
Manila Women's Forum

A Network of Women Professionals

June 2008

Helping Street Children Change Their Lives

By Barbara Wellink



Left to right: Nicole Bintner, Sue Hooper, the evening's speaker Dominique Lemay, Sam Heeney, and Julia Holz

Sue Hooper, our attentive host of the May 19 meeting, introduced us to the speaker whom she got to know through her work at the Asian Development Bank (ADB): Mr. Dominique Lemay from France, founder and president of Virlanie Foundation. Mr. Lemay, accompanied by four volunteers, told us how impressed he was with the polite behavior of Philippine street children after first meeting some of them in 1987 while conducting a research project in Manila for his Master's in social work.

Comparing them to the young drug addicts in Paris, he was surprised to find out that they were not violent children.

He felt the urge to take care of the many addicted, abused, neglected and especially the mentally retarded street children. After returning to France, he started to miss the Philippines, which made him decide to resign from his position of Caritas Director and return to Manila with his family. Mr. Lemay's passion to help street children changed his life and resulted in the establishment of the Virlanie Foundation in 1992, named after his

two daughters Virginie and Lauriane at the suggestion of co-founder Florence who died 10 years ago.

The foundation, run by 130 Filipino staff, 30 Filipino and foreign volunteers, takes care of 300 children inside 12 residential homes and about 1000 children outside the foundation, through outreach programs. Young unwed mothers and infants are also being looked after. The residential program focuses on social reintegration and family creation; besides providing shelter, meals, hygiene, values and chores, there is a

(Continued on page 2)

NEXT MWF MEETING ■ **When:** Monday, 2008 June 16, 6:30 p.m. **Where:** Rose Hunt's home, 1891 Sinaguellas, Dasmariñas Village, Makati City. **What:** Jac Vidgen, a Senior Practitioner of Buteyko's method of breathing reconditioning, will speak about optimal breathing and its significant health benefits, especially for asthma, allergies, anxiety and sleep disorders and stress. **Bring:** Something to share for the potluck dinner. **July meeting:** July 21.

(Helping... from page 1)

real sense of love for each child. The foster parents are carefully selected; they have to be people who really love the children.

The outreach programs, aiming to alleviate poverty and fight injustice for the poorest of the poor, complement formal school education through an educational center and therapist center where developmental activities such as arts and crafts to build self-confidence. The foundation also established a center especially for hygiene and medical care, and a new project in Negros is being developed for teaching natural farming. The overall idea is to teach the children to take care of themselves and to encourage families to go back to the province. In the past children of disadvantaged families were often split up; now there is a focus on the family as a whole.

We were shown a short movie in which four examples were given of

Defining Street Children

A great deal has been written defining street children, but the primary difficulty is that there are no precise categories, but rather a continuum, ranging from children who spend some time in the streets and sleep in a house with ill-prepared adults, to those who live entirely in the streets and have no adult supervision or care.

street children whose lives were transformed by Virllanie's care, assistance, advice and activities. So far, Virllanie has "given smiles back" to roughly 11,000 street children. The foundation, which does not adhere to any particular religion or political party, always welcomes new volunteers.

In response to a question about support from the Philippine government, Mr. Lemay answered that there is no financial support, but that there is dialogue with regard to training. The foundation has a role to play where there is a lack of government services. For instance, after a law was passed to raise the minimum age of children in jail from 9 to 15, Virllanie was worried about what would happen to the kids between the ages of 9 and 15 and tries to fill the needs of that group. The foundation provides legal assistance to children in jail and follow-up services after they are released.

Being commended by one MWF member for his success, the modest Mr. Lemay just remarked that the key is "to look at what is happening; there is no solution, the only thing we can do is help." He stressed that you cannot force children; they have to want to change their lives and adapt to the rules and the new routine. Since in the street there is no discipline at all, this is a difficult process that takes time. And Mr. Lemay admitted that certainly not all children are angels. However, some of the kids have become college graduates. The foundation was awarded the Human Rights Prize from the French Republic in 2001 and Mr.

Lemay was named one of the ten Outstanding Manileños in 2006 by the City of Manila.

On 18 September the Virllanie Foundation will have a big event at the Conservatory in the Peninsula Hotel in Makati showcasing the children's talents through dance, songs and theater. More information on the foundation can be found on Virllanie's website www.virllanie.org or through Virllanie.communication@gmail.com.

Manila Women's Forum

Manila Women's Forum (MWF) is a cross-cultural network for women. It provides opportunities to build friendships, to talk to women of various cultures, and to share information about resources. Our meetings are intended to provide intellectual stimulation and lead to personal and professional development. All women are welcome to join. The current officers are **Lisa Lumbao**, Chair, Programs, Treasurer, and Newsletter. **Shari Virjee**, MWF Membership Message Board and Assistant Chair. **Cecilia Leung** and **Julia Holz**, Programs. **Lisa Stuart**, MWF Membership Message Board Moderator. **Beulah P. Taguiwalo**, Newsletter, Website.

Cost of membership is P300 per year. Members receive a copy of the current mailing list in addition to the newsletter, which is also sent to non-members. A contribution is collected at each monthly meeting: P20 for members, and P40 for non-members. Please contact Lisa Lumbao at Tel. 813-0168, or at lumbao@mozcom.com for more information about MWF.

Visit our website – a work in progress
www.geocities.com/manilawomensforum

MWF Newsletter
c/o Lisa Lumbao
26-B Casa Real Townhouse
Real St., Urdaneta Village
Makati City 1225