

SUNDAY TALK

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Phuket women's club feeling like proud mums

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WHEN 17 students from Rajhabat University took part in the dragon boat races at Phuket's Pimex boat show recently, they didn't win, but nobody cared.

None of the students had ever set foot in a dragon boat until that day. Neither had they ever presented themselves as a competing team.

They were a team because all of them – studying tourism, art education, chemistry, teaching and other subjects – are scholarship recipients, and that day they had fun representing their benefactors, the Phuket International Women's Club.

Currently there are about 250 students in primary, secondary and third-level education on club scholarships, across the island and as far away as Bangkok and the Prince of Songkhla University in Hat Yai.

Since the scheme was set up 16 years ago – when members of the newly formed club became aware that girls, often very bright ones, dropped out of school because they were too poor – more than 550 students have received scholarships.



NOVICE DRAGON BOAT students get the hang of it.

Most have been incredibly successful. The first male student accepted, a talented artist, longed to study art in Bangkok when he finished his studies at Phuket Vocational School, but he didn't have the money.

These days he works as a successful graphic designer, and three years ago he returned to teach at his old school, his way of giving back.

"Our first doctor will graduate this year," club members boast, sounding like proud mums. But it's true.

The "first doctor" from Ban Nam Khem on the mainland north of



PHUKET INTERNATIONAL Women's Club scholarship students from Rajhabat University get ready for their first challenge in a dragon boat race.

Phuket was already studying medicine when the 2004 tsunami ruined her fisherman father's business and left the family penniless.

Rescued financially by the women's club, the young woman was able to return to university in Bangkok and is now ready to embark on a fine career. After internship, her hope is to return to her home village to set up a clinic.

There are six other medical students on the scholarship list, as well as two dental students, 13 nursing students, a pharmacy student and many others studying or training to become engineers,

scientists, social workers, secretaries and tourism workers. There are also hundreds still in primary and secondary school who have yet to decide on their future.

It's an option that would not be available to these needy but bright students without the money raised year in and year out by this international group of women, sometimes dubbed by envious non-members as well-heeled CDs (coffee drinkers) and GTLs (go-to-lunchers).

The club began as a place where women who were new to the island could meet and form friendships. It still has that aim. Now its transient

membership – reflecting Phuket and its lifestyle – is about 150.

The nationalities are diverse, and there are many Thais. The idea is to offer opportunities to as many needy young people as possible by raising funds in a variety of ways. Scholarships cost as little as Bt8,000 per year for a primary-school student and can rise to Bt50,000 for university students.

To ensure continuity in each student's education, a Fixed Scholarship Fund is set up to cover every year of the academic course.

The organisation's biggest fundraiser is the annual ball. This year, with the support and media sponsorship of the *Phuket Gazette*, the assistance of principal sponsor TGR Asia Group/Jumeirah Private Island and several other generous benefactors, that event raised Bt3 million.

That's an awful lot of scholarships.

This year the same group of students who took part in the boat race performed a rap in front of the 370 dressed-up, well-heeled older people during a sold-out great night out.

Trained by one of the club's newest members, a woman of long stage experience, it was a giant leap for all the students and a testimony to what's possible.