

Advancing Towards a Generation of Generosity

By Stephen Bell

A jewel in AustCham Thailand's crown for over 17 years, the Community Services Program has impacted the lives of countless underprivileged Thais. Stephen Bell spoke with Khun Sutipong Ittipong to find out more about the program's origins and future direction.

THE EARLY DAYS

Seeking to balance business with benevolence, in 1991 AustCham Thailand built water tanks for several schools in Kanchanaburi province, igniting the first of many valuable projects assisting in the development of communities across Thailand.

"We agreed the best thing we could do for any community is to look after its children, and the best thing we can do for the children was to support their education. We choose Kanchanaburi because of the Australian involvement there during the Second World War," recounted Khun Sutipong, a 17-year AustCham stalwart and Chair of the Community Services Sub-committee.

"In 1995, we started providing English language classes, which are still happening today. In 1998 we were also proud to have built our first school library in Kanchanaburi, to which our members generously donated Baht 600,000," Khun Sutipong said.

SINCE THEN...

The Community Services Program has continued its commitment to the education of young Thais, with many hours volunteered by AustCham Thailand members at the monthly teaching days at schools in Kanchanaburi, Chonburi and Rayong.

"Thai children are naturally quite shy...the programs give them the courage to learn English and talk with native speakers. In this way, I see the teaching days as a stepping stone to a better life," explained Khun Sutipong.

Over the years, AustCham Thailand and its members have also undertaken several major, long-term projects, including the construction of a library and a multi-purpose sports area for a school in Rayong; the donation of a foetal heart rate monitor and mini-ambulance to hospitals in Chonburi, in honour of the 60th anniversary of His Majesty the King's accession to the throne; the continued annual support of the Convoy for Kids charity golf day; and the building of a Bakery Training Centre for deaf Thais in honour of His Majesty the King's 80th birthday.

"Above all, I am most proud of the consistency of the Community Services Program, and the commitment of the Sub-committee and AustCham members over the years," Khun Sutipong said.



Khun Sutipong Ittipong, AustCham Vice-President and Chair of the Community Services Sub-committee.

THE FUTURE

How can the Community Services Program continue its success into its third decade and beyond?

"I would like to see the emphasis stay with children and the schools," Khun Sutipong said. "I cannot see any major challenges to this in the future because we have such a strong and generous membership base. The Chamber's members, many of whom have businesses in Thailand, understand the importance of giving something back to society."

"Many other chambers simply donate their money to a charity, but I am proud that the Australian-Thai Chamber actually conducts the projects themselves. It's a continual process, which I am confident will continue to have the support of the hard-working sub-Committee and the Chamber's members," Khun Sutipong said.

A list of the most recent Community Services projects conducted by AustCham Thailand can be found on page 24. AustCham Thailand warmly welcomes any ideas, innovations or donations for the Community Services Program. ■

One Day, an Education

For 13 years AustCham Thailand members (most without professional teaching experience) have volunteered their time once a month to teach Thai children basic English numeracy and literacy skills within a fun and relaxed environment.

The Community Services Program has supported weekend visits to schools in Kanchanaburi (Baan Had Ngiew and Sai Yoke Yai), Chonburi (Baan Khao Din and Wat Pra Pathanporn) and Rayong (Baan Khao Huay Mahad). Volunteers work with small groups of children aged between five and twelve years, teaching students about Australia, helping them learn and perform an English-language song, play educational games and help students practice their conversation skills.

Strengthening the program in 2004, Tricia Balmer and Kevina Stewart developed a loose-leaf workbook for students, which has not only helped aid the students' education, but also provided an easy structure for volunteer teachers to follow.

"The students in our classroom were keen and polite...the program was both a fun and worthwhile activity to be involved in during our time in Thailand," remarked Tricia Balmer in a previous edition of *Advance*.

No experience is necessary! If you would like to volunteer for a day, please contact the AustCham office for more information. ■



Donations Help Fuel Schools



School visits offer an opportunity for members and individuals to donate relevant equipment to schools in need. Over the years, AustCham Thailand and its members have generously donated resources ranging from water filtration/purification systems, televisions, computers, books, uniforms and stationery.

In recent years, AustCham Thailand has also provided nutritious lunches and entertainment for the children, with performances by Thailand's only qualified clown performer, Clown Eckie, with the support of the Sulet Group.

AustCham members or individuals who would like to donate resources to underprivileged schools are welcome to contact the AustCham Thailand office. ■