

Welcoming future leaders to advance health care around the globe

BY JOHN POWERS

Thailand is known throughout the world as the “Land of Smiles” because of the extremely friendly nature of its citizens.

For YSN doctoral student Chatsiri Mekwiwattanawong, her first impression of New Haven made her feel right at home. She had just arrived to begin her one year of study as a PhD student from Thailand when her landlord welcomed Chatsiri to her new home.

“How do you like New Haven?” the landlord asked.

“I had only been in New Haven for a few hours and already he wanted to know what I thought of his city,” Chatsiri comments. “That is the sign of a friendly place.”

Chatsiri is the latest example of a long and fruitful collaboration between YSN and Mahidol University in Bangkok.

Begun in the early 1970s, the relationship between YSN and Mahidol has continued to flourish. Poolsook Sriyaporn '73 came to YSN's Pediatric Nursing program as a student and has continued her connections with faculty and mentors since returning to Thailand shortly after commencement. Now a faculty member at Mahidol's Ramathibodi Department of Nursing, Poolsook continues to work and enhance this partnership. She was followed to Yale by Wantana Maneesriwongul, part of YSN's first doctoral class in 1998. Dr. Wantana was just recently named Thailand's “Nurse of the Year.”

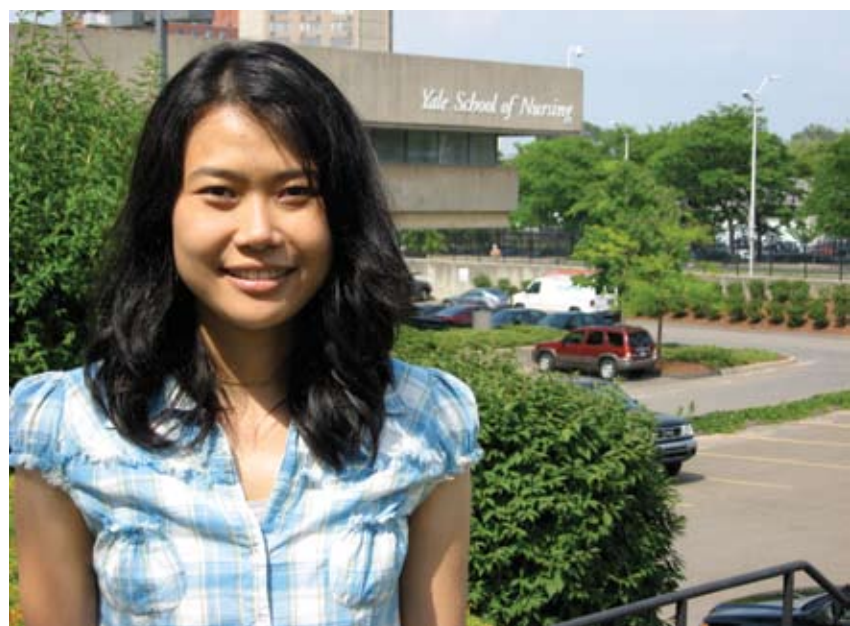
This cooperative venture has continued with faculty exchanges and a major conference held in Thailand in January 2006 that brought together scholars from Asia, Europe, the Middle East and North America. Since the mid-1990s, doctoral candidates like Chatsiri spend one year at YSN to work with senior faculty who serve as mentors with their dissertations and research.

“The Thai students have so much to offer us here at YSN,” states Margaret Grey '76, Dean and Annie Goodrich Professor. “They bring such a rich culture, extremely competent health care practices, and the opportunity for us to have cross-cultural research opportunities.”

Once the Thai students finish their year of study, research, and dissertation work at YSN, they return to Mahidol to complete their doctoral program. Faculty from YSN take part in the dissertation committee with these students, either participating via digital teleconferencing or actually traveling to Thailand to be present at the dissertation defense.

Funding for this program comes directly from the King of Thailand, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Mahidol is

YSN has hosted a series of scholars from Thailand, including: Chatsiri Mekwiwattanawong (below); Poolsook Sriyaporn '73, and Wantana Maneesriwongul '98 DNSc; Pawana Keeratiyutawong and Kusuma Khuwatsamrit; Somsiri Athaseri, Malatee Rungruangsiripan, and Apinya Siripitayakunkil; and Nuchanad Jeangsawang, and Suchira Get-Kong, pictured with Dean Margaret Grey '76.



the King's University, and the longtime revered monarch has dedicated funding from his government to provide tuition, travel, fees, and expenses for the Thai students studying at YSN.

While at YSN, Chatsiri has been mentored by Gail D'Eramo Melkus, Independence Foundation Professor of Nursing at YSN and Associate Director for the Center for Excellence in Chronic Illness Care. Dr. Melkus has dedicated her career and research to studying adults with Type 2 diabetes, which coincided with Chatsiri's research interests.

Unfortunately, as Thailand becomes more Westernized and developed, urban sprawl has come to this nation and obesity is a growing problem. With obesity comes diabetes and cardiac disease, now major health concerns for the Thai people.

“Chatsiri's work mirrored my research on Type 2 diabetes in adults,” comments Melkus. “Standards of care for diabetes are necessary in both the United States and Thailand.”

“There is now an epidemic of diabetes in Thailand,” states Chatsiri. “The diet has changed to fast foods, leading to diet changes, obesity, and poor health.”

Her goal is to further research dissemination on diabetes and healthy living to the masses in Thailand, to make a tangible difference in the lives of her people.

Traditionally, two or more Thai students come to YSN for the year of study, but for a variety of reasons, Chatsiri was here alone.



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Her fellow YSN doctoral students jumped right in and made her feel at home.

“I loved her amazement at our weather and how she coped with the cold,” says Moira O’Neill ’12, a fellow doctoral student at YSN. “We bought her some layers to wear and she invested in two snow jackets that she wore at the same time.”

“All of the PhD students at YSN became my friends and they took good care of me,” Chatsiri adds.

O’Neill had a unique and interesting perspective on Chatsiri’s native land, having traveled throughout Thailand for several months back in the 1980s.

“Chatsiri described to me an epidemic of diabetes related to significant changes in the Thai diet,” explains O’Neill. “The most interesting thing to me was learning from her how things had changed. When I was there I never saw an overweight person.”

“Meeting Chat was akin to meeting a national leader who has taken on a very important role for her country, to figure out solutions for improving the health of her countrymen through adjusting the way systems function, the knowledge and preparation of health care professionals and paraprofessionals, and the knowledge of healthy living among the population in general,” O’Neill continues. “This is the very exciting thing about being at Yale, that you often find yourself in a room with someone who just may be changing the course of history in an entire country.”

This past August, two new Mahidol doctoral students arrived at YSN to begin their year at YSN. Suchira Get-Kong is being mentored by Dr. McCorkle, while Nuchanad Jeangawang is studying with Tish Knobf and Marge Funk ’84.

What did Chatsiri gain from her time at Yale?

“We are taught how to think at Yale, to learn how to solve problems ourselves with discussion and presentations,” Chatsiri says.

It is the people of Thailand who will eventually benefit from Chatsiri’s time and experiences at YSN.