

The Liliane Foundation



How it all started

In 1976, after 38 years, I had the opportunity to visit the place where I was born, the Indonesian island of Sumatra. I went there with my husband Ignaas. It was wonderful to be back there. Although much had changed, a lot had also remained the same. The heat, the fragrance, the whole atmosphere gave me the feeling of being home at last. That feeling lingered on with me for three beautiful weeks. Thinking it over now, it seems only natural that right there, a whole new period in my life was about to begin.

The beginning

In Sumatra we visited a children's home, run by religious sisters, who welcomed us as their guests. There we met Agnes, or Gok Lian, as she was called by her Chinese name. She was 16 years old and had had polio as a baby. Her parents did not know what to do with her. As so many parents with disabled children in developing countries, they had no money with which to see a doctor. The child was a heavy burden for the family. She was left behind with the sisters, and this is where she grew up. The sisters gave her loving care but also had no means for her rehabilitation. Besides, there were no facilities for rehabilitation in Sumatra at the time. Agnes learned to sew and was very skillfull, in spite of her deformed hands. This is how we first met her: sewing, sitting down quietly among the younger children, on whom she kept an eye at the same time. We smiled at each other! Like her, I was walking with a stick, because I was also affected by polio as a baby. Although I was much older than her, she too had been born in a time and place where there were no preventive measures against polio. This meeting with Agnes kept playing around in my mind. What could we do to give Agnes a chance to build a more independent life; to develop herself to the best of her ability? Her handicap was beyond rehabilitation and moreover she had learned to manage fairly well. We asked the sisters what they would think if we would provide a sewing machine for Agnes. This would enable her to sew more professionally, and maybe in future she would be able to earn a living with it. Both the sisters and Agnes were enthusiastic about the idea.

Saving

Back in the Netherlands we applied to a lot of organizations for Agnes' sewing machine. However, with no luck. Our application was too small-scaled and it did not fit their mandates. The last thing we wanted to do was to disappoint Agnes. We thought it very important for her to know that we were still thinking of her and that we believed in her abilities. So we started saving money for the sewing machine ourselves. Both the money-box and the way we economized caught the attention of friends, relatives and acquaintances. And our enthusiasm caught them as well. After a couple of months the money-box contained more than we needed for the sewing machine. This was the small beginning of the Liliane Foundation.

Being seen

After Agnes' sewing machine had been paid for, a little money remained, but not enough to help another child. But if we continued to save money we might be able to help more. We were never at a loss to find a good destination for our savings. In those years Ignaas was travelling a lot in the developing world and many times he would meet questions like: "Can you help me to find some money to help a child that has been crawling around all his life; or to provide surgery for a child with a harelip that is becoming very lonely?" The amounts of money needed were always very small for our European standards. It was marvellous to be able to reply: "Of course we can help you. Just have a little patience. We are saving money for it." We saw on pictures and read in letters how the children were

changing. Love, showing interest and belief in their inner strength and in their abilities did wonders, to the children and to us. We became more and more conscious of the fact that assistance for medical treatment and education is very important, but that the greatest impulse for the children is the fact that they are being SEEN. Literally and figuratively! They are being seen as a valuable and equal human being. They develop themselves into esteemed respectable young people and adults, proving themselves to be equal members of their community, within their villages and their families.

Heart

The Liliane Foundation offers small-scaled and person-centered assistance to disabled children. That is obvious and crystal-clear. But the indispensable basis of it all is the respect and the belief in the strength and the value of every human being, regardless of how vulnerable or insignificant he or she may seem to be.

Now that the Liliane Foundation has grown and receives much international recognition, people often ask me whether I am proud of the Liliane Foundation having become such a sound and well-known organization. Consciously the answer is that I am not. It is good to have international acknowledgement and farce, but that is not what is most important. Essential is the fact that the Liliane Foundation has a heart, a warm beating heart, making hundreds of helpful and loving hands reach out to people big and small, close and far away; hearts and hands making each other feel that we belong together, that we need each other and that together we are united. I am not proud, but I do feel grateful, immensely grateful, each time I sense how all co-operators, both in the office and in the developing world, are giving this very essential aspect practical form. Thus part of that big universal family, of which we sometimes spoke when the Liliane Foundation had just started, has already grown/come true.

With kind regards,

Lieke Brekelmans-Gronert