April is the hottest month of the year in Thailand, and for students on summer holiday, also a time for water fights, swimming and traditional celebrations during the Songkran festival.

The kids faces lit up as Kru Ball, the Pongprae Resource Center teacher, asked who wanted to go on a field trip to the waterfall. Amongst cheering, laughing, and playing, the kids loaded into trucks and off they went to Khun Korn, the local waterfall. It is an annual trip that all the kids look forward to and this year was no different. April is the school summer holiday in Thailand, as it is the hottest season of the year. The best way to keep cool when there is no access to air conditioning is to stay in the water. Children will swim in rivers and streams, enjoy water fights, water balloons, and often times dump buckets of water on each other. This mostly takes place mid-month, during the week long Songkran festival. Songkran is the celebration of the Thai New Year, and full of water play, but also a time of deep tradition, honor, and paying respect to elders. The Pongprae
Resource Center hosts an annual Songkran day event, where the elders of the village are invited to participate in activities. This year, the kids of the village performed a skit and dance for the elders. The skit was well performed and entertaining as the kids pretended to sing and danced to traditional music. After the skit, the elders of the village sat on the stage while the students lined up to receive blessings. A special water made of flowers and oils was put into bowls and the children made their way one-by-one through the line, while the elders used flowers or their fingers to sprinkle water on each child’s head while whispering a blessing for the upcoming year. Songkran is a special time for families in Northern Thailand, as merit is made and traditions are performed. After the blessing ceremony, the families stayed for lunch and the children played games run by The Freedom Story staff. Many of the children in the village look to the staff as mentors and consider them family, and this sense of community was apparent throughout the day.
The high school and university students at the Chiang Rai Resource Center also enjoyed school holiday this month. In addition to working jobs and playing with friends, the students were invited on a community service trip to a local hill-tribe village.

*The goal was to help the students develop a heart to serve and give them an opportunity to give back to local communities.*

The hill-tribe village they visited was in need of a playground, so the staff and students loaded up old tires into trucks and hauled them up the mountain roads to the village. They spent two days carrying dirt, filling tires with rocks, painting, and designing a playground area. The Freedom Story students also had the opportunity to practice leadership skills by facilitating games and activities to the younger children in the village. They played various games including balloon and snake tag and kept the students entertained. The Freedom Story also used this opportunity to educate the local village students by running the 3-3-5 Program, a Child Abuse Prevention Program. They taught the students how to recognize, report, and help stop abuse. The families and children in the village were excited to host our group and appreciative of the new playground. The Freedom Story students also gained from the experience, learning how they can use their own skills to have a lasting impact on others.
Summer Activities

The Pongprae Resource Center activities staff, Kru Ball and Bee, have been busy this month keeping all the local kids entertained for summer holiday. Without school, the students have been coming to the center for full day programs. The staff have been creatively coming up with games to keep the kids busy as well as cooking things like, Tap Tim Glop, a Thai desert made from a starchy local fruit. The kids have also been playing sports, including basketball and soccer, as well as making arts and crafts and an taking an occasional field trip. All of The Freedom Story staff have stepped up to help run programs and the kids are full of smiles every time they arrive.

The village center is a community center and purposeful and intentional activities provide an outlet for students to keep busy over the holidays, learn new skills, practice leadership skills, and continue to develop strong and healthy relationships with each other and their mentors. The staff has also taken advantage of the full days to run education programs with the awareness team, for example a stop teen mom prevention program in coordination with the Thai government, as well as inviting a local teacher to the center to run a public speaking class.
During the summer holiday we were lucky to have Fulbright intern, Lauren Colby, join our team. She provided a fresh set of activities and English classes to both the staff and the students. She kept the students engaged in English lessons through fun activities, like scavenger hunts and music, and went along on the volunteer trip with the older students as well. She was able to impact the students in a positive way through her involvement and we will miss her. We are hoping her participation will encourage future Fulbright interns to come join us as well.

Boys Club

At the village center, Khae, the Advisor and Case Coordinator, facilitated a boys club group for young boys ages 9 - 15 in the community. She ran an Art Therapy Program to help the boys feel comfortable in sharing and expressing their emotions, thoughts, and feelings. Boys and Girls clubs are a way for the staff to connect with youth in a safe environment and The Freedom Story is planning to provide more of these in the upcoming months.
Human Rights

As part of his Legal Advice Program, Win, the Mentorship Program and Legal Advisor, led a legal training at the Pongphrae Resource Center this month. He spoke to the students about insurance and their legal rights regarding accidents, health and compensation claims. Win’s goal is to educate students from the villages about their legal rights in all areas, to help inform, protect, and prepare them for all situations. The students were eager to participate and due to Win’s wisdom and motivation, the program continues to grow and flourish.

Sustainability

This month, Worn and Bu, the Sustainability Team went to Bangkok to receive a Green Award from the Department of Environmental Quality Promotion (DEQP) and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. The textile production of The Freedom Story’s Sustainability Program passed the national green standard for Eco-friendly small scale textile production. They received a silver award, which means Seri products can officially use the Green logo to market their organic products. The Freedom Story staff are proud of the hard work and dedication of the Sustainability Team in working to reach this goal.

The team also hosted Lexi, a former intern from Berkley University in California. While interning and studying at Berkley, she took interest in the sustainability process and products, and came to have a tour of the program. Worn showed her each process of the program from raising silkworms, to the weaving and dyeing process, and the final products. It is always great to have support of young and enthusiastic community members who want to help make a difference.