

## **Let's Go On an Adventure!**

*By Dola Ngo '16*

American author and poet, Maya Angelou mentioned in a series of short essays she wrote titled *Wouldn't take Nothing for My New Journey* that “perhaps travel cannot prevent bigotry, but by demonstrating that all people cry, laugh, eat, worry, and die, it can introduce the idea that if we try and understand each other, we may even become friends.” That very idea transcends beyond just a simple quote someone has probably captioned for Instagram photos. To me it speaks profoundly of my senior practicum experience to Chiang Mai, Thailand. Traveling to a foreign country opens up a world of possibilities, and I clearly saw my opportunities as soon as my gigantic airplane landed on Thai soil. It has been well over a month now since my return to what now seems like a strange and distant land I call home. The days are hard because it is during these waking moments that my mind slips, and I am taken back to the people, food, and the big and small trips that were all too good to be true. I guess that is the price I have to pay for all the encounters I thought I would never have, in a place, I thought I would never have them.

Words cannot (nor will they ever) adequately express the great appreciation I have for the Thai people, for the Thai dishes that are still sending me through withdrawal, and for all the excursions that made this visit so remarkable. To those who are reading this: just know this article does not fully grasp my emotions of the short-lived, three-week trip, and the only way to understand is to relive it by inventing a time machine and going back as me (both of which are still possible). I will try as best as I can to transcribe something that is better cherished as memory.

## **Hello from the Other Side**

Going from the cruel coldest month in Pennsylvania to mostly 75 degrees and sunny was a no-brainer. My wearisome 24-plus-hour flight ended with a welcome that rejuvenated my soul. The long anticipated arrival was greeted by 18 first-year nursing students from Baromarajchonanee College of Nursing that came rushing to embrace us, strangers, with excitement and open arms. The two nursing students, Hi and Aun, to whom I was blessed to be assigned, offered – small as these girls were – to carry my heavy suitcases. From that very moment, I knew instantly that something intangible had been formed: a friendship unbreakable.

I remember that night; my fellow classmates were all sound asleep. I, on the other hand, whether by the jetlag or the elation of finally being there, only managed to sleep for two hours. As the cool breeze found its way to my skin, I stared out through the opened windows into the clear night illuminated by the full moon. I kept staring until the morning was signaled by the rising sun and the crowing roosters. My adventure was about to start.

The day was spent at Kad Laung, a very large market filled with ready-to-eat meals, local snacks, and fresh produce. There were also areas of the market that featured inexpensive goods, such as clothing, fashion accessories, and personal care products. All of these assortments were Thai-inspired, so for tourists like me that wanted to see new things, this place was it. If one can count it as such, eating has been a favorite hobby of mine and the street vendors of Kad Laung did not disappoint. I was cautioned not to risk upsetting my G.I. system by eating street foods,

but I did not care. I did not want what I considered to be food heaven to slip away from me. I ate as much as the capacity of my stomach would allow me. I took my chances and it paid off. I got to enjoy some of the most savoring, taste-bud-melting, flavor-overwhelming Thai dishes I had ever eaten. If it was not for Hi and Aun, I could have easily been lost in the midst of the colors, smell, and noise that made this place so special, but I would be more than alright if that had happened. After dinner, I ventured on one of the most interesting outings of the trip. The Walking Street in Chiang Mai is a shopper's paradise. Open every Sunday, the roughly one-km-long market on Ratchadamnoen Road offers art and craftsmanship of the Northern Thai people. The goods were made from a wide variety of materials such as silk, paper, fabric, metal, and glass. The overcrowded street had numerous restaurants, coffee shops, and bars if you elected to escape the crowd and people-watch instead. The entertainment was endless; everywhere I turned, there were musicians, puppeteers, Thai dancers, and local bands.

### **The Injustice of a Broken World**

After spending Sunday trekking the forest with elephants, the following week brought as much shock as it did humility. I spent three full days at the Nakornping Hospital doing my clinical rotation on the trauma unit. Good health care has always come easy for me. Back in the States, regardless of insurance, the team of medical staff along with the latest technology and improved modern medicine can treat whatever ailment afflicts me. I can go to my primary care provider for a common cold or to the emergency room for issues ranging from a slight paper cut to a heart attack. I know the cancer and women centers are fully equipped to handle the most complex of medical cases. My odds of a full recovery are ten times greater than most parts of the world.

The hospital is government-owned and is open to all patients. The lack of funding leads to limited resources, and the patients suffer as a result. The ER waiting room was consistently filled with people in agony, and the numbers did not dwindle. The halls were filled with patients in torment, laying endlessly in horrific hospital beds. They reused much of their medical equipment and were very resourceful with what they had. It was all so different and overwhelming; my heart drowned in my own tears as I witnessed one of life's greatest tragedies.

