

JULY 2007

REPORT ON ELS DHOORE'S WORKING VISIT

Our co-worker Els Dhoore spent three months as a volunteer in Kunci.

From the beginning of April till the end of June Els Dhoore did volunteer work in Kunci, the sponsored project of "De Sleutel" in Indonesia. This special newsletter tells what her experiences during the working visit were. Els Dhoore is a monitor at the Sheltered Workshop and took a career interruption to accept the challenge. Her report is interspersed with moving stories which illustrate the difficulties of working in the therapeutic community we have been helping to run near the university city of Yogyakarta since the end of 2005. The whole story can also be read on her Website.

A warm welcome.

After a long and tiring flight, though it went smoothly, I arrived at 20.15 h (Belgian time: 15.15) at the arrival lounge of Yogyakarta Airport, all ready to go. It was not long before three enthusiastic men approached me – Brothers Michael and Honorius, and N.. A real welcoming committee! I felt at ease on the spot. The drive through the city was my first acquaintance with a totally different world. The scene was filled with small stalls displaying all kinds of articles, with small eating houses, and especially with an unbelievably big mass of people and innumerable mopeds which passed the cars and vans on the left and the right. A co-passenger Wim, from Lier (Belgium), told me during a moment of waiting "inbetween flights", that he had seen young moped drivers crushed by cars several times during his former visits to Indonesia. The car drivers did not bother to stop. "A man's life is not worth much here as you will find out," said Wim...

After the chaotic drive we reached Kunci. I became a bit uneasy when the Brothers told me repeatedly, as if to warn me, that things were totally different from those in Belgium, that the showers and toilets were "a bit dirty" and my room rather poor.

But the warm welcome and the feeling of being expected are much more significant than luxury and impeccable cleanliness.

I feel grateful for all I received as I realised that it was prepared for my person. I had my own room, with even two beds and a wardrobe. The sanitary provisions needed some adaptation: there was only cold water in the shower (it made me shiver even in the hot climate); the toilets are holes over which you have to hang – that's Indonesia for you!

It was a great pleasure to meet Bro Apolonaris after we had exchanged so many e-mails. He was a great support in the preparation of my stay. The sympathetic Brother Honorius acted as my private guide – a task which he took to heart conscientiously.

Everyday life at the therapeutic community

Life never stops in Kunci, not even at night. The residents often make long nights to watch TV, play music, to chat and, in particular, to laugh. The nights have their own ambiance which entices you to stay awake in order to take part in the solidarity.

Darkness never sets in as the lights of the inner yard are left on. It is often so that when you think tiredness has overcome people and you open your door you see a resident sitting on his threshold enjoying a cigarette, in a brown study.

At six in the morning a number of residents start the new day while whistling a tune. Sleep takes little time here. The evening is filled with Kunci sounds: the crowing of D. and P.'s baby; Bro Eko braying with laughter; N. who plays the guitar and softly sings "What a wonderful world". "I'm missing my band," he tells me in a moment of silence, "I'm missing my music... so many things."

"Do you miss your life...?"

« Yes, I do, » he answers, « and yet, I'm afraid to go back. It's a funny feeling. »

« Like a war within you, longing to return, but being afraid at the same time. »

"Yeah..."

"Funny world..."



Life is so special at Kunci. No running or jumping; no dialoguing via e-mail and chatting. There reigns an intensity of different order springing from both man and nature. For example, sunshine and rain are both equally fervent. Residents, Brothers and I meet intensely and on equal terms, in quiet togetherness.

Take Bro Eko who settles down in the passage to play cards with a group of youths totally absorbed in the game. The omnipresent Bro Michael, who lies down on a mattress among the residents in the living room every evening and to fall asleep there. His presence even in his sleep is intense and

meaningful every night. Even on me, a recent and temporary resident, it has a calming effect to slip a moment into the living room and see this light snoring quinquagenarian in his sleep – a familiar figure, an anchor-hold.

Different comforts

After a fortnight have become accustomed to different comforts: clothes are washed by hand. I might ask the person in charge to do my washing, but I've chosen to do so myself. It has a healing, therapeutic effect to do the washing in the company of an amiable, very old washer-brother!

In my room lizards, locusts, ants, insects of all sizes and forms are my roommates; there are a bed of a thin mattress on thin laths, as shower which spurts one jet of cold water, and the "pee pit"... with which I'm now familiar.

