

## IN THE SPOTLIGHT

# Brown shares talents with Thai students

By Olivia Hubert-Allen '09

Jim Brown inspires students in his Global Experience classes to make the world a better place through service. His lessons highlight individual responsibility and ask students to look beyond their own needs.

After several years of sharing that message, Brown decided to take his own advice.

"If I'm going to tell students to go out and volunteer and do things in the world, I need to do it myself," says Brown, associate professor of history. "There is a great deal of satisfaction in transforming my students, but I need to grow as well."

Now Brown finds himself spending his summers halfway across the world in the stifling humidity of northern Thailand. This is the third year he has volunteered with Openmind Projects, a Thailand-based organization that places English and computer teachers in low-income Thai schools. Brown works at Wat Phrathatwittaya, a Buddhist high school in Nong Khai that provides free education for the region's poorest students.

This past summer, Brown taught English to boys ages 12 to 18 alongside a native Thai teacher named Nikhorn Pathrat. Without the benefit of textbooks, Brown says, learning is slow and lecture-intensive. Students display a wide range of skill levels, which can make teaching difficult. Despite the challenges, Pathrat and Brown taught between two and four classes a day.

"There are virtually no native-speaking English teachers in Thailand," says Brown. "Thai teachers often don't want to work with volunteers because they are embarrassed that they don't speak English well."

Schools look to English-speaking volunteers to help strengthen their English programs. Without English skills, Brown says, Thai students will have difficulty competing in the global economy.

Attracting volunteers to live in northern Thailand is a challenge as well. Temperatures above 100 degrees and unbearable humidity make any physical activity difficult. Brown slept on the floor during his stay this summer, hovering close to a fan to find relief from the unrelenting heat.



Jim Brown travels each summer to Thailand, where he teaches English to low-income Thai high schoolers.

Spending summers in Thailand has been a sacrifice for Brown, who could have spent time in Vienna, Austria, furthering his professional research on 19th century peasants.

"I feel this moral obligation," says Brown. "There's this trade off — sleep on the floor in Thailand or go to Vienna and sleep in a nice place among nice things."

During breaks from teaching this summer, Brown stayed busy working on other projects. He helped the school abbot, Phrakru Suyarnasopit, create an English program to teach foreigners about Buddhist meditation. Brown also took a trip to Cambodia, whose historical genocide he covers in his Global class. While there, he prepared for a Kernodle Center service learning trip he will co-lead in May 2008.

Overall, Brown feels his experience in Thailand has helped make him a more valuable educator.

"It allows me to speak in a more authoritative way about taking global responsibility," he says. "Now I'm doing service, not just talking about it. When I go home at night, I have some meaning, and that's the important part." @