

# Teaching in Thailand

When Meredith Lentz, of Salisbury, NC left the U.S. for the first time, it was to spend eight weeks in Thailand as a volunteer English teacher with Global Service Corps (GSC). “I wanted to go as far from home as I could,” said the rising senior at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Sponsored by the prestigious Morehead Scholarship— which provides exemplary North Carolina students (and with some restrictions, those outside of the state)—with a full ride to Chapel Hill, including summer enrichment and travel—Meredith lived with a host family in the western Thailand city of Kanchanaburi, where she taught at the local university. Though it was her first solo teaching experience, she relied on her years of high school tutoring, along with her abundant energy and creativity, to capture the attention of her students.

In the classroom, she first had to overcome the cultural differences. Just getting the students to show up for class was a major feat. “The students were notoriously late,” Meredith explained. “Time is not really an issue. Students would come into my 45-minute class 30 minutes late.” So, to encourage punctuality, she gave out candy and American flags to those who arrived within ten minutes of the start time.

Once she had them there, she had to contend with vastly different skill levels and the reluctance of students to speak English in front of their peers. “The Thai people are very shy,” Meredith observed, “and it’s difficult for them to speak in front of the class instead of writing things down.” The university’s two English teachers speak primarily Thai in the classroom and rely on memorization and lectures to convey the material. When Meredith arrived, she found that students who had studied English for five years still could not hold a basic conversation. To get the students talking, she used games and songs like Simon Says and Hokey Pokey. She let the advanced students help the others by splitting her classes of 30 students into small groups. Before long, she found that students were arriving early just to talk to her.

College directors also asked Meredith to hold two to three hours per day of “teacher classes,” focusing on basic conversation skills. These became so popular that Meredith was soon working up to six hours per day with the teachers.

Before long, many teachers had asked Meredith, a biology major and the only native English speaker at the college, to teach their classes for them. Within her first month, she was teaching not only English, but math, biology, botany, genetics and computer skills, using her own lesson plans and American-style methods. During this time, Meredith saw great progress in the English skills of the students. “They were much more receptive to learning English in a subject that they found important,” she explained.

Meanwhile, Meredith was undergoing her own transition. “I didn’t have a problem with homesickness, but I did have a problem adjusting to the Thai lifestyle,” she admitted. “They’re happy, relaxed and stress-free all the time. I’m so high-strung and extremely serious. They were always concerned that I was working too hard. By the end, I learned to relax a whole lot more and chill out and enjoy that way of life.”

When Meredith returned home at the end of the summer, the readjustment was difficult. “There weren’t a lot of people in my hometown who understood Thailand,” she said. “There was a huge disconnection between my knowledge and experience and theirs.”

As a result, Meredith came up with a plan for a cultural exchange and began raising money with the help of hometown friends and an adult mentor who had also been to Thailand. They needed \$5,000 to bring a teacher from Kanchanaburi to the U.S., where she would tour schools and civic organizations. The teacher would improve her English skills among native speakers, while teaching Rowan County students about a culture most had never experienced. Through the exchange, Meredith hoped to “encourage these [American] kids to think a little more globally” and to show them that “there are very different cultures out there.”

Miss Tan, age 27, was asked to come to the U.S. because her English skills were the strongest of all the younger teachers. She was teaching English at the time and would be able to transfer her new knowledge most directly to the Thai students. She and Meredith spent August of 2003 in Rowan County visiting 24 schools, Meredith’s home church, six community organizations and a local nursing home. Accompanied by Meredith and her friends, Miss Tan made up to seven presentations in a day. “She was really shy at first,” Meredith says, “but she’s a teacher through and through, and she handled them really well.”

The students made the effort especially worthwhile. Meredith enthusiastically describes the first presentation: “The minute she started talking to the students in this class, their eyes got so huge. She started by showing them on the globe where Thailand was in comparison to North Carolina.” Miss Tan spoke primarily to 3rd and 7th graders, but as the word spread, many students brought their siblings to meet her.

Meredith and her friends sent Miss Tan home with American souvenirs, Weekly Readers and letters—responses to the pen pal letters the Thai kids had sent to the American students. “Some of the Thai students had opted out,” Meredith said, “but when their friends started to get letters back, they got interested.” One school year later, many pen pals are still writing.

Meredith participated in her final Morehead-sponsored experience this summer. Planning on a career in education, she spent the summer conducting a self-designed study of education in Tanzania and Zambia. After she graduates in 2005, she hopes to teach high school biology and start preparing for her next trip to Thailand. “The next time I go,” Meredith said, “I will have at least a few friends and family members in tow.” AV — Mary Catherine Platt

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