

End of the Road for Thai Project?

A Stevens Point student fought the odds for U.S. education for stateless Thai women. But a funding shortage has put his visionary program in peril.

Erica Perez - Milwaukee Journal/Sentinel

Stevens Point - Like many idealists, Joseph Quinnell believed he could achieve the impossible. Unlike a lot of dreamers, the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point student actually made it happen.

But now, harsh financial reality threatens to dash it all away.

This was the dream: He wanted to bring undocumented women at risk of being sold into forced labor from Thailand to UW-Stevens Point to earn degrees. Born on Thai soil but lacking citizenship, these women had little to no access to government health care, education or travel.

Quinnell pictured these women, armed with an education, returning to their own country to fight statelessness and the sex trade from within. To make it happen, Quinnell knew he had to get people as angry about the situation as he was - to see red. That's where the posters came in.

"Do you have sex with strangers?" they read. "Thousands of children are forced to every day. Get ready to join the fight against child prostitution. Get angry. See red."

The signs plastered all over campus helped launch an unprecedented effort that in August brought two 19-year-old undocumented Thai students from rural villages to central Wisconsin. State Department officials, experts on statelessness in Thailand and university administrators agree: The accomplishment was rare, impressive and important.



Photo by Joseph Quinnell

Fongtip Boonsri (center, in striped shirt) and Aor Saokhamnuan (center, in green sweater and pink shirt) gather with children at the Development and Education Program for Daughters and Communities in Mae Sai, Thailand. The two have been promised jobs with the organization after they graduate from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, but a lack of funding is putting their chance to earn degrees at risk.

"Mountains moved to make this happen," said Brad Van Den Elzen, director of foreign student programs at UW-Stevens Point. "So many people stuck their necks out who didn't have to."

But the dream could end. Despite efforts, the Thailand Project hasn't raised new donations. And the women will run out of funding in August, 2009.

"We've proven the concept of gaining human rights through education (can work)," Quinnell said. "If it dies with these two girls in one year, we're never going to be able to get this again."

Thai visit stirs outrage

It began in 2005, when Quinnell first traveled to Thailand. A victim of childhood abuse, the art student from Wisconsin Rapids wanted to document the child sex trade with his camera. He wanted to make images that would show humanity's dark side. He also wanted to find some hope.

Still, Quinnell wasn't prepared for the emotions he felt. From the doorway of a brothel, a girl no older than 12 smiled at him -

a child's smile - as a saleswoman quoted her price: \$15 an hour. The innocent smile haunted him. He documented her image on his digital camera, one of hundreds he would record.

In Mae Sai, he stumbled upon a non-government organization that provides free education for young women at risk of child prostitution. The Development and Education Program for Daughters and Communities was created by Sompop Jantraka, a two-time nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Quinnell had found darkness in Thailand's brothels. At Sompop's school, he found hope.

He also learned the bigger problem: Many of the girls were stateless, which made them vulnerable to trafficking.

Between 6 million and 15 million people are stateless worldwide. Not considered nationals, they generally lack political, social and economic rights. In Thailand, an estimated 500,000 hill tribe and minority people are stateless. Some have lived in the hill villages for generations. Others are illegal immigrants from Myanmar, China or Laos.

Statelessness is the greatest risk factor for human trafficking in Thailand, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Back on campus, Quinnell began to tell others what he had seen. He might be an average-looking college guy in a baseball cap and baggy hooded sweat shirt, but he knows how to persuade. Art student Susan Perri was among the first to hear the story.

"I just knew I wanted to be involved somehow," she said.

