

# Princeton-in-Asia: B

□ VICKY S. MENDOZA

In 1898 Princeton University in the United States established the Princeton-in-Asia programme, aimed at giving new graduates a chance to immerse themselves in a foreign culture.

In the beginning the programme had an essentially missionary purpose, but over the years it has evolved to encompass young adults from schools all over the United

States working in a range of fields.

In 1998 programme graduates came to Laos for the first time, with volunteers coming to work on conservation-related programmes.

After seven years the programme has expanded to other projects and fields, like teaching at Vientiane College.

Dorian Needham is a newly arrived volunteer, who has been in Laos for all of three

weeks. After an enthusiastic initial observation, he says, "I've been overwhelmed by the friendliness of the Lao people I've met and their generosity and openness in approaching me or letting me approach them".

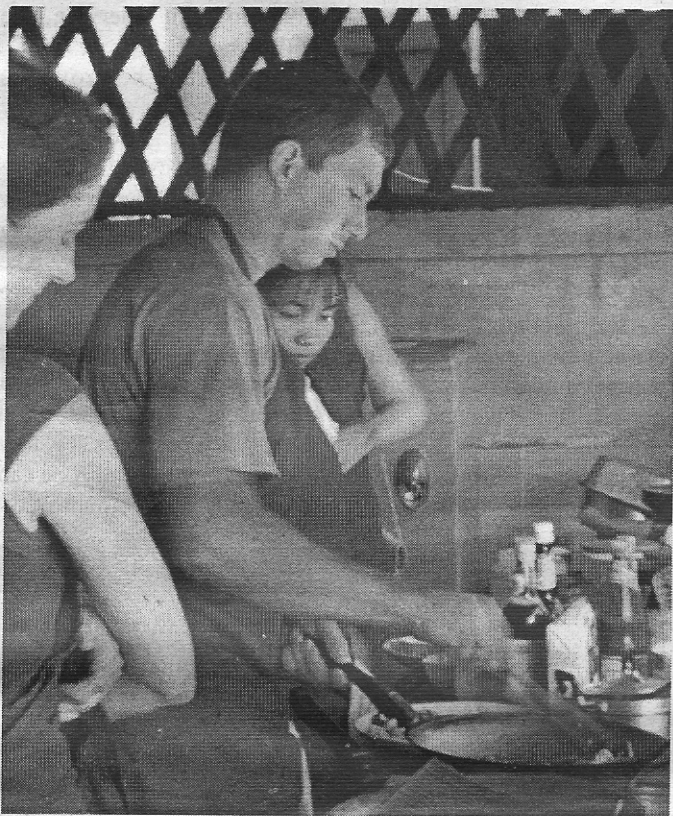
Recently, he went on his first out of town trip and found that "northern Laos is a land of incredible beauty, where craggy mountains jut up into the sky, reflected amongst the whirlpools and eddies of the Mekong."

He met many very friendly people throughout his trip, "though as a falang I was definitely a novelty in some of the tiny villages around Hongsa!"

As a volunteer Dorian teaches English to a wide spectrum of students, including young learners in the intermediate level, teenagers and young adults in the post intermediate level and he runs a writing class for teenagers and adults.

"The level of English among my students is very high, so I've been wonderfully surprised."

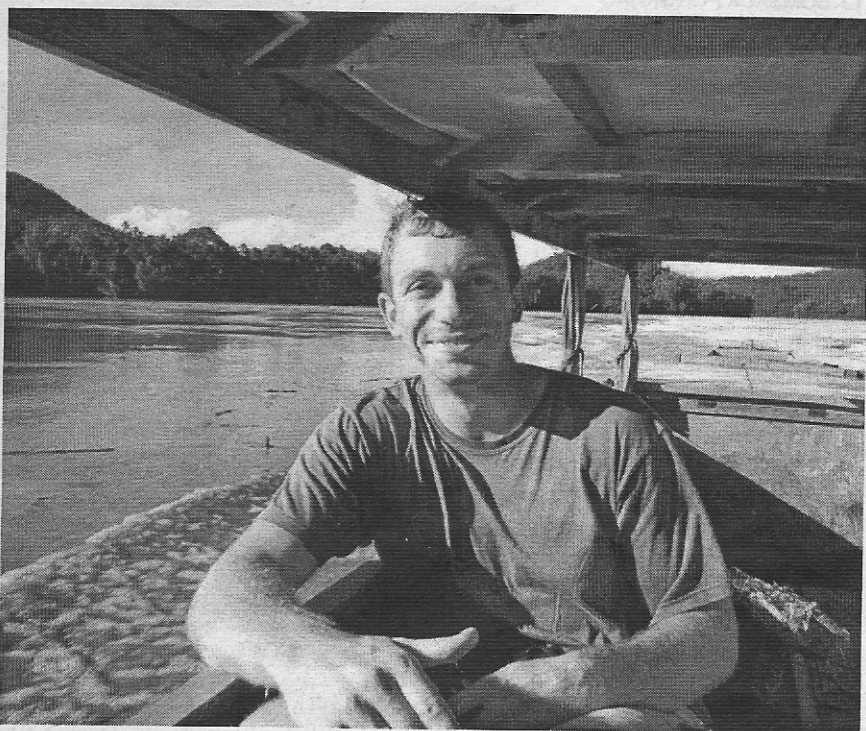
The primary purpose of brining volunteers like Dorian to Laos, is to provide voluntary service based work in Southeast East Asia, including teaching and working for non-government organisations. The programme also gives young people a chance to experience life in a foreign



Dorian learns the secrets of Lao cuisine.

# Bridging east and west

Enjoying a long tail boat ride.



culture, as more than just a tourist.

While China has been a volunteer destination for nearly a hundred years, foreign postings now include Kazakhstan and Japan.

In addition, the programme is no longer exclusive to Americans. Dorian is Canadian, while another participant, Elona Toska, is Albanian.

Dorian plans to embark on a career in foreign policy in the future, and believes his stint in Laos will benefit him immensely in his chosen field. "If you just put yourself in the place of people of other countries then you realise that not everyone thinks the way you do. Cultural interaction is more than just learning how to say 'Hello, how are you?', and sampling some food here and there. It's much deeper than that. I hope to gain a better understanding of the Lao culture while I'm here. If that can one day help me craft better policy then I would love

that."

Already he has found many similarities between Vientiane and his home city of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada. "Both are very green cities where it rains a great deal. My city is also known for being relaxed and laid back."

Dorian says the people

living in the two cities are also alike because they have "a sense of caring and family."

"I will say though, that Vientiane is a little more unpredictable. If you set out to do something it might happen, but there's a chance that it might not. Life is just a little less predictable here."

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