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As my time in Thailand begins to come to a close, I notice myself trying to absorb every last minute that I can here. My students have become aware of my imminent departure date and ask me daily when exactly I was leaving them. Although, I've told them several times now both in Thai and in English, it seems that they still don't quite believe me. I've been posed the question "so, when are you coming back?" This is especially hard for my younger students. I came into the school year back in October 2010, which marks the beginning of the second semester in Thailand. My youngsters didn't get taught by my then, and weren't even in Pla Pak Wittaya. So the fact that I only seemed to have lasted one semester, honestly saddens them, no matter how many times I reassure that another volunteer will soon be on their way. I will admit this report is difficult for me, because it feels as if I haven't been here nearly long enough. I hope I can elucidate all that I've experienced in Isaan, both the comical and the accomplishments.

Living "Ban Nok," the rural life

"Ban nok" translates roughly to country, its not necessarily polite, it could also be understood as "the boonies." However, it characterizes my life here. The first time I became aware of this word was in my M3 (9th grade) class. I was teaching prepositions and a completely unrelated topic raised to the surface, which was quite well said and I answer "yes! But, no." My students burst out laughing and repeating, "ban nok, ban nok." Of course, I was at a loss as this wasn't in my Thai vocabulary ability and quickly moved on. After the class ended, two concerned students came up to ask me "Teacher- Ban nok, khao jai mai" or "do you understand?" They then proceeded to draw elaborate pictures depicting a city and the country. Pointing to the country, they said "this, same-same Nakhon Phanom, ban nok!" Illuminating their and my perception of this small, not-so quiet village in its small province.

It's rainy season in Thailand and in Isaan this means rice-planting season out in the country. Rice is the staple and key income for my students and their families. In short, their world revolves around rice. Almost all my student's parents are farmers. Several times during the year, the planting or harvesting of rice takes priority over schooling. Of course it would in their eyes, rice is sustenance insofar as a staple food item as it is the family's salary. As such, those days would bring 5 out of my 35 students in the classroom. Some of the teachers would be missing too! But such is the rural life.

As my time closes, I think of the roomates I'll be leaving behind. No, I don't mean my Thai host mom but the critters that scamper in and out of the house as if there were simply no barriers to the outside. There were certainly walls to my house, though the cracks would fool one to not see them. In the extensive collection that became my household companions, several species were constant while others

came with the seasons. The colony of frogs that had taken up residence in the bathroom seemed to multiply by the day. The geckos running in every nook and cranny sang (or squacked?) their song all night and all day. Their close relatives, whose name I only know in Isaan, gapgkae, were giant-sized geckos. They would come out only at night and post themselves discretely near swarming bugs. Occasionally a snake or two would slither its way into our bathroom and hide behind one of the giant tubs of water used as a hand-flushing device. They would provide quite the surprise while reaching for the bucket handle. After dark, especially in the rainy season, I found myself unwilling to turn on the lights. This was due to the incredible amount of flying insect that would attach themselves to the light and therefore bother me throughout the rest of the night. I strategically placed brighter lights outside my door to deter them from my bedroom, though this worked only occasionally. The constant battle with the creatures was simply another facet of the rural life. At least they weren't the roosters and cows bright and early making all sorts of a raucous!

Living Isaan meant cultural differences from American lifestyles. Whereas we saw Saturday and Sundays as days of rest, Thai people knew these were days to catch up with outdoor improvement activities. The weekend began promptly at 6 in the am, which was the coolest part of the day, and would follow with a series of pounding and hammering. The village was alive with the sounds of productivity. As soon as lunch time hit, lunch being a key favorite part of the day, the village would become silent until about 4pm. As an American, after lunch was an active time for me but I would frequently find myself alone riding around on my bicycle. Due to my fondness to sleep in (until about 8am, if I was lucky) the teachers would joke how much I loved to sleep. In their eyes, I was sleeping all the time. Even if I was in my room reading, passing time alone, to Thai people I was sleeping, no matter how much I protested.

