

CiTY pages

An Ambitious Project

One UW student's trip to Thailand made him determined to fight the infamous sex trade

Pat Peckham - *City Pages*

UW-Stevens Point student Joseph Quinnell was shaken to the core in 2005 when he visited Thailand. His idea then was to document the faces of the infamous sex trade for a photojournalism class project. He came back so moved he plastered the campus with more than 100 large photos of brothel districts, exploited children, and young women. Quinnell wanted everyone to be moved the way he was. And he was determined to make a difference.

He put his studies on a slow track, recruited a partner, Susan Perri, and created The Thailand Project. Its mission is to change how Thailand treats its "stateless" inhabitants, whose daughters are the countless hostages of that country's infamous sex trade.

Quinnell, himself abused as a child, had taken his camera to the town of Mae Sai (pop. 27,000) and to larger cities like Bangkok and Pattaya, where at some restaurants waitresses also are on the menu. Sex tourists, many of them from America, pay to have intercourse with girls often in the 8 to 12 age range. Almost all these girls come from destitute, non-citizen families, who essentially sell their daughters under false promises (or self-denial) of good-paying jobs in the city. Their lack of rights and police protection feeds a sex trade that's widely ignored by officials there – in the PBS documentary, *The New Heroes*, it's estimated that 25% of that country's economy hinges on human trafficking. It's so blatant, Quinnell on more than one occasion while walking the streets, was offered time with heartbreakingly young girls.

Coming from a university setting, Quinnell came up with an education-based idea. For five years Quinnell and Perri have been making a highly public, internationally recognized effort to bring vulnerable, stateless young women from Thailand to the U.S. to receive four-year college degrees here. They have been honored by former President Bill Clinton and his Clinton Global Initiative. They have raised tens of thousands of dollars. And most importantly, in 2008, they succeeded in arranging for two women, Fongtip Boonsri and Srinuan Saokhamnuan, to attend UW-Stevens Point.



Photo by Joseph Quinnell

Quinnell's photojournalistic research on human trafficking (Summer 2005) led to the creation of The Thailand Project: Higher Education as Humanitarian Aid.

Fongtip and Srinuan (nicknamed Aor) have attended UW-Stevens Point for the equivalent of four semesters, preparing for and beginning college level instruction. In May, the two finished their first academic credit class, math. Grades: A and a B.

When their education is complete, the idea goes, they'll return to their district in Thailand with high aspirations and potential; and the people in their community will see, probably for the first time in their lives, that there is real hope. (Such districts are cordoned-off so Thai officials can control the comings and goings of the stateless population.)

Quinnell and Perri have put their own lives and potential careers on hold. They took light academic loads as they committed themselves to seeing Fongtip and Aor graduate in 2014, and to lay the groundwork for getting more young Thai people into colleges.

"A lot of people think this is about two students," Quinnell says, "but we're trying to change the lives of 2 million people."



Photo by Joseph Quinnell

A child holds the hand of her older sister in a red light district in Thailand.

That's an estimate of how many people in Thailand are considered stateless. Thailand of course isn't the only nation with stateless peoples living within its borders. But in Thailand, they not only have no right to vote, they also cannot own property in their own name, receive a public education or file a complaint with police. And Thailand's social, business, and governmental system is particularly vicious to such vulnerable people.

Located west of Vietnam and Cambodia, Thailand's neighbor to the north is Myanmar (formerly Burma). Many of the ethnic hill people in Myanmar have fled their home country, Quinnell says, because under a government where the military shares power with drug lords, parents are powerless to keep their own children. "The boys are being taken to be the next generation of the soldiers and the girls are taken to be rape dolls for the military."

These families who are denied citizenship in Burma, are allowed to enter Thailand, but are denied Thai citizenship. Their kids are actively targeted for child labor and prostitution. They are practically invisible to the Thai government and not welcome to return to Myanmar.

It was this ethnic group Quinnell originally sought to photograph. On that first trip to Thailand, Quinnell found Sompop Jantraka, a man twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work at a school/shelter center in Mae Sai. Improving the plight of the stateless people has become Jantraka's mission.

Jantraka's Development Education Programme for Daughters and Communities likely saved Fongtip from years in a brothel. An agent from a sex shop came to Mae Sai and approached Fongtip's mom, claiming to be recruiting for restaurant and office jobs. Being illiterate, the mother didn't know how to react to the offer to essentially buy her daughter. The promise was that Fongtip would be well cared for and return with a lot of money.

Fortunately, the mother was acquainted with Jantraka's center. The staff there told her not to believe the man.

But other parents don't ask. Either they're so destitute they jump at any chance to get money or they convince themselves that their daughters really are heading for legitimate jobs. Few girls ever return home. For those who do, most of the families continue to deny their daughters were prostitutes, which helps perpetuate a job-in-the-city myth based on desperation.

Leaving the sex trade is not often possible. Brothel operators take any identifying papers the girls might have, making travel nearly impossible in a tightly controlled country. They're required to work off the fee paid to their parents, plus the cost of new clothing and living expenses. Quinnell heard how Thai police turn a blind eye to brothels as long as the officers themselves get free service or are paid bribes. Girls who refuse are arrested for prostitution.

Quinnell and Perri were told if 100 women are "sold" to Bangkok, only 20 ever return and they come back as a "husk" with no soul. Aor says one woman told her of being forced to have sex with up to 50 men a day, even while pregnant. Jantraka outlines a system of "bloodsuckers" who live off the sex trade, including surgeons who sew up the hymens of young sex slaves so they can be sold again as high-priced virgins.



Photo by Joseph Quinnell

Bar girls switch between shift of advertising, serving drinks, and prostitution.



