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Amber Reiff

Purdue University, reiffa@purdue.edu

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HABITAT FOR HUMANITY:

A Student-Led Service Trip to Thailand

Amber Reiff, College of Engineering

STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCH

Amber Reiff started volunteering with Habitat for Humanity in high school and joined the Purdue Student Chapter as a freshman in 2014. During her sophomore year, she became more involved and held the position of Vice President of Development. While serving in this role, she planned on-campus advocacy events and recruited volunteers for Saturday site builds. In 2017, she traveled to Lampang, Thailand, over spring break with a group of like-minded students striving to make a difference. In this article, she shares her experiences on this trip and explores the impact of her participation. Beyond this trip, she has continued her involvement on the Habitat for Humanity Club Board and is currently the International Trip Coordinator for the 2018 service trip to Nicaragua. She is currently a senior at Purdue studying construction engineering and management and hopes to use her degree to build a brighter future for those in need.

INTRODUCTION

The Purdue University Habitat for Humanity Student Chapter is an on-campus student organization whose mission is to eliminate poverty housing and provide volunteer opportunities for Purdue students. In the U.S. alone, millions of people live in substandard conditions, and in 2016, over 40 million people fell below the official poverty rate (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Habitat for Humanity is dedicated to reducing these statistics. Since the Purdue chapter's founding in 1988, they have funded and built ten homes for families in need locally in Lafayette, Indiana. Starting in 1990, Purdue students have also made an impact across the United States on annual Habitat for Humanity Collegiate Challenge trips to areas in need during their spring breaks. In 2017, groups ranging in size from 7 to 12 students spent a week volunteering in South Carolina, Mississippi, Colorado, and Michigan. Outside of the U.S., there are still more than one billion people living in substandard housing (The Fuller Center for Housing, n.d.b). To help reduce these numbers, Purdue Habitat for Humanity students have traveled internationally to El Salvador, Nicaragua, and, most recently in 2017, Thailand.

I was one of the eleven fortunate students able to journey to the rural town of Lampang, Thailand, in anticipation of building hope and homes. Our goal was to be a part of the humanitarian effort to provide affordable housing by specifically providing the labor needed to construct a home for a multigenerational family in need of decent shelter. The family was experiencing extreme overcrowding in their previous establishment, which was made with mixed materials and had a simple dirt floor. We measured our progress throughout the week as we added block after block to the walls of the home. Working alongside the future homeowners, we also shared in their customs and ate local foods they had grown themselves.

We viewed our efforts as a small step in reducing the lack of equal opportunities within rural areas of Thailand. Per the United Nations, 88% of the country's 5.4 million poor live in rural areas, where "income inequality and lack of equal opportunities have persisted" despite the economic growth in metropolis areas such as Bangkok (United Nations Development Program, n.d.). As students, we witnessed life in Lampang beyond the statistics and saw that there is still much work to be done in these rural areas for struggling families.

DESCRIPTION

Our weeklong trip was organized and led by Oliver Berning, a senior at Purdue. He took care of most of the logistical trip planning before takeoff. Once we arrived in Lampang, we were greeted by Bootsaba Walker, a native to the area and one of our guides for the week from the Fuller Center for Housing. The Fuller Center was founded by Millard Fuller, who also founded Habitat for Humanity. In partnership with the Fuller Center, we were provided in-country transportation, food, and lodging.

Our first impression of Lampang was that it has a rich history, yet has adopted modern technology similar to that found in the United States. Traditional restaurants sit next to countless modern 7-Eleven convenience stores, and cars share the road with horse-drawn carriages. We always felt safe and welcomed by the locals in the city and in rural areas. We stayed in a hotel in the city, and the location we worked from was about a thirty-minute journey outside the city. Many families in Lampang, especially in rural areas, live in very basic homes of teak wood that are inadequate for modern living. The families wish for homes that can keep out rain and insects, but they often have wide gaps in the wooden walls and dirt floors.

Our first day, we visited the project site and were greeted by the future homeowners, with whom we would be working alongside. The home where the family was living at the time had dirt floors and was strikingly small for the large three-generation family. Right next door was a concrete slab and bare steel structure where we would be working to construct a new quality home for one of the sons and his family. Our main construction activities involved hand-mixing concrete and installing the CMU blocks to form the interior and exterior walls of the 500-square-foot home. The blocks and concrete mix

Figure 2. Students enjoying local fruit.

materials were delivered to the site at the start of the week, and a team of students used large tubs and hand trowels to mix the cement with water and sand while others carried smaller buckets to students installing the blocks. We also rotated jobs working to dig an 8-foot-deep and 3-foot-wide hole for the septic tank that would be installed later. In the heat, the work was made easier with many helping hands and local fruit from the future homeowners.