The trauma unit was split into two subunits. Trauma-One consisted of mostly heart, brain, and lung injuries, most of which can be traced back to motorbike accidents. Trauma-Two hosted patients with orthopedic-sustained injuries. The unit was understaffed with doctors and nurses and patients were held there until surgeries could be performed. As I surveyed the room filled with 30 beds, all occupied. I stood there for five minutes and just had to accept what I saw. It was a tough pill to swallow. Patients had bruises and lacerations so severe I could barely identify them. As I shadowed one of the nurses, it made me face the cold-hard truth of how easy I had it back home. Pain medications and sedatives are used to treat everything for Americans, but here, you would be considered lucky to have them. Though it was not easy for me to see them without some kind of pain relief, they, on the other hand did not complain. They just went on smiling.

The patients along with the medical staff showed me what God had been trying consistently to show me. We are born into this world and our desire to love and care for others is instilled in us

regardless of circumstances. I saw it at the Nakornping Hospital and the people who inhabited the congested place, patients and medical staff alike.

### **Not Noble by Birth, but yet Noble by Deeds**

After my short stint at Nakornping Hospital, I embarked even further north to Chiang Rai to stay at a village for a week. Before making my way to one of the villages, I made a stop in Doi Tung. Living my lackluster life, Doi Tung showed me what I needed to see. Doi Tung was once a place full of lush greens and natural resources, but as the local tribes began to abuse their surroundings the forest started to thin out; most of what was left was barren land. The people resided there made a living from selling opium plants, which they also used. Things didn't look bright for the people of Doi Tung as they struggled to overcome addictions, human trafficking, and illicit logging. As the forest was dying, so were the people who inhabited the land. Hearing about such a travesty, Her Royal Highness, Princess Srinagarindra, the late Princess Mother of Thailand, initiated The Doi Tung Development Project. She drew inspiration from her son, who first started the effort to end opium cultivation in the late 1960s. The Princess Mother saw with great distress her people were suffering and she did not hesitate to help. She realized the problem was not the people, but the poverty and lack of opportunities for education and livelihood.

With fearless determination, she took it upon herself to develop a model sustained by principle that would address social, economic, and environmental problems. Today, Doi Tung now flourishes as it once did. The Princess Mother could have approached the problem in many ways, one that would keep the aging Princess from traveling from Switzerland back to Thailand. She instead decided the only way to tackle such a complex issue is to immerse herself in it. She built her palace in Doi Tung in order to fully understand the people and their adversities.

All of this unfolded as the tour guide showed me with a simple video of a brief, yet profound history of Doi Tung. What really struck me during the those 15 minutes was the simple question of why royalty such as The Princess Mother would want to commit her time and effort for something that (at the time) did not have a clear resolution. My question was answered in The Hall of Inspiration. The long hall comprised the history of the royal family consisting of pictures, quotes, articles, handwritten letters, and artifacts. The hall explained The Royal Family's past and present anthropological works and the intention with which they did it. I slowly began my trip towards the exit and see why The Princess Mother gave up her later years. Down to her core, she had a good heart and spirits. Those attributes have been passed down to her from her family and still to this day the people of Doi Tung and Thailand stand in astonishment of her character. She truly and deeply cared about people regardless of class, social and occupation ranks, race, or color. She didn't send government officials to do her work, she sent herself. She stooped down below her status as a princess and became a commoner.

Her story reminds a lot of my Savior. Christ, just like the Princess, is of noble stature. He stepped down from his throne into a world he saw was dying. He could have fixed in many ways, from afar, but elected to come down to earth, throwing away his crown as a King.

Being a Christian I wonder about my role in the realm doing good in the world. I am expected to do more, to be an image of Christ in a world where chaos reigns, but truth be told, I have yet to do my part. Doi Tung and the Princess Mother has shamed me and revealed my lack of duty I owe to society. But it has also given me something intangible; it has given me the catalysis to start a legacy that will, I hope, coincide with my Christian responsibilities.

Doi Tung gave the much-needed encouragement and drive I lacked before I arrived at the village.

## **Va**

The word resourceful has never been a part of my vocabulary. Resourceful is not what I am, mainly because I have been bred in a society that has plenty. The surplus is overwhelming. If I need anything, it's right around the corner or a quick drive up the street. I leave the water running when I'm brushing my teeth and don't turn off the lights when I leave a room. I have a central air unit when it's scorching hot outside and I have a heating system when the weather is freezing cold. I don't have to concern myself about food because it's readily accessible with a simple swipe from my credit card and I don't worry about drinking water because I get it from the tap or through a filter. Life has been made for me, but it also has made me a person who neglects the notion that others don't have it as simple as I do.

