



# Refugee Relief

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## STUDENT SPOTLIGHT



### Kelli Bosak, AM '15

“SSA has set me on the path toward



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Bruce Thao spent three months in 2009 in Thailand, an experience, he says, that “changed the way I think about everything.” As a summer intern with RADION International, a local nongovernmental organization committed to helping Hmong-Thai villagers and Hmong-Lao refugees, Thao worked with children, learned about the administration of the organization and developed programming. Today, he’s still connected to RADION, working to ensure it has the resources it needs to fulfill its mission.

Thao, a combined AM/PhD student and a clinical second-year at SSA, was in Thailand through the University of Chicago Human Rights Internship program. He says that one of his main draws to the University was the program, which gives a select group of students the freedom to explore their interests in human rights and provides funding to work with a host organization to learn the skills and understand the difficulties inherent in putting human rights into practice. Prior to applying to SSA, Thao had spoken to former interns such as Jessica Darrow, a current SSA doctoral student, and when he started at SSA in the fall of 2008, he immediately submitted his proposal to the internship program.

In Thailand, Thao was the first intern for RADION and the first American to work with the organization. A two-

SSA has set me on the path toward gaining the skills and knowledge I need as a social worker. It has given me a professional identity, a network of motivated advocates, and a way to channel my passion by opening me to a variety of experiences.”

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year old organization with a staff of six, RADION has an ambitious agenda: to empower rural Hmong-Thai villagers and to serve Hmong-Lao refugees and others denied refugee status by the government. The organization provides job training, medical care, micro-credit programs and rapid-response programs for about 17,000 people. They distribute food, empower victims of domestic violence and run a children's shelter offering programs for abuse and drug addiction. While teams of medical professionals from Singapore help with medical care, RADION seeks to empower the community and not force them to integrate into Thai society. The Thai government is denying Hmong asylum seekers access to UNHCR to assess their refugee status and has cut aid to Hmong refugees. Thus organizations such as RADION are more important than ever for provision of these crucial services.

With such a broad set of programs at RADION, Thao developed a work plan which allowed him to do a little bit of everything. The Thai government would not allow Thao and other international aid workers to enter any of the nearby refugee camps— the largest which has more than 5,000 people—so he lived and worked in the children's shelter in Khek noi, the largest Hmong village in Thailand, located in a mountainous region similar to the part of Laos where many Hmong originated.

Each morning Thao and the staff would get the children

ready and drive them to school. He then spent his days in the office writing grant proposals, helping with English translation and doing research and administrative work. In the afternoon, he would implement therapeutic play activities with the kids, organizing outings and taking them swimming. As the children grew to trust Thao, he eventually developed a program addressing glue-sniffing, a popular drug of choice of children in the region.

“I feel a sense of responsibility and ownership when working with these kids. I had never lived among such a large Hmong population—and now I’m able to help my community,” says Thao, who is Hmong-American. Thao even had a chance to meet distant relatives in Thailand, which he says gave him a sense of home and a stronger connection to his work with Hmong refugees.

“I’m a first generation American. My parents simply don’t talk about what happened [when they had to leave the country],” he says. “They were initially scared that I was going to Thailand, but now they couldn’t be prouder.”

Back in Chicago, Thao is continuing his coursework at SSA, including a school field placement with World Relief, where he counsels refugee youth. He says he’s continually amazed and humbled by the resiliency of the Hmong as he studies the effects of trauma and migration. One of Thao’s most eye-opening experiences abroad was seeing

that many of the issues he encountered in rural Thailand are the same as those in the American inner-cities in which he has also worked, such as drug use, a sense of alienation among youth, and spousal and child abuse.

Although he's back from Thailand, Thao's relationship with RADION is not over. Upon his return in September, Thao founded a US national field office and was named Director of Operations for RADION International USA. His plans are to apply for nonprofit status, raise money, and recruit and train volunteers to go overseas. He's hoping to engage Hmong-Americans, many of whom are now well-educated, to volunteer in the villages as doctors, social workers and teachers.

Hmong—and others—have already been responding to his requests, asking how they can help. “People from all over the world, including students from other universities, are looking for ways to help the Hmong in Asia—but they haven't known where to start, they didn't know how,” he says. Thao says he's energized by the outpouring of support he's received and wants the Hmong community in Southeast Asia to know that “we have not forgotten about you.”

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