



RECONNECTING URBAN YOUTH TO THEIR LOCAL HERITAGE

Laphawan Leerapongkul (NeighborYouth, Trawell Thailand)

NeighborYouth is a camp for kids in Bangkok's Old Town area, that aims to transform the community into a friendly playground and learning space for local youngsters.

YOUTH IN URBAN POOR COMMUNITIES

In declining communities of Old Town Bangkok, especially in informal settlements, low-income residents are struggling to make a living and take care of their children outside of school hours. At the same time, there are no proper or safe spaces in these neighborhoods for these children to play or engage in outdoor activities. This lack of support increases risk factors for social problems ranging from domestic violence to severe issues such as drugs and prostitution.

Dating back to over a century ago, Old Town communities were once vibrant and well-developed, with a richness of culture and identities. For a time, these authentic ways of living were passed on from generation to generation. However, modernization is wiping out much of this intangible heritage. Kids grow up today with little connection to their neighborhoods. Many move away

and prefer not to follow in their parents' footsteps, so much so that some traditional occupations are now endangered.

VOLUNTEER-BASED ACTIVITIES FOR KIDS

In response, Trawell Thailand (a social enterprise focusing on local economic empowerment through community-based tourism) initiated NeighborYouth: a project aimed at reconnecting kids to their local heritage. We focused on four Old Town communities that Trawell had already been working closely with; Ban Bat, Wangkrom, Nang Loeng, and Mahakan. The project was first piloted as a two-day summer camp, with over fifty children between eight and fifteen years old from the four adjacent neighborhoods. To help our team, we recruited a group of so-called 'Neighbor Rangers', prioritizing older volunteers who grew up in or nearby such communities. We invited them to utilise their skills and ideas to create better spaces for kids by co-creating a 'NeighborYouth Camp' in their given areas.



In these camps, kids get to meet new friends, learn to map important sites in their neighborhoods and discuss the uniqueness of their communities. Sometimes we play sports, and guide each other in fun team building activities. We also host walk-rally games, where the kids have to complete various missions by learning their community's local professions, such as painting

alms bowls in Ban Bat, and interviewing the craftsmen and women in Mahakan.

IMPACTS

Even though the focus of these activities are the kids' own communities, afterward they are often surprised by how much they've learnt from looking into the details of places they thought they were familiar with. Many say they are now able to absorb the community's values and identities, and appreciate it in different ways. They are embodied with a sense of belonging and connectedness with the community. And as a byproduct, they also take away new skills of teamwork, leadership, and how to take care of each other. Indeed, we observed that long after the camps, some children continue to meet each other regularly and initiate fun activities such as football matches and science experiments.

The experience has also been valuable for our Neighbor Rangers. They say it has been a great opportunity to look back at their hometowns and see another side of the city that they have never experienced. They now realise the extent of the needs and issues which exist in the heart of our capital. They are keen to do more community work activities and to be part of creating a better city for all.

With positive feedback from kids as participants, volunteers as organisers, and parents in the communities, NeighborYouth has decided to organise activities more often. Now the volunteers are rotating to set up an annual summer camp and weekend day activities such as art workshops, cooking classes, and museum visits. And we are determined to continue doing our part, starting at the neighborhood scale. We want to be part of encouraging the next generation to be their better selves and to become

active, responsible citizens. Ultimately, our mission is to revitalise these declining communities and help them become as lively as they once were.

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DO'S

- **When dealing with kids, the key is to make it fun!** To make youngsters interested in something that they have never valued before is a big challenge. By designing our activities in a game-like format, we find that they are more eager to participate, especially when they're with friends!
- **When using the volunteer model, make sure to have a shared goal for each job and to provide concrete guidelines.** This will help to fulfill their expectations and achieve work goals at the same time.
- **Hold as many activities right in the community space. This allows the kids' parents to witness their children's learning, fun and laughter.** It's the best way to build trust among parents and to increase their willingness to cooperate with us in the future. For us,



kids are a good entry point to approach the rest of the community.

- **Engage every sector as much as possible to let them see what we are doing.** For the camp, the local district office provided an assembly venue. Local entrepreneurs were also invited to engage with the kids during the walk-rally activity held in the neighborhood.
- To work with kids and to build trust in the community takes time. Thus, **consistency is key.**

DON'TS

- Avoid talking about sensitive issues: we should always be aware of the kids' sensitive situations. In many cases, it's difficult for them to talk about their families, parents' occupations or other problems until they're ready or trust us.
- Don't spoil them! : some children who lack proper care at home will call for a lot of attention from us. We should try to keep a balance between taking care of them and spoiling them. Some basic information on child psychology should be made available to volunteers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lapthawan Leerapongkul: originally from Bangkok, Thailand, she holds a master degree in Urban Studies from Malmö University, Sweden. She has experience working with local communities in her hometown. Now, she and her friends initiated the citizen-driven urban development organization called SATARANA (translated: public at large).



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