



Devoted saint to children

What makes her immortal is her tireless dedication and her heart of gold, as **Arthit Khwankhom** writes

The last phrase the “saint” of women and children uttered, “*Ne les laissez pas*” (Do not abandon them) was to Professor Ukrit Mongkolnavin, who has run what is now known as the Pierra Maternity and Child Welfare Foundation since Pierra Vejjabul’s death.

It all started one day about 70 years ago, when a girl from a high-society family came to Pierra asking for help to terminate her unwanted pregnancy. The doctor suggested the girl first talk with her mother before making any decision to commit such a “sin”.

The girl was reluctant, being too afraid to confront her worst fear – admitting to her mother she was pregnant. Pierra understood the girl’s situation and agreed to help the girl tell her mother.

At the girl’s house, Pierra waited outside. Pierra would come in later, but things went awry. It turned out to be the worst mistake the doctor ever made. The mother did not listen to the girl, and was furious. The girl rushed out of the room and committed suicide. Pierra came in to find her hanging from the ceiling of her bedroom. The

doctor took the girl to hospital but it was too late – she died in Pierra’s arms on the way.

The tragedy inspired the doctor to do what society then did not quite approve of. She decided to set up a shelter for women with unwanted pregnancies where they would be taken good care of until giving birth. The babies were then adopted, raised, and given education and support by Pierra’s charity foundation until they could stand on their own feet.

The cost of such charity work generated huge debts. In 1964, or about 26 years after establishing the Pirayanukroh Foundation, Pierra was sued by the Government Savings Bank over an unpaid debt of about Bt3 million, accumulated through saving the lives of hundreds of mothers and their children. Newspapers ran the story about what the foundation and Pierra, who was then known as Mae Phra Khong Khon Yak, equivalent to the female saint of people in hardship, were facing.

This time the public reacted kindly. The public raised money to help Pierra pay off the debt and keep the foundation going. It was a significant change to the earlier reactions to her work. When Pierra first set up

the foundation, people were against what she did, as some of the women she took in were prostitutes. She was discriminated against by other doctors and reviled by others with the same family name.

Pierra was born in 1898 into a wealthy family in the northern province of Lampang. Her father had more than one wife and she had only one elder brother born to the same mother.

Her beloved brother died when she was seven and she was taken to Bangkok for her education. Her mother had to go back to Lampang, so Pierra was left with her grandmother.

After graduating from St Joseph Convent School in 1925 she applied to study at Siriraj Medical School, simply to be turned down because women were not traditionally enrolled to learn medicine at that time.

With solid determination to become a doctor, Pierra never gave up. Just because she could not study medicine in the country that did not mean she could not do so elsewhere. With help of a Catholic nun, Pierra went to Saigon, first to study French, with the aim of further education in medicine in French.

After studying in Saigon for one year, she moved to France. Life there was not easy either – she had to work to support herself and pay for her education while having to study towards a medical qualification.

Many times, due to a lack of money, she was forced to take a break from her studies to work. As a result, it took her 15 years to achieve her goal of becoming Thailand’s first female doctor.

In 1933 she graduated with a Doctor of Medicine degree from the University of Paris, and after

returning to Thailand she started working in the public service. As the first female medical doctor in the country, she started working at the Public Health Ministry, then a department under the Interior Ministry. Pierra remained in the public service for about 25 years before she left to work full-time at the foundation.

Pierra also opened a private clinic for sexually transmitted diseases to earn some money to support the foundation’s work. “Back then, venereal diseases were among the most terrifying of illnesses, as bad as tuberculosis and cholera. Many died when an infection spread to the brain,” recalled Ukrit. Pierra’s clinic was particularly popular among the well-to-do men who had contracted syphilis through having sex with prostitutes. At that time people did not know what a condom was.

“Many had failed treatment from elsewhere, and Doctor Pierra cured them all. It was far cheaper because she did not delay the treatment as other doctors did so they could make money out of a longer period of treatment,” said Ukrit.

With a certificate in venereal diseases from the University of Paris, Pierra soon became famous for this work as well. Many times the doctor, disguised as a prostitute, sneaked in to brothels to treat them for venereal disease. Unfortunately she sometimes ended up being kicked out by the pimps.

The awards, certificates, decorations, honorary degrees and other types of recognition Pierra received from universities and institutions, both in Thailand and overseas, for her dedication are too numerous to count. ■