



LE SOURIRE DE CHIANG KHONG

The Story Begins in 1995

In July 1995, after ten years of professional activity, Barbara Gautschi from Geneva decided to devote herself to a humanitarian cause and left Switzerland for Thailand. Working for a year as a volunteer in a shelter for victims of prostitution in Pattaya, she met Prapapone Khotsanlee, a Thai schoolteacher with whom she shared the same ideas on instruction and education. They soon realised that the scourge of prostitution must be treated "at the root".

The two women went up to the north of the country where they joined the Catholic Centre of Chiang Khong, which provides schooling for children and is dedicated to people suffering from AIDS. This decisive two-year stay introduced them to the Hmong villages where they get to know the people in charge of the schools and learn how to negotiate with the village chiefs. In 1998 they decided to create "their home" and rented a large house near Chiang Rai for 25 children from the region's ethnic groups.

Also in 1998, in Geneva, the association Le Sourire de Chiang Khong is created and is ready to support the work through a sponsorship and donor programme.

Quite quickly, the rented house becomes too small and a second centre is opened. If all the children are sponsored, Le Sourire also supports children who have stayed in their villages where a school exists. Private donations allow us to extend our help and thus finance the reconstruction of a school in a Lahu village and the opening of a school and day-care centre in an Akha village.

In 2001, the Thai government officially recognised Chiang Khong Smile as an NGO and in 2003 it was granted the status of a Foundation which ensures its sustainability. In 2005, Barbara was awarded the "Volunteer of the Year 2005" prize in Bangkok.

Given the unexpected development of the project, Le Sourire then decided to build its own centre. Following a positive evaluation of the Foundation's work by the State of Geneva, the Geneva government agrees to finance a suitable plot of land in Ban Sarapi - 50 km from Chiang Rai.

Initially, the large building offers space for all to live under "one roof". Gradually, the infrastructure was expanded and its capacity increased. Dormitories/shower rooms for boys and girls, a kitchen, study rooms, storage rooms for young people's belongings, craft workshops, staff huts, sports fields, etc. were built. At the same time, the agricultural project with its rice fields, fields, gardens, animals and buildings is gradually being extended to achieve self-sufficiency.

Always with the consent of the parents or the family, children are taken in from the age of six up to the baccalaureate, the business diploma or the end of an apprenticeship. The children are educated in government schools, which is a crucial factor for social integration. Indeed, learning the Thai language is essential for children who only speak local dialects. A small number of orphans are entrusted to Le Sourire by the government.

The fact that Prapapone is of Thai nationality contributes greatly to maintaining a good relationship with the official authorities - this is critical for the legalisation of undocumented children, a condition for being admitted to school.

In addition to food, accommodation, clothing, thorough schooling, sports and cultural activities, the home offers the children an education based on personal responsibility, solidarity and respect for other cultures. Wishing to be a School of Life Barbara and Prapapone's educational approach is based on the strength of mutual aid and the involvement of each person for the good of all. The children are not recipients of assistance, but actors in their own lives.

The respect and preservation of each person's traditions and customs is an important aspect of the Le Sourire approach. Coming from a rural background, the young people are enthusiastic about agricultural work. Generally speaking, their families greatly appreciate the fact that we maintain agricultural activities. Our aim is not to push the young people towards a city life, but to give them useful knowledge at the heart of their current and future environment.

If at the beginning of their adventure, Barbara and Prapapone had chosen and followed exclusively children from mountain tribes (Hmong, Akha, Lahu, Lisu), they also had to witness the misfortune that struck Thai families by the ravages of AIDS and drugs. A whole generation disappeared, and whose children were left to elderly grandparents, overwhelmed and deprived of any government assistance. Others are simply abandoned to their sad fate. Le Sourire has therefore extended its support to the Thai victims.

Our wish is to accompany the children throughout their schooling in order to guide them towards the professional future of their choice. Nevertheless, it happens that children leave home along the way for various reasons: parents moving house, family needs, the children's personal desire (dropping out of school, marriage) or the family's certainty that education is useless, especially for girls. We would like to help the children to improve their living conditions, while respecting their wishes. The continuation of their education is their choice in agreement with their families.

Most of the young people complete the schooling they have undertaken and the number of those who wish to go to university is increasing year by year. All those who have graduated have found a job in Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai or Bangkok. Some have returned home to support their families. In conclusion, they are all able to manage themselves.

If at the beginning of Le Sourire's activities the surrounding villagers showed their deep scepticism towards "the two women with their big family", they have since changed their opinion. The seriousness of the work of the household and the services rendered to each other have enabled a valuable and friendly exchange. A friendly contact has since been established.

Prizes and documentation :

Award of the 2009 Adèle Duttweiler Prize to Barbara Gautschi

Thai Government Award "Volunteer of the Year 2005" and Volunteer of the Year 2016 for the Chiang Rai Region" to Barbara Gautschi

Three documentary films directed by producer Claude Schauli :

" Barbara à bras ouverts " - report by Television Suisse Romande " Temps Présent " December 2001

" Le Sourire de Chiang Khong " - report by Television Suisse Romande 2007

" Les enfants du Triangle d'Or " - report by Television Suisse Romande 2015