

# How Smiles on Wings Took Flight

by Dr. Usa Bunnag

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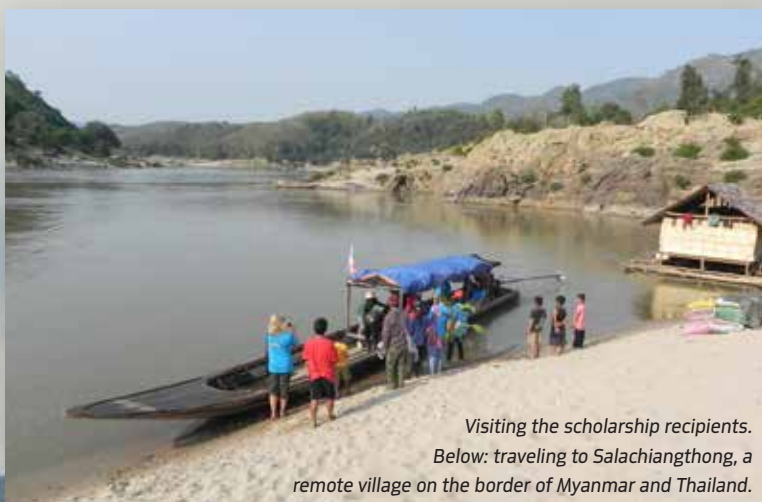



Dr. Usa Bunnag recalls how the nonprofit program she founded overcame hardships to bring dental care to Thai villagers



At Sobmauy village in Maesariang.

The journey of Smiles on Wings began in 2003, during a trip I took to the Mae Sariang district of northern Thailand. Hundreds of tribal villages are nestled in these remote hills, and many are cut off from the outside world during the rainy months. Depending on the time of year, traveling to Salachiangthong, a remote village on the border of Myanmar and Thailand, could require a two-day walk, a four-wheel-drive vehicle, a motorcycle with chains on the tires, a boat or even an elephant.





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Traveling to Salachiangthong, six hours from the nearest town

"To reach some destinations, the vehicles had to travel for four to five hours via streambeds, but during each mission the volunteers treated the entire student body, from first-graders to ninth-graders."

— Dr. Usa Bunnag

On our first visit to this mountainous terrain bordering Myanmar, my husband and I knew that our goal would be to bring dental care to the villagers who populate the area—even though doing so would require the help of a team of dedicated people.

The first missions included small groups with limited equipment, but by 2005 the program had expanded as part of an extensive tsunami relief effort based in southern Thailand. Through generous grants and donations, it grew even more, to include a mobile dental clinic in northern Thailand, a permanent clinic in southern Thailand, and even three college scholarship programs for children in Mae Sariang.

### An unstoppable effort

In 2009 my husband, Noi, suffered a massive stroke that left him paralyzed on one side of his body. Just two months later, we learned that Smiles on Wings had received its first grant from the American Dental Association Foundation to fund a post-tsunami dental reconstruction project in Thailand—one for which Noi had been expected to be the main coordinator. We had extensive soul-searching to do: How could I take care of my husband, teach him



A farewell from the children of Maelid village





*With a volunteer from Australia, through the first mobile project by the Australian-New Zealand Women's Group of Bangkok*

to live again, keep my dental practice going, and simultaneously carry out the Smiles on Wings mission?

The opportunity was something we couldn't turn down. We accepted the grant, and six months later Noi's doctor cleared him for travel to Thailand to carry out the mission, even though he now was in a wheelchair. I prayed that the 24-hour plane ride would not cause my husband to have another stroke.

During the post-tsunami dental reconstruction project, hundreds of villagers received extensive dental care from a team of providers and assistants from all over the globe. After the project concluded in 2012, our team in the U.S. raised more funds to build a permanent clinic in the area, near a school that was once destroyed but now houses more than 800 orphans. The clinic was completed in 2014, and the Smiles on Wings team continues to visit to treat the



*With the girls from Maelid, who helped as assistants*

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*With my husband and the mother of one of our scholars, who brought us a thank-you gift: a handwoven Karen tribal blouse.*

children, most recently in January 2016. Through additional grants from the After the Wave Foundation, the International College of Dentists, the USA Section Foundation and generous donors, the clinic will be fully furnished and serve area children for years to come.

In 2013, thanks to a grant from the Australian-New Zealand Women's Group of Bangkok, Smiles on Wings established a mobile dental program equipped with four-wheel-drive vehicles and mobile dental units to serve hundreds of children who live in Mae Sariang and surrounding villages. To reach some destinations, the vehicles had to travel for four to five hours via streambeds, but during each mission the volunteers treated the entire student body, from first-graders to ninth-graders.

### Sowing the seeds for success

Over the past 12 years, I've witnessed other hardships faced by villagers in these remote areas. Girls are sometimes married



*The children saying thank-you and goodbye*



“Dentistry allowed us to create Smiles on Wings; in return, Smiles on Wings gave us an opportunity to do more than I had set out to do.”

— Dr. Usa Bunnag

at age 14 or 15, and expected to work on farms. Some move to cities to work as factory workers or servants, while others fall victim to human trafficking.

During our missions, many local girls who came to help would share their dreams of attending college, which inspired me to create a scholarship program that enables young women from the Karen tribe to attend college, then return to their villages after graduation to make a difference as health providers and educators. By empowering and nurturing these women, we’re ensuring long-term sustainability of the Smiles on Wings program. Four women already have graduated—two are community health officers, one’s a nurse and another a teacher—and eight students are in college now.

Looking to the future, I know my purpose in life: My dental practices and the Smiles on Wings program both breathe life into me. My husband is still in a wheelchair,

but we’ve carried out 10 missions since his stroke, and the program is an integral part of us that we could never give up, no matter what the circumstances. Dentistry allowed us to create Smiles on Wings; in return, Smiles on Wings gave us an opportunity to do more than I had set out to do.

The last time I visited a newly chosen scholar, she and her guardian cried tears of joy and disbelief, because this young woman now has a chance to be a health officer and to make a difference in her community. When the right people come along, the scholarship program can produce nurses to serve in our dental clinics. Smiles on Wings will continue to make smiles for a long time to come.

As the motivational axiom says, you can be the change that you want to see in the world. Through Smiles on Wings, I can change the world—one girl, one village, one mission at a time. ■



A thanks from the children of Maelid

For more information about the Smiles on Wings program, visit [smilesonwings.org](http://smilesonwings.org)

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