

From Water to Wishes

In 1992, The Rain Tree Foundation, then known as ThaiCare, was essentially a privately financed club of do-gooders, building day care centres for underprivileged children.

Today, this grassroots group operates as a registered NGO, empowering rural communities in northern Thailand by helping them lead healthier, more fulfilling lives.

Co-founder Ralf Oberg left Germany a couple of decades ago, travelling to Thailand to volunteer in the slums of Bangkok. While in the big city, he met Wanida, a sweet woman who would become his wife and partner. He also found a greater purpose in life through helping children and the underprivileged.

At that time, there weren't many NGOs in the North, where Wanida had been raised. The need was great and the couple were eager to get involved, so they started to build day cares and children's homes. As NGOs multiplied in the region, they went further afield to isolated villages near the border with Myanmar, from Mae Sot to Mae Hong Son.

In recent years, the foundation's focus has shifted to the communities' biggest need — water. In rural areas, drinking water is often contaminated with parasites, bacteria, and viruses. These invisible pathogens can lead to myriad water-borne maladies that frequently result in the death of infected young children. Compounding the lack of

available fresh water is the lack of access to electricity and the high cost of installing gasoline-powered generators that power water filtration.

With Oberg's background in machines and automobiles, and the addition of other talented team members with mechanical knowledge, The Rain Tree Foundation has found a niche in setting up hydraulic ram pumps and biosand filters, two modern inventions based on centuries-old technology. With the help of Canadian NGO CAWST (Centre for Affordable Water and Sanitation Technology), they have been able to install over 1,500 filters in northern Thailand to date.

While clean water solutions make up a major part of The Rain Tree Foundation's mission, it isn't the sole purpose for being. Recognizing the importance of preserving each community's culture, as well as the value of self-empowerment, the group has kick-started various development initiatives. One of the most profound has been the reforestation of farmland. Working in tandem with local farmers, they have repopulated old fields with fruit, herb, coffee, and macadamia trees, all of which provide new ways to generate revenue.

"Our motto is 'Help people to help themselves,'" says Singer. "The foundation doesn't own property. All the projects belong to the communities. We work closely with the villages, only starting projects that interest them. We don't do things for free, though. The villagers contribute their part by providing labour (once construction is planned) or by supporting us with rice or vegetables if they don't have any money. We aim to help disadvantaged people lift themselves out of poverty."

Over the years, the foundation has grown and grown. Today, it provides education and support to over 270 children, counting five children homes, two schools, and two foster children projects within its portfolio. To increase its impact, a placement programme for volunteers and interns has been established. Adding to the cause is the work of former volunteer Anne Rieken, who registered a partner club in Germany called ThaiCare.de to make new international contacts and raise funds from abroad.

The Rain Tree Foundation welcomes volunteers and donations. To learn more about its mission and how to contribute to the foundation, visit raintree-foundation.org or contact info@raintree-foundation.org.

