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I arrived in Thailand during the rainy season. My nickname would derive from this arrival as I spent a month of intense cultural education, language training and ESL teaching instruction. Everyone in Thailand has a nickname, its one of the first questions we were asked. My Paww aww (school director) gave me the name “naam phon” meaning literally falling water, or more commonly understood as rain. Although it seems strange to name a person rain, my students have various nicknames ranging from Shrimp to Fat. They all have some sort of meaning or attachment to what the parents were doing at the time or maybe what they regard very highly. In any case, I came to understand that rain in my community was important if not vital, and being named such an intrinsic part of the community life tied me in a way I didn't quite realize in the beginning.

### **Placement Profile**

My placement is in a village named Pla Pak, meaning fish. It is located in northeastern Thailand in the Nakhon Phanom province bordering the Mekhong River with Laos. From Bangkok, it's about a 10 hour bus/car ride to arrive in the province. Northeastern Thailand is commonly referred to as Isaan. Isaan means many things and can hardly be described briefly, for it could never do it much justice. However, I will try to elucidate a fragment of its meaning through my personal experiences with Isaan.

I teach at a high school ranging from 7<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, named Pla Pak Wittaya. It's one of the larger high schools in the village with approximately 800 students. My students are Isaan. They represent a blending of Lao and Thai that goes back to the forming Siam. They are also some of the most underprivileged in all of Thailand. Isaan's socioeconomic status is significantly below Bangkok and central Thailand. The majority of my students and community are families of rice famers. As a volunteer, I am given a living stipend of 5,000 Baht, about \$150 per month. Some of my student's families make little more than this. Naturally, they don't have the means that central Thailand family's do to support schooling, livelihood and continuance of schooling. School is compulsory only until 9<sup>th</sup> grade, after this it is the student's choice whether he or she wishes to continue. Over half the students at my school drop out to continue in their parent's trade or find other means of supporting their families.

### **My roles in Nakhon Phanom**

My role as a teacher is much more than I could've imagined in importance and reverence. I instruct English to student's whose English instruction has been unenthusiastic, rote learning and simply ineffective. Thailand's Ministry of

Education deemed English as its first foreign language and made instruction of English mandatory and imperative to its continuance to become an economically thriving country. However, while schools in Bangkok have the privileges of tutors, international schools, schools where foreigners are hired in their own currency (a very high salary by Thai teacher standards), and access to expensive English programs, my students aren't given these same accesses. As such, my presence here, simply being here, is welcomed by an appreciation I could hardly imagine.

I am a young "farang" or white foreigner seldom seen by many of the students I know. Older expats and foreign men marrying Thai women are not uncommon, but a younger farang girl is far less expected. Because of this, and because I'm one of two in my entire village, I am treated close to a celebrity. My bike ride to school is greeted with students enthusiastically shouting my name, waving frantically and yelling a series of English phrases they are common with, such as "I love you, teacher" "teacher is beautiful" and "I miss you." Its comical, flattering and appreciated in a way they could hardly ever know. Simply traversing around my village gives me the same kind of attention and enthusiasm. Strangers invite me to dinner, lunch, or to a party or simply want to touch me. This was a strange experience the first time I encountered it. In the weekly market, I was wandering around sticking out like a sore thumb with my curly hair and blue eyes in a sea of dark hair. Suddenly a group of middle-aged women cornered me in a stall and started grabbing at my arms telling me repeatedly "suaaay" or beautiful in Thai. They asked to touch my hair, of course I wouldn't deny them such a strange request, but this has become a practice I've also become accustomed to.

I teach about three to five classes a day, including five 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes, one 7<sup>th</sup> grade class and three 10<sup>th</sup> grade classes. Sometimes I see little difference between my 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes and 10<sup>th</sup> grade in terms of their level of English. And other times, my 7<sup>th</sup> grade seems much further ahead. All in all, the levels of these kids are constantly being assessed. Along with this I instruct an English Club where the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students spend extra time studying English with interactive games and activities. Whereas Thai teachers typically follow the Bangkok curriculum, I tailor my lessons to the individual classes levels and abilities. Furthermore, I focus much on speaking, listening and using English in conversation. Many of the students are pretty adept at filling in a blank with an English word or writing a four word sentence, but most of them have no idea how to accurately pronounce an English word. Speaking in front of the class, alone, came at a shock to them, as they had never before been asked to partake in such a task.

