

The *Phuket Has Been Good To Us* Foundation

Providing Practical English Language Education to the Youth of Phuket



Thailand retains a cultural uniqueness that continues to make it a source of fascination and delight. English is spoken in most parts of the country, but perhaps due to the persistence of the nation's cultural independence, it is not spoken nearly as well as in places like Hong Kong or Singapore. In fact in a recent study, Thailand ranked second to last among nations in the region in English language skills.

In the last decade, Phuket Island, Thailand has emerged as a world-class tourist destination. Phuket had prospered in the past on the strength of tin and rubber industries but tourism, by way of property development and holidaymakers, is now the sole economic factor for the island. However, even on Phuket, few Thais speak English very well.





Demand is high in all sectors of the tourist industry for staff with good English language skills. Such skills usually outweigh factors such as experience in hiring, retention and salary levels. While there are many jobs available in the industry, upper management positions are still dominated by foreigners. The result is that many local Thais are leaving their families behind to find higher paying jobs in Bangkok.

Enter Fleur Birch-Atkinson, managing director of the Phuket Has Been Good To Us Foundation. The Foundation is the brainchild of her father, Tom McNamara a foreign business owner with a vision for the future. Ms. Birch-Atkinson, who grew up on Phuket and speaks fluent Thai, has transformed the Foundation from idea to a reality in a few short months. Together they are working to arm Phuket's next generation of youth with a far better command of the English language so that they can find higher paying jobs, remain close to their families on Phuket, and ultimately begin to assume the reigns of the tourist industry itself.

This is the mission of the Phuket Has Been Good To Us Foundation. On May 15, 2006 the Foundation began its sponsorship of a three year pilot program at the Baan Kalim School. Destroyed by the 2004 tsunami, the school was rebuilt and has now reopened with English being taught by the Foundation's Director of Education, U.K.-born Kate Cope. The English language curriculum in Thailand's public schools is not well implemented and funding is severely limited. Teaching methods usually revolve around rote memorization and there is short supply of native-English speaking educators. Ms. Cope is implementing new pedagogical approaches. Her work has included the development of illustrated instruction books, specific to Phuket, a



miniature, hands-on, "educational playground" for the classroom and an assessment procedure so that the pilot programme will be able to demonstrate its success.

This is only the beginning. The Foundation has already set in motion an ambitious plan to recruit volunteers from abroad to implement similar programs in other schools on Phuket and eventually, other parts of Thailand. The Foundation will be looking to both individual donors and large businesses on the island to fund the programs for each new school. This innovative approach to using private sector funds in public education will of course have long-run benefits for the very same business that are currently being courted: better skilled workers. Despite Phuket's explosive growth, all business on the island have suffered at one point or another from labour shortages and this plan promises to provide a solid long term solution.

For more information or to offer assistance, visit the Foundation's website at

www.phukethasbeengoodtous.org