



# LE SOURIRE DE CHIANG KHONG

Christmas letter 2017

Dearest foster parents and friends of Le Sourire,

“You become rich when you give and poor only when you refuse to give” (Sophie Swetchine). This was the theme of our discussions with our teenagers. Girapone (19) shared her thoughts with us.

“I’m thinking of my childhood when I was a little girl of seven. Along with some friends I was given the opportunity for the first time of going to a celebration during International Children’s Day. I was impressed by the huge crowd. With butterflies in my stomach, I drew nearer. At the entrance someone was giving out coupons to the children, which could be exchanged for sweets or various rides. I was very excited to think that I, too, could receive these coupons and have fun in this amusement park. So I joined the interminable waiting line. Once we had received the precious slips of paper, we began running in all directions to find the stands selling sweets or those proposing countless games organised especially for us. I stopped in front of a big stage where a question and answer game was going on. All of my friends joyously took part, answering the questions and receiving prize after prize. I admired them from the audience, amazed, dazzled, almost a little jealous of their performance. I was very shy, scared. I would never have dared expose myself like that in public. I felt so enchanted by this world of magic that I went through the day without exchanging a single one of my coupons. I was happy to see my friends laden with all kinds of gifts ! Although I became aware for the first time that day how shy and fearful I was, I was especially joyful that I had been able to take part in this unforgettable fun. The next year I went back and this time I received a knitted doll lying in a little box. It was my first doll. I was overjoyed. Deep inside, I had always dreamed of having a Barbie or a stuffed animal, but to at long last own “my doll” filled me with joy. For many long years I loved my doll, I took good care of her and kept her in a safe hiding place so as to never lose her.

I come from a very big family. My mother brought us up and took care of us on her own. Abandoned, exhausted, worn out, but with enormous courage she tried to offer us a decent existence. We were all still at primary school and my mother was extremely sad at being unable to give us more than the bare minimum. I didn’t want to be an extra burden to her, so I decided to accept some odd jobs here and there to ease our daily expenses. I do admit, however, that with each “salary” I was able to save a little money in order to buy “my” Barbie that I had always dreamed of owning. I was able to buy her; I was proud and happy. She was my very own, my most precious possession. Some time later, I gave in to the tireless begging of my little sister and gifted her with my Barbie.

One day I found some money on the ground. I took it to my mother. I was very excited. My mother gave the money to my younger brothers and sisters to buy sweets, explaining to me that since I was the eldest, before thinking of myself, I should think of my younger siblings.

Beginning in 4<sup>th</sup> grade primary school, I was away from home from Monday to Friday. The school was too far for me to walk there and back home every day. At the start of each week my mother gave me 5 bath (about 10 centimes) to buy sweets. But very often, when I returned home on Friday evening I gave her back my pocket money so that she could distribute it among my little brothers and sisters. I was so happy to see their eyes shine. When I was twelve and in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I often worked in the fields at the weekend, harvesting corn or rice, earning 200 bath (about 6 CHF). I gave 195 bath to Mother and kept five for myself. Above all, I wanted to help Mother; being able to support my family made me very happy.

My life took an unexpected turn when Barbara and Prapapone visited our village. They invited me to join le Sourire, in order to continue my studies. I moved into the centre and attended secondary school for three years. After lunch I washed the dishes with others on the “dishes team”, thus earning a little pocket money. It was an ideal way for me to get along on my own, without asking Mother for anything. The woman we worked with was very kind and generous. She even gave us beautiful second-hand clothing. When there was food left over in the cafeteria she let us take it back to the centre. Each time it was such a lovely surprise for all of our friends there to enjoy it during our evening meal.

After secondary school I went to the professional training school where I chose to take Home Economics. I am currently in the third and last year of my studies, which will enable me to attend university next year.

I come from an extremely poor background. I know what poverty is and what it's like not to have enough to eat. Thanks to my mother's courage, I witnessed what it is to struggle, to win and also to fail; this has given me strength to live. I was rewarded by the privilege of being able to join le Sourire, which has given me the opportunity of choosing a job, thanks to a worthwhile vocational training program. At the present time I am completely happy, at peace, fulfilled. It's what you might call the Love of Life, a feeling you can't explain. My only wish is to pass on this beautiful experience to others now and in the future.”

We join Girapone to express our deepest gratitude to you all for your support in its many different forms. Your fidelity enables us to continue our work and to widen our circle of mutual assistance. Le Sourire was born in 1998. Thanks to your trust, our programme has grown year after year. At this time, we feel we can say with joy that we are going in the right direction. We are planning to celebrate le Sourire's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, in 2018. We hope to see you again or to meet you for the first time, on that occasion.

Together with all of our children and staff members, we wish you a very happy New Year 2018.

*Barbara*

*Prapapone*