



Sam Newman Business Management Major

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Sam Newman abroad in the E-saan Province of Thailand, Spring 2009



Host mother from Yasothon Province wishes farewell as I leave her family's self-sufficient farm and her delicious home cooked meals.

Bangkok, the city of angels, better known as Krung Thep by the Thai people



How was Thailand? This question, a question that has been posed to me since the time I returned to the U.S. on June 22nd at 11:00 am, is a question that I will never fully be able to answer. Those first steps off of Korean Airlines KE-35 are memories that still rock me to the bone. Feelings of excitement, fear, exhaustion, anxiety, how could I ever forget? Even now my eyes swell, there's a click in my throat; dare I speak of it?

Dare I? Not because of fear, or of failure, or of judgment, but because of the magnitude of the dreams that I now have.

I owe something to the people that I met. I owe something to the individuals who taught me the difference between justice and law. I owe something to the friends that I made. I now dream of impacting those around me. I dream of the day when a former student emails me and says thank you for telling me about your experience. I dream of the day that my host family in Nong Jahn says, "thank you for giving back." I hope to tell you of my study abroad experience, and I hope you believe me when I say, "Thailand changed my life."

Thailand is a place of smiling faces, spicy food, and exotic women. Thailand is a place of corruption, poverty, and oppression. Thailand is a place of overwhelming beauty. Its beauty is found not only in the landscape but also in the people, in those hard working fishermen, farmers, fathers, mothers, and daughters. The people I met made me laugh, they made me cry. Thailand is known as the land of smiles. They are an infectious people. One

can't help but laugh as they dance and sing to their traditional Molum music. But at the same time, one can't help but cry as their government, corporations, and beloved king bring waves of harmful change to their peaceful lives.

My semester in Thailand presented me with four different close-up views of large scale development and their effects on the environment, the way of life, and the culture of these smiling people from rural Thailand. We had four topics of study: agricultural reform, rural to urban trends, mining, and irrigation. Each topic was given a full unit during the program, and in each unit my group would come together and become familiarized with the subject at hand. Our group would discuss our findings and what we wanted to learn when we went out to the village to live. Each student was paired with a family that welcomed us into their homes with meals on the fire and excitement on their faces. The time spent in these home stays, I will never forget. The awkwardness, the feelings of surprise, and understanding; I can't explain how amazing it is to experience connecting with someone you hardly know culturally, personally, or linguistically. I had exchanges with these people. We shared our experiences, our struggles, our hopes for the future. They taught me so much....

I learned so much from the people that I lived with, from sage old ascetics, from little kids. I learned that everyone in this world deserves certain things. Right to water, culture, housing, education, healthcare, right to food; these fundamental human rights should be attainable to all. *People's lives should not be put above another's greed for money, period.*



Host sisters take a break from hide and go seek to pose for a picture

Children told me how they help their family gather enough food for them all to eat. Social organizers showed me the power of an organized group, of people fighting for something that they believe in.

At one point in the semester, my home stay mother taught me the words for cry as I said my

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final goodbyes, and got into the van promising to come back and help during the rice harvesting season.

I saw how the green revolution has forced the farming industry, built upon the backs of hard working families, to become entangled by debt and eroding soil health. How their prospects for the future have been stolen by global agricultural firms, companies exploiting the people for monetary profit. I saw how it has become a struggle for many to find and grow the food that they were raised on, the food that they want to raise their children on. I saw how a gold company polluted a village's source of water with lead, cyanide, and arsenic with complete disregard for the people they were affecting.



Gold Mine site in the Province of Loei

In Thailand, I had the unique opportunity to live and experience the topics I was studying. This aspect of my program was so fundamentally essential to my experience that it not only allowed me to learn much more than I typically do in a traditional semester, but it allowed me to view education in a new light. Two aspects of learning that I took away from my spring semester abroad, was that the person and environment that you learn from and in, is critical to one's learning experience. For example, at Penn State I am a business major and in many of my classes I learn about consumerism, globalization, and capitalism. I have learned and currently learn about these terms and trends in a very theoretic macro sense, but while studying abroad I was able to study these same topics of study from a different perspective. I learned about large scale development, consumerism, and capitalism from people who don't necessarily benefit from these systems. I witnessed first-hand the hardships that our global system can put upon Thai people.

After my formal program ended, I used what I had learned about the culture, history, language, and way of life to travel throughout the country and really try to connect with as many individuals as I could. Many of my peers traveled outside of the country as well, to Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, China, and India, but I wanted to get a feel for Thailand on my own. I was ready to use my Thai language skills, meet the people, and see the sites that I had heard so much about. The tastes, smells, emotions, sounds; the people I met and friends I made, they all had an impact on me. My study abroad experience allowed me to have those experiences.

It brought me to a point where I could understand what people were saying, I could converse with them. I understood the sentiments of the population, and the forces that were changing their lives. I have traveled and I have studied abroad, and let me tell you studying abroad is quite a bit different.

Thailand made me passionate in other people. It made me passionate about my life and the impact that I can have. It made me realize the importance that we as individuals have on others. I feel liberated, no longer afraid to live a life for myself and others; no longer afraid to give people a higher priority than money.

My view of the world has been broadened and my goals in life narrowed. This has allowed me to engage in a number of very powerful experiences upon my return to the U.S. Two of those experiences which really stand out in my mind is my internship experience with "ENGAGE", a non-profit with its headquarters located in Washington DC, and as a Campus Campaign Coordinator for "Teach For America" at Penn State. In these positions I have worked towards a more sustainable and just world. I have taken the knowledge learned from my academic career, experiences, and business background and applied them in a capacity that fits the goals and priorities that I have developed. The future will be defined by our actions as a whole. We as individuals and society can use our strengths and wealth of knowledge in a constructive and meaningful way, in a way that takes into account humanity, the earth, and the future. I know that I will strive towards these ends.

Anyone who's reading this, I hope you travel. I hope you make connections and build relationships. Go somewhere you've never been, live in a manner that you've never lived; eat foods you've never dreamed of eating! Taking that first step onto Thai soil was like taking a running leap off into the clouds. Every second was a surprise, is a surprise. Thailand is so vibrant, colorful, and full of amazing sights, sounds, and people. Every second I was trying to take it all in. Coming back to the U.S. hasn't stopped my free fall of experience, and it won't stop until the day I die. My mind has been opened, I now see the world in a different light, with a more vibrant, exotic, and monumental shade. With everyday, every second, a chance to grow. Everyday, every second can be a learning experience.



A bungee jump free fall in the backpacker's paradise of Chiang Mai



Ancient ruins of Angkor Wat found in the city of Siem Reap, Cambodia