Photo by Joseph Quinnell

Srinuan "Aor" Saokhamnuan (left) is stateless and has permission to be outside Thailand only through August 2010. Fongtip Boonsri (right) was granted Thai citizenship and permission to study in the U.S. through Aug. 2014. Their advocates say there's a chance the Thai government won't extend Aor's documents to allow her to finish a four-year degree at UWSP.

During an interview on Wisconsin Public Radio for his Thailand photo exhibit, Quinnell revealed his next plan, to spring at least two students out of Thailand to earn a degree at UWSP. People loved the idea, but he had no money for it and there was the sticky matter of the Thai government, which had never allowed a stateless person to receive permission for more than a month of travel.

The "never" part was lost on Quinnell, who by 2008 had partnered with Perri. They went for 90 days to Thailand, asking Thai officials unheard-of questions, like how two stateless young women could get passports in order to leave the country – and be allowed back in. They secured the final set of papers on their 89th day in the steamy country. Quinnell says, "This is historic. This permission has never before been granted in Thai history."

Four people boarded a plane the next morning, two of them without a dollar to their name and knowing three words of English: "yes," "no" and "hello." Neither the young women nor their parents were certain the two Americans weren't just human traffickers with better stories. Neither had ever left their district in Thailand so freely and now they were headed for Wisconsin.

Aor had gone to school only through sixth grade; Fongtip hadn't started until she was 13. So their first semesters at UW-Stevens Point have been in remedial classes. Quinnell and Perri say Thailand has adequate universities, but won't accept stateless people because they don't have the government ID number required to receive a diploma. An admissions official in Chiang Mai told them there would be no point in pushing for admission because the ID number is the first question on the application form.

Stateless people who manage to get enough money to buy a home have to find a trusted citizen to put the property in their name. Sometimes that trust is misplaced and the true buyer has no legal

right to challenge the citizen. Stateless people also have little or no recourse when they're deceived by factory employers.

Back in her homeland, Fongtip was enrolled in a class at Jantraka's center to become a seamstress. She had also received leadership training and was learning computer skills. She knows she came very close to being enslaved at a brothel – knows how lucky she was that her mother didn't quickly agree to that agent's offer.

Fongtip, whose English is quite good, says of her current situation, "It's just my dream. I want to study and have a good education and have a good job. I couldn't do that in Thailand." Her goal is to be independent and help others, perhaps as a child psychologist. She admits she thought Quinnell and Perri were crazy when they first spoke of coming to the United States. "When I left the country I was thinking, 'Is this real?' 'Is this true?' This is something amazing."

Aor also was working at the center when she was recommended for The Thailand Project. She dropped out of school at sixth grade, because education beyond that would have cost double what a Thai family with citizenship would pay. She did attend classes at Jantraka's center, but only because her sister pleaded with the leader of their village to override her mother. "My mom say, 'No. Why you need education?'"

Aor knew she didn't want to go to Bangkok. "A lot of people go to prostitute and they come back with HIV or never come home. They're just gone forever."

Aor, too, was skeptical when Jantraka suggested she should go with Quinnell and Perri. "Everybody would say, 'Oh Americans so crazy. It is impossible for stateless people to come to the United States.' Who am I? Just poor, not rich, and no citizenship."

Her goal now is to return with a degree in communications so she can tell the world about the plight of stateless people.

Aor says the culture also contributes to the problem of human trafficking. "Parents always teach you, 'I take care of you when you are child, now you must take care of me.' You might be really sad in your life, but you still go to make your parents happy."

Some back in Mae Sai cannot comprehend that Fongtip and Aor are not working as prostitutes. When they returned to Thailand for a visit last summer, people asked about how much money they were making. Aor says, "I'm getting an education. My mom really happy, but also scared."

Quinnell says, "Every step is a struggle. Through this project, I've seen some of the most horrific things I'll ever see in my life, but I've also seen the most beautiful things."

His partner Perri, 24, grew up two miles from the UWSP campus. She says the Thai culture and country are beautiful, but attitudes they come across can be discouraging. One goal of The Thailand Project is to "start some movement within these countries that would include the right to a higher education," she says. Thailand's own citizens are largely unaware of how vulnerable and exploited their country's stateless people are, Perri says. "This is a problem within Thailand, but it does not define Thailand."

Thailand Project saved

Quinnell at one time hoped The Thailand Project could be university-run. The university has agreed to allow Aor and Fongtip to pay in-state tuition.

A better arrangement has been worked out now that the project officially is a nonprofit organization. Its fiscal sponsor is the Community Foundation of Central Wisconsin. "We're basically now running a small not-for-profit business that fights human trafficking. It's definitely a step forward," Quinnell says.

Last year the project was in danger of running out of money. But in January a New York couple, David and Elsa Brule, donated \$25,000 to cover the cost of running the program for its third year, and also agreed to sponsor Quinnell and Perri with salaries as they continue their efforts. "This is incredible news," Quinnell says.

To get the two young women through school with bachelor's degrees, the project needs \$120,000. After the money is raised, Quinnell and Perri hope to use connections they've made through the Clinton Global Initiative to visit other universities to speak to students. He says their message will be, "You don't have to wait until after you graduate to make a difference. You can do it now."



Photo by Matthew Mahon

Perri and Quinnell with Bill Clinton, at the 2009 Clinton Global Initiative conference honoring humanitarian efforts around the world.



Photo by Joseph Quinnell

Children at the school-community center in Mae Sai listen intently as Aor and Fongtip – on their return trip home last summer – challenge them to hope for a future, stay in school, and seek help from staff if they hear talk of being removed from school for child labor or worse. This photo was taken almost exactly one year after Aor and Fongtip left Thailand to study at UWSP.

HOW TO HELP

For more information or to donate online please visit:
www.TheThailandProject.org