

Evaluation Report for SEDA-Laos

Ban Hai and Ban Phao Schools

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I volunteered with the Social and Economic Developers Association of Laos (SEDA-Laos) from Saturday, August 2, 2008 to Saturday, August 9, 2008 as an English teacher. SEDA-Laos is a registered non-government organization in Laos. On Monday, August 4 I went to the Special Disabled Center for Handicapped Veterans Camp 790 in Ban Hai and met the Lao family I would stay with while I was in this village. This camp is a government funded community for veterans of the Vietnam War. The parents of the families are disabled. Some are blind and some are parallelized or missing limbs. While I was here I lived with the man who was in charge of the camp, Eyela, and his family. They took very good care of me and I got to eat real home cooked Lao food. I also met one of the veterans, Chunchi, and his family. He and his family were very good to me. They invited me to eat with them and I slept in his house for one night. Chunchi is missing his right arm and his left hand as a result of an M18 Claymore land mine that was planted by the United States during the Vietnam War. I taught English to the kids in the village. The students range from about five years old to seventeen years old. There was an even mix of both males and females. On the first day, we had class outside the assembly building in the center of the village. Class was outside in plain view so people watched from a distance and gradually came over. By the end of the class there was double as many students as in the beginning. In the afternoon we moved class to the school, which is just outside the village. The school is the former Ministry of Labor building, which was donated to the village after Eyela sent a request that the village needs a school. The kids were very shy at first but after we played some games, like hangman, they got involved and we had lots of fun. I taught them how to say their name, where they are from, how old they are, and how many brothers and sisters they have. Each day I walked to the school with the village kids in the morning at seven o'clock. We stopped around noon and I walked back to the village with them for lunch. Then at one o'clock we went back to the school and had class until three o'clock. On Wednesday, August 6 Souly, who is the director of SEDA, came to pick me up. I said goodbye to the students, Eyela, Won, Chunchi, and the rest of my friends in the village.

I arrived in Ban Phao on Wednesday, August 6. Souly introduced me to the family that I would be living with in this village. I met Okun, who is the principal of the Ban Phao School. The next day I walked to the school with Okun and met the Lao teachers and students. There were about eighty students in my class. The age range was from six to thirteen years old with an even mix of males and females. I was the first foreigner to teach at the school and the students were very shy at first. Nobody can speak English at the village or at the school. The students knew the ABCs so we played Hangman. I split the class into three teams for the game. They all had the same word to figure out and whichever team won I gave cookies to. I also pointed to things around the room and we said what it was out loud, for example – window, broom, table, chair, pencil, notebook. We played Simon Says with body parts, for example – head, nose, eye, ears, teeth, neck, shoulder, arm. I taught them how to associate nouns with verbs, for example – cookie-eat, broom-sweep, chalk-write. They really liked playing Hangman so we did that a lot. I had coloring books for them and when I held them up they all ran to me. I found out later that there are no coloring books to buy at the market. They need to go to Vientiane to buy things like coloring books. We stopped around noon for lunch and the students returned at one o'clock and we had class until three o'clock. I met Mok, a twenty three year old woman whose parents live in the village and own a restaurant. She spoke English and translated for me to my Lao family – Tun, Mayshun, Liantong, and Maytoo. They treated me like family, taking me over friends' houses' for dinner at night and inviting me into their homes. For my last night in Ban Phao my Lao family, some of the students, and the people in the village had a Basi ceremony for me. On Saturday, August 9 I went to Mok's house to wait for the bus to Vientiane.

There are no foreigners in Ban Phao or Ban Hai. I was the first foreigner to teach at both schools and the first foreigner to stay in both villages. I got many questionable, blank-faced stares when I first arrived and my initial thought was that my presence was not welcomed. These villages are sheltered away from the corruption of money and materialism with little to no Western influence. The country itself is one of few places in the world that has been left completely unspoiled. They never see foreigners and it is no wonder why some people in the village ran away when they first saw me. But in my short time living with them I have learned that Lao people are the friendliest, most genuine and sincere people I've ever met. I've never seen people who live such a simple life with so little and are so genuinely happy and content. They treated me like family and I have made many friends in both Ban Phao and Ban Hai that I've left behind but hope to see again when I go back.

Funds need to be invested immediately into the Ban Phao School. The Ban Phao School is in awful condition by Western standards. The walls are falling apart and there are no doors or windows. The desk and chairs are very old and are in no condition for students to be using. The students don't have necessary school supplies such as notebooks and pencils. The classrooms are merely empty rooms with only the desks and a chalkboard. The library, if you can call it that, is nothing more than one shelf of books. The books have been donated by Room to Read Laos, a non-profit charitable organization. There is no road to the school. It is in the middle of a field and it gets very muddy. When I was teaching there was no eraser for the chalkboard. I was given an old shirt and a piece of paper to use. The school needs to be demolished and a new one needs to be built as soon as possible.

The Ban Hai School is the former Ministry of Labor building that was donated to the village as a school. The building itself is in decent condition but needs more renovation. At first glance it looks like an abandoned building and the classrooms have nothing but the chalkboard and desks. The classrooms need new chalkboards and desks and chairs for the students. The classrooms are small and there was not enough room for everybody when we had class so some students had to look through the window from outside the classroom. The students need school supplies such as notebooks and pencils. I think funds for this school should be directed toward new textbooks for the students and a computer room with internet access that can be built in one of the classrooms.

Funds at both the Ban Hai School and the Ban Phao should be focused on getting the students all new textbooks in each subject and building a library for them at the school that they can use. There should also be a playground built at each of the schools for the children. The Ban Phao School is in urgent need of construction in which the old school can be demolished and a new school can be built immediately. Funds should be focused on this construction in Ban Phao. Once the new school is built, a library and a playground can be built for the students and new textbooks and school supplies can be bought. Funds at the Ban Hai School should be focused right now on getting new textbooks in all subjects, building a library and playground at the school, building a computer room with internet access, and buying the necessary school supplies such as notebooks and paper. The lack of educational infrastructure in these villages needs to be addressed. Within the next three years I hope to see these needs met.

Photo gallery: <http://picasaweb.google.com/souly2008>