

SAWADDI

Asian Arts & Culture by the American Women's Club of Thailand

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The Gift of a Thai S



Students wave farewell after completing a successful weekend English Camp sponsored by the American Women's Club of Thailand.

Smile

Text and Photographs
by Jane Iverson



Thailand, known throughout the world as the Land of Smiles, is a source of charm and fascination for all foreigners who have the opportunity to live in the country. Rich in colorful history, sparkling temples, brightly robed monks, beaches, spas, vendors and delightful foods, Thailand throbs with life, making it a treasure for the expatriate community.

The heartbeat of this alluring country, though, is the Thai people themselves. Their lovely smiles, given spontaneously, make the foreigner immediately feel like an honored guest. Thailand's main religion, Buddhism, balances and blends the many ethnic cultures represented here. But while Thailand is rich in culture, the country has many people who live in poverty.



Many female high school students drop out of school to help take care of younger siblings. At home in Nakhorn Phanom, a young girl wearing a traditional sarong holds her little brother.

Student and her parents greet the visitors with smiles of happiness.



Honored by a visit from their daughter's sponsor, this family presented a special meal made from their first harvest of rice, bananas and sugar cane.

The members of the American Women's Club of Thailand (AWC) are well aware of the social problems in Thailand and have always worked diligently to help the needy. Founded in 1955, the AWC has given millions of baht to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to support orphanages, schools, AIDS homes, hospice programs, and self-sustaining community projects to help enrich the lives and communities of the Thai people. Education has always been a focal point of the Welfare Committee, so in 1995 a scholarship program for rural high school students was implemented by the AWC.

The program was initiated after a concerned American Peace Corps volunteer (PCV) brought to the attention of the AWC Welfare Committee the case of three female students from his district whose parents could no longer afford to keep them in school. Their prospects were dim: the fathers had been offered much-needed cash for their daughters by traffickers. The PCV wanted to know if there was a scholarship program for such students.

There was not, but because of the urgency of the problem, many committee members dug into their own pockets to keep the girls in school.

This incident spurred the Welfare Committee into researching Thailand's education system at the primary and secondary levels. In Thailand, basic education is based on a 6-3-3 system, in which the first six years constitute primary education, the next three years are for lower secondary education and the last three are for upper secondary education. The students at the last level may then choose a direction that would guide them toward continuing their education either at a university or a vocational trade school.

In the past, the government paid tuition only through the lower secondary level, equivalent to the freshman year in American high schools. If the students wished to continue with upper secondary schooling, their families were expected to take over the burden. In 1999 the law was changed, and the government started paying tuition for upper secondary

level students on a graduated scale. The program was to be phased in over a three-year period, and by 2002 all children in Thailand would have their tuition paid.

The Welfare Committee found that rural families had little or no extra funds available, and most hands were needed to support the family. Even when tuition is paid by the government, other school-related costs remain too expensive for a great number of students. Many rural families earn less than 25,000 baht per year, or around US\$600. For poverty-stricken families, school supplies, books, uniforms, meals and transportation are out of reach. In rural Thailand the secondary schools are consolidated, which means the schools can be far away from the villages. Many students who wish to continue their education must travel great distances. A few schools provide dormitories for the students, and in many cases students stay with teachers or distant relatives. All of these additional expenses strain the family income.



Beds line the walls of the dormitory where girls live to attend the school in Samoeng.



Students test their engineering skills to see if their egg can make it to the ground from a two-story drop without breaking.

The Welfare Committee also found that, in keeping with Thai tradition, boys are given the first opportunity to continue their education when the family does have extra funds. Daughters are expected to help the family by baby-sitting younger siblings, cooking, cleaning or helping their parents in the rice fields. In some cases they become instruments of barter.

In 1995, the AWC implemented the sponsor-supported Scholarship Program that has had life-changing effects for rural female students. Since 1996 more than 1,700 scholarships have been bestowed on high school students by generous sponsors from around the world. The program has grown over the years, from 98 students in 1996 to more than 460 students in 2002. The success of the AWC Scholarship Program speaks clearly: two hundred graduation certificates of achievement were issued in 2002.

These students have been helped at a critical time in their lives. By keeping promising students in school, sponsors give them the opportunity for a brighter future. Many of the students have continued to pursue their life goals after graduation, with respectable jobs, higher education through government loans or through other programs, such as the military,



While Margaret Spellings reads instructions during a classroom session, students follow along closely.



