



Sister Dorothy with her Vocational Service Award.

Mary Chin

IN her mission to bring pre-school education to disadvantaged children, unsung heroine Sister Dorothy Laudi is undaunted by remoteness, lack of basic amenities and the dangers lurking in the Paitan River. For the umpteenth time since 2005, she has thrown her personal safety to the wind by travelling on the crocodile-infested river. But God has been protective.

That year, Tambunan-born Sister Dorothy of the Congregation of Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception (FSIC) set up the first kindergarten, 'Tadika Pelangi Dalamas' in the Paitan Sub-District.

Within seven years, the unassuming nun had opened eight kindergartens, the latest being Tadika Ceria Sonsogon Magandai in Kota Marudu. The others are Tadika Pelangi Dalamas, Tadika Harmoni Sulit (which is the main centre), Tadika Sinar Batangon Barat, Tadika Rumpun Lakang, Tadika Fajar Komuniti Lubang Buaya, Tadika Cerdik Tawonan and Tadika Sahabat Rakanan. The first five are located along the Paitan River while Tadika Cerdik Tawonan and Tadika Sahabat Rakanan are located between Paitan and Beluran (in

the Sandakan area).

Currently, there are about 170 children aged between four and eight years under her wings with an enrolment of 25-28 children in each kindergarten.

The majority of them are from the Orang Sungai ethnic community where farming is the main economic activity.

Each pre-school institution is managed by two certified trained teachers and a cook.

It is a six-hour drive from Kota Kinabalu to Paitan town. From the town, the villages are accessible only by using four-wheel drive vehicles or travelling on the Paitan River in small boats. For example, Kg Dalamas can only be reached by going upstream on the river for an hour. And it takes one and a half hours to travel by boat from the centre at Kg Sulit to the kindergarten at Kg Lubang Buaya, and two hours when it is low tide.

Normally, Sister Dorothy would travel from KK to Kota Marudu by public transport, and from here, the trip to the Paitan Bridge would take more than two hours. From the Paitan Bridge, it is an hour's journey by boat to reach her house at Kg Sulit.

remote Sonsogon Magandai to fetch children to St Theresa's Convent & Hostel, Kota Marudu.

Right: Sister Dorothy with some children on a stretch of the Paitan River.



Even Paitan's crocodiles are no deterrent for Dorothy

Her unwavering commitment, zest and energy was reflected in her acceptance speech at the 28th Anniversary Celebration of the Rotary Club of Likas Bay.

"With good health, I can go on for another 10 years," she declared to a round of applause, moments after receiving the Club's Vocational Service Award (plaque + RM1,000 cash). On hand to present the award was the Minister of Science, Technology & Innovation, Datuk Dr Maximus Ongkili.

The Franciscan Sister, however, declined to reveal her age, saying "Age does not matter."

Admittedly, Sister Dorothy almost fainted when the then Mother General of FSIC, Mother Cecilia Liew appointed her to take charge of upcoming kindergartens in the Paitan Sub-District. She was sent there to help the local communities set up kindergartens. That was in 2005 upon her return to Sabah after her graduation from Edith Cowan University.

"The posting was in response to Bishop (now Archbishop) Datuk John Lee's request for two Franciscan Sisters to be based full-time in Paitan.

"The other Sister is my sibling who has been transferred to the Convent in Tambunan. Sister Hillary is a trained agriculturist. We were together in Paitan in the infant years but since last year, I have been alone." However, there are 16 teachers from the laity.

Initially, most of the kindergartens were housed in the village community halls. Later, with donations from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and well-wishers, the villagers organised gotong-royong activities to help put up proper buildings on allocated or donated sites. Still, they are barely equipped - just chairs and tables, no fans, no lights, no electricity supply; no water supply except for rainwater!

In her citation, Rotarian Yvonne Tan of the Rotary Club of Likas Bay said of Sister Dorothy:

"Her love for children and the burning desire to help them is the source of her inspiration.

"To sum up Sister Dorothy's significant contribution to society, she has devoted herself to educating the children in Paitan, a sub-district located at the northernmost corner of the Sandakan Division. The distance from Kota Kinabalu is about 250km.

"The children's inability to read and write is her greatest concern and that was the driving force that led her to set up the kindergartens and hostels to help these kids.

"Her relentless effort would go a long way in helping to reduce and eventually eradicate illiteracy in the rural communities."

Speaking to the *Daily Express* later, Sister Dorothy said she was glad that the kindergartens are recognised by the Ministry of Education.

"I am grateful that the Government provided a launching grant of RM10,000 for each kindergarten, totalling RM50,000.

"From there, I have to beg for everything... food, money to buy food, money to buy petrol for the boatmen, money to pay for the boatmen's service, stationery