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# In the presence of the princess

## *Professor David Engel receives an honorary degree in high Thai style*



**S**UNY Distinguished Service Professor David M. Engel – well-known for his course on The Legal Culture of Thailand, in which he takes a small group of UB Law students each January bridge term to northern Thailand – was honored Jan. 24 with the honorary degree of doctor of laws from one of that nation’s major universities, Chiang Mai University. The degree was conferred by Crown Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, daughter of Thailand’s King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

Professor Engel kept notes on the elaborate ceremony. Some excerpts:

**Jan. 21:** I was invited to deliver a one-hour lecture (in Thai) to the faculty and 2011 graduating class of the Chiang Mai University Law School in a large auditorium. Presenting the lecture was tiring, even with several practice runs beforehand. The general themes were (a) the importance of considering the social and cultural environment of law, and (b) the troubling phenomenon of the apparent disappearance of law and rights consciousness from the lives and narratives of Thai people.

**Jan. 23:** There was a full-dress rehearsal for the honorary degree recipients from 6:30 to 11:30 a.m. We were fortunate in this regard, since the students had to undergo three full days of

Above, the Crown Princess presents Professor Engel with an honorary doctor of laws degree from Chiang Mai University.

rehearsals before the official commencement. The preparations were elaborate and highly choreographed, and the 6,000 students for the most part had it down pat. We old-timers struggled a bit more – when and how to bow to the Crown Princess before and during the walk across the stage, how to extend one’s hand, how to receive the diploma and return it to one’s chest, how to back away and bow again, etc.

**Jan. 24:** On the day of the commencement, we got up early and were taken in a van by my “handlers” to the CMU Convention Hall at 6:45 a.m. Everyone was fed, robed and put in position more than an hour before the Crown Princess arrived.

The ceremony began with Buddhist monks chanting while the crown princess entered and lit candles and incense at a shrine. The honorary degree recipients were then announced one at a time and walked across the stage to receive our diplomas from HRH to the applause of the assembled students (no room in the convention hall for their parents or families). On my way back to my on-stage seat, I was intercepted

by the CMU president and the chair of the CMU Council. We chatted for an hour, but then I returned to my seat behind the Crown Princess and watched for six more hours while each student received a diploma from her hand.

The speed and precision were remarkable, approximately 28 students per minute, each of them bowing, extending and retracting the hand properly, stepping back and bowing again. The Crown Princess demonstrated impressive stamina. Meanwhile, we sat more or less at attention during the proceedings. One doesn’t cross one’s legs in the presence of royalty.

When the ceremony concluded in the afternoon, the honorary degree recipients were invited to the doorway of the Crown Princess’ quarters. As she left for her limousine, she stopped to talk with us. She was completely unpretentious, living up to her reputation for simplicity and humility. She chatted with us in Thai, English and French. An entirely different, elegant and esoteric vocabulary is required to converse with royalty in Thai, but she put us at ease by using ordinary colloquial language, and we responded in kind. As she drove away, students and their families raced to line the route and get a glimpse of her. She is the people’s favorite.

That evening, there was a grand reception at the Dhamma Hall of the university, with speeches by all the dignitaries and by the honorary degree recipients. I received four bouquets, an engraved silver plate, and a certificate awarding me the status of honorary alumnus of Chiang Mai University.

**Jan. 25:** The next evening, the Law Faculty held a beautiful reception for me on the lawn of a hotel along the river, with speeches by the dean, the president and two longtime friends and CMU colleagues. I gave another short speech, trying to convey in Thai and English my gratitude and my affection for friends and colleagues at CMU as well as my appreciation of the history and culture of northern Thailand.

*“We sat more or less at attention during the proceedings. One doesn’t cross one’s legs in the presence of royalty.”*  
– Professor David M. Engel