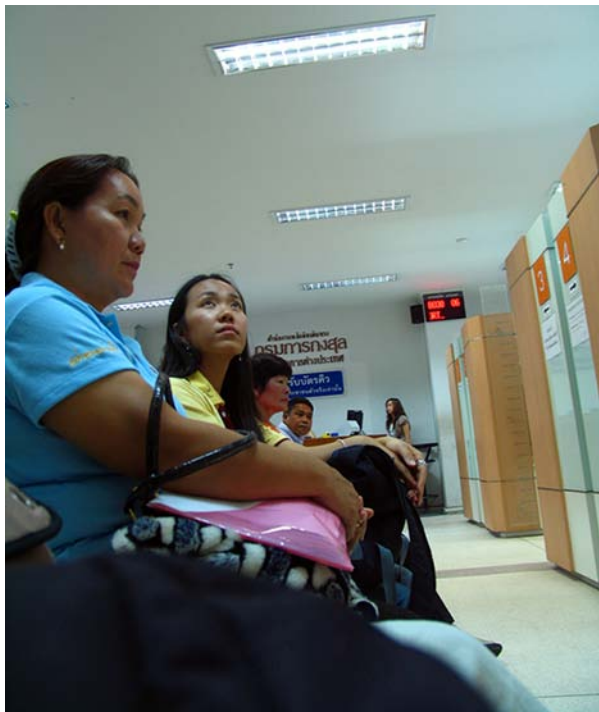


Photo by Joseph Quinnell

Fongtip Boonsri (center) waits for her number to be called at the Thai passport office in Chiang Mai. The once-stateless student, who's now studying in Wisconsin, was granted Thai citizenship.



Photo by Joseph Quinnell

Aor and her mother stand in front of Aor's childhood home in Mae Sai.

An idea takes hold

Quinnell knew his idea was wildly ambitious. Before asking people to believe, he wanted them to see the problem through his eyes - and his camera lens.

In spring 2006, Quinnell launched the largest art exhibition the college had ever hosted. If you were on campus, you couldn't avoid the 150 giant photos from Thailand hung everywhere. The show scored Quinnell a radio interview. On air, he pitched his idea: Let's bring women from the Thai development and education program to UW-Stevens Point.

Hundreds of conversations sparked, and things began to happen.

The university foundation created a Thailand Project fund to accept donations. Money poured in. Among those who donated were retired professor Susan Gingrasso and her husband, professor Doug Henderson.

"I got really excited," Gingrasso said. "I turned to Doug and said, 'We have to do something with this.'"

They talked to their pastor. Church elders at Frame Memorial Presbyterian pledged financial support for one student for one year, even before university officials knew how much that might cost.

Bob Tomlinson, vice chancellor for student affairs, became lead administrator on the project, but was skeptical.

"When he first came in, I thought, boy, Joseph, do you really know what you're talking about? We were talking about essentially undocumented non-citizens," Tomlinson said. "We had the clear understanding and the ground rule that we could only do this with private funds. We could not use state resources in any fashion."

The effort faced challenges in two countries, with supporters in both trying to make everything work. In the United States, State Department officials said the women would have to prove they wouldn't

become illegal immigrants. In response, Sompop promised jobs for graduates at his organization upon their return.

To get U.S. student visas, the women would have to prove they could pay for their studies. Van Den Elzen estimated how much the project would need to raise to pass muster: at least \$45,000 for one year for two students - more than they had.

Perri, the art student who now was Quinnell's partner on the project, crafted a plan to enlist fellow students in the fight. Some 160 volunteers helped hang posters all over campus. Be angry, the signs demanded. See red.

In one week, the fund-raiser netted over \$12,000. University foundation staffers helped raise more. They surpassed their goal.

In Thailand, the students would have huge difficulty getting Thai officials to approve travel outside the district, let alone the country, because they lacked birth certificates.

Sompop's assistant in Thailand began the pitch for the travel documents. It died practically on arrival. The head of Thailand's visa division said the students could leave but never return. But the project's whole point was to have the students go back to Thailand as advocates for their own people.

"I had people telling me, 'If you want to help these people, you can have them.'" Quinnell said. "But that's not the idea. Man that was depressing when that happened."

Finally, a breakthrough

Quinnell's blind faith faltered. He had put off graduation for two years, paid for multiple trips to Thailand and accrued thousands of dollars in debt, only to see the project stall. Then, by chance, Perri's relatives gave her money to see Thailand for herself.

Quinnell used airline miles to get himself a round-trip ticket, and they flew to Thailand in summer 2008 - more skeptical this time, but hopeful. They carried with them letters of admission to the university for two 19-year-old women, Srinuan "Aor" Saokhamnuan and Fongtip Boonsri.

