March is an exciting month for our scholarship students as they transition into the summer and new school experiences.

Graduating Grade 9 students choose if they want to go to high school or vocational school. Graduating high school students have to apply to universities and think about subjects they feel passionate to study. To celebrate and honor these students, the Scholarship Team hosted a graduation party at the Pong Phrae Resource Center. Staff and families greeted the students with flowers and congratulations. Tawee, the Thailand Director, welcomed everyone and called each student by name to come up and receive a gift, including a Freedom Story T-shirt. Part of Thai culture and respect for elders includes a blessing. Each student knelt in front of his or her family as a gesture of appreciation and the family member gave a blessing to congratulate the students. For the students that do not have family, The Freedom Story staff filled that role to congratulate and bless the students in continuing on their journey. The students ended the ceremony with selfies and pictures, food, celebration, and fun.
Leadership Development

The Leadership Development Program at The Freedom Story continues to impact students through its partnership with ECPAT Thailand. This month ECPAT hosted a 4 day and 3 night camp with a focus on teaching about Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC). Ketsara, the Leadership Director, took 6 students from Pong Phrae village to join 26 other children at the event. The camp included relationship building activities, games, skits, and education about CSEC. On arrival the students wrote down what they hoped to get from the camp and they ended with a reflection and discussion. The students learned about 5 different types of online exploitation including cyber-space bullying, sexting and blackmail, child marriage, grooming children for exploitation, and travel. The students also practiced public speaking with the goal of teaching other kids in their village about these issues. At the Pong Phrae Resource Center, Kade also ran a Life Skills Camp. The goal was to teach the students independence through learning basic skills such as washing, ironing, and cooking. Students stayed overnight and played sensory games to enhance critical thinking skills, created art from natural materials, and played large group games. In the evening the kids performed a skit and cooked together using oven and gas free supplies. The students enjoyed the learning opportunity while gaining skills that will help them in the future.
This month, the counselors at The Freedom Story started to work with students as clients and counsel them in regards to stress, education, family, and mental health issues. In addition to setting up and starting the Counseling Program, the Awareness Team has been working to provide education activities for local communities.

_The families were interested in learning, and the Awareness Team is hoping through education they can help change the traditional Thai view that mental health is a shameful illness that cannot be treated._

Lux, the Awareness Director, led a training for parents and caregivers at the Pong Phrae Resource Center to educate them about different teenage mental health issues. Twenty-five local villagers came to the training and Lux taught them about topics like depression, stress, bipolar disorder, normal phobias, and alcoholism. In addition to education about these issues, she also provided tips and training on how to acknowledge, observe, and help teenagers that are suffering from these issues. Also this month, Lux partnered with the Scholarship Team to run an education advice session with graduating students. During the session, Lux administered a questionnaire she developed to guide and assist the students to learn their passions and dreams for future study and career. The team believes that helping the students find their strengths, weaknesses, and passions will help guide them to study subjects that align with who they are, and in the long term, lead them to be successful in both school and career. The students enjoyed the activity and helped positively prepare them for the transition into higher level studies.
The month of March brought many volunteers to both of our resource centers to teach classes, in addition to our normal after-school activities. Satvika Khera, a volunteer from India, taught a small group of students at both centers a photography and videography class. The students enjoyed learning about aspects of videography and how to take professional pictures. Lauren Colby, a volunteer from the Fulbright Scholarship Program in America, has been teaching a 5 week schedule of classes including yoga, music, and English to both staff and students. This month, we also welcomed a new local volunteer, Daniella Castro, who is an English teacher from America. She is taking over the role of Saturday English and various classes at the Chiang Rai Resource Center, as this month we sadly said goodbye to our current volunteer Elle Winstead.
In Other News

In big news, Anantara Vacation Club (AVC) reached out to us to ask if we wanted to partner with them for an annual fundraiser in Bangkok. The AVC team built a beautiful display including pictures, videos, and information about The Freedom Story. Tawee, Thailand Director, and Lisa, International Liaison, attended the 4 day event where they helped to sell raffle tickets for prizes donated by AVC. In addition to raising 50,000 baht, the team also raised awareness by promoting the work done by the Freedom Story through various interviews with media organizations in Thai and English. AVC published an article in Expat Magazine and is hoping to continue to raise money for the cause through corporate donations in other office locations, including Singapore and China.

After meeting the Service Coordinator from International Community School in Bangkok in January at an NGO fair at a local school, Lisa was invited to a discussion panel on human rights and anti-trafficking. Along with representatives from 4 other organizations, Lisa spoke to both middle school and high school students about the prevention side of anti-trafficking, the work that The Freedom Story does, and ways the students can get involved. Working with international school students allows for The Freedom Story to provide information and inspiration to young adults that will grow up in a global community. We hope to give them the information needed to find their own passions make a difference in the world.

There were several professional development opportunities for The Freedom Story staff this month. After attending a recent training in California, Tawee led a staff-wide training on data culture. Win, the Human Rights Manager and Tawee also attended a government meeting to apply for status as a public benefit organization. This approval would open doors for funding and applying to government grants in Thailand.
This month has kept the Sustainability team busy as they are looking forward to the launch of their new product line, Seri, later this year. Worn, the Sustainability Director, led a seminar and workshop at Maejo University in Chiang Mai organized by the National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA) on the use of microorganisms on agriculture. Worn also hosted a volunteer from our US team that has been working to promote the Seri line through a program at Berkley University in California. She came to visit the center, where Worn gave her a tour of the silkworm education center, showed her some of the Seri products, demonstrated the different aspects of the bag making process, including how to use indigo to dye cotton. Worn also led a workshop on indigo dyeing with the weavers at Baan Pang Lao Village in Chiang Rai. Learning how to do all parts of the bag making process is providing additional income for local families in surrounding villages, which will help provide the means to pay for their children’s education.