

Meet an MI Student

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My Peace Corps service in rural northeast Thailand has taught me lifelong lessons of how to work and integrate into another culture far different from my own. As a Volunteer in the community business and organizational development program, I have worked implementing grass-roots projects. My program is designed to bring local volunteers into the Sub-District Administrative Organization (SAO), the most local form of government, to assist in capacity-building activities.

As a Peace Corps Master's International student, I began my graduate coursework in 2008 at the University of Washington in Seattle. I completed various classes in policy analysis, project monitoring and evaluation, and program evaluation at the Evans School of Public Affairs. My academic coursework proved useful in helping me understand the organizational management of the SAO. I have helped SAO staff identify community needs, design and effectively implement programs, and utilize both local and national resources. Together with my Thai counterparts, I have built community playgrounds, promoted volunteer service, led youth development trainings, and organized health projects around HIV/AIDS and diabetes management.



I have had a unique chance to witness firsthand how Thai traditional values and communal ways of living are altered by the country's growing economy and modernization. Although Thailand is prepared to meet all of its United Nations Millennium Development Goals by 2015, I have seen graduating students unprepared and unqualified for the working world, people wracked with debt, and families separated by urban migration in search of higher wages.

To help identify community needs and priorities, I have facilitated and designed an infrastructure survey of the local Childcare Development Centers. The results have indicated a clear lack of playgrounds, which improve gross motor skills and encourage creativity and exploration in young children. With a budget of \$3,000 in grant funds and community contributions, I initiated and completed the building of playgrounds at five centers. The project involved over 50 village volunteers, who received training to build playground equipment made from recycled tires and seat belts. Although SAO staff, village leaders, and teachers were involved at the local level, the project also utilized outside resources such as American and Thai nongovernmental organizations, a local technical college, and local businesses. Most importantly, this project allowed me to work with SAO staff one-on-one to transfer skills in project design and management.

I view Thailand as my greatest teacher, in that it has pressed me to think critically about societal values, communal ways of living, and ways to provide critical government support services. I know my experience in the Peace Corps and my graduate course work has prepared me well for whatever may come next. I hope to have a long-term professional career in improving social services and the capacity for government to serve its most vulnerable and at-risk populations. The Peace Corps experience has given me the ability to adapt and cope during challenging situations. I feel confident these new skills will be useful when facing any cross-cultural dilemmas working in community development at home or internationally.