



Volunteer Summer 2007 Weekly Update Highlights

From Thailand – June 28, 2007

Sawadee-ka/krup from Thailand!

It has been one week since we left the New York City Orientation, and here we are in Nongsaengnoi! So much has happened since our journey began from JFK. After a night stopover in Bangkok with pad-thai from Chabad, we boarded our connecting flight to Ubon Ratchathani and were greeted warmly by a smiling delegation of our partnering NGO - Pattanarak - members and children from the school in our village.

Laden with jasmine necklaces, we drove to the Khong Chiam region and into our village, Nongsaengnoi. Stepping off the trucks, we found ourselves surrounded by a swarm of excited villagers, anxious to meet the *farang* (foreigners) who would spend the summer with them. A full-scale parade ensued including dancing children clad in celebratory traditional Thai outfits and festive music blasting in the background. We were jet-lagged but fascinated but we jumped in and joined in the dancing and celebration following the procession into our new houses, and trying out some Thai words and introductions along the way. Seri, the founder of our partnering NGO, Pattanarak, and Adjan Sompon, our Professor, were infinitely welcoming and warmhearted at our arrival. We were a little shocked to see the bathroom facility, but we quickly warmed up to squat toilets and bucket showers (and we will never go back).

Settling into our new home, we celebrated one of many new firsts: our first Shabbat facing westward towards Jerusalem! Rachel Finkelstein and Elana Sroka led a pre-Shabbat reflection that set us in the mood for the beautiful Kabbalat Shabbat tunes led by Jenna Brofsky and Azi Grysman. The Shabbat spirit flowed into Saturday, where we relaxed and wandered around the village, meeting some of the villagers, and enjoyed the afternoon doing some learning and playing games with the children of the village.

On Sunday, we drove out to the Pha Tem National Park for a hike by 3000 year old wall paintings and spent some time walking around the town of Khong Chiam.

On Monday, we took part in the ceremony of the "sao ek": the first pole erected of our building project, the canteen for the 300 children of the village school. Azi Grysman, in addressing the leadership of the community, spoke of the value of education and the need to work together to improve that in the community.

Each day that passes, we have more and more interactions with the children and as we continue to break down the language barrier between us, we are building strong connections with them. We re-invent every playground game any of us has ever played as children and though we break our teeth trying to explain our games, we enjoy hours of smiles and appreciation that make it all worth it. Sarah Kaplan has become a popular choice for the children to call over in the favorite game of "Red Rover"!

With our building project postponed until Monday the 2nd, we are spending this week helping the farmers of the village. We got down and dirty in the muddy rice paddies weeding and transplanting, and helped to plant eucalyptus trees, and though we left with many questions about sustainable development, we also gained a newfound appreciation for the efforts invested into each grain of rice that we eat.

Our afternoons for the summer are filled with a slew of activities in the school. We teach classes from ages 4 for 15 trying to transmit to the children even the most rudimentary English language skills. Francesca Littman had her whole class clapping for each right answer, and Benny Kaplan taught a room full of students how to say "the scorpion is in the class" after a frightening visit. We also are helping run the clubs for the secondary school students, which include: Arts, Dance, English, Science and Thai Language. Ben Wood-Isenberg, Beckie Chermiak, Jenn Singer, and Josh Weiss led a rockin' English club meeting for the high school students, teaching Beatles songs and getting them all dancing.

After school hours, we coach sports and stir up spirit for the four teams that the students are divided and we eagerly await the three-day color war that will take place at the summer's end. Today, Craig Fryman and Brandon Roth coached the red team to an enthusiastic volleyball victory!

We have also been learning in frequent educational sessions about sustainable development and engaging in heated debates. Ceki Hazan enlightened us with his expertise gained on European soil in a lesson he gave on development institutions.

Our fearless leaders are sharing our talents with us; Shmuly Yanklowitz led a shiyur on moral progress in the Bible, and Shayna Szymkowicz is leading meditative breathing sessions each night.

Our spirits are high and we are learning a ton with every experience that comes our way. We hope everything is well at home. We're holding down the fort out east!

With much love and Shabbat Shalom!
The AJWS Thailand Summer Team