

Tikkun Olam with the Thai AIDS Treatment Action Group

Lori Levine is a public health professional living in New York. She has been involved in comprehensive community-based initiatives for over 20 years. Before becoming an AJWS volunteer, she worked at the Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University, where she served for ten years as the deputy director of a national demonstration program called "Free to Grow," an initiative committed to building broad-based partnerships to promote healthy families and communities for young children.

It's close to midnight, and I'm sitting on the floor of Ott and Karyn's home with some of the leadership of TDN (the Thai Drug User's Network.) Ott was one of TDN's founders, and it's not unusual for its members to convene here, on his living room floor, soliciting his support in his newer role as director of TTAG, the Thai AIDS Treatment Action Group.

There are papers strewn everywhere, and two or three laptops are open and running. We're talking about a document I've been working on to help TDN think through a restructuring of the roles and responsibilities of their board and staff. We're drawing organizational charts, with circles and arrows, translating as we go, talking about ways to consolidate roles and improve communication. They're preparing slides to share with fellow network members later in the week at their board meeting. They are almost embarrassingly thankful for the time I've spent helping them. I, however, am profoundly moved by the scene of which I'm a part...

This entry, from my blog (<http://loriinbangkok.blogspot.com/>), describes the feelings I often experienced as an American Jewish World Service volunteer. For ten weeks, I worked at TTAG, a non-governmental organization committed to building grassroots leadership to effect broad-based policy change for vulnerable populations at risk of or living with HIV/AIDS.

Working to engage people living with HIV/AIDS throughout Thailand, TTAG is committed to ensuring that the voices of those living with HIV/AIDS are heard in the highest policy arena. It has recently expanded its efforts to address the special needs of one of Thailand's most stigmatized groups affected by the AIDS epidemic – intravenous drug users – and provides technical support to groups like TDN to promote harm reduction strategies to reduce the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, as well as promoting access to antiretrovirals and other life-saving therapies.

My tasks and responsibilities at TTAG were not new for me. They included assessing program and organizational structures, developing staff capacity building strategies and management coaching for program leadership, as well as anything else to help move the organization's work forward – hence the late night sessions with TDN!

Over my career, I have done tasks like these with dozens of communities throughout the United States. Indeed, during my time working with TTAG, I was often surprised at how similar the capacity building issues were to those of grassroots organizations I've worked with at home. The cultural context was distinctive, to be sure, but the issues were very much the same. So what was so wonderful about the experience? What was that feeling of appreciation and preciousness that I felt about being there?

It has been clearer and clearer each day since I returned that the sense of gratitude I felt was directly linked to being a volunteer: to having the opportunity to offer my expertise to others separate from the monetary compensation associated with doing these tasks as part a job.

I've worked in social justice related fields all my life, including building grassroots leadership among young parents and advocating for equitable resources for low-income communities. Yet, none of this prepared me for how truly happy I felt doing this work as a full-time volunteer. Unhooked from the politics of the workplace and the sometimes onerous American expectations around success and worth, I felt liberated to be fully present with the situation in front of me and to be able to access my skills with an open heart.

I found that I listened more easily, with less distraction and second-guessing about what others might think. I felt both braver and more humble – willing, once trust was built, to offer a potentially unpopular opinion about a supervisory or program decision, as well as always aware that my brief time with TTAG offered but a tiny window onto its history, life and future.

My time with TTAG was very much the full embodiment of the Jewish value of *tikkun olam* – healing the world – that I learned years ago marching alongside of my civil rights' activist parents and which I have sought to transmit to my children throughout their lives. For all these reasons, it is an experience that I know I will have to build into my life more intentionally from now on, and one which I will encourage family, friends and colleagues to taste in the years to come.