Bunk Beds and Ceiling Fans in Chiang Dao

by Timothy Diemer

How hot was it? It was so hot that the elephants refused to work until they had been given a proper bath and scrubbing in the nearby river. Three members of the IUPUI student chapter of Engineers Without Borders [EWB] may have been at a loss for words to describe the weather in the mountains of Northern Thailand, but the elephants said it well enough. As a result, when school children at a partially finished dormitory said that they needed ceiling fans, the IUPUI students could claim a skin-deep understanding, even if the message passed from Lahu language to Thai language to English.

The IUPUI chapter was established two years ago. IUPUI faculty mentor Jan Cowan led several trips to areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina. The EWB trip to Chiang Dao in Northern Thailand, however, was the first journey outside the USA for the IUPUI group. IUPUI faculty mentor Tim Diemer, a former Peace Corps volunteer and refugee relief worker in Thailand, accompanied the group. The EWB student members were Laura Robertson, senior, construction technology and interior design; Sara Brown, senior, biomedical engineering; and Tron Artavatkun, senior, electrical and computer engineering.

The objective of the EWB project in Chiang Dao is to improve the facilities at a dormitory for hill tribe students who come from villages far removed from the nearest school. Some students who reside at the Chiang Dao dormitory live in small mountain villages. They have to walk a full day over trails to catch a bus that must travel several more hours to meet a bus that will take them on another long journey to a town large enough to offer public schools. Because it is not practical for students to return home to their villages each day and Thai schools do not have facilities to board students, temporary lodging for these children is a pressing need.

Nongovernmental organizations have stepped in to meet some of the need for temporary housing. EWB-USA, for its part, works in partnership with some of these NGO efforts. The award of the Chiang Dao project to the IUPUI chapter of EWB is one example. By providing improved facilities where students can live during the school week, the EWB project has potential to increase access to pri-

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mary and secondary education for as many as 100 ethnic hill tribe children.

Under guidance from His Majesty King Bhumipol Adulyadej, the Royal Thai government recognizes education as a key element in the development of impoverished hill tribe communities. The EWB effort is consistent with initiatives of the Thai government to provide remote hill tribe villages with increased access to primary and secondary education.

Immediate needs at the Chiang Dao facility are bunk beds, skilled installation of electrical wiring and ceiling fans, windows and shutters to keep out the monsoon rains, a waste disposal system, improved kitchen facilities, and recreational facilities. The IUPUI chapter includes members from a wide range of engineering and technology fields, so the technical expertise is plentiful. While skilled labor is donated, the greater challenge is funding, both for material costs and travel costs. The IUPUI chapter continues to actively seek funding for its projects.

In addition to their work to assess technical requirements and to propose a budget for the project, the student travelers faced the challenge of adjusting to life and work in a location 11 time zones away from Indianapolis. While Tron Artavatkun is a Thai national, he had never

Friends and Money

International students at IUPUI sometimes ask about differences in attitudes toward friendship that they may experience during their time in the USA. One told me of offering an American friend a ride home one day when he learned that the friend’s car was in the shop for repairs. The American student, who lived quite some distance from the campus, was reluctant to accept, but finally agreed when the international student insisted that it was no trouble. When they arrived at the apartment complex, the American student thanked his classmate and then, as he stepped out of the car, pulled three dollars from his wallet and offered to pay for gas. The international student told me later that he was completely surprised by this response to a simple favor that any friend would do for another. “I was so disappointed,” he told me. “In that moment I felt like a taxi driver, not a friend.”

“Let me try to explain,” I replied. Traditions in your country are probably more group oriented rather than individual oriented. This difference affects attitudes about friendship and obligations. Coming from a more group-oriented culture, you would expect to have obligations to friends and relatives, as they have to you. In fact, everyone owes favors to friends, relatives, and business contacts, and everyone receives reciprocal favors in turn. The web of obligations is a normal part of effective social interaction. There is no need to split up the bill at a restaurant or otherwise keep score, because the sense of obligation is deeply embedded and everyone understands it implicitly, at least until cultural boundaries are crossed.

The American friend, on the other hand, was perhaps mindful of Mark Twain’s advice about friends and money: “...friendship... will last through a whole lifetime, if not asked to lend money.”

He was therefore trying immediately to repay what he saw as a debt. He is most comfortable when any debts he owes to friends are paid immediately.

The idea of interdependence within a web of reciprocal obligations is captured by the Chinese concept of guanxi and by the Thai concept rūcāg bun khun. The contrasting idea of avoiding such obligations is at least as old as Shakespeare’s Hamlet: “Neither a borrower nor a lender be; for loan oft loses both itself and friend.”

The EWB team faced similar cross-cultural dilemmas as they navigated among American, Thai, and ethnic hill tribe worldviews. The experience opened new dimensions in their problem solving skills.

—Timothy Diemer
visited such remote hill tribe villages, nor watched the reaction to his own culture that Middle Americans typically display on first trips abroad. Interdependence is the intricate weaving that shelters Thai life, so why would the Americans insist on such independence? Yes, the weather was hot, but who would not delight in Thai food? And why were the Americans having such difficulty accepting their role as proper guests? The Americans came through in the end, however, by learning a passable version of one Thai song, which they performed with what the Thai might call “good heart.”

The engineering and technology accreditation body specifies that graduates shall demonstrate advanced skill at working in groups, as well as global awareness. The rapport and cohesiveness that any group must establish to reach its potential for productivity are all the more elusive for the diverse group. For members of the IUPUI chapter of Engineers Without Borders, the challenge of a trip to Northern Thailand to plan for a community development project resulted in increased skill at working within a diverse group, as well as new perspectives on the global dimensions of engineering and technology.

For information on supporting EWB activities, e-mail Tim Diemer at tdiemer@iupui.edu.

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