

Bringing compassionate touch to Cambodian kids

For three years, Religious Education leader Mike Norman has traveled to a remote Southeast Asian orphanage to give healing massages to HIV-positive children.

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Touch is something babies need, children crave and adults long for. In fact, it's critical for the emotional, physical and spiritual well-being of every human being.

Mike Norman, associate director of the Office of Religious Education who oversees youth programs, has found this out first hand. For the last three years as a volunteer with "Heart Touch," he's traveled with a team to an orphanage in Cambodia that cares for more than 200 HIV-positive children. At the 18-acre compound divided into eight large family-style units, the men and women who are mostly professional massage therapists practice the art of compassionate touch therapy. The results are often nothing short of miraculous.

"Being touched is so taboo in some ways here in the United States and also in Cambodia. But it's amazing to see how just human contact can change a person's life, and the little kids especially. Like a two-year-old who is freaking out because they have never seen a white person before and they don't know what they're like. But if you just massage their arms for a few minutes, the next time you come they sit in your lap immediately and try to say 'massage.' And when you get out of the van, all the kids just come running."

Norman points this out after his most recent trip, Nov. 26 to Dec. 11, to Our Village orphanage outside of Phnom Penh. The city was the former headquarters of the infamous Khmer Rouge and its leader Pol Pot. Under his rule from 1975 to 1979, some two million Cambodians died through political executions, starvation and forced labor. The genocide was dramatically chronicled in the movie "The Killing Fields."

"I've noticed that touch is so much even more than talking," he continues. "These kids have been through trauma. They've lost parents or been abandoned. People might say, 'You should sit and chat with them.' Yes, I agree with that. But, more importantly, I think for two weeks they have this intimate contact with a group of people. So the language barrier is there, but the touch dissolves that immediately. While you're massaging someone, they just laugh. Laughter happens constantly. Or they doze off."

It's the laughter along with the deep friendship Norman has forged with John and Kathy Tucker that keeps him coming back to the orphanage. The former Maryknoll lay missionaries founded New Hope for Cambodian Children (NHCC) and Our Village in 2006 to provide holistic care to children infected with HIV/AIDS as well as outreach support to affected children and their families in six provinces. NHCC also operates a transition house called "Happy Home" for babies too sick to live at the orphanage, which is supported by the Clinton Foundation and other philanthropic organizations and individual donors.

Norman, 48, got involved with Heart Touch through friends who were volunteer-



SATISFACTION — Mike Norman holds an infant at Our Village. "I think my two weeks there gives me more satisfaction than anything else I do," he says.

ing their time and talents at the literally hands-on organization based in Southern California. The nonprofit's mission, since its inception in 1995, is the training and delivery of "compassionate and healing touch" to homebound and hospitalized men, women and children.

Locally, Heart Touch volunteers massage infants, older kids and adults who are terminally ill or in hospice care at Children's Hospital, Cedars-Sinai Hospital, Mattel Children's Hospital at UCLA and Kaiser Permanente hospitals among other health-care facilities. Its International Global Outreach program also currently operates in Thailand and India besides Cambodia. Volunteers, like Norman, raise about \$4,000 to cover costs for travel, lodging and meals during their two-week humanitarian stays.

"How it works at Our Village is the team drives up in our van and the kids come running shouting 'massage! massage!' because they know the English word now," he reports. "But they love it because for most of them it's the only time they're getting touched all day. So it's that compassionate touch that they crave."

He points out that their massage is not the laying-down-on-a-table, covered-with-a-towel traditional kind. Instead, most of the orphans are rubbed while sitting outside on benches. They just roll up their shirt sleeves and pants so lotion can be rubbed on their arms and legs. A good bench massage takes 20 to 30 minutes, starting with the neck and shoulders, then the arms and finally the legs and feet.

But what often happens when a line forms is the kids start imitating the Heart Touch vol-



GROUP SHOT — Norman, squatting, poses with seven other 2010 Heart Touch volunteers and New Hope for Cambodian Children founders Kathy (second from left) and John (far right) Tucker.

unteers and wind up trying to massage each other. So by the second week they're really into it, according to Norman, and on the last day they're even giving the volunteers massages. The team also teaches the caretakers at Our Village how to continue the compassionate touch therapy when they're gone.

"I've gotten really close to the kids, like one named Thavry who came here last year for Youth Day at the Religious Education Congress," he says. "They're become family, and I think my two weeks there gives me more satisfaction than anything else I do.

And I don't want to belittle my work here in the archdiocese. We work hard all year in youth ministry teaching youth how to enrich their faith life in hope that what they'll do is pass it on to other generations.

"We don't usually get to see how we've really impacted junior high or high school students we're working with in a parish and what they do later in life. But because of this intense two weeks, we get to see how these young people in Cambodia are changed."

After a moment, he explains, "And that's through our compassionate touch." ❖



MESSAGE LINE — A Heart Touch volunteer massages a boy as she gets an impromptu rub herself.