

C From Thailand to Stillwater, Cowboys go

alumni

by rebecca l. nida

Students from around the world look to Oklahoma State University's College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources for the best educational experiences. Two CASNR alumni made the most of their OSU experiences and are now serving as presidents of major universities in Thailand.

Maejo University, or MJU, and Chiang Mai University, CMU, are located in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Chiang Mai is the second-largest city in Thailand.

Thep Phongparnich, president of MJU, is just one of the students who roamed OSU's Agricultural Hall. He earned his doctorate of agricultural education from OSU in 1978.

"As an ordinary student, I was so impressed with the OSU students because they all looked like real cowboys," said Phongparnich. "It had become one of my dreams to study at OSU if I had the chance to go to the USA."

As a student, Phongparnich began his climb up the campus ladder. Becoming president of the Thai Student Association in 1977 was a starting point for him. He also participated in the Horticulture Club and the Collegiate Future Farmers of America.

Robert Terry, agricultural education regents' professor emeritus, served as Phongparnich's adviser. He said Phongparnich was an active member in the college and in the classroom.

"Our Thai students were very accom-

modating, pleasant and cheerful," said Terry. "Phongparnich never spoke out of turn and was very appreciative of any help. These students were a really good exposure for us and our other students."

Terry said, at the time, these men did not know the impact they were or would be making on students around the world.

MJU is a state university and the oldest agricultural institution in Thailand. MJU's mascot is none other than a cowboy.

Phongparnich's time at OSU not only gave him the best educational experience, but also a look at the cowboy way of life. Since his presidency, MJU has become known as the "Home of Cowboys." Their mascot is a Pistol Pete look-alike atop a bucking horse.

"I certainly got this concept from OSU," said Phongparnich. "I have been dreaming about this mascot ever since 1979 when I just came from OSU and started to work at MJU. During that time, no university or college in Thailand had a mascot. MJU was one of the first to have one."

He said the cowboy represented men who worked in agriculture, and a cowboy should not be afraid to work under the sun. Since MJU is an agricultural university, Phongparnich chose this mascot. He said cowboys represent hard work, but also remain true gentlemen.

Pongsak Angkasith, president of CMU,

also knows the halls of the agricultural education department. He received his master's and doctoral degrees in agricultural education from OSU in 1974 and 1976.

Angkasith also began his climb up the leadership ladder after serving as the president of the Thai Student Association in 1974. He was named Graduate International Student of the Year by the OSU International Student Association in 1976.

In November 2004, Angkasith was inaugurated as president of CMU. In the same month, OSU President David Schmidly presented him with the OSU Distinguished International Alumni award.

James Key, professor emeritus of agricultural education, said Angkasith was an excellent student in his classes. He said he knew both men had high expectations for their futures.

"I did not expect in total to become the president of CMU, but during my school career I was trained to be a leader and administrator at both CMU and OSU," said Angkasith. "They supported me to work at this responsible and accountable position with high honor."

Key visited Angkasith in Chiang Mai when Angkasith was the head of the agricultural education and extension department. Since then, Angkasith has made great strides through his administrative accomplishments at CMU.

CMU's main campus is spread across 725 acres with Thailand's original forest and main attractions surrounding it. Angkasith said it is the first regional university of Thailand, founded in 1964.

"OSU and Stillwater are my second home. I spent three years there and know every corner of the town," said Angkasith. "The two times that I have come back to visit OSU, they have still kept the old way of life [with a] nice, clean and green campus to make a suitable environment for studying. Stillwater people and our OSU friends are very nice to the international students. I was very happy to be in Stillwater."

Thailand university presidents are appointed by the King of Thailand.



OSU alumnus Pongsak Angkasith serves as president of Chiang Mai University. photo courtesy of adele tongco

to the distance

The king decides if the appointee is fit to hold this position. For every university graduation, the King or Prince of Thailand is present.

Phongparnich and Angkasith spent time together not only while in the classroom, but also by living together. They served as mentors for one another's academic success.

Key said Angkasith played an instrumental role in bringing Phongparnich to OSU. Because of the success he was having, Angkasith encouraged Phongparnich to come here and be a part of the program.

Terry said the extreme respect these men have for any kind of authority is unique, especially for their teachers. To these students, the professor was always right, and they had hesitancy in asking questions or participating in discussions. Eventually, the faculty helped the Thai students overcome their reluctance in class.

"If either of them were to walk into the room right now to shake hands with us, they would take our extended hand and place their other hand over it and bow slightly as a signal of their honor and respect," said Terry.

There were challenges when working with international students during this time. Key and Terry said the department learned to handle language and cultural adjustment difficulties.

Terry said breaking these boundaries opened new doors. Once these boundaries were broken, mentoring and working with international students provided a rewarding experience for the entire agricultural education faculty.

These mentors meant the world to Phongparnich's and Angkasith's educational experience at OSU.

"Many persons made an impact on my life, my career and my success at OSU where I learned to work hard and join with other international students," said Angkasith. "Dr. Terry and Dr. Key gave us valuable time and knowledge during our time at OSU, which makes us proud of them."

Phongparnich said he agrees.

"As an ordinary Thai citizen, it is in-

deed an honor to serve your country and your people by being president of a state university. I feel I could serve it honorably and with excellence, particularly with my strong conviction and vision. I know I am a good leader because OSU made me one."

These men have devoted their educational experience to making Thailand a better place educationally and economically.

David Henneberry, CASNR assistant dean for international programs, said the Thai people feel education is the key to a growing country.

"OSU is known globally for its strong educational commitment to international students," said Henneberry. "Our educational objectives and curriculum are being used globally. These alumni are taking what they have learned here and implementing it at colleges overseas."

The cowboy spirit has inspired these alumni to excel academically.


Terry said he was not sure how much he had to do with Phongparnich and Angkasith's success, but it was one of those rare privileges where he was on the receiving end of the really meaningful experience of being associated with them.

"I am certainly gratified and thankful that I had the opportunity to be a part of it and got to know these people and experience for myself some of the things they do," said Terry.

"They are very gracious and loving people, and there

is no pretense to their approach," said Terry. "They are truly genuine and show a respect unlike any other."

Key and Terry said OSU's enthusiastic cowboy spirit has spread to Thailand through CASNR's graduates. These students have taken back to Thailand a part of Oklahoma's success in education, leadership and culture. It reflects in their actions as presidents of these major universities.

No matter your background, culture or beliefs, CASNR can find a place for everyone to become leaders. These alumni went the distance to explore their educational opportunities and to prove there can be a little bit of cowboy culture in everyone. 



OSU alumnus Thep Phongparnich is the president of Maejo University, the "Home of Cowboys." photo courtesy of adele tongco