



Prateep Ungsongtham Hata



WHY IS PRATEEP A NOMINEE?

Prateep Ungsongtham Hata has been nominated as WCPRC Decade Child Rights Hero 2009 for her 40-year-long struggle for the rights of Thailand's most vulnerable children. Since she was 16, Prateep has spent all her time fighting to give tens of thousands of poor children in slums and rural areas a better life and the chance to go to school. Prateep's organisation offers children financial support; runs fifteen pre-schools, a school for children with hearing impairments, and homes for vulnerable children; builds school libraries; lends money via "The Bank of the Poor", and runs "The Poor People's Radio Station", where children can make their voices heard. Prateep's life is threatened by criminal gangs in Bangkok's slums. They don't like her giving poor children an education and a chance to say 'no' to dangerous work, drugs, prostitution and criminality.

Ungsongtham Hata was born in Klong Toey, Bangkok's biggest slum. When she was ten she scraped rust off the ships in the harbour to survive. But in her dreams, she went to school...

Today Prateep is 56, and for 40 years she has been helping tens of thousands of poor children in Thailand to a better life, and to go to school.

Prateep's story begins even before she was born in a little village by the sea south of Bangkok. Her father, Thong You, a fisherman, had heard that workers were needed in Bangkok harbour. He decided to move there with his family.

Everywhere, poor people from the countryside crowded into the harbour hoping for a better life in the city. They started building little hovels of sheet-metal, crating paper

and old boarding. That's how the slum Klong Toey came into being.

She sold sweets

When Prateep was born, her father worked in the harbour, but everyone in the family had to help and make money.

"I was only four when I went round selling sweets that my mum had made," recalls Prateep.

Every morning she gave the family's ducks water and looked for the eggs they had laid.

Prateep sold the eggs they didn't need in the marketplace. Every day she also helped her mother to fetch water two kilometres away.

Her mother, Suk, wanted Prateep to begin school, but there was no school in Klong Toey. And because Prateep, like all the other poor children there, had no birth certificate, she couldn't begin at a public school in town.

Without a birth certificate children are not considered Thai citizens, and have no right to go to school. Finally, when Prateep was seven, Suk found an inexpensive private school that would take her in.

"I was overjoyed! The first time I entered the classroom was the best day of my life," Prateep did well there. She didn't mind that all the other children had nicer clothes – she was just happy to be in school in the first place. In the afternoons, Prateep sold sweets. She had a lot to do, but she was happy.

Prateep thought it was unfair that the poor children couldn't go to school.



Prateep started a school in her home.

The worst day

But one day when Prateep was ten and had just finished fourth form, her mum told her that they couldn't afford to keep her in school.

"It was the most miserable day of my life. I couldn't stop crying."

At first Prateep started work at a fireworks factory, then later at a factory that made pots. On days when the factories didn't need her, Prateep worked in the harbour.

"I scraped rust from the ships. Since I was so little, I had to crawl below deck and clean tight places where the adults couldn't get in. It was scary and dangerous, we had no safety gear. Sometimes when we had worked the whole day, the foreman said we had to stay there and work at night as well. Many of the children took drugs to cope. Some nights, I did too. It made me sick, but at least it kept me awake."

One morning when Prateep was on her way to the harbour, something happened that changed her life completely.

"I met my old classmates. They were on their way to school in their neat uni-

forms. I was wearing ragged, dirty clothes. When they asked why I had quit school, I felt foolish and started to cry. It all seemed so unfair. But right then and there, I made up my mind. Somehow I would go back to school again!"

Prateep gave most of the money she made to her mother, but saved a little for herself, too. When she had worked in the harbour for four years, she had saved enough money to begin at an inexpensive night school in town.

"My dream had come true! I went to school evenings, and in the day I worked in the harbour. Often I was so tired that I fell asleep on the bus to and from school."

Her first school!

During the years in the harbour, Prateep had met many other children who worked and had a hard life. They didn't have birth certificates either, and Prateep thought it was unfair. At 16, she decided to start her own school!

"My sister Prakong and I set up a classroom in the downstairs room of our family's little hut on stilts. Then we went to the neigh-

One in six of the world's population live in slums. Eight million of them live in Thailand. Three million Thai children have no opportunity to go to school. Many of them are forced to work instead, and at least 30,000 children are trapped in a life of prostitution. In order to help these poor children, Prateep and her organisation, the Duang Prateep Foundation, DPF, do the following:

- 2,500 poor children get financial support so that they can go to school.
- At Prateep's 15 pre-schools, the children get milk and nutritional food, as well as free dental and healthcare.
- A school for children with hearing impairments. The families cannot afford to send their children to the expensive schools for children who are deaf and hard of hearing.
- In two homes, the most vulnerable children, who have been assaulted, abused or who have drug problems are offered a chance to start again.
- Build school libraries in villages and offer support to children there so that they can go to school.
- Give particular support to girls to help them earn a living so that they can remain in the village. If the girls leave the village they run a high risk of ending up in prostitution.
- "The Bank of the Poor" lends money to poor people, who cannot afford to borrow money from ordinary banks.
- "The Poor People's Radio Station" allows children to make their voices heard.



On the first day, 29 children came to Prateep's school; soon they were over a hundred.





hours and told them that they could send their children to our school for one baht a day (25 cents). Already the first day children turned up who couldn't pay, but they got to stay anyway."

In the first week, Prateep taught 29 children. They sat on newspapers that she spread on the floor. Talk of the school spread like lightning. After a month, 60 children were there, and soon over a hundred children stood outside Prateep's house every morning!

"I read stories to them and taught them to read, write and do sums. I found that many of them hadn't eaten anything before they came, so I often cooked rice to give them before we began."