The kitchen got a lick of paint recently and is looking brighter and fresher, but it stands no comparison with a "Flemish" kitchen: no cupboard with neatly arranged crockery, but nails in the wall to which anything can be attached; no extensive space rack, no modern set of pans, no zinc with a dish drainer, but a stone washing-up bowl against the floor.. Yet, delicious meals are here prepared. At any moment of the day, different dishes are on the table, protected from vermin by means of a cover.

A siesta is a must for the residents. The forenoon is spent on showering, breakfasting, a general meeting of more than an hour and a half, preparing and having lunch – for most of them it is a bruising battle.

Seriously sick people

All residents at Kunci, except the minor L., are terminally ill. They have to visit the hospital regularly for blood drawing, check-ups, new prescriptions. One is a TB patient; all the others are contaminated with HIV and hepatitis. Their sickness has greatly weakened them. It is shocking to realise that none of them will live long. The AIDS virus inhabits their body and already subjects them to a situation which will turn into hell at a later stage. Whatever their limitations, these people are looking ahead, are enthusiastic about their future. They have a partner, sometimes even children, want to take care of their family by abstaining from drugs, trying to find a decent job and to live in a proper house. They are making beautiful plans.

At staff meetings on Wednesdays and Fridays, every plan of a resident is considered; I'm allowed to take part in these meetings. Resident N. hopes to leave Kunci by the end of April. He will be the first client to leave this young rehabilitation centre, having finished his programme. Much time is devoted to help him prepare to take this important step. There is much exchange of ideas between him and the caregivers; no pressure is exerted on him; it is left to him to make decisions. This young musician, struggling with his feelings about the upcoming departure, often retreats to his own room to focus on himself, his thoughts and his music.

The situation of the other residents, struggling with their serious drug-dependence problem besides their sickness, is also considered in detail:

- * D. and P. with their 7-month-old baby Sun-Sun: D. wants to start a private business and working on "a proposal for the government". His parents, who at one time were desperate about their son, have come to the centre to discuss things with the staff. Their support is of indispensable importance.
- * H., 36 and married a third time, two children; they rent a house and are under a month's notice, without extension. Thus, they have to look for another house. With regard to a job, he has no clear perspectives.
- * A. is actually a prisoner but has been allowed to serve his prison sentence at the centre where he gets the so much needed monitoring. He may help his father in their business afterwards.
- * Finally, there is the 16-year-old L., a troubled teenager, who is stimulated to return to school but is reluctant to do so. Her parents' support and co-operation are vital in this respect.

In this way I have the opportunity to look at the life of these people as if through a window.

Solidarity

I have often experienced solidarity at Kunci centre, eg during the meeting of the residents when I asked how they saw my living with them. For I had simply entered into their life. I wanted to listen to their feelings, their way of experiencing my presence. They revealed their first experiences, feelings, expectations. They consider them, think on them, want to get at the bottom of things – just like me. The centre is for them, just as for me, a temporary home, but the accents differ.

I've come as a healthy woman to experience things; they have come on account of sickness and with a troubled mind in order to kick off their drug dependence and to find peace of mind. In the end this period is for all of us enriching and healing; here we find one another.

In the room next to mine, three residents have switched on the PC to listen to music – trendy English and Indonesian songs. They join the music on top of their voice. It moves me and I get a vision of A., the seriously ill TB sufferer. He is 23 but looks only 15, meagre, wasted away, his face pocked with acne. He has a lot on his slate and here he maintains his image of intouchability and indifference. The passages are often filled with the almost roaring sound of his voice when he joins the songs on the MP3 player. He makes everyone laugh – A. the tough one, the clown. But there is also the A. who shyly strolls in the corridors of the hospital, free from any clownish behaviour. He looks so vulnerable in his oversized apron and worn-out cap.



English lessons

A special challenge is my appointment as "English teacher ad interim" for the postulants. Every Wednesday night, at 7.30 h on the dot, I'm waited for by five devout young men in silence – whether or not they are eager to learn. Although these youths have had English lessons for years, their knowledge of the language is still poor. They were really afraid of attending the lesson at the first time.

