STEM

Revitalizing Baan Tawai: Working Together to Preserve a Cultural Art Form

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Baan Tawai is a woodcarver's village in the northern Chiang Mai Province of Thailand. The village not only houses over 600 businesses, all sustained on woodwork, but also acts as the center of commerce for a unique art form that represents the mingling cultures of Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle. However, the village has seen a business decline in the recent years, threatening the art form with extinction. Although the global recession played a role in this, there are other factors at play. Master artisans are dying without leaving apprentices, while art pieces are sold for a fraction of their true value and exported abroad. To help combat this decline, summer 2014 marked the launch of a joint program between North-Chiang Mai University and Purdue University. A group of fifteen students traveled to Thailand for six weeks, where they conducted market research, interviewed artisans, and recorded the village's history. During their time, they successfully began to unravel the complexities surrounding Baan Tawai, and returned successfully with a clearer understanding of the problem, hundreds of interviews and surveys, and a new bond of trust. Since then, continued research and analysis has been conducted by experiential learning teams in Krannert, utilizing the contacts made over the previous summer. The projects have received coverage on a local, national, and global scale in various papers and magazines. Summer 2015 marks the second study abroad, and although still in its early stages, these projects have created hope that Baan Tawai can be revitalized.

Research advisor Chad R. Allred writes, "Baan Tawai village is an icon of northern Thailand's unique artistic and cultural heritage. Alyse and her colleagues have laid an important foundation for this ambitious multiyear project."

Students receive a lesson in woodcarving from the village leaders.

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