



# Princess of Thailand visits the prison

By LORRAINE MOLLER

The call came at 7 a.m. "The princess would like to know what you are wearing today." The call is from my Thai contact, Vitaya Suriyawong from the Ministry of Justice. With an air of false confidence, I tell him that I am wearing a pants suit, wondering "what do people wear when they accompany a Princess to a prison?"

All month, it's been a flurry of e-mails, security concerns, updates to her entourage, questions about royal protocol — questions as seemingly simple as how to greet her.

The day had arrived — the princess of Thailand was coming to visit the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Why visit prison? Her Royal Highness Princess Bajrakitiyabha Mahidol is taking a semester at CUNY's John Jay College of Criminal Justice to brush up on the latest practices in criminal justice. As a faculty member and prison volunteer, the assignment is close to my heart.

I drive to the prison, where I await the group. I practice her name, trying to fudge it out phonetically "P\_h-rä-ki-t\_y\_h-pä (first name) M\_h-h\_d\_l (surname)." Arriving with her, the Ambassador of Thailand to the United Nations and several representatives from the Ministry of Justice, a total of eight visitors. A few more cell phone calls and the cars pull up, three black Mercedes with diplomatic plates. Dignitaries emerge from the cars in dark suits. I race, ceremoniously extending my hand as I stumble through the greeting, "Good Morning, Your Royal Highness Princess Bajrakit. Interrupting, she says, "Call me Pat."

And so the visit began. Inside for processing, this petite, stylishly dressed Asian royal removed her shoes and jewelry and stepped through the metal detection devices like a veteran.



NUNTARATH THEPDOLCHAI PHOTO

Royal titles are deceptive; HRH wears two hats. In Thailand, her second title is Deputy Provincial Public Prosecutor. Born in 1978, the granddaughter of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the world's longest-reigning monarch, HRH earned both her law degree and her doctorate at Cornell University. Since then, she has become a passionate advocate for the prevention of trafficking of women, and in her country established a program for the elimination of violence against women. Recognizing that female prisoners are often themselves victims of crime, she has shepherded the new proposal for the "United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and

Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders." Recently, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) awarded her its medal of recognition for her role in promoting women's rights in the administration of justice. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) followed suit to express appreciation of her efficient advocacy as its good will ambassador for Thailand. Programs in Thailand under the royal initiative of HRH include "Inspire," aimed at providing moral support, basic health care and opportunities for re-entry for female prisoners. It is this concern for gender-specific programming that she brings to the tour of the Infant and Par-

enting Program at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, the site of the most advanced programs in the country.

Deputy Superintendent James Hayden conducts the tour, which starts with the Parenting Center and Infant Daycare in the basement of the school building. Director of the Children's Center Barbara "Bobby" Blanchard provides the background for this life-affirming program that teaches parenting skills and provides educational resources that facilitate communication between parent





**The princess of Thailand with women at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Left, the princess holds an infant at the Children's Center.**

have done that."

The gathering gave the women the chance to speak about how meaningful the program is as well as an opportunity to ask the princess a few personal questions. How old are you? Do you have any children? Since you're 30, isn't it time you got married? That HRH is a working woman juggling her responsibilities of state with her job as a lawyer revealed a different side of royal life than we see in the media. Even Deputy Hayden admitted to having some preconceptions about the princess before they met. "I thought she was going to arrive wearing a long robe. But she is a very bright, gracious, accomplished professional woman who is deeply involved with current issues on the incarcerated." He added, "She made the women feel important that they were a part of the strategy she would take back with her."

The group moves on to the Puppies Behind Bars program, where the inmates demonstrate the extraordinary skills of puppies in training to be service dogs. Many will go to Iraq veterans who are suffering with post-traumatic stress syndrome. The canine students impressed us with their ability to follow commands, such as picking up a receiver of a telephone and shutting off a light switch, to name just two of the 85 commands they will learn. While one of the inmate trainers shared a poignant account of her personal journey, HRH, who owns several dogs, interacted with them, lavishing royal attention on the appreciative pups.

The group then traveled to the conference dining room, where the Thai guests and prison staff ate heartily, shared stories and where the final vestiges of any stereotypical notions faded in the spirit of camaraderie.

Our final stop is the playroom connected to the visiting area, a room rich with resources, toys, books, with walls adorned with colorful painted figures. You could almost hear the children's voices, "When are you coming home, Mommy?" "Let's pretend. Can we play house?" "Why are you crying, mommy; I love you. Let's play."

Lorraine Moller is a volunteer at three Department of Corrections facilities, most recently Bayview.

and child. The foundation of the program is the belief that maintaining the bond between mother and child during incarceration is crucial to the family's well-being.

Then, onto the nursery, where women incarcerated during their pregnancy can keep their babies for the first 18 months. First we walk the hallway that connects each of the tiny, colorfully decorated rooms furnished with a bed for mom and a crib for baby. The mothers greet us at the doors of their rooms, each of them holding their babies. HRH is radiant; conversing with the mom and ogling the infants, she puts everyone to ease.

We remove our shoes before going into the common area to preserve the cleanliness of an area with crawling babies. The Thai visitors are right

at home, since in their culture this is the custom before entering a home as a show of respect. Everyone present is amazed to find the princess so engaged with the infants. Several of the babies have their chance to get a royal hug as HRH holds them, listening intently to each story told by the moms. For Deputy Hayden, this is the most memorable part of the visit, witnessing HRH hold the infants: "You have someone at this level so genuinely thrilled to hold the children; you know how caring she is." Nursery mother Sherise Harris said, "It was very wonderful to know that the princess would be interested in us. We don't get many people like her, especially from another country. She was very polite and wanted to know a lot about us. That was a good thing. She touched the babies. A lot of royalty would not