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Law School Report

GOING GLOBAL

LEGAL THAIS

Professor Engel teaches in Thailand – and UB Law students were there

“The trip of a lifetime” is how some students are characterizing an unprecedented venture for the Law School: a January bridge course in northern Thailand led by a UB Law professor.

The Law School has a long-established relationship with Chiang Mai University (CMU), located more than 400 miles north of Bangkok. Director of International Programs and SUNY Distinguished Service Professor David M. Engel, who served in the Peace Corps in Thailand and speaks Thai, has for many years taught CMU students such courses as torts and research methods during UB Law’s bridge term. Other UB faculty have done the same, teaching through Thai interpreters.

But until now, no UB Law students have studied at CMU, because instruction is in Thai and the language barrier seemed insurmountable. Then, Engel said, “It finally dawned on me that if I took a group of law students over there, I could be their instructor, and I could teach them in English. My wife, Jaruwat Engel, was born in Thailand and is a former UB Thai language instructor and certified translator. She and I can serve as interpreters when our students hold discussions with Thai LL.M. students, professors, lawyers and judges.”

That is what happened



“Going to another culture or another society is the very best way to see your own more clearly.”

– Professor David Engel



UB Law students converse with village monk in Thailand.

starting just after New Year’s, when the Engels accompanied 10 UB Law students to Chiang Mai University for a two-week course, taught in English, on “The Legal Culture of Thailand.” There they participated in an intensive learning experience, including an exploration of the city of Chiangmai and some travel in this mountainous, culturally diverse area of northern Thailand that Engel loves.

Before offering the course, Engel was not sure there would be sufficient interest among the students. But 40 showed up at an information session in the spring, and a rigorous application process involving essays, transcripts, references and interviews produced the final class.

Why 10 students? Engel laughs. “It was for a very practical reason,” he says. “That is how many we can fit into a van to drive everyone around.”

It is said that travel is broadening; beyond that, Engel says, studying the Thai legal system can pay benefits for law students. “I cannot think of anything better for our students than to gain exposure to legal systems, lawyers, scholars, judges, and law students in other countries,” he says. “Going to another culture or another society is the very best way to see your own more clearly. Here, everything about our own legal system seems inevitable. But once you look with fresh eyes, you start to see that, ‘Oh, our system represents this set of choices rather than this other set of choices.’”

The Thai legal system, like many legal systems of the world, is based on civil law rather than common law, although it has been influenced in some ways by the English and American systems. Buddhism is a pervasive influence in all aspects of Thai culture, including the behavior of actors within the legal system, yet in the formal sense Thai law is resolutely secular. This disjunction between official law and its cultural context presents a fascinating issue for



students to explore in particular subject areas, such as tort law or environmental law.

Of the students chosen for the course, Engel says, “They are just an outstanding group. Some have extensive international experience, but a substantial number have never been abroad and most have not been to Asia. Some of the students bring particular interests with them” — such as public health, human rights and women’s rights — “and I am working to tailor the course to include those interests.”

Dean Nils Olsen, he said, has provided some scholarship support to help defray the cost of airfare, and alumni contributions are welcome as well. Engel’s hope is that other UB Law faculty will adopt this model and lead teaching excursions of their own.

For their part, the students packed their bags expecting a life-changing experience.

Juneko Robinson, a third-year student, has a personal interest in Thailand. Her father, she said, was in Thailand on a military assignment in the early 1960s and brought back some mementos — including a model of a Thai ceremonial barge in a glass case.

They kept it next to the couch in her California home.

“As a kid I was so fascinated by this,” Robinson says. “I thought, what kind of a magical place would produce such a magical-looking boat? So when I heard about this program, I knew I wanted to go.”

Robinson, who is pursuing a doctorate in philosophy in addition to her law degree, is interested in international human rights law, and says, “It is important for anyone going into international law to get a working knowledge of civil law countries. Since they are so widespread, it’s most likely that human rights violations will occur in civil law settings.”

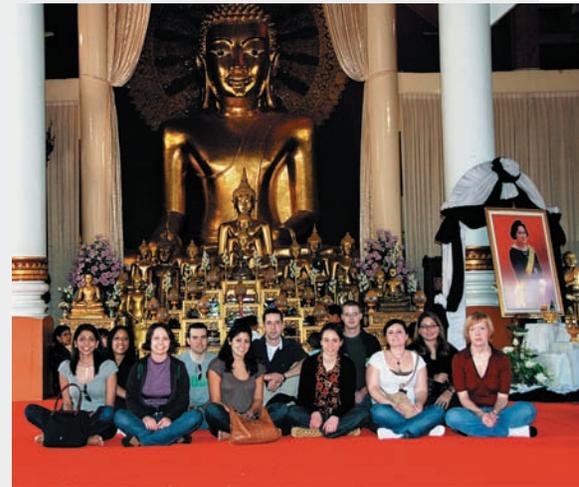
And, she says, “It is tremendously personally empowering to go to a place where no one knows you and you are thousands of miles away from everything that is familiar, and still find a way to be able to connect with people. It allows you to look at your own personal experiences and realize how much you have not questioned about your own culture. You really learn how American you are when you leave America.”

For second-year student Jason Wand, the experience was a chance to broaden his travel horizons. “I always wanted to study abroad when I was an undergraduate,” he says, “but I never had the opportunity to do so. I have always wanted to experience something of a different culture. I have traveled in Europe and been to Israel, and I thought Thailand would be an amazing opportunity?”

In addition, he hoped to extend the trip in order to see Bangkok and maybe Tokyo, and to visit a friend who is teaching English in China.

Says second-year student Brenna Terry, “I call myself a human sponge as far as culture goes. And it really helps to have someone who knows so much about the area and is able to give an insider perspective.”

Terry says the Dalai Lama’s visit to UB Law School widened her horizons. “I had realized that culture does have an effect on law, but it had not really hit me until I heard the Americans asking questions from the perspective of retribution and punishment, and the Dalai Lama responded from a Buddhist perspective. It is important to have a cross-cultural experience in general, and if you are going to work in the international community, it is a fascinating area. This was a once-in-a-Law School opportunity that I thought was unique.”



Law students in Wat Phra Sing.

Making UB into an international university

A faculty task group has recommended that UB build upon its leadership in international student recruitment, overseas education and study abroad to create a comprehensive international strategy and identity.

With more than 4,000 international students, UB is ranked 10th in international student enrollment among U.S. colleges and universities. It is known for pioneering overseas programs, particularly in Asia, and for having one of the most entrepreneurial international education offices in the country.

Making UB into an international university would enable it to better train students for “the challenges and promises of the global community, facilitate globalized research and enhance understanding among the world’s peoples,” according to the report.

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