

The Ayui Foundation is a non-denominational, non-government organisation that provides a home environment, educational opportunities and future pathways for disadvantaged hill tribe young people.



Director
Sumalee Milne

Ayui

November 2007

From the Director

The Akha Swing Festival

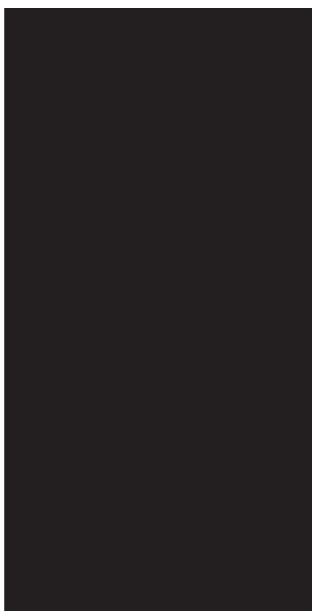
The children went home to their mountain villages for the two week October term break. Before going home we all attended the traditional Akha Swing Festival event held at the Akha Association, down the road from the hostel. The Akha Swing Festival is held over a few days in late August/September each year. It falls on the 120th day after the village has planted its rice. The festival marks the end of the hard weeding work on the rice and is a time of celebration as everyone waits to harvest the new rice crop. Each village erects a 'swing' - four tall bamboo poles in the ground, bent and tied together at the top, with a knotted rope hanging down the middle. The long rope can swing pretty high, so it's quite exhilarating...especially on a mountaintop! After the event, the vine rope is tied down and not used again and each year, a new swing is erected. It is a time for singing, dancing, swinging and feasting. We enjoyed traditional dances from a number of villages represented, and ran into two of our boys' mothers who were playing percussion with cymbals and a bamboo pole. The kids all had a turn on the swing, and ate the Akha food, traditionally eaten with bamboo chopsticks - just like at home.

Baan Ayui's Newest Members

During the term break a young woman contacted the Akha Vice-president of The Ayui Foundation asking if her two cousins could live at the Baan Ayui hostel. Meega (14) and her sister Meenoo (10) were born in Burma. When their mother died (3 years ago) they migrated to Doi Mae Salong, Northern Thailand, with their father, however as a farmer he could not afford education or food so they were sent to Chiang Rai to live with their old aunt. After one term at Baan Namlat School, they needed better home and financial support. A few weeks before, the sister of one of our boys asked if we could take in a girl from her village who was living with her alcoholic, abusive step-father and her mother who was suffering health problems. Pantiwa (11) said she doesn't want to live at home anymore, and her mother felt she would be happier and safer at Baan Ayui. The president and vice-president of the Foundation went to visit the girls to find out about their family situations. A committee meeting was held where it was unanimously agreed to accept the 3 girls. Luckily, as they all attend a school very close to the Sahasart Suksa School, we could accept them immediately instead of having to wait until the next school year to move schools.



FOUNDATION



Group Discussion Topics

Every Sunday, before our weekly house meeting, the Director facilitates a Group Discussion. This is an open forum with our young people on a particular topic, to educate, gauge their level of knowledge, and to have participation in a discussion on a topic relevant to their lives.

My Holidays

Each child talked about what they did during the holidays, and they were very different from how Thai teenagers spend their holiday. One boy went swimming and fishing at a waterfall near his village every single day. Several of the boys helped tend to the family cows and pigs, four of the children joined in celebrations for their villages' 10th anniversary since it was established, one of the older girls had to baby-sit her nephew while his parents worked in the fields, and one of our boys was catching and selling crickets, which only come out this time of year after the monsoon rains - the crickets he caught on the hostel lawn and fried were quite delicious. I said that it is great that as teenagers they are willing to help their families earn money, raise livestock and work alongside their parents in the fields.



