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Global Connections with Local Impact:

St. Paul's Community School of Excellence Students Experience Thailand

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Hmong students at Community School of Excellence (CSE) in St. Paul no longer have to imagine what it would be like to visit the other side of the world and connect to their roots; they actually experienced it. Last December, a dream came true for Mo Chang (Director of CSE) and the local charter school. CSE's eighth grade class culminated countless months of preparation, planning, pen pal connections, dreaming, and studying as they boarded airplanes for a three week learning excursion in Thailand.



Ban Rakpaendin students; Mai Kou Xiong; and Mo Chang during Hmong New Year (Courtesy of Community School of Excellence)

Community School of Excellence is continuing the long term vision of strengthening their Hmong connections in Asia. This is CSE's third visit to Thailand. The first trip established a relationship with Hmong sister school, Ban Rakpaendin, and offered opportunities for teachers to research and develop Hmong Academic Curriculum for the St. Paul school. The next summer, CSE Faculty and staff made school visits throughout Laos and Thailand. During last summer's visit, Mai Kou Xiong, one of CSE's Hmong Language and Culture teachers taught English and continued to solidify relationships at Ban Rakpaendin School in Chang Rai. As for this year's trip, several children have already expressed that their lives are forever changed.



Pheng Xiong stands in what was her house at Wat Tham Krabok. (Courtesy of Community School of Excellence)

Arrival

The long flight finally reached its destination on Sunday, December 27th, 2009. The first stop was a local morning market in Thoeng, where the students breakfasted on sticky rice and grilled meat. The Community School of Excellence team piled into three vans and began their journey up the winding road to Ban Rakpaendin School in Thailand's Chiang Rai Province. Excitement and nerves filled the Eighth Graders as they were finally going to see the students and staff whom they had been in touch with as pen pals for the past two years. At first, CSE's students were quiet, taking in their new surroundings. Thus began the students' immersion into the life many of their parents knew so well.

Hmong Sister School Connections

On December 30th, Ban Rakpaendin School and the nearby Hmong villages hosted a New Year celebration in honor of CSE's special visit. Students joined Hmong and Thai community members from surrounding villages and paraded

through the main street in their traditional clothing. The procession culminated at the school yard where a group of many Hmong and Thai leaders from the local area as well as representatives from Chiang Rai Province welcomed everyone.

The Hmong New Year festivities highlighted traditional and contemporary Hmong songs, dance performances by both school children and adults, and traditional musical instruments. The students displayed their talents in reciting poetry (paj huam), playing the kheng instrument (txhuab qeej), as well as break dancing, hip hop, India dancing, acrobatic, and singing both Hmong and English contemporary songs. The CSE students were amazed at the skills and talents of their Hmong counterparts, especially competitions of various kinds: tuj lub (Hmong spinning tops), tua hneev (bow and arrow), and khaws txhuv hauv vab (picking pebbles from a woven tray of rice kernels). Mr. Joel Depies, CSE's technology teacher, joined a Hmong basket (ev kawm) relay contest containing a 25 pound sack of rice. Depies took second place in the men's relay after running head to head with Mr. Sakorn, Ban Rakpaendin's principal. He recalls, "I almost won against the principal, but I overran the first turn. He is a very strong and fast man. He was the champion Thai Boxer in all of Chiang Rai Province."

Next stop: a cultural fieldtrip jointly planned by both schools. Students and staff traveled in three coach buses to tour historical sites. The Middle Schoolers expressed that it was a fun day filled with developing friendships, learning from one another and exchanging life stories. Together they visited the Golden Triangle, Mae Sai (Border of Myanmar), White Temple, Chiang Rai Flower Garden, Boating through the MeKong River and even shopping at the Big C Mall. Some things remain the same on both sides of the ocean.

Another day, CSE's students had the opportunity to shadow their pen pals and their new friends from class to class. CSE student Vamzeng Lee participated in an English class with his pen pal. Standing in front of the class, he explained the difference between British English and American English to the students.

The school day ended with two friendly soccer matches. The evening air cooled down a bit as everyone prepared for a night of eating, singing, and dancing around a giant bonfire set in the school yard. A Hmong family arrived with steamed sweet rice and their rice cake pounder (lub dab tuav ncuav) to offer everyone the experience of making rice cakes. As night fell, students sat around the bonfire eating a dinner of sticky rice and grilled pork. The evening was filled with ongoing karaoke by the students and teachers. The event was an idealistic display of multi-culturalism and multi-lingualism. Again, through their songs and stories, the students discovered that some things are the same, no matter which side of the globe.

The final event between the St. Paul and Thai students was a community service project. CSE's eighth graders, Ban Rakpaendin's students and local villagers prepped and painted a Community Center, including a mural depicting the importance of education and the relationship between CSE and the community with the painted message: Ntau txhais tes ua hauj lwm sib; ntau lub tswv yim ua txoj kev qhib (Many hands make the work lighter; many ideas make the future brighter). This quote appears in Hmong, English, and Thai-truly a global message.

The final good-byes between the students and teachers took almost an hour to conclude. All hearts were heavy and tears were shed as CSE's students were

rounded into the vans. After ten days strong connections had been made amongst all the students. The world had become just a bit smaller and both sets of children were affected by their new friendships. "Everyone cried. I was very sad to leave my new friends. They asked that I remember them and to come back to see them," CSE student Yadosa Xiong explained. "I wish we could have stayed longer."

CSE Director Mo Chang, compared the departure of the CSE group to the departure of the families in 1976 as they prepared to come to the United States. Arms reached out the windows and all were hanging on to each other for as long as they possibly could.

City Students Farming in Thailand

The students were given the unique opportunity to experience a day of farming with local families and their pen pals. The families came prepared with baskets (kawm), farming tools (hlau thiab txuas), and meals consisting of none other than rice, boiled meat and steamed vegetables. "Our group cooked lunch at the farm using gathered fire wood. The family provided us with this opportunity so that the students could understand what is involved in a normal day at the farm," Mai Sae Vang, CSE's Middle School Hmong Language and Culture teacher, explained. One group of students experienced harvesting corn, another group's responsibility was to weed approximately a two acre cabbage farm, and one group cleared brush from a fruit farm. The St. Paul students felt humbled and appreciative of the chance to farm with their long-distance relatives. As a result of the farming experience, 8th Grader Mai Vang Lee found new inspiration to attain higher education in hope of returning to Thailand to provide assistance for the hard- working families. "I would really like to find ways for students to attain a higher education so that they would not have to work so hard."

Thailand Home

Perhaps the most poignant part of the trip was the visit to the Hmong refugee camp, Wat Tham Krabok. Again, the students were in awe as their three vans slowly entered the gate into the Wat and meandered to the location where many of the students once called home. The infamous rocky mountains seen in many Hmong movies, surrounded the Wat creating a beautiful backdrop for what used to be a town bustling with life. It is a ghost town now with about 60 members still residing there. Many of whom are patiently waiting for the day when they can leave the desolated place behind and create a new home.

To be continued in the February 24th issue of HMONG TIMES with student's reflections of their experiences while visiting their new friends and relatives in Thailand.