

Joseph Skowronek, '06  
**Khao Lak, Thailand**

My experience in Thailand goes beyond what words can describe. While I was planning this trip junior year I had no idea what to expect to get out of it. I'd heard so many stories about past summers of service that I thought I had a reasonable idea of what to expect, but I really didn't. Listening to stories and looking at pictures can only tell you so much. I will never forget the people I met or the things I saw while in Thailand; they will be in my thoughts forever. I don't expect anyone looking at these pictures or reading these stories to fully understand what I experienced but I am more than happy to share my summer of service pictures and stories.



We started our trip with a seventeen-hour direct flight from JFK to Bangkok . From Bangkok we took an hour and a half flight to Phuket where we spent the night. Next we had to get a ride to Khao Lak (about a 1-2 hour drive) where we stayed for the rest of the trip. We went to the volunteer center to talk to them about where they needed the most help. This is when we decided to work construction in a village called Laem Pom, where the majority of the Tsunami survivors were still homeless months after the tragedy. When we first arrived we saw most of the houses were just roofs. Until then, families had to live in temporary shelters like the one below.



Along the sides of the roads in Laem Pom village was rubble left from the tsunami that the villagers and volunteers gathered the best they could in order to make room for homes. Everyday these piles would remind me of what this place must have looked like immediately following the tsunami.



Since most homes were incomplete, and the ones that were complete had no indoor plumbing yet, the villagers all shared a community bathroom along with all of the volunteers. Without getting into too much detail, just imagine a hole in the ground and a bucket of rainwater instead of the usual luxuries.



It was really amazing to see how these people coped with their tragedy and loss. Every family in the village had a story to tell and family members gone. Despite all of the hardships, these people were able to come together as a community and help one another complete their homes. The women in the village did not usually help in the construction work; rather they cooked in a community kitchen. The women got together and prepared all of the meals for the people in the village to eat together. They also prepared lunch for us and the other twenty or so volunteers (the number varied throughout the trip) every day. The first house that Karen, Kristen and I worked on belonged to one of the oldest men in the village. His family after the tsunami included him, his wife, and one of their granddaughters, everyone else was lost. They couldn't have been nicer to all of us, even though they didn't speak English. His wife would always bring us water and soda while we worked on her house and asked me if I was hungry, "nai", about four times a day. This picture is of Kristen and I leveling the ground before pouring the cement foundation of their house. We had to do it about 4 times because it was monsoon season, so every day we came back to the village our work was washed away and we had to start again. It finally took a nine and a half hour day with all the volunteers to get the concrete poured before the rain came again.



This is a picture of one of the coolest guys on earth escaping the monsoon in the village kitchen. I loved working on his house because him and his wife would go out of their way to make you feel at home. He could barely see, yet he helped us mix cement for brick laying and did all sorts of manual labor. Just being around him made me realize how strong people can be in the face of adversity.



This is the old man's house when we first arrived at Laem Pom. Weeks of concrete pouring, brick laying, and plastering lay ahead. Not to mention the dozens of other houses we were working on at the same time. I mostly worked pouring concrete for the houses foundations. Carrying around 120 lb bags of cement in 100 degree heat and 100% humidity is FUN!



This is the old man's house right before we left. The bricks have been laid and the walls have been plastered, a few more details and it will be his family's new home.



One of the reasons we picked Laem Pom was the story behind it. We were told that they suffered not only from the tsunami, but from outsiders as well. After the tsunami struck a group of wealthy businessmen and landowners referred to as the "Thai mafia" sent crews of people into Laem Pom village to block it off. Residents of the village who were not there at the time of the tsunami were not allowed to return to find deceased loved ones or belongings. The mafia said the villagers had no right to be there simply because they were too poor to own any documentation proving legal rights to the land. These people had been living on that land for decades without any harassment, but the mafia saw the tsunami as a perfect opportunity to take the land for resort and golf course space. Luckily the villagers were able to fight back through the legal system to get their land back and start rebuilding homes with the help of international volunteers. The picture here shows a crowd of villagers watching as a building is being uncovered in their village. The mafia had buried much of the evidence that a village had existed there before the tsunami. This provided further evidence for the villagers in the ongoing legal battles between them and the mafia.



This flag reads, "Water, Power, House." The day of the excavation this flag was raised in the village. The villagers swore they would not take it down until all of their homes are rebuilt and they have power and water. The mafia has a lot of connections, including the power and water companies. Since they are in a legal battle, the mafia is making sure that these people have no power or running water, a less than subtle hint that they want them to leave. The entire time we were there these villagers had to go without these basic necessities.



These next two pictures are mostly just fun. The first is of a monkey that hung around the volunteer center. We would see him every morning begging

for food. There were also wild dogs that came around and every time they would get into a fight the monkey would jump out of the tree and smack them across the face! The second picture is of Kristen, Karen and I in front of one of the elephants we rode in our elephant trekking trip through the jungle (I got my own elephant and they had to share one HAHA).

