



The Collegian

The University of Richmond

Thursday, March 1, 2007

"Students hear Thai rice farmers' pitch for fair trade"

by Chris Vola

Some University of Richmond students got a literal taste of the benefits of organic farming and sustainable agriculture at a downtown restaurant Tuesday evening. Approximately 35 students gathered at Mom's Siam on Cary Street to eat organic rice and to hear Man Samsee and Samrat Thong-iam, two farmers from Northeastern Thailand, speak. Both men work on separate co-ops that sell organic jasmine rice, among other products, both domestically and to developed nations.

The event was organized by juniors Gabe Anderson and Katherine Lydon and was sponsored the Education Network for Global and Grassroots Exchange (ENGAGE), a San Francisco-based nonprofit activist organization founded by students studying in Thailand. Both Anderson and Lydon spent last semester in Thailand and stayed in several villages, including Samsee's and Thong-iam's.

Anderson said his semester abroad made him aware of the dire situation facing rice farmers in Thailand, the world's biggest rice exporter, where 68 percent of farmers in the rice-growing region hold a debt that is three times their annual income. He also learned that shopping for food in the United States was about more than just trying to find the lowest price. "By meeting with villagers, companies and government officials, and by living with farmers, we saw how our decisions back home can make a big impact overseas," he said.

Samsee and Thong-iam, accompanied by ENGAGE's global action director and translator Kyra Busch, are currently on a tour of East Coast universities, spreading awareness about organic farming and fair trade. Fair trade is a social movement that promotes standards for international labor, environmentalism and social policy in areas related to the production of goods, according to www.fairtrade.org. Fair trade organizations, backed by consumers and companies in developed countries, support producers like Samsee and Thong-iam. These organizations pay a premium to farmers for their harvest that covers their cost of living and the cost of production, allowing them to pay off debts and to improve their own health and the health of their families.

Common fair trade products include rice, tea, coffee and honey, at slightly higher prices than domestically grown products. This price increase is because the producers get a higher percentage of the profits, according to the Free Trade Federation. Other fairly traded goods include crafts, jewelry and ceramics.

Before switching to organic farming a few years ago, Samsee said, his village relied on the use of dangerous pesticides that killed fish, made villagers sick and depleted the soil of vital nutrients. "When we were using chemicals, it was ruining many things," he said. "When we stopped using fertilizers, we had life in our fields; we had fish we could eat. Organic farming helps my village's overall well-being."

On fair trade farms, producers adhere to strict standards regarding the use of pesticides, the protection of natural waters and other ecosystems and the management of erosion and waste. Selling at fair trade prices enables farmers to pay for organic certification and training in agriculture techniques, according to ENGAGE's Web site.

According to Samsee, living on a co-op has several other benefits. "We get to be controllers of our own fields and our own farming," Samsee said. "We can elect our own committee members in the co-op and get a fair trade premium. Then we can all decide how to use that money."

Samsee and Thong-iam are now able to provide emergency services and food for sick and elderly people in their villages, create a sustainable system of agriculture through the use of organic farming and teach children the value of forest conservation and herbal medicine. They divide all the rice that they do not sell among the members of their co-ops, grow vegetables and raise pigs in order to develop a community that is virtually self-sufficient. "It's like having your own market," Samsee said. "You can just go in your backyard and pick whatever you want to eat."

Lydon saw firsthand the conditions in villages that used pesticides and said that although the fair trade system is not perfect, it is a much better alternative to the environmentally damaging methods of farming that have been used for years in Thailand. "I feel much better about supporting farming that's safe for the environment, that builds strong communities and provides workers with decent wages," she said.

The Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO) currently recognizes certified producer organizations in more than 50 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, encompassing approximately 1 million families of farmers and workers. In 2005, fair trade-certified sales were estimated at approximately \$1.5 billion worldwide.

Because most of the fair trade distributors are based in California, fair trade goods are often hard to find on the East Coast. Anderson and Lydon have been working to bring fair trade Thai rice to the University of Richmond, and Busch said that for the first time this year, fair trade-certified products will soon be available on the East Coast.

Other students voiced similar sentiments. Junior Lana DelliCarpini said that learning about the lives of the rice farmers and organic farming had a profound effect on her and would offset her subsequent trips to the supermarket. "They're not looking to have luxurious lives, and they're not in it for the money," she said. "They're just looking to live."