

A month at Tomato Village

By Catherine Francetich, April 2007

When I told my friends in Australia I was going to teach English during my 'holidays', most of them thought I was either crazy or far too generous with my time. People told me "you'll burn out if you don't have a 'real' holiday, why don't you just go lie on a beach?" But the amazing thing is, (and I suspected it might end up this way) that I have never been more relaxed than I was at the end of my month in Tomato Village. The beauty of it is that you are away from many of the distractions of your normal work and life, while still having something to do for a few hours a day that is important. Compare this with the normal 'tourist' holiday: walking all over some crowded city, making sure you see everything in your Lonely Planet guide and taking a picture of yourself in front of every monument. I think you'd agree the latter is much more tiring. Added to that, it just feels good to teach children. They teach you so much in return.

I found I laughed more than usual in the village. The head teacher, Benjamin, laughs a lot too. He laughed at me for how many photos I took of small things (like a piece of bamboo or an interesting wall) and I laughed at him for always bringing me more food than I could eat, even when I said I was not hungry. All together, I felt very welcome and at peace with the world while I was there. Important in this, was the support of Benjamin and his wonderful wife and daughter who looked after me so well. I will always be grateful to them.

The head teacher is a lovely Burmese gentleman named Benjamin with an enquiring mind and quick sense of humour. There is always a sparkle in his eye, and everyone respects him because he is so knowledgeable about everything. In my time at the village I asked him about things as different as Burmese and Thai politics and the plight of refugees to how to harvest rice.

In my third week I met another wonderful volunteer named Christine, who came back to teach after coming earlier that year. I can understand why she came back, as I find myself wishing I could go right now! It was interesting to meet and see the styles of different teachers, including Benjamin and Assumpta, who is also Burmese and teaches the youngest class. They were, all together, some of the most welcoming and inspiring people I have ever met.

In the short time I was in the village, I met 3 of the oldest students whose chances at good employment and a career were very obviously improved due to the language skills they learnt at the school. Not only was their language study giving them real opportunities for good employment and further study, but it had increased their confidence to chase their dreams. I can only imagine how many other students will begin to get job offers, enroll in University or further their dreams over the next few years as a result of the opportunity to learn at the Child's Dream school. The level of English that the older students show is extraordinary, given that they have only studied for 2 years. I imagine that when I go back in a year or two, I will meet graduates who are working in good jobs, using their

language skills and fully participating in the life and politics of Thailand in a way that minority children normally cannot do. I believe that the success of this project lies in Child's Dream's choice to fund it as a grass roots project, using the huge power and good will of local people to help each other.

Benjamin and Childs Dream understand the benefit children get from interacting with and being taught by people from all over the world. Their perspective is broadened and with this their future prospects are broadened too. The school itself is simple, but nice-looking and has those things that the children most need.

I was happy to see such a proud and harmonious community in Tomato Village. It's a small village with four different ethnic groups. Although people did not share the same ethnicity, they lived together, worked and celebrated festivals together. They have a lot to be proud of in the spirit of their school, its students, teachers, and the well-deserved support of Child's Dream.