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How an Orphan Taught me to Smile

William McHenry

My name is William McHenry and I am a senior at Linfield College in McMinnville Oregon. I am majoring in Political Science and minoring in International Relations. I have been lucky to have been given the opportunity to travel, work, and study abroad. One trip stood out above the rest. This past summer I volunteered at the Yaowawit School in a southern rural region of Thailand. Yaowit is a German funded institution that provides food and boarding to underprivileged children—along with a first-rate English-based education program. Through a contact of my academic advisor, one other student and I were given the opportunity to assist in a kindergarten classroom. Both of us were apprehensive about the experience given that we spoke little Thai and lacked formal education training. How could we even begin to relate to the children? Would they even be able to understand us?

Any reservations we had vanished as soon as we entered the classroom. On the first day, as I was introducing myself to the teacher, I was mobbed by a group of kids. They trapped both of my legs with affectionate hugs. Each child smiled in the brightest, most innocent, way imaginable. It was an unforgettable moment, and it occurred every morning before class began. We were celebrities. These Thai students were so eager to learn they were willing to openly embrace foreigners. I have never been so warmly embraced by a culture. By the end of the first day we had nicknames. Within the first week I began to feel part of a family. We ate with the children, played soccer with them, and taught them traditional American songs while they taught us Thai equivalents.

Among the students, there was a five-year-old orphan girl named Fa who was as bright as she was confident. Every day she would take pride in whispering the answers to me before other students could respond. She was never wrong and always smiling. Not only did I admire her intelligence but also her generosity towards others. During mealtimes, she would make sure to help other younger children serve themselves before helping herself. Fa did not let her unfortunate circumstances hold her back. Instead, she embraced both her fellow students and her education.

I left Yaowawit with a deeper appreciation for the human spirit and with respect for the children I had opportunity to educate. Sometimes the smallest moments can change one's entire perception of the world. My moment came from the smile of an orphan. Winston Churchill once said, "A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty".