped at an Akha village so Bryan could order some small cane stools for the schoolroom in their home. This was my first eye opener! An array of things caught my eye, from the beautifully coloured headdress worn by the women, to the small children carrying babies on their backs, and then the young child brought to us appearing to have difficulty walking after a fever. Leila took details with the hope to return with someone who could assess her.

I was not prepared for what was about to happen next. As we turned into the driveway of Leila and Bryan's home, over one hundred children were yelling and screaming with joy to welcome Leila home after her six-week absence. A big lump came to my throat and tears welled up in my eyes. I had to really try hard to control myself here before I burst out crying with happiness for them!! It was a truly beautiful experience to see how much Leila and Bryan mean to these children. As I stepped out of the truck, Leila pointed to me, and immediately I had a mob of children around me welcoming me with bunches of flowers, and asking if they could call me mother! After much talking and meeting people, Bryan pointed out Khampat to me. He was the young boy who they sent to Vientiane for a prosthetic leg. Even though he was a bit dubious about my presence, I managed to get close enough to say hello and see that he could run very well! Now he is attending school, which is a big step forward for him. As the evening turned into darkness, it was time to go inside. A handful of young girls came in eager to hear about Leila's trip to Sri Lanka. Two of these girls, and one boy were handpicked by Xuyen Dangers and sent to Vientiane by Leila and Bryan to stay at Dong Khoi School to become young leaders. Such a worthwhile programme as I would see in the following days. The girls worked with their peers to organize games, dances and activities. Something these children have never had. With inspiration from Xuyen, Leila and Bryan have set up the Butterfly Children's Centre in their home, for these less fortunate kids to come, learn, play, and share their culture. Their work is based on the children's development and wellbeing. With

donations from friends, Bryan has bought many school textbooks to share with the local kids, and as you can imagine they are very much in demand. Never enough to go around, these books are like gold to them. They are so eager to learn. Every evening between 4.30pm and 6.30pm around twenty kids come to the house for activities. However, when I was there, it was more like one hundred kids! Most evenings, Leila and Bryan give them half a cup of cold water and a handful of peanuts; this is a real treat for them.

The next day, we were woken early by the roosters, no chance for a sleep-in here! Then it was a lovely walk a couple of kilometers to the local market for the day's fresh provisions. The altitude here makes the air so fresh and clean, and the fact that there are very few motor bikes or vehicles is an added bonus to preserve this beautiful environment.

Back at home, Leila had prepared some fresh bread and tea, and as we sat on their balcony, I understood why they had named their centre the Butterfly Children's Centre. Such a peaceful setting, with many butterflies flying around the tree tops. It was at this time a young man came to the house, eager to be reassured about his deaf brother who Leila and Bryan had sent to the Vientiane Deaf School for an education.

It was a difficult task to get him accepted, but now this boy is shining and learning, and will hopefully return to Muang Sing to teach other children to sign and learn. The young man also invited us to his village at 10am on this day. Even though Leila and Bryan had many other plans, it was decided that it was important to visit this village as they had an invitation, and to reassure the people about the welfare of the deaf boy.

None of us were prepared for this welcome! We were met immediately by two "Bad Spirits." They were two men dressed up in many layers of torn clothing and leaves with coconut shell masks. Rather scary for the un-initiated! But as we found out, easy to send them away- just give some money. As the majority of the village gathered around, Leila reassured them that the deaf boy was in good hands in Vientiane, and progressing very well. Once she had their attention, she started to interact with the children and encouraged them to talk and even sing. After some

songs from them, and a couple taught by Leila, it was time to give out some things I had brought with me. Some t-shirts, clothes, donated toys, caps, balloons etc. This was a rare treat for these people; they were so well behaved, and patiently waited their turn for a small gift from the falang. It was evident that the need for basics like clothing was great. Many children were naked, but still wore their ethnic headdress. This was a very poor village.

Later, we searched for a man who I had visited in the Vientiane Skin Hospital. He had suffered leprosy and his recurrent foot ulcers had turned nasty once again. After discussion with him, it was decided that he would return to the Vientiane Skin Hospital for further treatment when it could be arranged.

Our next treat came in the form of the village teacher. A lovely young woman who had trained in Vientiane and returned to her neighboring village to teach the children. Not to miss an opportunity, Leila commandeered the Nai Ban and the teacher to the schoolroom to try to figure out how to get the attendance levels up at the school.

A key indicator was the lack of school textbooks, all the learning was done entirely from the blackboard. A difficult task in any culture.

As we headed to leave, a crowd started to gather around the top of the village, so we followed. Many firecrackers were being let off, followed by the discharge of bullets from guns. We were informed that this was an important day to rid the village of “Bad Spirits” and the louder the noise from the firecrackers and guns the better. Hence our invitation to the village and subsequent meeting with the two “Bad Spirits” on our arrival. This certainly was an experience!

Right before we were leaving, we were ushered to a village house to find a man in pain, unable to walk. After assessing the situation, Leila realized that this man was a TB sufferer, but had probable acute arthritis in his knees. He agreed to go to the Hospital, so his family busily prepared his belongings, including a bundle of firewood to boil the water, and organized his son to go with him. The local Hospital was another interesting experience! Leila had described it as a barnyard, now I knew why!

Hard to describe, but if you can imagine an old wooden shack in disrepair, earthen floors and chickens running around, you might have the picture! The story goes that an organization had offered to build a new hospital, so about two hundred people simply picked up the old hospital, and moved it to the other side of the land, albeit in knee-deep water in the wet season. Nurses and doctors wore rubber boots to work! In the mean time, the organization had decided that it could not build the new hospital straight away. Bryan to the rescue, he has provided the funds to build a concrete floor in the main building of the hospital. He is well known here, and the staff often refers him to poor patients needing financial assistance.

A couple of hours later at the house, the children began to arrive. Thanks to Bryan's efforts, what had started out some months earlier as just a few children, had now grown to so many, that every day there were new faces visiting the Butterfly Children's Centre. This day, I tried to teach some of them the Hokey Pokey Dance. Lots of laughing from the children assured me that this was very foreign to them and I probably looked very silly! Next, I endeavored to teach them Duck, duck goose, a run and catch game around a circle. This was more successful, and got more children involved. Hopefully they will play this game in the future. Then it was time for them to teach me a game, the jumping sticks. At first I was very weary due to my poor coordination, but I gave it a try with the help of the girls. I think I need a lot more practice on that one!

A special treat later in the evening was a performance put on by the children. All dressed in their beautiful ethnic costumes, dancing and singing cultural songs. It was heartwarming to witness the good rapport and encouragement between the girls of different ethnicities. One would hope that this relationship will continue to grow, thanks to the intervention of Leila and Bryan.

On to the next day. It seemed so much had happened within such a short space of time, as if I was in another world. After some breakfast and our trip to the markets, we visited the Museum. A very informative look at the different ethnicities in Muang Sing and Luang Nam Tha, and some artifacts from days gone by.

Bryan then took me to the Hospital to visit the man we had taken there the day before. A remarkable recovery, he was now smiling and able to walk a short distance aided by a stick. He was treated with intravenous antibiotics for septic arthritis. Even though this hospital does not have white walls and the smell of antiseptic, the staff does the best job they can with the few resources they have. On this visit, Bryan was referred to a poor family with a very sick baby; with an illness they called Malaria of the brain. It was obvious that this baby needed urgent medical attention, so Bryan was able to provide financial assistance for them to travel to the Hospital in Luang Nam Tha for further treatment.

The highlight of this day was our trip to another neighbouring village to visit some old patients. One was a young boy, who had suffered some sort of infection in one of the bones in his arm. The end result was the removal of the bone in the village! No operating theatres, anaesthetics or analgesia here. The result was a significantly shortened arm with limited use. The boy's stepmother was unwell with a fever on our visit, and despite the fact that Leila and Bryan had offered to take her to the local hospital, she decided she would wait until her husband returned home from hunting.

Leila again seized the opportunity to interact with the children, giving out apple, oranges, carrots etc. The people in the villages often appear to be malnourished, having no understanding of good nutrition, or the means to provide it. Most of them would be surviving on one meal a day. It is interesting to realize that simple nutrition is responsible in preventing many of the illnesses and diseases now eradicated in our modern world. I witnessed many examples of the result of poor nutrition in Muang Sing. Like the young fourteen year old girl brought in by her mother to ask Leila if there was anything that could be done for her eyes. On examination, she was found to be blind in one eye, with extensive scarring in the other. Sadly, this was due to poor nutrition as a young child, and nothing could be done. The simple carrot, that our modern day children may turn their nose up at, could have given this girl her sight. Another of Leila's projects is to get the villages to grow carrots with the carrot seeds she brought back from Sri Lanka.

Leila and Bryan are tireless workers, the children and people of Muang Sing are their life. The admiration from the children was evident with every interaction,

and likewise with Leila and Bryan, they simply love them. There certainly was “not a dull moment” in my time at Muang Sing, and it seems that sometimes it could all be a bit overwhelming. The decision on who to help first, or how many to help in one day, is often questioned. This couple has such big hearts, and their door is always open to whoever needs their help.

It was now time to leave this cozy little town. Leila accompanied me to Luang Nam Tha by road on a songtaeo. We rode with about twenty-five other people and their luggage; it still amazes me that everyone managed to fit it, albeit rather closely. As one young man decided to light up a cigarette in this confined space, Leila didn't miss the opportunity to inform him of the dangers of smoking to himself and to others. Always on the job, well done Leila! I agreed wholeheartedly as she explained that if she didn't tell him, then who would? I learned that in order to help these people effectively, they needed to be educated in their village about the basics of health and good nutrition. Leila then showed me a folder she had made consisting of pictures of fruit and vegetables to show the patients that come to her.

As we said our goodbyes, and I boarded the plane for Vientiane, I couldn't help but struggle with the inequities in this life. I would return to my comfortable home, with every need met. For most of these people, it is a daily struggle to have even their most basic needs met. A recent quote from a friend helped me to deal with it, she said, “Some things just never fit smoothly, but in the end, all that matters is what's happening in the heart and mind.” This thought is an inspiration to me, the same as Leila and Bryan, thank you both for my Lao Experience.

FOOTNOTE: If anyone has any unwanted clothing, especially warm children's clothing, shoes, books, toys etc. please take to the Health Frontiers office so Leila and Bryan can collect when they are in Vientiane for the people of Muang Sing.

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