

# Three Men and many babies

There are countless Singaporeans who silently go the distance to help the less fortunate – at home and abroad. Among them are Robert Kee, David Szeto and Dr Vijayan. AUDRINA GAN meets the Samaritans.

## ROBERT KEE Giving hope to children

Affectionately addressed as “grandfather” by the children he adopted at orphanages in Thailand, Cambodia and Nepal, 64-year-old Robert says, “A 14-year old child grabbed my hand and asked me not to die because there would be no one to look after them”. Founder of The Operation Hope Foundation (OHF), he started the Singapore-registered charity to help the poor in developing countries.

Started in 2001, OHF has a 120-children orphanage and training/livelihood centre in Cambodia, 120-children orphanage in Thailand as well as a 40-children orphanage in Kathmandu, Nepal.

During one of his regular visits to the orphanages, a group of teenage girls urged him to stay with them when he retires, promising to take care of him. “Even my own children do not say that to me,” quips the father of three.

Some of the children have been with Robert for more than 10 years and the bond between them clearly runs deep even though they have no blood relations.

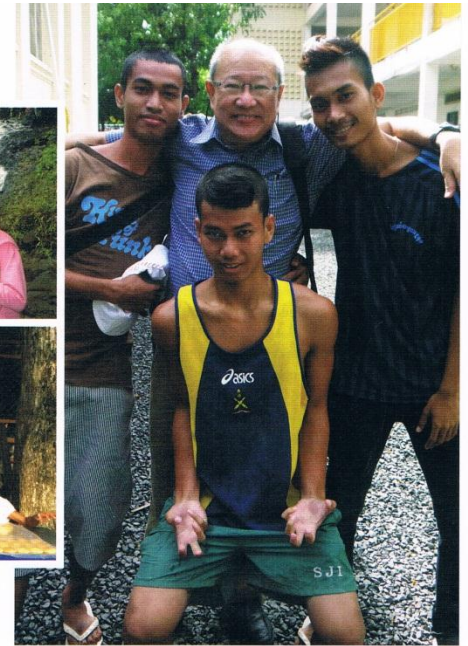
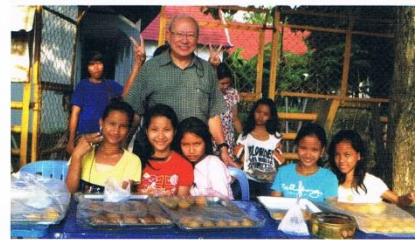
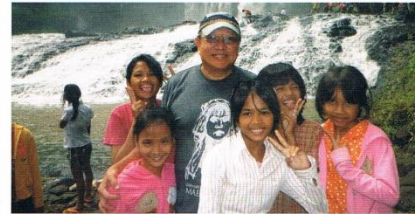
**“You can see how the children have really grown up from the time they were abandoned till now. One of my boys is now studying computer science.”**

### Strong bond

It was his love for children that drove Robert to set up OHF to help the underprivileged. In December 1994, he watched a documentary on child prostitution in Cambodia and was appalled to learn that the country was the top centre for paedophiles.

It prompted him to travel to Cambodia to scout for the possibility of establishing a welfare organisation for the children. “Back then, Phnom Penh had no street lights and everywhere was in pitch darkness even in the afternoon. Guns were easily available and there was a lot of kidnapping of foreigners. So it was very dangerous,” Robert recalls. “Now that I think of it, it was the scariest thing I have ever done.”

But his perseverance paid off. Today, the children he adopted are able to attend English and computer classes while learning other lessons that would be critical to them being self-sustainable in the future. In 2010, AsiaMalls



sponsored some of Robert’s children in Cambodia on a two-month industrial training programme in Singapore. This group of teenagers got a taste of what it was like to do window display, public relations or serving in a restaurant.

**“I’m excited to see the transformation of the children. But at the same time, the children are now expecting a better future. In the past, they were happy to get married at a young age and start a family. But now they aspire to be accountants or work in some other professional capacity.”**

### Creating employment

In fact, his constant worry that the children will face difficulties in securing a job – particularly in developing countries where the employment rate is extremely low – has triggered him to build a boutique hotel and orphanage in Pokara, Nepal. With construction still in the works, these will be run by a social enterprise, which is a separate entity from OHF.

According to Robert, a hotel provides many opportunities to help the poor. The children from the orphanage can work in the hotel after finishing school. Hotel guests can visit the orphanage and selected guests can provide training such as

English and computer lessons to the children.

Some of his other achievements include the recent approval of OHF’s application to register an NGO in Thailand with Robert as chairman. This allows OHF to lease an 800,000 sq ft property to build, operate and manage an orphanage and training centre in Phitsanulok, Thailand.

But Robert is no armchair supporter. He’s a hands-on person who gets his hands dirty. As a qualified engineer, he has worked on low-cost drip irrigation, solar cookers and vegetable processors to help poor, rural farmers. Today, his son manages his companies which are involved in electronic manufacturing, and property.

It allows Robert to devote his entire time to the organization - travelling every two months to oversee OHF’s projects.

**“I am 64 and still going strong. When you are old, you need to work to live and keep your brain cells alive! It is no longer working for money! Bob Buford wrote a book called *Half Time* about using the second half of our lives in a more meaningful way.”**