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Annual Report

Honors Students Explore Thai Culture

—by Sandy Feinstein and Lisa R. Weidman



A group of Penn State Berks-Lehigh Valley honors students and faculty members embarked on an adventure to Thailand as part of the honors course, Writing Thailand. Required to keep daily journals of their experiences, the students' reflections became even more poignant when the group arrived home less than 48 hours before the notorious tsunami devastated the region.

Departing on December 13, and returning on December 24, 2004, the group, made up of eight students and three faculty members, followed an agenda primarily set by the students. From the first day to last, excerpts from the students' journals below reveal their experiences in Thailand.

Akiko Mack, a junior Science major at Lehigh Valley campus, began writing before the plane left the ground and continued all the way through the return flight home.

December 13: Beth (Pinto) and I kept getting up and going to the back of the plane to look out of the window of an emergency door. We saw these deep crags and worn-looking protrusions form a bed of ice. There were clouds and mountain peaks—ash on a white canvas.

On the first day of sightseeing,



after having arrived at midnight December 14, the group traveled by public bus to the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre. Heather Stopp, a junior Applied Psychology major from Lehigh Valley campus, describes the effect their visit had on a group of school children.

December 15: Imagine having students on a school trip staring at you for some unknown reason instead of at the items on display. Although you notice this occurrence, you continue looking at the plaques with the rest of your group. Apparently, you have also captured the attention of the chaperones on the trip. This event previewed the rest of the Thailand experience.

Jeffery Houston, a sophomore Archeology major at the Berks campus, proposed an excursion to what he described as "a particularly interesting and well-preserved example of an Angkor temple, Phnom Rung." He expands in the following entry:

December 16: After a long van ride, it quickly became apparent that we were approaching Phnom Rung when we began going up a set of steep switchbacks that ascended the extinct volcano on which the temple was built. We caught a few glimpses of the temple through the trees as we climbed. The scale of this site cannot be appreciated until you have visited it. This was truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

While Jeffrey chose the volcanic temple setting east of Bangkok, Leah Hudak, a junior Science major at Berks campus with a particular interest in marine biology, chose an excursion to Hua-Hin beach.

December 17: Our visit to the beaches of Hua Hin, one of the most stunning beaches of Thailand and one of the largest tourist attractions, was the highlight of my excursion. The beaches were lush with exotic plants and animals and covered with creamy sand. In the water, visibility was clear enough to observe the thriving ecology of the Hua Hin. It was a breathtaking experience.

The subsequent visit to Erawan National Park, arranged by a Thai friend of Dr. Richards, was a personal favorite for Josh Leaver, a sophomore Political Science major at Lehigh Valley campus.



December 18: There amidst the seven-level waterfall that encompassed the area, I felt as if I had entered another world. With each level we ascended, I became increasingly engulfed in the park's powerful yet peaceful energy and beauty. I have never been moved by something quite the same way as I was that moment.

After a hectic day of shopping in Bangkok, the group flew north to Chang Mai, a location chosen by Bethany Pinto, a senior Applied Psychology major at the Lehigh Valley, who chronicled her reflections on Chiang Mai.

December 20: The trip to Chiang Mai provided the opportunity to see how people live, work, and worship. We had the chance to see some of their trades in action as they made items such as wooden crafts and jewelry. The experience riding the elephants wasn't exactly as I had expected and required a lot of trust in the elephants as they made trails for themselves, which sometimes included climbing up a steep incline. It was an unforgettable experience!

It wasn't all elephants and shopping. Jeff Markowitz, a junior majoring in Biobehavioral Health at University Park and former Student Government President at the Berks campus, provided a native academic component to the trip, having arranged a visit to Chulalongkorn University and presentation by one of the faculty.

December 22: Our band of travelers had a bioethical dialogue with Dr. Soraj Hongladarom, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. Bioethical issues in contemporary Thai society include the AIDS epidemic, prostitution, and human cloning. We learned about the hospice role that Buddhist temples play in caring for Thais afflicted with AIDS, how many poor Thais turn to prostitution as a means to support their destitute families, and about how cloning has captured the public interest.

Although the group arrived back in the United States on Friday, December 24, the trip did not end there. Briana Bianco explains:

December 26: Today I heard the sad news that an earthquake has caused tsunamis all over Southeast Asia, including Thailand. People keep calling me and saying they are thankful that we came back when we did. We're all amazed at how weird it is that we were right there. I'm not freaked out because we were there or it could have been us. Thailand was just a place before. Thais were just other people we have never seen or met. But now we've been there. Thailand is real now. The people are more than strangers. They welcomed us into their country and into their homes. Now we watch them on TV, suffering.

Dr. Sandy Feinstein, Honors Coordinator and Associate Professor of English, coordinated the trip, which was funded by Schreyer Ambassador Grants, as well as Boscov and Berks-Lehigh Valley international grants. She was joined by her husband, Dr. Neal Woodman, research biologist and curator, and Dr. Malika Richards, Assistant Professor of International Management, who, having served as a Peace Corps worker in Thailand, arranged personal visits with Thai families and friends who gave generously of their time. ■

