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Little By Little We Draw Closer To Each Other



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Little By Little We Draw Closer To Each Other --- By Trish Magal
Just as the sun sets, the girls arrive in two vans which they have managed to squeeze in over forty people. Our neighbors can hear their excited voices squealing as they race up all the stairs to our door. Freshly baked lasagna hangs in the air. Their eyes are filled with happiness and each one bows in greeting. They step over the threshold and feast upon the foreign surroundings. Never before have they seen a kitchen with counters, sinks, an oven, and a refrigerator. One student points to a small rice bowl and tells me that she has eaten out of one just like this one in her own home. She touches her heart indicating how good it

is to eat rice from it. Another student notices the Lake Superior Agates from MN and asks if they are Joe's. "Yes," I answer wondering how she connected them with him.

We are all hungry but I know ritual is very important here. I speak on behalf of my family welcoming each person into our home. I want them to know how much we love each one of them. And how excited and happy we are to share Valentine's Day together. The House Mother beckons a student to present us with a gift on behalf of all of NLCF. Normally, traditional Ahka cross stitch is done by one person but they beam as they tell me many students have had a hand in doing the work. It is a community effort. I look at the beauty of the exact stitching and realize that they chose the mossy green, ceylon and lapis blue colors because they knew what I would like.

Just before lining up to get food, the House Mother again stops us and says that they would like to pray for our family. What would we like them to pray about? I feel awkward because I feel that we already have enough. So, I divert it by saying we would rather that they pray for the people in Burma. Joe's recent trip took him into the world of 60,000 refugees. Their lives are so hard. Use their prayers to God to help them. They wait again until finally, Joe speaks and says that we wish we could speak Thai better. This makes us all laugh together. No one understands this better than they. They are all ethnic minorities who have grown up speaking their own tribal language. They understand how difficult it is to learn Thai. And many are trying to learn English, Japanese, French or Chinese as well.

The students are satisfied with our answers and begin to pray in deep earnest. It is not a prayer in unison. Rather, each person beckons her own individual prayer on our behalf. Forty voices join and fill our room. The sound of it reminds me a massive surround sound of bees. The voices seem to circle up and around us until a shift. The whirling subsides and the room falls quiet. We feel calmer, closer and warmer.

It's time to eat. And each girl steps into line and eagerly looks down the counter with its heaping pans of homemade lasagna and fresh green salad. There are still more treats to come. Cupcakes topped with Snowcap candy from the States. And small oranges. Some girls may have seen photos of foreigner food but have never had enough money to eat it. And out comes a camera to keep as a memory.

This time I have remembered that they often find our food a little bland. So, we have roasted hot Thai chilis to add some spice. There is plenty of sweet mayonaise dressing for their salad. And I notice a few of the students helping themselves to what they could find on our counter adding fish and soy sauce for a bit more of salty taste. I make a mental note of this so that I will have it available for next year along with a bowl of sugar.

The girls spill out of our kitchen and go into the dining room and living room to find just the perfect nook for relaxing. Many happily sit on the floor. They look comfortable and happy to simply be able to enjoy themselves. They do not have to be rushed. They do not have to take care of anyone. This is a rare treat. Now it their time to talk and listen and eat. Every once in a while there is a delicious swell of laughter. It feels luxurious.

I notice an empty chair next to a girl who I did not know very well. I have always been drawn to her beautiful welcoming smile but she attends Thai school. We begin to talk and I am able to figure out that she loves learning Chinese. I ask her to say something in Chinese and she laughs telling me that I am beautiful. And we laugh again. We are comfortable together.

Soon, another girl sits down on the other side of me. I know her better. She has a sharp, curious mind and often asks me questions about the world or what foreigners like. I realize that now I am the one that is under her intense scrutiny. She blurts out that my stomach is big and my arms are even bigger. I laugh knowing that she means no harm. In her culture people speak openly about such things. It is good natured comment. And I swallow back the thought that I am offended. It reminds me of those innocent comments made by a 5 year old who can not lie. I glance out of the corner of my eye, and I catch Joe grinning from ear to

ear. He has fully understood the conversation from where he is seated and is enjoying my predicament.

The meal is done. And the girls ask if they can see Joe and my bedroom and bathroom. I don't mind. And they race up the stairs behind me. They catch their breath. We have a bed. Each girl walks over and taps the mattress before gingerly stroking the quilt. Again, a camera comes out and girls take turns posing on it including the House Mother.

They look around and I notice their eyes seeing all the books filling our bookshelves. I know that they have don't have access to a library and even if they did there is little time for anything else but house work and the rice fields. They look closely at some of my own artwork. And seem interested in a collage that I made about myself. And then it is time to go back to the others.

I find some of the staff on a small balcony. And together, we gaze out at tiny lights shining in the darkness. I comment that life is changing out there. Soon more houses will be built. More people will be trying to provide for their families and will move closer to the city. We glance up to the sky and see stars almost as if we are all saying a prayer and looking for guidance and strength. Below us, laughter wanders up as the staff's little ones and my youngest daughter are hamming it up playing some sort of tag game. I can hear the smallest laughing the hardest. And I smile as I think about how much she reminds me of her mother.

I thank God for all of this. And especially for these amazing people.