

Title III Faculty Development Mini-Grant Report

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2006 – 2007

Ethnography and Performance for Internally Displaced Persons

\$2250.00

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Purpose: To preserve stories of Burmese refugees through ethnography and performance, and to encourage LSUA students to become responsible world citizens through service learning.

Narrative:

My husband, photographer David Rackley, and I flew from Alexandria to Dallas, to Tokyo, to Bangkok, then traveled nine hours by bus to reach the border town of Mae Sot. Here, we met other humanitarian aid workers, representatives of Partners Relief & Development, who facilitated our entry into the refugee camp of Mae La. In order to work in Mae La, my husband and I had to pose as an art instructor and conceal our cameras. I bought art supplies and crossed my fingers. Once we were safely hidden inside the camp, we brought the cameras out, and started filming and taking photos. The children who were assigned to me told their stories through art. I facilitated self-disclosure by giving assignments such as “color a picture of home” and “draw your best friend.” The Mae La children did not speak English, and did not speak much at all. What they did say, they said through an interpreter when they described their artwork. The school’s principal and pastor shared their stories on camera.

The Thai authorities allowed us only one week in the camp. At the end of the week, I was contacted by Partners. The refugee camp pastor had given us a very positive review, and another pastor, Thomas Peacefully (a name he chose because Westerners could not pronounce his real name) requested that we visit his village, Thoo Mwek, Khee, and teach art there, as well.

At Thoo Mwek Khee School in the Karen village, the students were older, between 12 and 21, and several understood English. The students were eager to “talk to America,” and they shared stories of their lives and their dreams for the future. They sang for me, and stole my heart. Before we left, my husband and I started work toward building a computer lab where the students could do research and prepare for college. The students asked for nothing materialistic. They asked if we could help them learn.

In Burma, education for hill tribe children is virtually nonexistent. Soldiers march into schools, rape and kill the teachers, then burn the ramshackle bamboo structures to the ground. The majority of the children in Thoo Mwek Khee are estranged from loving parents who sent them away, across the border, to safety and education.

I agreed to tell their stories, to try to raise money and awareness, and to return next summer, to teach them English, art, computer skills, theatre, and music. I am working to assemble a team to help me accomplish this.

Before I left Asia, I visited the Joe Louis puppet theatre in Bangkok, and saw a performance derived from the traditional Thai *khon* theatre — a highly sophisticated and stylized form of staged entertainment with dancing, singing and music. Unlike other puppet performances, the puppeteers appear on stage and their movements reflect those of their puppets. When the puppet nods his head, the puppeteers nod theirs, giving a carefully choreographed performance which takes years of training. The fantastically decorated puppets act out traditional stories often from the Ramayana - an epic text originating from India, interacting with the audience as they bring the puppets from the stage to "meet" the audience.

Participants & Impact:

This is hard to determine. Two of us traveled. About thirty LSUA students and ten faculty and staff members contributed supplies. I taught about 150 students directly; hundreds more observed. I interacted with many other humanitarian aid workers and political activists. Thousands will hear about this trip and the circumstances under which the Burmese people live. As people hear about the atrocities in Burma, several join the cause, attempting to help. Do they qualify as participants? This spring, I will incorporate devices I observed in the Joe Louis puppet theatre into my Theatre for Young Audiences class. And the participants continue to snowball.

Budget:	Receipts	No Receipts	Standard
Travel			
Plane fare	1384.00		
Bus fares	45.00	35.00	
“Cab” fares		200.00	
Lodging	301.00	175.00	
Meals			1326.00
Vehicle rental (with driver)		100.00	
Interpreter		250.00	
Recording equipment	879.00		
Miscellaneous			
Art Supplies	32.00	49.00	
Medicine	417.00		

Receipts were a real problem. Often, I could not make a driver understand (or care) what I needed. At one “hotel,” no one spoke English or knew how to write in any language. The second place I bought art supplies had no cash register or calculator, just a guy yelling, “Sixteen hundred baht!” Still, I was able to travel and live more cheaply than I had anticipated.

Benefit to me:

- I have learned much about my world and about myself.
- I have witnessed amazing dignity and grace in the face of oppression.
- I have seen real bravery.
- I have lost the ability to worry and complain about small things.
- I have come to the realization that most things are small things.
- I have found a way to make a difference in the world.

Benefit to my students:

As an instructor, I have a broader world view.

To the students who sent school supplies, kid-packs, and vitamins to IDPs, I bring testimony that their efforts mattered, that as young as they are, they had an impact on many lives.

The lectures I am giving on behalf of disenfranchised Burmese certainly impact my public speaking students (especially when I tell them how much I am paid).

I can implement elements of khon theatre into my acting, directing, and theatre for young audience instruction, adding to the students' arsenal of performance techniques.

Benefit to LSUA:

The *Town Talk* did an extensive article about my trip shortly after my return. The article mentioned LSUA, the students, and the Faculty Enrichment Grant program. I have been interviewed on Radio Free Asia twice – before I left, then again, after my return. I was told that my words would be broadcast all over Thailand and Burma. In August, I spoke at the Coughlin Saunders Performing Arts Center for the World Cultural Economic Forum. On October 12th, my husband and I will have an art show and presentation about Burma at the Alexandria Museum of Art, and in November, I am scheduled to do two guest lectures and one public presentation at Columbia College in South Carolina. I am working with Arkansas Tech University to find an appropriate time to speak on that campus.

The publicity I receive for my presentations reflects positively on our university.

As I travel to speak about Burma, people hear about LSUA's faculty enrichment grants.

The people with whom I interact in Thailand and Burma think of our little school as a shining beacon of education, democracy, and hope, and aspire to come here to study. I hope they can.

The Unexpected:

I thought I was going to Thailand to collect fairy tales, myths, and legends. Instead, I recorded stories of abuse, torture, and death.