The myth of an angel's touch

A few days ago, L.'s mother visited this 16-year-old who has been at Kunci centre for several months. I've met this woman a few times but on that day we had an intense conversation. I had to do with a woman, a mother who radiated nothing but warmth, love and care for her family, her two children. "They are my motivation to live," she told me. She stroked my hair and called me "Els, an angel"; she begged me repeatedly to take her daughter by the hand: "In your touch she will find her way."

Hearing someone talk in this way gives you a heartwarming feeling but, at the same time, it makes me afraid of becoming mythical, for I'll never be able to answer the woman's expectations and be the "saviour" of her daughter..

Homeless children

"Don't let your life be forgotten by others" are significant words of a teacher who told them to Mr Kenky, the one in charge of vocational training at Kunci. He still feels very strongly about it: "I so wish to have meaning in this life, to have meaning to the people around me," he said to me today.

For a few years he was of invaluable importance to a group of vagrant children. Indonesia has a great many homeless children. Throughout the day you can see them at busy crossroads where they defy danger and the chaotic traffic in order to collect some coins from one or other driver. Some play self-made small guitars; others just

hold out a hand showing their poverty and suffering. They are twelve or younger and live on the street. When darkness sets in they gather in small groups near the rubbish dumps spread all over the town. There, surrounded by the garbage of other people, they build their cardboard shelters for the night. Henry was looking for meaning in life near such a rubbish dump for several years. He went there in the evening to talk and listen to the children, trying to educate them somehow.



Sick Sun-Sun

Since a few days screams of pain flooded the passages and reach any corner or room. Little Sun-Sun suffers from a vicious skin infection which makes life difficult to her. Her tender baby skin, red with irritation and hyperhot, can hardly bear any touch. Seeing and hearing the helpless child is heart-rending, and moves you deeply. Everyone is concerned but feels powerless about the child's suffering and that of its parents.

In fact, they did not want the baby. For both were drug-addicted and HIV-contaminated; the mother was a prostitute and her partner did not father the child. In the end, the baby was born healthy and wealthy. D. registered as the official father; P. gave her a job; the couple decided to go into therapy and be responsible parents. Their outlook is limited, but they want to give their baby a long and different life. My admiration for the couple has increased in the past few days. D. runs his legs off; P. walks to and fro in the passages, hour after hour, cradling the baby prudently in a baby sling. They hardly take some sleep but in spite of their tiredness and caring they remain calm whereas other parents might panic. I've watched them one night when they sat outside nursing the baby's skin. The mother kept the baby in her arms and sang sweet lullabies for it while the father was nursing conscientiously any sore patch of the skin and blew over it to give some relief. The baby stopped crying and became limp and quiet, giving itself over to the mother's warm voice and tender touch. The scene was both heartwarming and heartrending.

Discovering life at all levels

A new month has started, May. Spring has come and nature displays all its beauty; all and everything lives and revives. Myself also. The team considers me more and more as a full member. It strengthens the communication and increases the opportunity to bring in my own input. We meet, we draw up texts and reports together, we grow toward one another. My teaching English lessons continues; a female teacher of the local school has joined the students to rush up her English.

Today is D-day for the young family of D., P. and baby Sun-Sun. After weeks of preparation they are leaving for their small house in a tiny village Ngasem. They have spent one and a half years in the safe surroundings of the rehabilitation centre, under the protecting wings of the community. There was time and space to find rest, to reflect on their life, to find each other as partners and to discover stability. Their rucksack is filled with lessons in life. No wit is up to them to take a fresh look at the world, longing for discoveries, shy of the mysteries life has in store for them.

A moment of being on my own



I was fortunate to get away from it all for a short time. The town of Wonosobo is situated in the mountains, a few hours away from Kunci. There the Brothers have a community. They co-ordinate the school for the deaf (150 children) and the boarding. The buildings are surrounded by well-kept gardens with fragrant exotic plants and tropical trees. An oasis of rest. The local church too is soaked with this serene atmosphere which is audible in the softly sung Javanese hymns and visible in everyone's presence.

I'm moved by seeing so much has been done for my arrival: my chair is at the head of the table; the best crockery has been taken out; a lot of typically European, vegetarian dishes are served; worried inquiries if all is to my liking. I feel like a princess!

