



On August 6th 2012, I traveled to Koh Tao, Thailand to bring hope to children through teaching English. Flying about 26 hours in total flight time, this trip meant the most to me because it was a gift. I felt more focused on my cause because someone else was supporting and believing in me through Lumos. Upon my arrival in Bangkok at 11 pm, I knew that things were about to get different than what I had envisioned.



Once I reached the island, I was greeted by the only English speaking teacher of the school, ushered into a room at the guesthouse, and told the other volunteer would give me a recap of what I needed to teach the next day. The offer letter from my organization said that we would be given a language orientation, cultural orientation, and 24 hour ground support. This was the first of many points where the organization I had partnered with failed to describe the reality of Koh Tao's program.

The other volunteer, Fatemah, became my lifeline in Koh Tao. The first night I came we walked around the tourist beach looking for some dinner. The contrast between the tourist area and the locals' district of the island shocked me. The locals' area was closer to the average standard of living. The tourists had no awareness of what was literally half a mile from Westernized havens. I quickly learned the Thai word for foreigner- "farang", but realized that many would consider me a local due to my skin tone.



As time went on, I had to find my own way to familiarity both in the classroom and the social scene of Koh Tao. In the classroom, I learned that many of the volunteer teachers stopped trying. Because of the lack of preparation and care, the children had a very spotty knowledge of conversational English. The coordinator of the project said that the kids just needed to learn the “accent” of the Westerners. The majority of the volunteers lost faith in their cause and that attitude showed in the classroom. I began researching and self-teaching Teaching English as a Foreign Language principles as I wrote lesson plans. I made myself familiar with practical solutions like Dave’s ESL Cafe and other forums for aspiring TEFL teachers.

I came up with my own version of structure for the lesson plans. I used a system called 20/20/20. Like in the exercise classes called 20/20/20, we broke the class time into 3 sections. One section was for speaking through drills, the next section was for writing, and the last section was for games that made the students use their language creatively in a team situation. I found that ultimately, if we used the game as a reward for the end of class, the children were more likely to listen. Sometimes that game was just as simple as Duck, Duck, Goose, but I would change up the actions by adding verbs they just learned. Creative solutions for the challenges of teaching children who were already so disappointed with the consistency of the teaching at their school became the most important thing to my effectiveness in the classroom. Just to make

sure I was teaching as much as I could, I offered free tutoring lessons to any and all of my students four days a week also.



Though I came to teach, I learned the majority of whether I had fun or not depended on my attitude towards learning about new things and becoming a part of the locals of Koh Tao at a basic level. By the end of my two months in Koh Tao, I had more Thai friends than farang friends. The other teachers I taught with- Fatemah, Alie, Gregg, and Nikki- became like family to me. We had see hardship together. As far as Thai friends, I came to know a wonderful group of guys who were regulars at a coffeehouse venue in the center of Mae Haad. In my free time, I would sit there to have interesting conversations about Thai culture, history, and philosophy. I became good friends with an artist from the mainland named Nod. He was an anomaly because he could speak English with no accent whatsoever. He had taken on so much influence from other countries because he was interested in art from places like America, Australia, and Great Britain. The first grade teacher at the school, Took, taught me so much about love. She was all but completely unintelligible in English, but she so deeply cared about Gregg and me that she invited us to her home in Songkhla. Even when you must use the Google Translate app on your Android tablet to communicate friendship, it is more than possible to overcome obstacles.



The family who became like my Thai family was the Lofts. I met them randomly one day when I was looking for a camera case. I had managed to lose the case while taking pictures at school on Mother's Day during my first weekend in Thailand. The gentleman I met was Mr. Kevin Loft. He happened to have his oldest child in my first grade class. I started asking questions like "Where is the best place to hang out?" and "What food should I buy?", but ultimately, once I met his wife, P'Jin, and youngest daughter, Charlie, I genuinely began to care about them as people. Kevin was from Australia and his wife was from Thailand. Their family's bicultural background made them a perfect study for me as I understood the interactions between East and West. While they related to me and could speak English, P'Jin spent many afternoons explaining the nuances of the Thai mentality on marriage and family to me. Tara and Charlie became my best students. I would accompany them on visits to the beach and pool. I was trying to teach Tara about the solar system, waves, and the moon while splashing in the water after school one afternoon.

By the time I left Koh Tao, the situation switched from being so unsupported by the organization to my own trust in autonomy and ability to survive. I had gained great friends, found my place in their town, and accomplished enough as a teacher to say that I had succeeded in my purpose. It was about at that point of comfort which I realized I had to leave. I left Gregg at the ferry pier before going to school. I said my goodbyes

and left well wishes for the guys at the coffeehouse. Of course, I tearfully said goodbye to my Thai mom, P'Jin, and her family. As the ferry rocked on the stormy sea away from the beautiful island, I realized how beautiful the people there had become to me.



For the last month of my time in Thailand, I volunteered with a liasion company, Greenway, in central Thailand. The town of Sing Buri is the capitol of one of the most important provinces in Thai history. The company in central Thailand supplied the volunteers with a week-long orientation week that included everything from language, cultural, and culinary orientation. We visited the ancient capitol of Ayutthaya, partook in traditional meditation at Buddhist temples, and visited the Bang Rachan museum. I learned so much about the area and the significance of their peoples that I felt it easier to teach. The coordinators were always will to talk about Thai culture, teach us a few words, or talk about the effect of Westernization in their culture. There were many more volunteers in Sing Buri and because were weren't able to leave the volunteer center at night, we became a very close knit group. I have so many new European friends that have given me reasons to want to travel in Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and France.

Teaching in Sing Buri was completely different as well. Instead of teaching about 80 children in three grades, I became the main teacher for an English Summer Camp which had ages ranging from 6 to 14. The coordinators at this school were far more involved with guiding me on what to teach the children. My teaching coordinator actually taught TEFL courses, thus his feedback was always value when he sat in on my

classes. It was challenging to find an activity that made sense for all the levels of English present in the classes. The older students were more willing to work with me on what we were doing. Sometimes, they would act as translators for instructions or examples on how to do a worksheet or play a game. Also, I had learned how to improvise with lesson plans and have a few backup lessons in case the way I approached the concept was ill-fated.



Thailand was everything I had expected and even more what I didn't expect. I spent so much time researching and working on details for how I would make the trip work. Ultimately, life happened and what needed to happen followed. I will forever be changed and I am so grateful for the opportunity of a lifetime. As much as I love teaching, I think teaching in Thailand showed me the negative aspects as much as the positive ones. I'm still discerning between law school and graduate school, but I think the time to get there will be worth it. If there's one thing I learned in Thailand it was Mai Pen Rai, a Thai version of Hukuna Mattata. What will happen will happen when I'm ready.