

Edito

Education and Training for a Future with Dignity

The children in our care at the Centre of Le Sourire come mostly from the mountainous regions of northern Thailand, from the Lahu, Lisu, Akha and Hmong tribes living in the hills. Many of these Sino-Tibetan people immigrated to Thailand in the 20th century, passing through China, Myanmar or Laos. They have settled in villages that are far away, lost in remote areas, often inaccessible during the rainy season. They barely manage to subsist, scraping a living from their farms. The temptation is great to improve their everyday lives by dealing in drugs, which is very risky, or by prostitution. Schools are virtually non-existent because many older people, who are often illiterate, consider them unnecessary. This explains why it is so difficult to find teachers who are willing to teach in such conditions.

The young generation is thus cut off from the reality of the modern world. Their ignorance, combined with misinformation, lack of experience and naivety, creates a dangerous cocktail of dreams and illusions. This stimulates their desire to leave their native villages and find happiness in the “big city”. It must be mentioned that, even in the most remote corners of these tiny villages, television is present, with its illusory programmes depicting city life in glowing colours !

The idea of bringing these children together near a school and giving them a family environment is essential. Our programme, “School of Life”, thus finds all its meaning. Le Sourire guarantees quality education to each child, on a basis of equality. In addition to compulsory schooling, we also make it possible for each child to have access to vocational training or university studies.



In addition to compulsory schooling, we also make it possible for each child to have access to vocational training or university studies.

For our institution to function well, rules for living together, which also respect each individual’s personal development, are indispensable. We do not turn our children into welfare recipients. Rather, our pedagogical vision is based on the power of self-help and on each youngster’s personal involvement for everyone’s wellbeing. Our young people come from rural areas, so we initiate them into farm work and general upkeep of the land or farm. Their free time is occupied with sports and cultural activities. We make sure that each ethnic group’s traditions are maintained and passed on to its younger members. Especially for our adolescents, we place great importance on talking together and raising their awareness of problems resulting from drugs, prostitution, violence, social injustice, incivility, etc.

By preparing our young people for the future through this joyful and loving approach of mutual support, we are giving them a solid foundation for planning their life with confidence and hope. Our main aim is not to channel them toward city life, but to enable them to pass on to others what they have received, wherever they may wish to settle down. Some of them may choose to spend their life in a city, but many prefer to stay in this area or to return to their village in order to put their skills into practice. In this way they become an example for their family, or even their village !

Lisa de Beauregard, President

The water war in our rice fields

In order to have a second harvest, natural irrigation of the rice fields by mountain water is definitely insufficient for the numerous rice fields in our region. Most of these harvests depend on water reservoirs installed around the countryside, which fill the canals alongside the fields. Certain fields that are closest to these reservoirs are thus assured of irrigation. But others further away often suffer from the malice of certain farmers who block the canals with bags of rice, so as to have as much water as possible for their own rice fields.



Water supply is regulated by a very strict timetable and the fields are jealously guarded by their owners. During the day the atmosphere is calm; but at night everything can change ! Games of hide-and-seek take place at night; gun shots are not uncommon. It is customary to carry a gun in our region. So it is better to avoid exchanging rude or provocative words with others ! Texan Thais defend their daily bread !

During such agitated nights as these, our staff, along with a few of our brave adolescents, keep guard over our rice fields so that “our water” does not get stolen. It’s a “kind war”, but it is necessary to make others respect us ! This is another side of reality that our young people must learn about. From time to time they clearly enjoy staying up all night outdoors, especially when it’s for a good cause !

Ban Kun Ta

For two years Le Sourire has made several visits to Ban Kun Ta, a Hmong village lost in the mountains of our region. Before assuming a concrete commitment, we wanted to know all about the families, their living conditions and means of survival, their needs, in order to better understand the children we were planning to help. Recently the chief of this village asked us to consider the urgent case of a child in danger.



When we arrived in the village we learned about a child, aged eight, who was totally abandoned. His mother and older brother had been arrested for being in possession of 400 tablets of methamphetamine and given long prison terms. His father, a daily drug user, doesn’t seem to realise he still has a son with him ! He spends his time working at his job : in his humble hut he makes knives when in a state to do so !

During this time the little boy is left to his own devices and wanders from house to house in search of something to eat. So we have decided to take him into our Centre. Since we are at the beginning of a new school year, other children in similar insecure situations from the same village may well join him.



Suwine

Suwine is the youngest of seven children, the only boy. Before him, Gintana, his older sister had already spent a few years with Le Sourire and trained in bookkeeping. When she returned to their village she married and is apparently leading a pleasant life.



Suwine came to our Centre at the age of thirteen and entered his first year of secondary school. When he finished his compulsory education his father requested that he return home. He planned to marry his son to a girl he had chosen and with whose family the marriage contract had already been signed !

