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## The Wai: College Admission Essay Sample

We climbed out of the van and into the lush Thai jungle, overgrown and wild, unlike anything in America. The soothing trill of the locusts was met by complete silence, aside from the deep breaths of the colossal creatures across the road and the occasional gasp from an amazed service member. The thick, damp air that was hung like blankets over the treetops wrapped us in the scent of an organic mixture of musk and grass. I soaked in the atmosphere, mesmerized by the elephants, who seemed gentle and serene despite their daunting stature.

The first few moments of my service trip to Thailand to volunteer with endangered Asian Elephants were filled with beauty and wonder. But as my service group and I returned from our awe-induced state, we got to work caring for the elephants. The group leaders introduced me to my Thai mahout, Pun, who would be helping me care for our elephant Tantawan. I reached out my arm to shake his hand, but his palms were pressed together in a wai, the customary greeting in Thailand. I was taken aback and filled with panic; for the first time in my life, I was in a situation where I did not know how to properly communicate. Pun barely even spoke English, and I knew the next week would be challenging. I would have to work to communicate with Pun in less conventional ways than language could provide.

Rising with the sun each morning, Pun and I would trek into the jungle to find Tantawan quaintly munching on banana leaves. On the way, Pun would teach me his language. He pointed at chickens and exclaimed "kai!" and, in his happy-go-lucky nature, burst into Thai song about different animals. Though I couldn't understand what he was saying, the tone of his voice told me everything I needed to know. If Pun's voice had a gentle lilt, I knew he was happy with my work. But if he took on a solemn tone, I knew that I was doing something wrong. Together, we fed Tantawan—I always snuck her extra sugarcane—and examined her for any wounds.

Immersing myself in the Thai culture and diving into service enlightened me in ways I could never have predicted. Among the most valuable lessons was one from Pun: that relationships have no limits. Though language divided us, Pun, Tantawan, and I worked together in harmony. I will never forget Pun's smile when he made me a hat of banana leaves or Tantawan's joyful trumpet when she took her baths.

When I first discovered that Pun and I did not share a common language, fear overwhelmed me. How can I possibly collaborate with someone I can't communicate with? I wondered. But my worry was without reason; the language barrier was not a barrier after all. Pun and I communicated with body language and tone to care for Tantawan in the best way possible. Different cultures do not hinder achievement, but rather encourage joint effort. My initial distress

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