A small village in Chiang Rai that consisted of 127 homes instilled in me what it means to live off the land and how to handle circumstances with the cards you were dealt. My first stop was at a house owned by a lady, probably in her mid-30s. She made and sold crafts with material she recycled or grew herself. Her artwork was hung around the premise of her home and could be bought at the weekly market held by the people in her village; a quick stop to her front gate could guarantee you a bumblebee made from coconut shells. She bred and raised lobsters right in her backyard. The way she did it spoke highly of her creativity. She had two kid-size pools with tiny minnows and oyster shells with algae growing on them in order to feed the lobsters and an aquarium-like filter to clean the water.

My second stop was at a house on the outskirts of the village. There lived a husband and wife who grew a variety of fruits and vegetables. Their garden extended all around their house with squashes and cabbages that flourished in the morning dew. They used the nearby river to water their plants along with homemade fertilizers made from chicken and cow feces. They spent roughly two hours each morning and evening tending to their garden. The hours in between were spent working their acres of rice patties.

My third house was an older lady whose primary source of income was from selling rice crackers and juice made from the momordica fruit. She bought sticky rice from her village in order to make her rice crackers, but she grew momodica (among many other fruits) in her backyard.

My last stop was at a house where a couple in their mid-60s wove floor mats from rice straws they grew in the nearby field. Using a machine they built themselves, they worked as a team to weave these mats and sell them to the village. They averaged about ten mats per day and each mat took 30 minutes to put together. They were sold for 50 balt (a little over one U.S dollar) and

could be found all throughout the village. Because the mats were made from rice straws, they would eventually dry out and would need to be replaced. This provided a demand for the couple's business, which in turn provided them with a steady source of income.

Each visit brought something new, but something always remained the same: their hospitality and kindness. Each home welcomed me with open arms and array of snacks and drinks. They treated me like one of their own and showed me their set of skills used in their businesses. They gave up their time, and while language barrier prevented us from understanding each other, I knew our presence at that very moment made us family, strangers as we were.

## **Blood Runs Deep**

For Community health, I went back to Chiang Mai to visit three patients who could only afford home care. The community nurse would see them once a week for routine care and address any concern they or their family might have.

My first home was a patient in her mid-60s. She severely fractured her hips, had two strokes, and has recurrent UTIs. While she was not that old, her physical condition suggested otherwise. She was bedridden and confused. The community nurse came and checked on her once a week, but it was up to her seven kids to take care of their dying mother. I was blown away – almost in tears – at the commitment and love her children displayed for their mother during a very trying time. They were by their mother's bedside each day attending to every need. It's easy for us back in the States to look at this situation. When our loved ones get sick, there are health care professionals who will do amazing work to bring them to full health; but here, in a small village where home care is drastically different, family is the sole reason why a patient gets better or worse. Roles change as we age. Parents take care of their kids during their feeble and dependent stages, and if they do so with love, their kids will look after them when they are old. There was no doubt that this lady, possibly in her last days, raised her kids well.

My second home was that of an older lady in her 80s; just like the first patient, life had not been good to her as she was suffering from multiple strokes. She was bedridden and heavily dependent on her two kids, one daughter, and one son, to look after her. They alternated day and night so as not to overwhelm the other, though they would humbly deny such accusation.

Everyone dreams and fantasizes about their love story, envisioning living and dying together with their soul mates. The last house defines that love story. An older couple living in a small house was the epitome of "till death do us part." The wife suffered a stroke that has left her hemiplegic on the left side of her body. Her husband had been taking care of her for four years. They seemed very content with the circumstance with which they were presented. They embraced the life they had and nothing about their relationship had changed. The husband still loved his wife just like the first day they met. It was a testament of a love that can overcome anything.

I learned that family is everything here. The love for one's parents or children can reach far beyond the horizon. These visits were the summation of why we are born into families. The search for meaning, in part can be found right where we are, right in the house we grew up in,

with the people who have been by our sides since the beginning. Desmond Tutu once said, "you don't choose your family. They are God's gift to you, as you are to them" and it's a gift I often discard in hopes of better ones. These families showed me that you won't find what you are searching for because you already have it.

### **Here Comes the Goodbye**

All good things must come to an end. Packing was hard this time around, but watching my friends loading my luggage onto the bus was even harder. I would recall this scene like my first night here, with them helping me carry my heavy suitcases up to my apartment. During the ride to the airport, while it was not verbally expressed, I could see the emotions that burdened everyone. I tried talking and making jokes, but it was to no avail, as I was also hit with a huge wave of sadness. My flight was delayed by an hour, a blessing in disguise as it allotted me an extra hour to comprehend what was happening. Those last minutes were just a tease from Father Time as the hugs and departing words brought tears. As I walked through security, I looked back and waved three times, each one heavier than the last.