School

The children of Baan Ayui like most of their teachers and school subjects. Of course, some find English class difficult, especially since they are still grappling with the Thai language. Aju (12) has been a victim of a bully a few times - being ordered around at the threat of being beaten up. The same bully once demanded, and was given, the T-shirt that Aju was wearing under his Akha vest. Aju has been told to make sure he lets a teacher know next time he is bullied. The best part of this discussion was that the five other boys at the hostel found out that Aju was having some school difficulties. I saw them all talking outside later telling him that they will always stand up for him as his brothers. I was so proud of our older boys letting Aju know that they were concerned, and giving him a bit of self-confidence.

Who Am I? - My Identity

This was a previous topic, where the children were asked to share their backgrounds with each other, and the three newest members of the household were given a chance to tell their stories. In addition to the information about the girls above, it was revealed that Pantiwa's father often smoked opium, and left the family five years ago to work in Phuket. Pantiwa's older sister married at 18, and she was left alone with her mother and step-father. Her step-father is often drunk and violent, and sometimes gambles their money playing cards. Her mother tried to run away from him several times but he brought her back.

Meega and Meenu attended school in Burma; Meega finishing Grade 5. As a result, they are both fluent in Burmese. Meega can also speak Lahu, as her village was close to a Lahu village, and her English is better than most of the other children at the hostel, as she studied it at school in Burma. However, as her Thai language skills and pronunciation are not up to standard, she was placed in Grade 2 at her school. Meenu (10) is also in Grade 2. While they were living in Mae Salong, they went to school for one term only, then had to drop out and work with their father, as he couldn't afford their schooling. Both of the girls say that the Burmese education system is faster than Thailand's, with young students memorizing the Burmese alphabet, and English vocabulary, after only a few days, as well as having better English. Someone who did not know Meega would think that she was stupid, being in Grade 2 at age 14 and mispronouncing Thai words, but I reminded the children that many Westerners can only speak English, whereas Meega can already speak four languages.

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Health Issues

Our oldest girl, Wanpen, had to have a tooth extracted. It was her first visit to the dentist, at age 18, and she was pretty scared but put on a brave face. She experienced the weird numbness of anesthesia for the first time.

Citizenship and Other Hilltribe Issues

- We are so pleased to announce, after applying several years ago, that Buyer (17) has finally received her Thai ID card, along with her parents, which means they now have Thai citizenship status. When asked how she wanted to celebrate this important occasion, Buyer suggested a barbeque dinner, which was thoroughly enjoyed by all the kids, especially the boys as they got to start a fire and barbeque the fish. Now that she has citizenship, Buyer has the right to open a bank account, buy a house/car/motorbike, vote, not be exploited by employers, and get her motorbike license, which she was encouraged to do. She can already ride a motorbike, so she passed the tests easily. Buyer can now run errands when the housemother is not free, and is glad to help in the running of the household.



- Housemother Noi's father was fined B5,000 for charges of trespassing/farming 2 rai of public forest land, when he expanded the area that he had been farming for the last 10 years.

After the trial, the family held a blessing ceremony for him, to lift his spirits and wish that no more bad luck would befall him. However, since then, Noi reports that he has lost his appetite and seems depressed. This is a very common and demoralizing problem that Noi's father just realized – fertile mountain areas once available for farming being decreed as national forest areas and not to be farmed, reducing the hilltribe people's ability to grow enough rice and crops to feed themselves. For the first time ever, Noi's parents had to buy rice, which they usually grew themselves. When hilltribe people lose their land, they lose their ability to sustain themselves and, therefore, lose their sense of self-esteem.



Our Wonderful Visitors

Jemima Beaumont, aged 24, from Australia, was our second volunteer. She was asked to write a few paragraphs on her time with us, and this is what she had to say:

“I have to admit when Sue asked me to write a piece about my experience volunteering with the Ayui Foundation I thought it would be an easy task. But as I sit here attempting to sum up my experience in words, I am struggling. I am struggling not because I have nothing good to say, but because my experience is one that is quite emotional for me. So putting emotion aside for the moment, I shall start from the beginning. Madeline, my 6 year old, and I were picked up by Sue at the bus station. After ferrying us to our guest house to wash off nearly 15 hours of traveling we arrived at the Foundation’s hostel where all of the children live along with Noi, the amazing housemother, and her beautiful little girl Fah, and let’s not forget Anyi the bouncy puppy either. After each of the kids shyly introduced themselves to us in English, we ate our first meal. It was our first taste of home-cooked Thai and hilltribe food.

