

Volunteer experience

Year:

Project:

Work:

In February of 2006 I came to volunteer in Thailand through an organization that I believed was well established and would be the best option for me to give something to the children of Thailand. I was in contact with the organization's staff for weeks before my departure date, making sure that I had all of the details correct.

I thought I would be taken to my placement (which was supposed to be helping at an orphanage in the southern part of Thailand) by a staff member, once I had completed their orientation in the north of Thailand. However, on the Sunday night we were supposed to leave I was told that they would be sending me on the train alone with written instructions on how to get to my placement. And by the way, you'll be teaching English instead of working at the orphanage.

I took all of this in stride, although a little leery being a young woman alone for the first time in Asia, because I just wanted a great experience. Then I got about 45 km. away from my supposed destination and my directions stopped. I had to make my way to the next place on my own, in a small community where no one spoke English.

This does not seem like a big deal now that I have been living in Thailand for over a year and a half, but at the time it was very distressing. Once I got to the town, I was promptly taken to my home stay and met the elderly couple who would be taking care of me. I have absolutely no complaints about them, they tried to help and accommodate me in every way, and I was very glad for their support even if I didn't understand it. The next day I met the kids I would be teaching and I couldn't have been happier.

It was a lovely 6 classroom school, in the jungle, where the kids stared at me when I ate lunch, and they REALLY wanted to learn ENGLISH. The teachers took my arrival as I sign that they could take a break, and would leave for the hours that I taught there students, which made it quite a bit more challenging for me. But if I didn't want a challenge I wouldn't have traveled all the way to Thailand to volunteer.

So everything was great, except for the fact that the whole month that I spent teaching at that school, I wasn't contacted once to check up or see if I was all right. I tried getting a hold of the southern Thailand staff member, but she was always busy or didn't pick up her phone. If it wasn't for two other foreign teachers that I met my second week, who helped me through all shock of living in a Thai community, I would have surely finished my month and flew back to Canada.

I loved the kids and the experience, but it was still quite hard being alone with no one in the community to talk to. Because of those two friends I met, I fell in love with Thailand just as much as they had, and I still haven't left. I have volunteered at another school in the province of Patthalung, where I was the first foreign person they had ever seen, and experienced things that make Thailand so unique.

Now I am working for a new volunteer organization started by one of the friends that I mentioned earlier, and it is my purpose to give each of the volunteers as much or as little support as they need. I want volunteers to feel welcome, and feel that they are not alone. If people aren't worried or unsatisfied with aspects of their living situation, they will have much more time to focus on the truly important part of their experience, helping the kids!

About the Author

My name is Chelsey, and I am a 23 year old woman from Canada. I am currently living and working in Thailand, and encourage all others who would like to volunteer to get up and do it. Volunteer in your home country if you are not able to go abroad. If you would like any info on the volunteer organization I am currently working at, or would just like to ask questions, please e-mail me at: chels@tmvolunteers.org or go to: www.tmvolunteers.org.