However, Suwine, a very bright young man, had other motivations and ambitions. As other boys of his age, he wished to continue his schooling. He asked us to keep him at Le Sourire. He had a lively discussion with his father, then we tried to negotiate the necessary number of years that would enable him to finish his training. However it was thanks to Suwine's insistence and persistence that his father finally gave in to his dearest wish. The marriage contract was annulled and the dowry returned. Usually the dowry is a certain sum of money, or of rice, or rice alcohol, or simply a chicken – depending on the family's situation !

So Suwine entered a vocational school, choosing to learn the trade of electrician. Free and happy, he finished his studies and put his new skills into practice at our Centre, proposing ideas for new projects and all sorts of repairs. He was very curious and gifted; he was able to do everything and became a model for our other young people.

To complete his knowledge and strengthen his skills, he accepted a job in Chiang Rai where he is giving complete satisfaction to his employer. In his free time he often comes to see us; he tells us about his life, encourages and counsels the young people and even gives us a hand when we need it !

Suwine dreams of becoming independent one day – he says he wants to help his family, his village, his region in the future !

Tribute to the Deceased King

On 13th October 2016 Thailand lost its king, aged 88. King Bhumibol had been leader of his nation for almost 70 years; he had never lost his popularity. He was educated in Switzerland and named successor to the throne in 1946. Crowned in 1950 as Rama IX, he guided his country respecting its traditions and also keeping in tune with the times. He was generous and ruled according to Buddhist moral principles. He was both deified and very close to his subjects, who loved and respected him immensely.

He was a man of science with prophetic foresight : throughout his life he took interest in the environment and climate problems. At the same time he liked travelling around his country and personally meeting his most simple subjects. Many experimental projects, conceived and created by the King, were implemented during his reign, thus enabling the poorest people to lead a more dignified existence.

To honour this “Father of the Nation”, a national period of mourning has been decreed. Very strict rules were in force for the first 30 days. Now people are asked to show moderate discretion. All government employees are obliged to wear black for a year. During this time the King's remains may be viewed by those who wish to pay him a final tribute.

Across the country government and other official buildings, schools and sports areas are ostensibly draped in black and white, the colours of mourning. Le Sourire has followed the custom by celebrating more discreetly our end-of-year festivities and various activity days.

Regular Follow-up Visits to Children at Schools in the Villages

Ban Rai is one of the villages where Le Sourire sponsors and follows children from very poor families. Many of them, after completing their elementary and secondary education, wish to continue their studies at a vocational school or university.



For all of the elementary schoolchildren, Barbara and Prapapone make regular visits to the schools where they talk with the headmaster and teachers and evaluate the children's results, motivation, behaviour and attendance. These dedicated educators also alert us systematically to children in tragic situations who need our help.

As for the young people attending secondary, vocational schools and universities, several meetings during the year are held directly with the parents or grandparents. Since the universities and vocational schools are often far away, we organise one meeting every year during the school holidays, where the student must also be present. As there are many young people in Ban Rai whose education we sponsor, a woman living in the village proposed to hold these compulsory meetings in her home. This gives her special status in the village ! During our friendly conversations the students have the possibility of settling any problems they may have, of asking for advice, etc. We keep a record of the attendance at these meetings : each person must sign or leave their finger print. We end with a delicious meal (local cooking). The car waiting for us outside is often filled with fruits, vegetables and rice coming from their own harvests, in a gesture of gratitude.



This also happens !

Ratana (fictitious name) came into our Centre at a very young age. As she was studious and responsible, we were able to entrust her with many activities that gave her self-esteem and visibly made her happy. She was equally good at housework, gardening and farming. She had a pleasant personality and was skilful in caring for the younger children, with discretion and gentleness. Always smiling, she was loved by everyone. As a young adult, she chose to do commercial studies and specialised in accounting. There, too, we greatly appreciated her help with our administrative work. Her scholastic results were excellent and she won several national prizes. We were very proud of her, full of hope. For us, her future was a sure success !

One day however, when she returned from a stay with her family, we were obliged to notice – to our stupefaction – that her behaviour had drastically changed. The same girl, without any explanation, no longer showed interest in our activities. She became contemptuous, haughty, even arrogant. We had the explanation shortly thereafter : her mother came without notice one day to our Centre and informed us that she was withdrawing Ratana and enrolling her in a private school. This decision surprised us, since the family had always said they were very poor. Without other information from them we could not understand the reasons for such behaviour.



However, we do often experience the cases of parents who suddenly become rich through drug trafficking, who no longer need our help and who withdraw their children from our care. Forgetting their former humility and simplicity, they place more importance on material possessions than on simply being. They show false self-confidence and disdainful behaviour.

It also happens that families without any education whatsoever no longer feel that it is useful for their children to go to school. Indeed, they see examples around them that it's possible to get rich without going to school. So they withdraw their children. However, the adventure can turn out to be dangerous. Often, very quickly, the offence is discovered and punished by a few years in prison. And so the problems begin again !