Student proudly shares information about her family with Therese Beauvais during Family Tree session.

Thai and American flags are placed side-by-side at the entrance of the school that hosted the English Camp.



Teachers share new information with colleagues.



At the beginning of English Camp, students express their creativity by drawing their group mascot.



As the last evening came to an end, the volunteers and students enjoyed the music and their new cross-cultural friendships.



for nurse's training. While the Scholarship Program has helped many young people in Thailand, statistics show that enrollment in secondary education continues to lag, with only 70% of students aged twelve to seventeen attending school.

A new AWC educational avenue was initiated in 2000 and is still gaining momentum—the English Camp Program. Held yearly for AWC scholarship students, the cross-cultural English camps are located in different regions of Thailand, with a central host school facilitating the camp. For the Scholarship Committee, bringing the students and teachers together for an all-expense-paid educational weekend is a logistical challenge well worth the effort. Research shows that integrating students from different backgrounds is one of the richest vehicles for chal-



Above: Students gather clues in the Treasure Hunt. Right: After finding all the clues, they raced back to the gym to construct their krathongs. Left: A student with a beautiful Thai smile shows off her completed krathong (float).

lenging them to learn. The rich diversity of cultures increases motivation and social development.

The 2001 English Camp, held in the northeastern province of Udonthani, was attended by 174 students from sixteen schools in eleven Isaan provinces. For many of these students it was their first trip outside their province. Supervision of the students was undertaken by school advisors, many of whom are English teachers.

Although the camp was geared toward the students, time was also vested in a program for teachers to help develop their English proficiency and give them ideas and materials to enrich their teaching skills. They, in turn, continue the cycle by sharing new ideas with their students and co-workers when they return home.

At the Udonthani camp a dynamic staff of fifty English-speaking volunteers consisted of AWC members, friends and American Peace Corps volunteers. The initially shy students were integrated into groups with enthusiastic PCVs providing team lead-

ership. Speaking English was a requirement of the camp, but translators were available when needed. Programs were designed to enhance the students' use of spoken English and teach them comprehension of the language. Finding their Thai/English dictionaries invaluable, the students clutched them like gold throughout the camp. Dictionaries are given to the students to use in their studies when they are selected as AWC scholarship students. With a rotation of seven different classes, daily group activities and two evening programs, the campers were kept very busy.

In the treasure hunt, teams tested their English reading skills with hidden clues while trying to find materials to make *krathongs*. Made of banana leaves, flowers, candles and incense, krathongs are floating offerings normally made for an important Thai holiday called Loy Krathong. Giggles rampant, the teams raced around the school grounds looking for clues. Once a clue was found,

pages of the dictionaries flew as the students looked up challenging new words to discover the location of the next clue. When the last clue was found, the students raced to assemble their krathongs and set them afloat. The first ones to float were the winners. Glittering stickers were the rewards for a job well done, and all the students' name badges were ablaze with stickers.

Classroom sessions included Letter Writing, Family Tree, Jeopardy, Reader's Theater and Describe a Picture. Group activities included egg drop, singing, dancing, and a special evening of cultural exchange. The "East Meets West" cultural exchange gave volunteers an opportunity to introduce customs from the United States, while the students shared their own traditions with the group. The students were also able to enjoy a rare opportunity for cross-cultural exchange between the different provinces of Thailand.

At the closing ceremony, students and teachers were given certificates



The 2001 English Camp turned out to be a real camp when the host school pitched more than eighty tents to house the students.



Students consult their dictionary during a classroom session.



After their class sessions, students gather for a group assembly and activity.

of attendance. Everyone rushed to exchange addresses with their new friends. Standing near the gate, the volunteers waved goodbye to the homeward-bound students as they left the camp. Eyes brightly shining, their faces beamed with excitement and their famous Thai smiles stretched from ear to ear.

The success of the English Camp Program has been not only in the enhanced English-language skills of the participants but also in the exchange between students from small isolated villages in various provinces. For the volunteers, the rewarding Thai smile was the primary compen-

sation, along with the pleasure of knowing that they had contributed to a monumental moment in the life of each and every student. ❖

Jane Iverson served as Welfare Committee chairwoman for two years and was a founding member of the Scholarship Program. Continuing her support for education, she chaired the Scholarship Committee for four years. Jane remains an enthusiastic volunteer and champion of all AWC charitable projects.

To participate in the next English Camp (Nov 8–10, 2002) or to sponsor a Thai high school student, contact:

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