

Final Report

I can close my eyes and picture all of the blue post-it notes hung across the white wall above my wooden desk. They were filled with questions; questions regarding culture, work, and travel. If I took one down then I'd soon add five more, all with the hope that I would be fully prepared for my next chapter. I printed out articles about Eastern culture and made comparisons with Western culture. I set up more video chats than necessary. I read through my grant writing textbook, and highlighted through my social entrepreneurship notes. The more information I gathered, the less stressed I felt about the big adventure ahead of me. Of course, it was pretty scary moving to the other side of the world in a region I was completely unfamiliar with. Through months of preparation, I created a picture in my head of what I thought my life would look like once I landed in Thailand. Looking back, I think doing so helped me get on the plane [EVA air. 100% recommend. So good.].



The photo on the right is from my layover in the San Francisco airport where I was able to see my sister, Emily, before my flight to Chiang Mai. In my hand I'm holding a pack full of cards written by family and friends that she had gathered. Those puffy eyes are from a wholeee lot of tears.

I should probably provide a quick recap of what I *thought* my Lumos trip would look like. For 10 months starting in August of 2018, I was going to bounce back and forth between the two organizations in different cities in Northern Thailand that are both run by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, a Catholic congregation of nuns. All of the nuns that I worked with were Thai. My role was to work as a grant writer, which meant I would help the organizations secure funds to provide the financial means to support and stabilize projects being created at both organizations. One of the organizations is the Wildflower Home Foundation (WFH), a home located outside of Chiang Mai for mothers and their children. The reasons that brought the

mothers to this home varied, but the most common were domestic violence, homelessness, and mental health issues. These women were typically rejected from their families with nowhere else to go. The other organization was The Good Shepherd Youth Center, a home in Chiang Rai for young women ages 13-20 who are at risk of human trafficking. Both of these organizations have similar missions: to provide a well-rounded education, training in practical skills, and counseling all within a safe and nurturing environment. Although I am not Catholic, I was enthusiastic to learn about the work these nuns were doing in Thailand.



The original plan was for me to alternate living and working at each organization every month. I had hopes I would easily learn Thai, become best friends with everyone, and help them learn how to sew or teach them English when I wasn't grant writing. I would be busy; I would be thriving; I would be beaming with purpose and happiness. "How cool! How adventurous! How rewarding! Wow!" I said these things over and over to myself in the months leading up to my departure. This all was a lot more dreamy than the reality of my Lumos experience, and though you may not see or hear hints of this in my writing, I believed I would create a significant impact in the organization.



The drive from the airport to the WFH was an absolute adrenaline rush. Scooters and motorbikes crowded the streets; billboards covered in the Thai language marketing phone plans and Wendy's obstructed the view of the sky; and men and women lined the streets with booths and food carts selling all kinds of items. It was fascinating and stimulating, but a bit overwhelming. I felt the distance from home, and while I was captivated and intrigued, my heart kept sinking. This is how I felt the first few weeks in Thailand. Pure exhaustion, not due to jet lag (surprisingly), but from taking in everything. All the while, I was only interacting with people in small, broken conversations. It took the residents of the WFH a little while to warm up and try to communicate with me in English since I had not learned any Thai yet. So I just stared and smiled, and took pictures. And called my parents crying.

Since I was super eager to get to work, I started asking questions to learn more about the health of the organization. I asked about the goals for the future, the current needs, and what the plans were. It became apparent to me that I was creating shaky ground quickly. As an outsider, a foreigner, a westerner, and a younger person, it was dishonorable for me to seek so much information. I was viewed as intrusive. In a culture where "saving face" is valued and tradition/hierarchy is engrained, my fresh set of eyes were seeing things that my mouth shouldn't have verbalized. Even though the majority of my questions and suggestions were regarding the vitality of the organization, they were breaking trust and hope that the organization's leadership initially had for me. I was constantly assessing how a conversation had turned direction so I could apply that learning the next time. Trial and error, trial and error. Learning and unlearning.