I've been very involved in the development of a program at Pla Pak Wittaya called English for Integrated Studies or (EIS). The idea behind it is to give high achieving rural students the opportunity to partake in a majorly English curriculum. As such, they learn Science, Computers, Math and English all in English. This program mimics English Programs that are far more expensive and out of the reach of rural students. However, EIS brings the same quality and abilities to the students on a lower socioeconomic scale. I teach the English classes while helping to coach the

other two Thai teachers in bettering their English to effectively converse with the students. Furthermore, I showcase teaching styles learned through my TEFL training and give training to these teachers.

Outside of my placement responsibilities, I'm partaking in teacher training hosted by the Area Educational Office in coordination with WorldTeach. The purpose of this is to train teachers in teaching methodologies utilized by American teachers. This developed by request of Thai teachers who have observed foreigners teaching and has been opened to the whole county. We hope they take away innovative ways to teach, especially using new technologies and incorporating more learner motivation strategies. It is specifically aimed at Thai English teachers, who tend to teach straight from the book and they themselves don't practice their speaking English. This program hopes to make a lasting impression on teachers and to develop curriculums tailored to student needs.

### **Living Isaan**

Isaan encompasses many meanings. It not only represents a geographical area but a long history of Thai nationhood, a language, political stance, culture and ethnicity. My students all speak two languages and interchange it often, Thai and Isaan (also called Lao). This unique identity separates the northeast from the rest of Thailand.

Isaan is describable as a strong nationhood to Thailand with older residing Laos cultural influences. Like all cultures, Isaan has a particular kind of food blending Lao and Thai cooking. Sticky rice, som tam (ripe papaya salad) and laab (meat salad) are staples of Isaan cuisine and I am frequented with utter surprise by Thais when I eat these foods. I feel this to be a reflection not of the food, which is absolutely delicious, but of Isaan culture. A "farang" eating and enjoying Isaan food conjures a rhetoric by Thais of surprise that something so "hillbilly-esque" could be enjoyed by a foreigner. This rhetoric, I believe, represents much of what central Thais may think of Isaan. I find this to be reflected in the schools, not by rhetoric, but by physical and economic factors. Schools in Isaan are mostly government subsidized, from school uniforms to everything including notebooks. Bangkok students have the opportunities to attend International Schools and private schools, where the resources and schools are available. I've also noticed an enormous disparity between elementary education in the northeast as compared to the rest of the nation. Many of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade students coming into high school are virtually illiterate in Thai due to the lack of concise education in elementary school. Young students are more often found cleaning, gardening or engaging in some sort of festival training. Little time seems to be spent in the classroom, and some teachers in elementary don't take their roles seriously. Nevertheless, it's a challenge with 7<sup>th</sup> grade students barely reading Thai script to introduce an entirely new alphabet and expect the level of English readiness that central Thailand expects from them through standardized tests.

I see my students carrying small containers of sticky rice. Often, they are found hanging around their necks in class or being carried as if a purse. Being that I primarily studied Thai, my students interchange the two languages so often that I get lost as to what they are saying. A particular game they've found to be of utmost humor is trying to get me to say words in Isaan. When I'm speaking Thai or English, they often yell out "Teacher! In Lao.....!!" With the hopes that I'll say it and they simply find it hilarious. These words will be meanings to "waterfall" or "tall," and yet a foreigner saying them is as good as a stand up comedy show.

While Lao-ness is a great part of their identity, Isaan bears no feelings of nationality towards anything but Thailand. Every morning the national anthem is sung and sometimes I'll here the students singing it to themselves. Other times, I notice students drawing the Thai flag all over their notebooks or writing the phrase "Long Live the King" and English phrase they love. In fact, most Isaan people find being called "Lao" offensive. They no doubt understand that it's the same language, but actually being called a citizen of Laos and not Thailand is against their personhood.

My service is not over, but it has reached its halfway point. I have acclimated into a society very different from my own and experienced being fully engulfed in the culture. I cannot wait to continue the second term and help with a WorldTeach run teacher training camp for Thai English teachers. We hope to leave these teachers in the rural areas better equipped with the skills to teach English effectively, thereby giving these children greater competitive job skills to advance their careers beyond their rural and impoverished outposts.