

Karen Patricia, '06
Khao Lak, Thailand

My Summer of Service took me to Khao Lak , Thailand . It has since proved to be one of the most memorable and influential times of my life. Because of the December 26, 2004 tsunami, I had absolutely no idea what to expect. Joe, Kristen and I connected with Tsunamivolunteers.net, which is an amazing organization located in Khao Lak. Khao Lak took the brunt of the tsunami in Thailand and the most lives were lost here.



Entrance to the Village and a tsunami warning sign (Part of the new warning system)



Me with my trusty wheelbarrow of concrete...on this particular day I won the award for being covered in the most concrete by the time we broke for the evening.

While there I worked mainly construction in a village called Laem Pom. Laem Pom previously was a fishing village with a population of 190 (20 children); after the tsunami the only surviving villagers were those that were not at home that morning, 80 people (10 children). The families were then kept away from their village because of a political land right issue, where the Thai Mafia, built a fence around the village and no surviving villager could gain access to the remnants of their homes, or search for more survivors for ten days. Some of the people who were in the village at the time of the tsunami had survived, but were unable to get medical attention because of the mafia block; lives that perhaps could have been saved were lost because of people rather than the natural disaster. This land right issue was a part of every day life when we were there and is finally going to court; hopefully what we have been a part of building will remain. Even through all of this, the villagers were phenomenal and some of the strongest people I have ever met.



Rain could not keep us from working hard, after laying bricks under water we concreted in the rain, but the smile on his face was well worth it. Old Blind Man has the orange poncho wrapped around himself, he was coming to check our progress (the whole crew chipped in and bought him glasses).

The whole six week journey was during monsoon season, but only the first two weeks we really spent building in the rain, the weather brightened for us most days. Yet, rain did not stop us or the spirit around us. Above is a picture of the owner of the house, "Old Blind Man," as he was nicknamed, who would come and assist us all the time, even though he could not see you if you were a foot away. He was a very persistent man, and all he wanted was a home again, he lost all his children to the tsunami. His will never surprised me.



PiDang is the woman in the center, giving Morgan (a volunteer from GB) bunny ears. We were all having a blast pouring the concrete for her floor that day. Her husband is wearing the blue T-shirt and standing next to me, and holding the shovel is Chai (an amazing worker, him and his sister were the only members of their family to survive)

Another villager who I became close with was PiDang. She is in her early 30s and lost her 10 year old daughter to the tsunami and Mafia cruelty. Someone had gotten her a message that her daughter was alive, but needed to go to the hospital and she could not get to her. One month later, she identified her daughter by the swatch of cloth that used to be her underwear...the pictures that she showed me of her daughter and her candidness about everything that had happened to her and her family will stay with me forever. She is leading the crusade to keep her village a permanent home for the 30 families left; despite her lose she perseveres. I had the luck of working on her house with her, her husband and her son (besides the three of them she has one sister left).



My favorite little guy, Few, he decided to help me untangle string lines one day that were needed for measuring.

I also developed a friendship with one of the children who was always in the village. Most of the children are kept at the camps because a construction site is really no place for them and also because of the Mafia. Few, became one of my close friends and would even help me with little tasks that I was given on building assignments. I had started as a digger and by the end could do everything needed to build the foundation of a house. For a few days I even found myself in charge of a whole crew of other volunteers.



On my last night in Khao Lak: George, Sanchia, Me and Mandy. These three girls worked at Laem Pom with me and we all became very close.

The other volunteers present really made my experience unique. Because we worked through an organization, people from all over the world worked with us. I have friends now all around the world that I continue to talk to every day.



The grandmother of Aphirak (my sponsored child) and myself, she was such a nice woman who invited me back to stay and visit anytime.

The last thing I was able to do before I left (which was a very hard thing to do) was sponsor a child. I met his brother and grandmother, though he was not going to be in town and found out the story of what happened to the rest of his family. To hear the grandmother tell me of their tragedy was almost unbearable at this point but I know that I will be supporting a whole family with what to Americans is insignificant.



This boat and area surrounding it have been bought to be made into a memorial for the tsunami, the boat is more than 2 km from the sea and amazingly all the fisherman (at least 20) onboard survived, a car was also on top of the boat but has been removed.



This road now ends in the ocean...



This resort, Theptharo, is pretty much untouched and remains that way. The bodies of water are all lakes formed from the tsunami, and bodies are still missing here.



Not everything in Thailand was destroyed though; this is the Lampee waterfall which is an amazing treasure in the jungle.

My experiences in Thailand have opened my eyes and I have continued the efforts since then by trying to attract public interest as well as fundraising to send more back to the people I have met.