I'm accommodated at a room of the community: the room is spacious and beautiful; it has its own washbasin and European WC. After almost

one and a half months at Kunci, I spend the evening in different company. They go to bed at a reasonable time. It's my first night without the noise of laughing or discussing people, crying babies and blaring TV sets. I thoroughly enjoy seven marvellous hours of sleep for the first time after many weeks.

It is only now that I realise the not to be underestimated impact the restless behaviour of the Kunci residents have had on me. When at dawn I drink a glorious cup of coffee I burst out in tears. They are no tears of distress but of recognising and reviving the familiar. Tears of gratitude for the experience of the difference...

N.'s story

"Can I sit with you for a while?" asked N. me one evening. The evening was soggy like every other one. The tropical heat reigns always and everywhere like a bacterium. I had been listening in to N., my eyes closed and daydreaming on the waves of his melodious voice and the guitar chords.

"Of course you can, feel free," I answered, surprised at his abrupt stopping the guitar playing. The music gave rise to a long conversation about education, choices, mourning, passions, desires and anxiety about becoming your own real self again. N. hails from a famous musical family. His father was one of the most important Indonesian classical composers. His obsessional love for classical music in combination with his function as an army officer and « toughness » assured a Spartan education of N.. The 11-year-old N. knew that it was his heart's desire to become a musician but not in the way of classical music as his father had planned. At any moment he was free from struggling with the classical guitar, safe from his father's all-seeing eye, he sat down to listen intently to his small transistor radio in his room. Blues and rock music were forbidden but marvellous music to his ears. They were his dream.

He defied his father's anger, got beaten up, endured the pain of many altercations, and became « a famous sex, drugs and rock and roll star », celebrated but also infamous.

Two years ago his father fell seriously ill. N. did not realise the earnestness of the situation as he was totally taken up by his wild life. His father died in hospital. His son had not been at the bedside. N. had never learnt to manage his emotions; tears were to him like a punishment. He mourned in a rough, ruthless way. He did not cry but composed hard rock, drank, injected himself with heroin. He became HIV contaminated.

He ignored his sickness for a year and escaped in drugs and music. One morning he woke up after the umpteenth high; his body felt painfully stiff; he was lying on the floor of a dirty, shabby room; an empty needle was lying next to his arm. He could not remember how he had landed up there. Then and there he poignantly experienced how much his life was in ruins – lonely, under constant intoxication. A life which was rather death. N. became conscious of the need to put a stop to this way of life. He registered at the rehabilitation centre and began to fight drugs and sickness, as well as to gather his emotions. He met his real self. The mask of drug-addicted rocker had been thrown off in that shabby room.

This former rich youth, healthy and wealthy had lost everything and had become poor. At present he feels richer than ever before, for he is confronted with his real self. And that he wants to reflect in his music.

A moving birthday story

Time to eat is an essential part of Indonesian daily life. Time is taken out to prepare and take meals. It shows strikingly in the manner a local dish, "güdeg", is relished. Güdeg is made of the güdeg fruit, a tropical fruit hanging from trees everywhere; it is ovate, greenish yellow and thorny. Its effective preparation is an intricate process of baking, simmering, stirring, adding spices at definite moments, and letting it rest overnight. The result is heaven to the tongue.

My first acquaintance with this delicacy was linked with another unique meeting. On the evening of my birthday two Brothers invited me to accompany them to a "güdeg house", near the community house. We stopped in a dark street but found a simple, beautiful little house. There were a few small tables covered with a simple cloth and with a small candle in the centre surrounded by small jars filled with spices and sauces. A big metal pot was the centre of the house. From behind a flowery curtain came refined, delightful odours. The ambiance was determined by the presence of two women – a mother and her daughter – who gave us a warm enthusiastic welcome.

Plates with all kinds of food were put on our table, and a generous portion of a strange substance was distributed from the metal pot – güdeg. I can hardly describe its taste or looks; it is a combination of sweet and spicy, delicate, almost tender food which melts on your tongue – a real bliss.

The mother sat down next to me; her eyes intense; she stroked my hair with her small wrinkled hand. She began spontaneously to tell about her life: she had been a celebrated singer and dancer. In her youth she travelled all over the country and was honoured everywhere. She was a beautiful woman as I could see on a picture she showed me. She met her « prince » along the way, married and they had a daughter. Many years ago her husband died. Thereafter she learnt the art of preparing güdeg. She has passed on this art to her daughter. But this woman excels at being quietly happy and grateful for any stage of her life. In this, her final stage, she radiates happiness.

