



God's hands and feet

Avis Rideout (above centre) has ministered to the people of Thailand for several decades in addition to working with underprivileged children in orphanages such as the one depicted here. — Submitted photo

Nikki's Place/Agape Home improves lives of those in Chiang Mai, Thailand

By DONNA SQUIRES
SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAM

For decades, Avis Rideout served as God's hands and feet in Thailand, but it was while working in an orphanage that she discovered her true calling — tending to the needs of orphans there.

Nelson Mandela once said, "when we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same."

When I saw Avis interviewed on television, I was so stirred by her passion for the children I knew I wanted to help.

In getting to know her, I have learned that she is exactly as she seemed in the TV interview — an exuberant, energetic, determined person with a wonderful Newfoundland sense of humour.

She is a hands-on mother — cutting the kids' hair, driving the bus — she can always be found interacting with the children. She inspires others in the way she uses her natural gifts by just being herself. Avis is the genuine article.

She and her husband, Roy Rideout, had been ministering to the people of Thailand as missionaries for many years. Having been trained as a midwife, Avis had seen many new lives come into the world, as well as many deaths. When there was a rash of deaths from AIDS, so many people died they were buried in mass graves.

Avis soon discovered what the orphans needed was to be loved in a special way — to be touched, held, cared for. There was a time when so many people were dying that not



Avis Rideout and her husband Roy with babies at Nikki's Place/Agape Home in Chiang Mai, Thailand. — Submitted photo

everyone knew the children's names.

Avis knew what those babies needed was to receive agape, or Christian love. The essence of agape is self-sacrifice, as opposed to romantic or sexual love. Agape is love which is of and from God, whose very nature is love itself.

Avis calls herself a loud, boisterous woman. But she is also a true, bonifide, original character with plenty of love to give.

She founded and directs Nikki's Place/Agape Home in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and leads a team that has improved hundreds of lives since it

opened in 1996.

Because of her determination and incredible hard work — she hardly slept during the first two years of operating Agape Home — Avis has created a true "home," a word she greatly prefers over "orphanage" or "institution." Most of the children are HIV-positive, and she has nursed and loved many of them over the years.

In the beginning there were many deaths due to AIDS, but more recently the children have been living much longer lives, thanks to improved medication and loving care. One of the nurses commented, "I

used to say that I worked in a home for children who are dying with HIV/AIDS. Now I say I work in a home for children living with HIV."

The children are nurtured by caring Thai nannies, who are assisted by volunteers who come to Agape from all over the world.

Avis' vision continues to expand. In the month since I've been here, 20 teenagers moved into homes with adoptive parents. There are currently more than 70 children living here. For several years now, Avis has also extended agape love to mothers who want to stay with their children, and

there is a mother and baby unit for this purpose.

Project Lek is an initiative that seeks to keep parents with their children and provides a stipend to families so children can remain with them in the family home.

In a recent documentary titled "Leave Her To Die," Avis said: "We've got a big ship to sail. But is the ship big enough? No — I want to build it bigger and I want to build it better."

Avis said the work of taking care of orphans all started with a stirring in her heart. She felt that God wanted her to provide a home where children would be nurtured. The home was started with a seed — Nikki, a little girl who was near death. Avis and Roy formed a special bond with her and adopted her, and nursed her back to health. Today, she is a beautiful, much healthier, 17-year-old teenager — one of their six children.

The work of their mission exemplifies a quote from American motivational speaker Les Brown, who said, "If you want a thing bad enough to go out and fight for it, to work day and night for it, to give up your time, your peace, and your sleep for it ... if neither cold, poverty, famine or gaunt, sickness and pain of body or brain can't keep you away from that thing that you want; if in darkness and grim you beseech and beset it, with the help of God, you'll get it."

Donna Squires is a volunteer at Nikki's Place/Agape Home

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