

In June of 2015, I traveled on a veterinary service trip to Chiang Mai, Thailand. For the first week, I volunteered at the world-renowned elephant sanctuary, The Elephant Nature Park (ENP), in all aspects of elephant care. During the second week at the Animal Rescue Kingdom (ARK) shelter, I learned veterinary skills in a clinical setting from a DVM, and provided veterinary assistance for 100 dogs. As part of my voluntary fundraising project for this trip, I raised \$1,350.00 to purchase over 100 pounds of veterinary supplies for both organizations. Through this endeavor and the success that ensued, I not only experienced how international support can promote the wellness of animals, but I also had the chance to connect Thailand with my communities in the United States.

Before I left ENP, I was fortunate to hear a lecture from founder Lek Chailert about the hardships and truth of elephant treatment for human entertainment. Although I knew about the ordeals elephants endure in around the globe, I was appalled by the extent of the torture I saw in the footage. Emaciated, exhausted, and beaten elephants slept on the sides of roads while cars drove past. They were too tired to care about the noise and vibrations. Calves were torn from their mothers to be “broken” and trained, while the mothers were killed because they were fighting to protect their young. Upon leaving ENP, many thoughts were spinning through my mind. I knew that I had done my job for the time being, yet I felt the need to do more.

During the following week at ARK, I met a frenzy of dogs in the back enclosure. After a few minutes of incessant licking and jumping, the pack dispersed and there stood a matted, tick-infested mix. His name was Nakhon, meaning “capital of a kingdom” in Thai. When he put his paws on my hip and stared with such conviction, I knew I had to do something. Over the course of the next few days I spent hours shaving him and removing hundreds of ticks. He even sat quietly, wagging his tail, as I drew blood for a 4DX test. I couldn’t believe the kindness in spirit, trusting nature, and complete forgiveness that this dog exhibited. He was truly special, and I would have been foolish to ignore his yearning for a second chance. Upon returning home, my parents proposed that I earn the money to adopt him. I worked as a groomer and dog handler throughout the summer, and I set up a GoFundMe campaign to earn funds. After meeting my goal, I coordinated his international transport, ground transportation from the shelter to the Chiang Mai airport, translators, veterinary services and health clearances. Within four months of my return from Thailand, I was able to unite this dog with my family, and give him a forever home.

I decided, upon his arrival, that he deserved a new name to match his new life, so I named him Conan, meaning “little wolf”. After his six months of challenging acclimation, I proposed and completed an independent project at Hotchkiss in which I trained Conan in obedience so that he could someday become a registered therapy dog. Throughout this process, I closely observed the interactions that students had with Conan. Whenever I walked him, students stopped to embrace him. The stress and exhaustion in their faces would melt away into a smile. Students commented on how seeing Conan was “the best part of their day”. As midterms approached, I realized that I could make a direct impact on the student community throughout the intensity of the weeklong exam period. I proposed a therapy dog visitation to the Dean of Students, my class dean, and library director and gained their support. I then planned and coordinated the visit of two therapy dogs and handlers during studying sessions in the library. When I first broke the news to the school, I received thirty-five email responses thanking me for making the visit a possibility and expressing their enthusiasm for my idea. On visit day, over one hundred students showed up in the library. I watched as they came down the steps, their moods completely transforming when they spotted the two dogs. For that hour and a half, students left their

worries at the door. Some cried, some laughed hysterically, some jumped around in excitement, and some just sat, quietly petting the dogs.

My proudest moment was this past December during the midterm exam period when I walked Conan through the same library doors. This rescue, whose only former knowledge was how to protect himself, now proudly wore his very own service badge. He sat with an open heart and lolling tongue as each student entered *my* therapy dog session. As the students surrounded him with smiles, he seemed to soak up their tension. It was as if he understood their suffering and was eager to make it all vaporize. I'd like to think that it was his way of being thankful for the life he is now blessed with.

In addition to Conan's therapy work, I continue to educate my peers at Hotchkiss about the importance their decisions have on animal welfare while they are in foreign countries, such as not supporting elephant riding. As the head of the Hotchkiss Humane Society, I actively organize supply drives and fundraisers for local shelters such as the Little Guild of Saint Francis in West Cornwall, Connecticut. I also created a volunteer program so that Hotchkiss students could participate in animal welfare work in their local community.

I believe that often times I can do the most good by looking around at my immediate surroundings and finding a small way to affect change. Some of the world's greatest problems seem to be in foreign places, and for this reason we often overlook opportunities to create a better existence for our immediate community members. Although my volunteer initiative began many miles away in Chiang Mai, it followed me back home. Going into the planning of Conan's therapy dog visit, I knew that I would not be able to create a stress-free exam week. I only knew that I could do something with my passion for dogs, my knowledge of their stress-relieving abilities, my resources, my experience and my will to bring about change.