We don't speak the same language, we've never met before, and yet... inexplicably we are drawn to each other and we understand each other without words. There are moments of sheer magic and enchanting meeting. On leaving the house she embraces me with the warmth of a mother; and I know I'll return to his güdeg woman.

The legalisation of Kunci RC



Together with some Brothers I have the opportunity to trace the path to Kunci RC's legalisation. A few weeks ago this process began with a definite chest filled with the expected necessary documents. The first stop was at the "Local District Department" or "Private Department", names KTKS – a very small building in a street with dilapidated small houses and a few rice paddies. We entered a small waiting room. A big board covering two walls showed 72 notices in blue felt-tip pen. When I asked what it all meant someone told me that they were the rules, laws and conditions. KTKS is a very important stop on the road to legalisation for any private

organisation. The office represents the first necessary link in the process. Every private enterprise in Yogja must be registered at the KTKS; only after the permission has been granted can further steps be taken (eg application for funds). After the officer had gone through our dossier we came back empty-handed: we were in need of extra reports, surveys and proofs before we could obtain approval. We had to return twice in the course of the following weeks before the long-awaited "stamp and signature" were granted.

Thereafter we could approach the "District Social Department" or "Governmental Department". In the hall I had picked up some vague musical sounds, and the more we ascended the stronger they became. On the top floor we found out that twenty women were trying in vain to sing in unison. It was my guess why they were singing so loudly. Later on I heard that they had been rehearsing for a song contest among the different departments with regard to the 91st anniversary of all governmental departments.

The small moustached officer who received us after a quarter of an hour from behind a blue half-length partition, was the co-ordinator of the District Social Department. His secretary accompanied him; she was a severe lady looking down her glasses. Her uniform sat tight round her body and she seemed to have an innate frowning-angry look. And thus our conversation started, drowned by the loud music. The Brothers explained enthusiastically how they had gone through the former stage and they submitted all their documents.

After almost an hour of discussing, the co-ordinator signed all documents, and the severe-looking matron took them away for stamping them. Mission accomplished!

Daily life

The daily cost of life and clothing do not stand comparison with Belgian standards. A few examples:

- * a packet of cigarettes costs less than a euro;
- * a pair of jeans of a famous trademark costs 15 € on average; a trendy frock costs about 12 €;
- * the rent for a small house with 2 rooms is 500 € per year;
- * a villa with a fine big garden costs 20,000 €;
- * an extensive meal can be prepared from local ingredients for less than two € (20,000 rupiah).

Other expenses may be equal to those in Belgium, eg a doctor's visit; hospital costs; buying and maintaining a car; even the purchase of a motorbike. A new moped costs 1,300 €.

Looking back on my experiences

I entered into oriental life, a world of cultures and traditions. In the past few months I could live and experience this world in all its aspects.

It was no tourist trip but a period of tough physical confrontations, unexpected meeting, cultural and professional discoveries – a period of working and living at unknown depth. That's how I wanted it.

The past three months I availed myself of the opportunity to build intense contacts with the residents. Our rooms gave out on the same passage; we made use of the same bathrooms and lived together practically night and day...

I was shocked by the very bad health situation of the residents. Almost all of them, except one, suffered from terminal diseases (HIV, TB and hepatitis). Their dire state hardly allows them to be active during the day. The KUNCI team do their utmost to offer a well-structured and adapted programme, but are confronted with many obstacles, especial with the weakness of the residents. I noticed that none of the residents has a healthy sleeping habit. This has no good influence on their already weakened health and results in their inability to take part in the planned sessions or activities. Consequently, I saw during my first month at the centre that the weakness of the residents has an enormous impact on the organisation and development of the professional detoxification. Adaptations are a must. The staff has to exert much patience and understanding.

In all honesty I have to confess that my stay was an enormous adventure on several levels : the journey to the other side of the globe ; the warm welcome of a community of Brothers and residents ; living with the residents, and especially meeting my Eastern colleagues. I was granted the unique chance to take part in their life and work; I could share in their open and honest communication; and I feel very grateful for all I received.

Read Els's report on her journey completely on the blog:
<http://www.periwanitasaya.blogspot.com>

Due to privacy matters, we haven't mentioned the complete names of our clients