Tension grew between myself and the organization's leadership, but work was still able to get done. Unfortunately, as I grew to love the women and children I was working with, the organization's leadership I was working under became less likeable. I ended up only writing a few grants because I didn't have faith the money I'd help bring into the organization would be used according to the original plan. For example, I wanted to write grants to strengthen the security of the home. It was unfortunate to see that anyone could come onto the property at any time, and I had seen for myself that individuals who should be kept away from the women were making unannounced visits. When I proposed I work with other nonprofits to better understand the security practices they had (guards, cameras, companies used) and then write to foundations that I believed would support the project, I was asked to do things differently. Without any research, I was given the task of getting a large amount (in Thai currency) of money so that we could support a man in the community who could be a guard on the property. The leadership believed it was better to provide a poor man with a job and save time on research rather than putting together a structured plan. The collectivist mindset in the leadership didn't understand why I didn't want to provide someone in their community with a job. Since I believed that the women and children deserved better, and didn't have faith that the idea would come to life, the project fizzled out. This happened often: our hearts being aligned in mission, but our brain telling us how to work things out differently.

Thankfully, the grants that I did write brought some money in, and I was fortunate to see development on the property during my time there. My role turned into more email

correspondence, coordinating visits from donors, volunteers, and visitors who wanted to learn about the home. I felt like a spokesperson for the home (at least the English-speaking one). I spent more time talking with people and telling them about the home rather than working on projects to improve it. Although this was enjoyable, as I was able to meet people from all over the world, it wasn't what I had hoped to be doing. I wanted to bring sustainable plans and funding to the organization. I wanted to practice what I had learned in college. But the leadership requested I push that to the side, so my experience ended up being completely different than I expected. There were some tangible, recognizable successes in my time with the WFH, but in the end, I believe I walked away with more intangible and unmeasurable outcomes.



The building on the left is the new home for mothers and their children living at the home, and the building on the right is the new daycare center for the children who are too small to go to school!

I ended up only working at the WFH, and I moved off the property seeking a better work-life balance and escape from all that was going on. I never saw the Youth Center in Chiang Rai. At first, we pushed back my start date with the Youth Center so that I could accomplish more things with the Wildflower Home, but then I made the decision to only live and work in Chiang Mai because I grew fearful of working at the Youth Center. I didn't feel confident I would be protected or helped if issues arose while volunteering in another province in Thailand (the visa situation is tricky in Thailand, and depending on who you're working with, you can get into a lot of trouble holding a passport in a province that has not allowed you to be there). I also didn't think I could stomach more heartache from the work I was doing. *And* I didn't want to leave the small yet mighty community in Chiang Mai outside of my work that provided so much support and love. So, I decided to stay back. The decision left quite a few nuns angry, and made me even more uncomfortable to be around them for some time.

Overall, the lesson laid on my heart throughout this experience was to honor *all* people. To honor the mothers who confided in me with hopes for a better outcome in their time with the organization. To honor the visitors, donors and volunteers who asked questions that were hard to answer. As for the leadership, despite it all, I learned ways to honor them even when:

- They made use of some of my capabilities, but held me back for the most part
- They were condescending or hasty with me instead of gracious
- They requested that I compromise my personal values for their advances.

And lastly, I learned how to honor myself and my well-being after jumping into such emotionally, heartbreaking work in a new country 9,000 miles away from home.



The thing that I think about the most is the grit some of the women had. Women who had experience rejection so strong, and pain so deep and so undeserved. And they pressed on. I asked one of the mothers that I grew closest to about her smile. It's contagious, it's authentic, and it's consistent, and it was present even in moments when she was frustrated and tired. This mother worked at least 12 hours per day and when she was finished she took care of her children. Her past gave her so much reason to frown, to weep, to yell. At first I wondered if the smile was a mechanism for "saving face," but it wasn't. She told me she was happy to work, even on the

days when it was hard, because she was working for her children and they were worth it. Jackie Pullinger, a woman who has spent nearly half a century working with prostitutes, heroin addicts and gang members in China, once said, “God wants us to have soft hearts and hard feet. The trouble with so many of us is that we have hard hearts and soft feet.” This particular mother, and many others as well, emulate the beauty of having a soft heart and hard feet. Witnessing that has changed my life for the better.



Thai-style barbeque, called “Moo Kata,” with the mothers

My friend Kelly reminded me of a verse that connects quite perfectly with my experience Thailand. Zephaniah 3:17 says:

The Lord your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.

