

Hmong students reconnect with homeland

Some born there, others American-born, but all moved by Thai class trip

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For part of the eighth-grade group, it was a class trip back to a life they once knew; for the others it was an introduction to a world they had only heard about.

A group of Hmong students with the Community School of Excellence in St. Paul recently traveled to Thailand for three weeks. The goal was to help the students "connect globally to Hmong around the world," said Mo Chang, founder of the Hmong language and culture charter school in St. Paul's Thomas-Dale neighborhood.

Not only did the students tour the region, they also studied in a school, met the villagers and farmed the land.

"One of the things we wanted to do was give them a real experience of what life (there) is like," Mo Chang said. "They learned how hard it is."

The conditions and the work — student Jer Yang worked the ground with a hoe — certainly left an impression.

"I almost hit a grave," the 14-year-old said.

The students prepared by selling eggrolls, soliciting local businesses and contributing their own money to pay for the trip. They also wrote to pen pals from a Thai sister school in anticipation of a meeting.

About half the students who signed up for the trip were born in Thailand before immigrating to the United States. The others were born here. In all, 28 made the trip. The trip was emotional and eye-opening, the students said.

Yong Le, 14, said he shed a few tears when he stood near a house he once lived in.

For Kao Nou Yang, also 14, the reality and poverty were a bit shocking: "I get to see the people that I used to know ... and I haven't seen them for five years now. They were older and very skinny."

The American-born students had a different set of impressions. When he saw the Hmong villagers, 14-year-old Kong Tay Le "wanted to do something to help them." Then he felt their generosity. "They were living in poverty and a lot of stress, but they still did something for us."

Villagers "welcomed us to their home. They welcomed us to their family," Mo Chang said.

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