The work was planned by the Fuller Center, which helps build homes that are simple and decent according to modern Thai standards. The Fuller Center of Lampang is led by a board of directors composed of locals who donate their time and energy to making the program possible. A few of the family members also worked with us all day, showing us how to mix concrete and making sure blocks were installed properly. Not being able to communicate in words with the family did not stop the group from building bonds of friendship and sharing in dancing and impromptu soccer games. During construction, they were able to instruct us mainly through body language and following their example. A few times, they would take tools we were using, show us how to use them properly, and then give them back with a smile. We were also able to communicate through our Fuller Center guides, who could translate for us. In addition, we discovered that one of the students and a local volunteer could communicate through Mandarin Chinese. Throughout the week, while working alongside the locals, we acquired a great appreciation for their values of family, kindness, and hard work.

When we weren't working on the house, we had a few hours in the evenings to explore the local area. We took advantage of this time by visiting local outdoor markets, temples, and an elephant conservation center. The crowded markets are frequented by locals and pose a great opportunity for an affordable exchange of goods. We were shocked at the immensity of these markets and

Figure 1. Students doing construction work.

Figure 3. Elephant conservation center.

the wide variety of startling foods and products available. The many temples we saw were very elaborate and were decorated in detailed golden designs. Locals only visit these temples for special occasions, and we could sense that these sacred spaces were incredibly special to them. The elephant conservation center was home to talented elephants and their caretakers who were assigned to them at birth. These experiences opened our eyes to the many cultural differences. The largest difference that stood out to me was the smiles and friendliness from strangers. Thailand is known as the “land of smiles,” and this was certainly felt by the group during our time in their country.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

We measured the physical success of the trip throughout construction and felt we had accomplished our goal when we left with the house nearly completed and the family in good hands to put the final finishes on their home. We were elated to receive pictures of the completed house and the happy family with keys to their beautiful and stable home. We could not measure the intangible impact that we left on the community. Months later, we can look back and see how we played a part in the larger structure of the Fuller Center system to provide lasting hope for a brighter future in the hearts of locals.

With the help of volunteer labor, such as students from abroad, houses are continually built in Lampang and surrounding rural communities. While the Fuller Center of Lampang is relatively new, beginning in 2015, they are working on their fourteenth house (The Fuller Center for Housing, n.d.a). Across the globe, the Fuller Center continues to build homes in 20 countries, as well as in 70 communities in the United States (The Fuller Center for Housing, n.d.b). As students, we were grateful to have worked with a top-notch organization that was well prepared to accommodate a large group of students. Our

largest challenge of having a language and cultural barrier was mitigated greatly by our guides, and we always felt welcome and safe. We loved spending time with their local volunteers and had no issues working with them.

STUDENT AUTHOR IMPACT

This service trip impacted me and other students by bringing together an enthusiastic group of students and uniting us in an extraordinary cultural experience paired with humbling service. Our eyes were opened to the lifestyles in rural Thailand, in comparison to the glamor and excess in urban areas of Bangkok. We were better able to understand the challenges of wealth distribution and the effect it has on living conditions. However, we also learned the great positivity and kindness that can still radiate in the hearts of rural communities.

With so many differences in culture, we were not always prepared for what we saw and experienced, but I don’t think there is anything more that should have been done to prepare us. By not always knowing what to expect, we went into experiences with an open mind, ready for anything. The challenges we faced regarding the language barrier ended up being opportunities for us to learn about each other and find commonalities in different ways. During breaks from construction, we would play soccer with the young children in the family and felt renewed by their energy. In addition, many students including myself did not have phone service for the week, making it challenging when trying to navigate the city. Despite this, it was largely a great benefit to not be distracted by our phones.

My work in Thailand and at Purdue through Habitat for Humanity has been an invaluable compliment to my academics. The firsthand construction skills I’ve learned have paired with my technical knowledge gained by studying construction engineering and management.

Figure 4. Buddhist temple.

I have also attained many leadership skills through these experiences, and I've continued to take on more responsibility both through Habitat for Humanity and through my courses. Shortly after the trip, I was elected as the next international trip coordinator, and I am excited to take part in another great experience of service. The successful trip to Thailand set a precedent for many trips to come. During spring break of 2018, an even larger group of Purdue students traveled to and served the community of Las Penitas, Nicaragua. I took what I've learned from the Thailand trip and shared in creating new experiences and new hope for another community seeking volunteers. Students who are interested in serving during any spring break should email purduehabitat@gmail.com.

Figure 4. Wall construction.

CONCLUSION

In the spring of 2017, a group of Purdue students bonded together to tremendously help one family in need, while also making an impact in the larger effort to create affordable housing in rural areas of Thailand. We all feel personally rewarded by this experience and grateful for the memories that we made. I was also humbled by the amount of work left to be done in the community of Lampang. As for myself and other student volunteers, we continue to work toward the big moments of joy for families and the many great memories made along the way. My experiences on this trip were unforgettable, and I encourage all students to think about traveling internationally on a Habitat for Humanity service trip during their time at Purdue. Serving abroad is different in many ways to working in the United States, and it has taught me about the challenges and rewards of stepping outside

Figure 3. Elephant conservation center.

your comfort zone and immersing yourself in a foreign experience for an extended time. My advice to students would be to start thinking about international service as a way to challenge your global views and to experience something unlike anything you could imagine. My hope in writing this article is that it might encourage Purdue students and faculty to consider how they can be more involved in international service-learning activities to make a lasting difference in the lives of others worldwide.

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