

## Derek (Steve) Hallam



The founder of the Rejoice Urban Development Project is Englishman Steve Hallam, from Cheshire. Steve has spent a lifetime in service to humanity in one way or another, so the fact that he has continued to do so in Thailand should perhaps come as no surprise. However, unlike many who have come to Chiang Mai to help the less fortunate, he is doing this as a personal commitment, not as one to a god or as part of a religious belief. He left a successful business in the UK, saying, "Life is more than collecting money. It was time to pay back."

He was born in Macclesfield in Cheshire, the only son of a career Post office worker. As far as the family was concerned, Steve would also join the post office, and so when he was 16 years old he followed his father into the postal service, starting as a motorcycle delivery boy. Steve did not mind this at all. Like most 16 year olds, to be given a motorcycle to ride was a dream come true.

However, Steve had another dream. This involved working with people, and he harboured the notion of going into medicine or the police force. His hero was in the TV series Fabian of the Yard. Those dreams were, however, a little way off yet.

When he turned 18, the post office asked for the motorcycle to be returned and he had the choice of either becoming a postman, or work behind the counter. Neither appealed. He looked at the police force, but he was too young at 18 to be accepted; however, he found he would be accepted as a nurse, so leaving postage stamps aside, he stamped his mark in nursing, emerging after three years as an SRN (State Registered Nurse), and with an SRN girlfriend, whom he wanted to marry.

Life can have some strange turnings, and Steve's has had some. The young couple applied for a loan so they could buy a house, to then find that SRN's did not qualify for a mortgage! Not even with their combined incomes. However a policeman, even a probationary constable, qualified for a rental allowance which could be used to pay a mortgage. At that point, Steve Hallam made up his mind to follow Fabian to Scotland Yard!

He spent the next two years pounding the beat and then applied to join the Criminal Investigation Department. He was accepted and sent to Scotland Yard for detective training. Steve 'Fabian' Hallam was on his way!

He progressed through the police force, ending up with the regional crime squad, working on murder enquiries, a posting that covered a ten-year span. This kind of police work is demanding. "You were never at home," said Steve. This did not do wonders for his marriage. "The irony of it all was that I joined the police force to get married, but the police (work) finally broke it!"

He looked at his options again. One was to go back into uniform, another was to leave. "I was getting

burnt out, so I got out and formed my own security company.” This was 1977 and the UK economy was burgeoning. “Banks would ring you up, begging you to borrow money,” Steve said. In this climate, and with his connections, Steve and his security company did well. He was joined by his cousin, also recently divorced, and the two of them oversaw a rapidly growing company. “We were just collecting money,” said Steve simply.

They also spent the money on items such as overseas cruises, and then they decided on a holiday to India and to look at the Taj Mahal. They saw more than the famous monument. “I saw kids scrabbling in rubbish dumps for food.” It was at that point they decided it was time to pay back.

The decision was to get rid of everything in the UK and help in some way with the AIDS problem in India as carers. Steve spoke to the British Foreign Office about the proposed move and was asked did he have a second choice, as the FO did not feel that India in those days was safe for expats. They did have a second choice, Thailand, and so arrived in the Kingdom.

They went to Pattaya and saw the late Fr. Raymond Brennan of Pattaya Orphanage who advised them that certainly there was an AIDS problem, but the sufferers did not remain there, but went back to their home villages up country to be cared for.

The next step was Bangkok and contact with the Catholic Church saw Steve and his cousin being involved in the setting up of a hospice in Pathum Thani, and then joining Fr. Joe Meier in Klong Toey to set up a 30 bed hospice there. “We were it. We were the staff,” said Steve, devoting five years of his life to the unfortunates from the slums.

Eventually their money ran out and with the economic crash of 1997, it became easier to find people to work as carers and so Steve and his cousin came to Chiang Mai.

“We came up to start our own hospice. We had no money, but we had contacts in the funding agencies, but up here we found that the AIDS patients were staying at home with their families. A hospice wasn’t needed, but a home care system was.”

So the Rejoice Urban Development Project came to be. The name ‘Rejoice’ did not have any religious significance, but came from the young lady who used to be the ‘Rejoice’ girl on the hair shampoo adverts! There are stranger reasons for names, no doubt, but the project has a nice ‘sheen’ to it, and is now formally recognised as a foundation in the UK, with application pending in Thailand. Steve’s vision cares for 150 children a week and provides medicines and scholarships for children infected and affected by AIDS.

Fabian of the Yard has come a long way!