Another sense of a rural life, is the sense of community not necessarily found in cities. I was known throughout the village as "Ajarn Farang" which translated, means white teacher. Although I'd like to be known for more than the color of my skin and profession, this title gave me a place in the community. By this I mean, it made me a notable person in the community, not a passerby. This entitled me to many of my favorite qualities of "jai dee" or good heart. Namely, invites to dinner/lunch by strangers who clearly knew who I was, random gifts, and questions of "bai naiii" where are you going? Several times this was followed by an offer to hop into the back of a truck or the back of a motorbike. I felt very much like a member of the Pla Pak community, although my name might not instantly be recalled by community members, my appearance and why I was there certainly did. These random moments, which constitute some of my best moments in Isaan, could not have been realized without my being a part of the community.

The Last Semester of Teaching

My last semester of teaching was my favorite. I felt like a part of the community, comfortable with my students and significantly more comfortable with the school and its resources. This allowed me to take chances with my teaching and try new

things. In the beginning of the first semester I made an “About Me” poster including pictures of my travels. The students would frequently point out my pictures in Mali, Africa and of my redhead friend. This provoked thinking that perhaps not many students had been exposed to people who looked different outside of their community. Many of them had never even traveled to Bangkok, the capital. In this second semester, my 8th grade class, I decided to include in the curriculum a section on geography and nationality. Many things became apparent immediately, their lack of knowledge regarding continents (in Thai) and the dispersal of languages. Seeing as this was an English class, I prompted the countries in which English was spoken. The varied answers included France, USA and Mexico. This surprised me, highlighting simply the differences between my education and travel experiences and theirs. My nationalities lesson kept the students exceedingly engaged. They were excited to see pictures of people from around the world and the different animals. In this lesson, I would tie in weather vocabulary to further highlight differences between where they live and what the images represent. It was an amazing experience to walk into the library and find my students huddled around computers looking at google images of different regions. This inspired a project for the students. Each was assigned a different country, they were to draw their interpretation of a person from that country, identify what language is spoken, the term for their nationality and a popular food from the nation. The project was a tremendous success and the students came into my office to tell me how to say hello in several different languages. The project allowed them to use the Internet as a tool, something they don’t utilize so much aside from gaming. Furthermore, they used their own research to find out supplementary worldwide information, which the students enthusiastically shared with me. Overall, it was one of my most successful lessons, bridging the English language with the fortunate experiences I’ve had in my life and sharing my Spanish-American culture with my students.

August was my final month in Pla Pak Wittaya and the end meant a long haul back to the US. But before this, I organized and planned a very fun and popular event, an English Camp. English Camps happen periodically in Thai schools, communities or hosted by a local wat (temple). The idea is to make English learning fun and drive the students to pursue their ambitions while utilizing English. I was able to organize, plan and implement a weekend English Camp for students in Prathom 6 (6th grade elementary) through M3 (9th grade of high school). These students came from my high school and local elementary schools in and around the village. Hosted on Pla Pak’s campus, I organized the day’s activities and invited some of my foreigner teacher friends to participate. The week leading up to the camp, the students were anticipating it on a level I was surprised to find! I employed the help of the seniors who would act as camp counselors and teachers ran the activities. I made sure that all the activities were highly interactive and the student’s would learn while not be constrained to sitting and writing. Mostly, there was barely any writing at all. We focused on activities that required the student’s to listen and speak in English. Furthermore, in our evening show they were able to show off their English skills in a performance of their choice. Prizes were given, English was rampant, energies high and dancing happened all day. Overall it was a very successful English camp and a great way to spend my last weekend in Thailand.

Conclusions

I feel eternally grateful for the chance that JJCF offered. Without receiving this grant I don't know if I would have been able to participate in WorldTeach. My placement in the province of Nakhon Phanom changed my outlook on the world and introduced me to a very different way of life. Isaan represented a unique ethnic fluidity, a Laos cultural tradition mixed with Thai and embracing a very Thai nationality. Isaan represents many things, a culture, a language, an identity marker and a region. It also represents a proportionally underprivileged region in Thailand, in which its rural areas suffer from disparities in educational quality and ability. This is especially seen with English, the language required by Thai universities to be competent. Lack of this skill would prevent access to lives outside of the rural area. To ensure better social fluidity, I participated in volunteer teaching in a rural Thai school. This next year has a new volunteer who will continue to train Thai teachers, serve as a teacher example in language acquisition aside from rote learning, and open eyes to the world's diversity. While I hope I impacted these student's lives, I certainly know they influenced my career choices and dedication to international development and international education. I think about them, peruse through the many gifts I was given and Thailand will always have a special place in my heart, especially Isaan.