"Over and over again I tried to get the authorities to approve the school. I was afraid they would force me to close it otherwise. I don't know how many officials I visited just to say: 'Please sir, the poor children in Klong Toey also need an education. We're worth just as much as any other children. And since we can't attend other schools, please acknowledge our school!' I also told them I wanted them to help us poor kids get birth certificates."

"Mostly, they laughed at me and said that the poor aren't real people. They

threatened to arrest me if I didn't stop teaching."

Finally, though, Prateep won and her school was recognised by the authorities. But it took eight years! More teachers started there, teaching materials began coming in, and at last a whole new school was built.

Helped tens of thousands of children

When Prateep was 26, she was given a prize of 20,000 dollars. She didn't keep any of it, but used it all to start an organisation, the Duang Prateep Foundation, to be able to help yet more children.

Today, Prateep has been fighting for the rights of poor children in Thailand for 40 years. Tens of thousands of poor children now have a better life and the chance to learn. Some 100 people work for the Duang Prateep Foundation, and most of them are from Klong Toey.

"My dream is for every child in Thailand to have a good life, so that the Duang Prateep Foundation won't be needed any longer. But still several million children must work instead of going to school. Others are forced into prostitution and many end up in drug abuse and criminality. I will fight for the rights of these children as long as I live." 🌐



Deuan gets financial support so that she can go to Prateep's school for children with hearing impairments.





Kea 'doesn't exist'

"I don't have a birth certificate, so I never got to go to an ordinary school," says Kea. Many poor children have no proof of birth, and so they're not considered Thai citizens. They 'don't exist' for the authorities and are denied the rights that other children have.

KEA

escaped from the wicked man

When Kea became an orphan, she was badly treated in the village where she lived. So she ran away to the city, joined a gang, and at the age of 8 was sentenced to 3 years in juvenile prison. When Kea was 11, her 'stepmother' sold her to a man for US\$ 50. A dreadful time lay before her. But today, Prateep has helped Kea live a new life.

In a nearby city, I met other abandoned children, and they became my friends. We lived in the slums. We took care of one another, and they became my new family.

"We often got into fights with other local gangs. Once my best friend stabbed a girl quite seriously. When the police came and asked who had hurt the girl, I told them I had. I loved my friend, and she still had family of her

own. I had no family, so I knew no one would miss me if I went to jail. The police believed me, and I was sentenced to 3 years in juvenile prison school. I had never thought the sentence would be so long! Since I was only 8, I was the youngest intern, and the older girls took care of me. It wasn't really a school, more like a prison. We didn't have a single lesson in 3 years."

Sold for 50 dollars

"When I was released from juvenile prison school, I rejoined my friends. But some days when I felt lonely and sad, I sniffed glue to try and forget. One day, a woman and her daughter began talking to me. The woman said that she was my dad's second wife, and that she had been looking for me since he died. At last, maybe my life would be better!

"One day a man who knew my new 'mum' came to visit. He lived near Bangkok, and he said he needed home help. 'Mum' suggested that I go with him and work a few months to make money for the family. I thought that sounded OK since I knew I'd soon be home again. Before we left, the man gave 'mum' 2,000

baht (50 dollars) in advance. I didn't give it much thought then, but I soon realised that I'd been tricked.

"When we got to the man's house, he wasn't kind any more. There was a very high wall around the house, and it looked scary – almost like a prison. I was frightened. Inside, there were other girls my age, but the man said that we mustn't talk to each other. At first I didn't understand what kind of place it was, but after a while I discovered that men came to the house every night to visit the other girls. They went to different rooms where the men forced the girls to do nasty things. At first, all I had to do was tidy up, but I was terrified and couldn't sleep."

Ran for her life!

"One evening, the man who had bought me came and





“We don’t just learn to read and write here. We also learn how to grow vegetables and cook,” says Kea.

Adults should learn about the Rights of the Child!

“Here with Prateep we learn a lot about the Rights of the Child. I think that’s good, but actually it’s the grown-ups who should learn about the Rights of the Child. They’re the ones who must learn what is right and wrong since they’re the ones who hurt us,” says Kea.

➔ said: ‘It’s time now!’ He tried doing disgusting things with me, but I refused. He got furious, and started beating me with an electric cord all over my body – in my face, on my legs and back. After that, he or other men would often come to my room. I tried to defend myself as best I could, but it wasn’t easy. I was only 11, after all.

“One night when I’d been in the house for three months, I got fed up. I talked to Pun, a girl who’d become my friend. We decided to run away in the morning while everyone was asleep.

“Silently, we sneaked to the wall. I stood on Pun’s shoulders since I weighed least, and managed to climb over. Then I opened the gate from outside, and we ran away.

“We had enough money to take the bus to Bangkok.

“We went to a market.

As we stood there, some policemen approached. They got suspicious when they saw that we both had bruises and sores on our faces after all the beatings. When they asked us what had happened, I began crying, and we told them everything.

“We were lucky - the policemen were kind and took care of us. Since I had no family, I got to stay with the police a few days. Then I met Prateep, and she promised to take care of me. She has given me a second chance. I have a home, and I can even go to school!” 🌐



The Rights of the Child on Children’s Radio!

“Grown-ups don’t listen to children in Thailand. They only give us orders without finding out what we really think,” says Duang, 14.

But in Klong Toey, many adults listen to the children’s community radio station, which tells them about the Rights of the Child.

“Obviously the grown-ups take us more seriously when we’re on the radio!” says Duang laughing.

Hitting children is wrong!

Some 130,000 people live in Klong Toey, so Jib, Som and Duang have a big audience when they’re on the radio.

“Radio is good because you reach so many people at the same time. I knew that many children in my neighbourhood were being beaten at home, and through our radio show we could explain to everyone in Klong Toey in a simple way that it isn’t right to hit children,” says Som, 13.