

Founding GC Participant Forges a Powerful Path in Thailand

Long-time Global Campus Chiang Mai participant Sriprai Upanom, who goes by the nickname “Pim,” may look small, but she rolls big. A leader in and out of Global Campus, Pim’s latest dream is to deliver workshops to people across Thailand on how to be a powerful wheelchair user – how to get over, around or through just about any obstacle. Her message to fellow wheelchair users is simple: nothing should keep you from getting where you want to go, even if the world doesn’t seem to be designed with you in mind.

Pim inspires her audience because she’s lived out this message many times over. After a motorcycle accident left her partially paralyzed at 19, she agonized over how to move forward. In Thailand, it’s expected that the youngest daughter will provide for her elder parents. Pim wondered how she would ever be able to generate income to fulfill this responsibility.

Pim joined GC Chiang Mai 15 years ago, in its formative years, and quickly became a member of the core team. The Global Campus model promotes personal development, using education and peer support to reorient a participant’s experience away from one of disability, toward one of positivity and possibility. Pim took up the charge, and decided to pursue her dream – to establish the first mini-market in her rural village, to generate income for her parents and create a community gathering place for her neighbors. Pim learned how to write a business plan, and submitted a successful proposal for an incentive grant from the World Wide Small Change Foundation, a long-time supporter of the Global Campuses Foundation’s work in Thailand.

This grant changed her life. The new mini-market thrived, allowing Pim to save money to accomplish yet another dream – she purchased land and built a new house, fully adapted for her own needs and those of her aging parents.

After just a few years, Pim left her older sister in charge of the successful market and moved to the city to work as a hospital receptionist, drawing a steady income there as well. For seven years she regularly drove the 30 miles home on her days off to help her parents with the cooking and cleaning, making the trip through intense heat or monsoon rains on her wheelchair-adapted motorbike. This gave rise to her third dream, to buy an adapted car. She worked overtime over long periods, inspired by the thought of being able to take her parents to their doctors’ appointments, and to make pilgrimages to famous temples, a life goal of many Thai Buddhists. Eventually she bought a car, and found a mechanic to adapt it to her particular needs. Today, Pim can often be found transporting campus participants to GCF seminars and field outreach activities.

Last year, the long hours sitting in a wheelchair at the reception desk finally lead to a health-based change. As always, Pim drew on the guidance of her Global Campus experience to reflect on her accomplishments and to explore new possibilities. Working with GCF, she decided to dedicate herself to Global Campus initiatives full-time. She leads community assessment and planning activities relating to universal design, particularly wheelchair accessibility. She's become an advocate, teacher and champion for persons with disabilities, demonstrating that becoming an agent of change – in one's own life, and in society – are attainable goals for anyone with the will to persist and to strive. Her work in this sphere is rewarding, but her eyes still shine brightest when she relates the joy she shares with her beloved Mother and Father, now in their late 80's, well cared for and endlessly proud of their daughter's many accomplishments.