Throughout our 12 days with the Foundation we played many games with the kids. I have to admit though, that I think that I learnt more games than I actually taught them. The boys have a fantastic ability to play with whatever they can get their hands on. We played games with things like rocks, sticks and rubber bands. The boys were really patient in teaching me the rules and (I thought) complicated techniques involved in some of the games. I assigned a little art project for the kids to get them thinking about what is important to them. Each of the kids got an A4 sized piece of cardboard and was asked to be as creative as they wanted in making an image that represented something that was important to them. The results were beautiful - most of the kids created images of their families situated in Akha villages complete with rivers, veggie gardens and clothes hanging to dry. Noi, the house mother, did a beautiful collage symbolizing nature and one of the boys did his school.

The images of beauty and community that the kids created in their pictures give no indication as to the difficulties that they are faced with as members of a minority group. Their ability to smile, despite their backgrounds was an inspiration to me. As is the wonderful opportunity created by Sue, and those who support the Foundation, in giving the kids a safe base from which to go to school, learn to be a valued member of a household, and most importantly, take pride in their cultural heritage.

A few days after our farewell to the kids we left for Chang Mai, where on a busy road we heard ‘Country Road’ blaring from the speakers in one of the bars. This was a song that the boys sang to me at the top of their lungs, which a previous volunteer had taught them. I smiled remembering them sing it with such unrestrained joy. We will miss Sue, Noi, the kids and Anyi immensely, and hopefully we will come back to visit when we are next in Thailand to see how beautifully everyone has grown.”



Future Plans

Our plan to start growing straw mushrooms has been postponed, as it is not the time of year when they are easily available. However, our vegetable garden was finally started, with a big thanks to Jemima and Madeline for the packets of vegetable seeds they also gave as a parting gift, including tomatoes, coriander and Chinese cabbage. It was a small gift but when you look at how it will teach the kids to be responsible for tending the garden, how they will see produce that they grew themselves, and how they will be able to eat more fresh vegetables that they love so much, it was a huge, lasting gift.



We plan to start an Akha embroidery activity on Saturdays, for the children to learn and produce traditional embroidery – another aspect of their culture that is not being passed down as much as it used to be.

The Ayui Foundation Online



The Ayui Foundation is finally online - come and visit us at www.ayui.org to read more about our young people, find copies of previous newsletters and hear about some fantastic fundraisers generous people from around the world are running - helping The Ayui Foundation support our kids.

If you would like to donate to The Ayui Foundation - Cheques can be made out to 'The Ayui Foundation' and mailed to:

414 Moo 4, Baan Mai, T.Rimkok, A.Muang Chiang Rai Thailand 57000

or sent to Julianne Bradley 14 Fossey Street Holder ACT Australia 2611

Thank you...

We would not have been able to have accomplished this much without the support and generosity of the following people:

- **Khun Tinnakorn Nugul**, a local art and photography teacher, for buying sketch books and pastel crayons for all the kids and taking time out of his busy schedule to come in once every couple of weeks to hold art classes. The children look forward to his art classes so much, and he always finds something praiseworthy about every picture.
- **Khun Prapaiphan Jaruthawee** of Thammasat University, Bangkok, for her donation of B2,500 specifically to purchase reading books. This enabled us to buy 22 books, which the kids started reading as soon as they were brought to the hostel.
- **Candace Fitzsimons** from Australia and **Anthony** from the USA donated lots of their clothing before they left Chiang Rai to return to their respective homes. Anthony also left us some fun items such as badminton rackets, a stopwatch and a slingshot.
- Thanks to the **Wellington ESOL Home Tutor Service**, New Zealand, for sending a package

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If you would like to contribute to The Ayui Foundation organisation and know that your gift is making a difference please contact Sumalee Milne at ayui.foundation@gmail.com

Thank you for thinking of us.