In Thailand there were *loads* of solitude, and a soft yet powerful direction on me (from friends, family, mentors, and above all, the Holy Spirit) to just quiet myself. To hold in shouts I wanted to give when I saw something absolutely wacko happening in the organization. To soften the condemnation I wanted to provide to a leadership that, in some ways, was just trying to do the best that they could. To hush away the fear that told me I was doing more harm than good. Lastly, to hush away the idea that I always knew better. As time progressed, there were so many teachable moments where an urge to speak was quieted and instead a more meaningful thing came to be. A lesson; a bit of compassion; a new and more thoughtful plan. I don't say all of this to preach to others that the answer to dysfunction and despair is *always* to stay quiet. But when I understood that the leadership's heart was in the right place, the desire to speak against them was overshadowed by the need to work lovingly with them.

To observe but not judge;

To understand but not *always* practice;

To hear but not *always* speak;

To pick the worthy battles;

To try to be a blessing instead of a critic;

To honor all;

I keep visible a quote from Warren Buffett (random, but okay) that says: "You will continue to suffer if you have an emotional reaction to everything that is said to you. True power is sitting back and observing things with logic. True power is restraint. If words control you that means that everyone else can control you. Breathe and allow things to pass." It's been hard to jump back into the States, where a cancel culture is being manifested and "activists" are screaming that silence is permission for issues to persist. I used to think that way, too, but now I'm learning to speak less and do more. I no longer want to be a person who pumps out criticism and rebuttal for the sake of wanting things to be done my way. I am grateful for the ways I learned to keep an even-keeled approach and open mind in Thailand, as it has improved my communication and relational skills.

I no longer strive to always be right. I strive to listen to God, and to work in matters needing justice with forgiveness and redemption. It is what I was eventually shown by the leadership at the Wildflower Home, and what I gave in return. I used to act in ways to prove that

I know better and care more. I still do, but I can recognize faster that that's the easy, hollow route. God has shown me that the rewarding work is done by giving our eyes and ears, and eventually our hearts to others. I believe that humanity was saved by grace and redemption, and if that is the foundation of our plans to restoration, good will come.



Knowing and believing this, I walk with more relief than I did before beginning my Lumos project. This relief doesn't numb, but it provides hope rather than rage. My Lumos experience has shown me that the world has always been broken and will always be broken, and we have a God who has always cared for it and will always care for it. That's the summarized version. All I hear about on the U.S. news is racial tension, but I don't hear about the racism happening in Thailand. I am told that I am the most privileged in my country, but that didn't prevent me from experiencing discrimination in another. Terrible, sad events that happen are shown on replay, but we don't talk about the bad things happening elsewhere as much. Living in a different country showed me that I used to walk around with those blinder things horses wear in races. You know, the material that prevents them from looking behind them and to the side? I could only see what was in front of me, or what was demanding my attention. Learning more about the brokenness of the world feels like I've taken the blinders off. I've learned genocides are currently taking place; racism is happening between many different groups of people; corruption lies within all governments. Seeing more and more things has told me time and time again, "Natalie, you are *so* in over your head." But, like the mothers, we must work hard and press on, even when our expectations aren't met. There are so many people worth working hard for.



Thank you, thank you to the Lumos Foundation and committee for granting me this opportunity to work in Thailand. Thank you for instilling confidence in me by saying yes to my project proposal, and thank you for providing this incredible opportunity to students. Thank you to Thandi Dinani for being a wise, compassionate, and kind mentor throughout this whole experience. I will forever be grateful for the love and honor I feel towards my Lumos experience.

I wrote a blog post to future Lumos travelers with tips and advice about how to prepare for a Lumos trip, but now I think I would approach that conversation differently. If I could give one piece of advice for anyone going to work in a third-world country or working in an emotionally hard setting, it would be to be like the women at the Wildflower Home. Go to the new country knowing experiences will give you a soft heart, but press on with hard feet that won't quit. There will be so many things that knock you down and leave you speechless or discouraged, but with the right amount of dedication and grit to keep moving forward, more will come out of the experience than you can comprehend.