A Beautiful Summer Laced with 150 Smiles

18th July 2016, 5 a.m. in France. The Opel's motor is running. Our team composed of six *Compagnons Scouts et Guides* of France is leaving Vannes for Chiang Rai, a city in Northern Thailand, where our host awaits us. The project we have been working on for two years is finally beginning ! We have only one thought : discover the Centre of the Swiss foundation that will receive us for three weeks, "Le Sourire de Chiang Khong".



Our first week is quite difficult because of the Centre's rather intense daily rhythm. The life style is also very different from what we're used to. Our food is essentially rice. The toilets are without paper. These are all real discoveries for us. But we quickly adapt so as to live our experience fully and be immersed in the culture of the Thai Centre.

Each week we discover new jobs to be done on the farm and in the garden. We clean the stalls of the pigs and cows, gather longan fruits (similar to lichees), plant corn, water plants and trees, prepare ground corn fodder for the pigs, harvest rice and clear brush, deliver young pigs in Laos. We have a very busy schedule ! These various tasks fascinate us because we all come from urban settings. They bring the extraordinary into our lives.

We also take part in the daily needs of the Centre, such as cleaning the common rooms, buying food, cooking for the children and staff.

All of these activities, many out-of-the-ordinary, enrich us immensely. They teach us how to do many new things and give us wonderful experiences in human relationships.

Our three weeks have come to an end and we are returning home to our Bretagne, tired but happy. As we wave at the mountains from afar, we are filled with memories of the people we have met, the new skills we have acquired. The landscapes, green and humid, laced with 1001 flowers, are etched forever in our hearts...

Les Compas-dre-lien

LABoutique

Our Shop – a great, ongoing story...

The idea of gathering and reselling objects at low prices germinated over ten years ago at the Bazar of the small Steiner school in Sion. As those in charge of the flea-market stand, we transformed it into a secondhand shop of accessories (jewellery, scarves, ...), which rapidly became very popular. We also put some new, end-of-season clothing on sale which a shop in Morges had generously offered us.



From 2009 everything unfolded quickly ! We started selling secondhand clothes in one of our apartments in Sion, at first in favour of Le Sourire. We then joined forces and extended our networks with the association Couleurs de Chine, which supports the same aim : give underprivileged children from that part of the world the essential basics and schooling to enable them to lead lives of dignity.

Great success !... But the private apartment became too small. Then, for years, we were fortunate to have the opportunity of organising a big, biannual sale in favour of our two associations in a private villa with an ikebana workshop, lent to us in the centre of Sion.

For three years now we have been renting a basement room in Sion converted into a shop with the help of friends who volunteered their time and skills. In January 2017 a second room became available, where we can stock the clothes and accessories for the next seasons.

To cover expenses and guarantee sponsorships (currently twenty a year for le Sourire) we organise occasional sales, about once a month (Friday afternoon and Saturday morning).

The idea is simple : our friends and acquaintances give us clothes and accessories (new or used, but clean and in good condition) which we sort out and prepare to sell.

Lots of customers rush to our sales to discover our “treasures”...

Since last year we also have a website. Our address list is growing.

www.la-boutique-sion.ch

LABoutique is located at 31 Avenue de la Gare in Sion, in the first basement.

If you wish to receive information about our sales, you can enrol on our website .

But if you do, don't forget to confirm your request when you receive a mail back from LABoutique.

We will be happy to welcome you and are looking forward to meeting you !

The LABoutique team

Solidarity and Charity

In late November 2016, two teenagers, Isaline, 15 and Aurélie Fabri, 13, organised a stand at the Christmas market of Gy in the canton of Geneva, for the children of Le Sourire.

The idea came to them at the Association's picnic which they attend every year in the summer with their family. The two adolescents were so delighted and enthused by the pictures and energy of the children of Le Sourire that they decided to bring their help, too, by participating in the Christmas market of their village.

Throughout the autumn, they devoted their free time to creating handcrafted objects and sweets. On the first Sunday of Advent, they were ready for their market.

They spent the day selling their treasures. Passers-by were certainly won over by their gesture of solidarity, their smiles. The result of their sales was significant ; with pride they offered it to le Sourire.



Thank you, Isaline and Aurélie, for this wonderful proof of solidarity and charity!

Barbara has received the Prize for Volunteer of the Year 2016 in the Northern region of Chiang Rai.



A word from Barbara and Prapapone

Moving with the times yet preserving essential, timeless values ...

This is the exercise of a tightrope walker that we must accomplish in order to give a solid, stable foundation to the young people in our care. Helping them to grow up in a context where things change fast without holding them back, passing on to them ethical values, basic principles of how to behave, of solidarity that make them into caring adults. Training, educating, encouraging a person to grow in dignity is a delicate, serious task full of responsibility. It is also the greatest privilege.



Thank you for your friendship and invaluable support in every shape and form.

Barbara

Prapapone

Our heartfelt thanks to our printer Gessler SA in Sion for the realisation of this publication.