

Adventures in Education Excellence: Scholarships, Thailand, and Elephants – Oh My!

Bright Light Volunteers, a 501(c)(3), non-profit organization designed to empower program participants and community partners through education and service, just completed their inaugural global service learning program in Thailand with Professor Stacie Freeman of Bethel University. What outcomes were achieved?

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Stacie Freeman, Professor of Sociology at Bethel University and Bright Light Volunteers' Co-Executive Director, just returned from Chiang Mai after serving as a leader for a group of Chico, CA high school students during an adventure in global service learning in Thailand. She couldn't be happier. During the three week program, Freeman had ample opportunity to really get to know each participant.

She shares, "Sometimes I worry about the future, but groups like this one restore my faith. These young people are destined for big things and the world will be brighter as a result. I'm thankful that their paths and mine crossed during this amazing program."

The inaugural group for Bright Light Volunteers' Thailand program included two participants that each received a \$500 scholarship reward that was provided by former Bright Light Volunteers Board Member, Melissa Sperry.

"The funding support that Bright Light Volunteers has provided to our students have absolutely changed lives," says Pam Bodnar, a recently retired school guidance counselor that formed the Thailand group. She adds, "I organized a group of students to go on a program in Ghana's Volta Region for three weeks last year. This experience is exceptional."

The majority of service hours during the program were spent working and learning at an elephant refuge center outside of Chiang Mai and teaching English at a local Karen Tribe school. Participants also had the opportunity to give alms to monks, visit ancient temples, hike up to view magnificent waterfalls, cooking lessons, and other culturally immersive experiences.

One of the Thailand scholarship recipients, Alex, reports that she feels that the experience has helped her to develop valuable, real-world skills for future employment: "Helping rescued elephants, and working to build homes for orphan children expands my understanding of the world, and gives me applicable skills that will help me as I pursue a career in the nursing field."

Bright Light Volunteers maintains a private FaceBook page for each group and program, allowing parents, friends and family to join their student's journey and receive updates and photos from the group's daily activities. Posts of gratitude from parents after the program completion were plentiful; it turns out that the experience was transformational to more than just the student participants -- parents were touched as well:

"I am seriously moved to tears by this, so proud of these kids - of my daughter - and so unbelievably grateful that they were given the opportunity to experience this journey," says Chuck Mahar, the father of one of the Thailand program participants.



Bright Light Volunteers program participants taking a photo break at the elephant refuge center where they volunteered in Thailand.

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Catherine Greenberg, founder of Bright Light Volunteers, adds, "I was inspired to start Bright Light Volunteers after experiencing the impact international service has had on my own children. Each of these experiences sets forth a transformational ripple effect that touches the lives of the students that have participated in our program. I'll never tire of watching it all unfold."

As for Mrs. Bodnar, the school guidance counselor that started the Thailand "ball" going, there's no rest for the weary and many more lives to be touched. Reports are that even though she is now officially retired, Bodnar plans to recruit participants for a March program in Cuba, where Bright Light Volunteers still operates.

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About Bright Light Volunteers

Bright Light Volunteers is a 501(c)(3), non-profit organization, designed to empower program participants and community partners through education and service. Specifically, our programs adhere to global service-learning best practices, which combine community service with both experiential learning in the field and online coursework through our university partner. Our vision is to make the world a brighter place by creating a more peaceful, just, interconnected world where global challenges and opportunities are met by educated, compassionate, global citizens and leaders.

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