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Glass of Learning

In an exchange with us, the students of CIEE Thailand, *P'Suwit*, an organizer in Northeastern Thailand, told us that everyone must always keep his or her glass of learning half-full, because if it is filled to the brim, it will spill over, leaving no room for more growth and learning.

Before participating in CIEE Thailand, I would have thought, "*Well, that's why I've been going to school my whole life.*"

But I soon realized that learning is much more than what you learn in a classroom setting with books and a teacher; it's about opening your mind to the hard issues of life, to connecting to the people who surround you, whether that means your neighbor across the street or someone half-way around the world. It's about seeing where you fit into this world that we all live in, and finding what you can do to make it a better place.

So when I found myself living in a landfill for a few days, I thought there was nothing strange about it, though my family and friends back home sure did. But what better way to learn about consumption, the consequences it brings, and the people it affects, than to stay in a landfill community for a couple of days. And not just stay there, but work side by side with the villagers as they go about their daily lives, including, of course, scavenging.

Upon our arrival to the landfill community, we were taken on a tour, the main attraction, of course, being the landfill itself. The first thing that came to my mind as I gazed upon the miles and miles of trash was that there were so many plastic bags. I paid no mind to the fact that a pungent smell was wafting through the air, or that I was walking on top of literally tons of people's thrown out waste, I just could not get over the fact that there were so many plastic bags. But at some point, as I was trampling through the mounds of trash, trying not to sink down in the spots that were not quite as compact as the rest, I took a look around me, and just stood gazing at what had become my classroom. Here I was, standing on top of discarded plastics, papers, and food, and all I wanted to do was take in everything that I was seeing and everything that our guide was telling us about the landfill and the community. And I was really intrigued, if not excited, about my upcoming stint as a scavenger.

The next morning, at five a.m., my housemate and I went out with our Pa to try our hands at scavenging. With a basket on our backs and a pitchfork in our hands, we started up the hill of trash to meet the dump truck with the newest waste arrival. As I watched the trash spill from the back of the truck, I was struck once again by the fact that this was what I was doing for my education. And as I swung my pitchfork to strike that first blow into the heaping trash mound, I knew how lucky I was to be standing calf deep in a pile of garbage, trying to sift through it all to find the treasures that lay within that provide the many members of this community with their income. And what hard work it was! After only a short period of time, I had but a few items in my basket, whereas my Pa already had about a third of his filled. And the items which we could get money from were very specific. I would hold up one plastic bag for my Pa to okay, who, with just one glance would shake his head and with a smile say no. I would then hold up another bag, that to me looked identical, and my Pa would approve of this one. I couldn't seem to figure it out. But Pa appeared to have all the answers; I just wish I could have been more help.

After a few hours of hard work, it was time to head back down to sort out everything we had found. When we placed everything in front of us, I thought we, or Pa rather, had done fairly well. I might not have personally made Pa a lot of money, but I knew he was happy just to have

someone not only care about what he does, but to work along side him. For years, nobody would even look at the landfill, little lone enter into it.

Even today, the landfill community members are scoffed at, and when the few government officials do come to look around, they insult the villagers by wearing masks and leaving as quickly as possible, not daring to stay for a meal, which would be the polite thing to do.

So, as I left the community later that day, I knew that this had been one of the most satisfying educational experiences I have had. And one of the most important things to remember was that it wasn't all about me and my education. It was about a real community and real people, and what we could all do to try and understand each other and make the most out of the world we live in. That, I think, is one of the most important things that my experience in CIEE Thailand has shown me. And knowing this, I don't see a way that my glass of learning could ever be full, because there are too many people in this world to talk to and learn with.