Members of Thailand's Shan tribe, Aor and Fongtip were born in impoverished villages in the Chiang Rai province. They had no citizenship or birth certificates. Sompop's school had recruited them at a young age, helping both avoid human traffickers. But they grew up with many others who weren't so lucky.

Aor (pronounced "Aw") dreamed of becoming a spokeswoman for Sompop's organization. Fongtip wanted to counsel victims of forced labor and prostitution.

This time, Quinnell and Perri armed the students in Thailand more thoroughly.

They spent nearly 90 days doing research on Thai nationality laws, re-establishing contacts, and gathering family photos and letters of support. This time, the head of the visa division said

yes - but only if the head of immigration, the Ministry of Interior and the provincial office also said yes. It was another seemingly impossible hurdle.

"It was kind of like the 'Wizard of Oz': Bring me the witch's broomstick," Quinnell said.

Now it was up to Thai-speaking supporters to persuade officials there to see red, to grant something unprecedented even if it put their careers at risk. Sompop tackled immigration. Two law students from a clinic at Thammasat University in Bangkok volunteered to persuade the others. They got their approvals. Aor got an alien travel document, and Fongtip got Thai citizenship.

In the end, the head of immigration felt so moved that he offered his cell phone number for Aor and Fongtip to use if they faced problems getting out of Thailand.

Four days later, Sompop saw off Fongtip and Aor as they flew to Wisconsin.

"They can become our next generation of non-governmental organization leaders," Sompop said. "I believe this project is going to prove that things that were impossible can be possible."

Fongtip and Aor soak up every moment in the U.S. They take 20 hours a week of English as a Second Language. One donor gave them free tickets to a Packers game. They joke about shipping snowballs to their friends in Thailand.



Photo by Joseph Quinnell

Fongtip Boonsri (left) and Srinuan "Aor" Saokhamnuan go for a ride on donated bicycles in Wisconsin Rapids. The 19-year-olds from Thailand are students at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point through a program aimed at undocumented women at risk of being sold into forced labor.

A new challenge arises

Quinnell and Perri will graduate this spring, when they hope to collaborate on a documentary about statelessness. But a challenge remains: Fongtip and Aor have money only through May, but they need four more years to finish bachelor's degrees.

So far, the volunteer group the university formed to raise money hasn't gotten enough donations. University officials say they must walk a fine line, supporting the program without spending public resources on it - including money, space or time.

"(Quinnell's) story is remarkable, and it's one that we want to hold up as some sort of a poster child," Tomlinson said. "It comes down to resources. We are committed to the Thailand Project, but not at the expense of a student from Milwaukee or Green Bay."

That frustrates Quinnell, who believes the project is central to the university's mission of global awareness and public service.

Plus, Thai officials took big risks to grant travel documents. The U.S. admitted undocumented students in part because of the potential of the idea.

"They're going to come back and be effective advocates for stateless Thai people," said Michael Morrow, the top-ranking official in the U.S. Consulate in Chiang Mai. "There's a shortage of capacity in the hill tribe areas of people that really understand the laws."

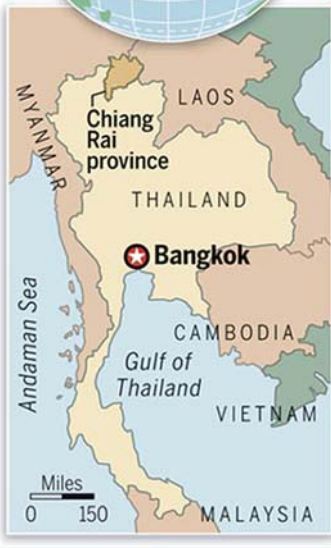
Quinnell worries the Thai government might not allow stateless people to study abroad again if Fongtip and Aor return without the promised degrees.

But he's an idealist, after all. And while raising the remaining \$200,000 might seem like a Herculean task for a small university in central Wisconsin, Quinnell still believes deep down - somehow - people will see red.

"I feel really hopeful at this moment. I feel like things are going to come together."

The Thailand Project

In August, two 19-year-olds from villages in Thailand's Chiang Rai province who were stateless enrolled in classes at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.



Bob Veierstahler
Journal Sentinel

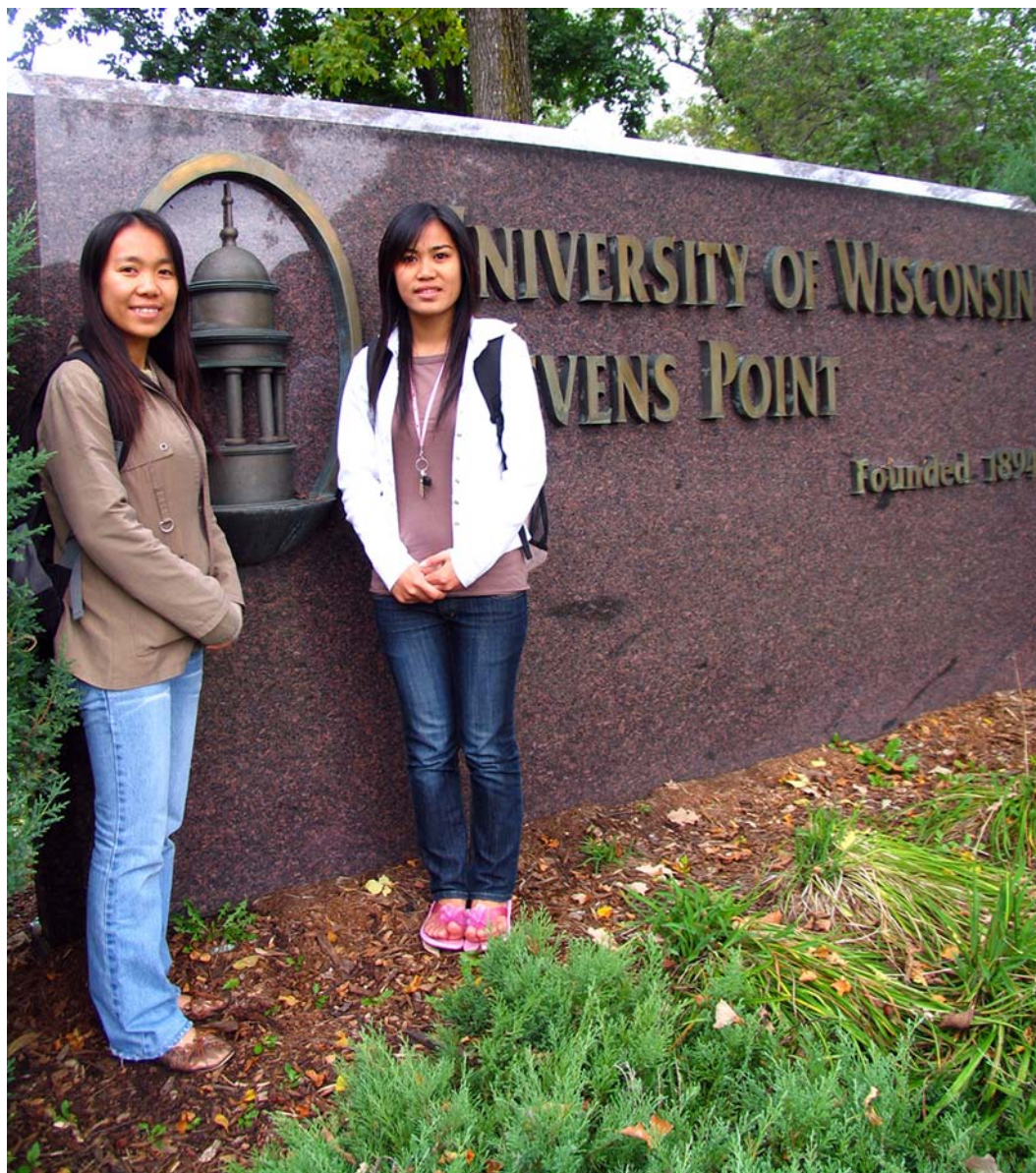


Photo by Joseph Quinnell

Fongtip Boonsri (left) and Srinuan "Aor" Saokhamnuan (right) pause for a photo before their morning ESL class. If scholarship funding is achieved, they will begin academic study in the fall semester of 2009.