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A School Like No Other... in Pattaya

A school like no other will open this May 26th at the seaside town in Pattaya. Instead of the typical hefty school fees, parents can instead perform 400 hours of community service and plant 400 trees. Students too are required to perform seven hours of community service per week in the local Pattaya area, as well as within the provinces of Chonburi and Rayong.

A highlight of this iconic education institution is the establishment of the Kelly Lifelong Learning Center, dedicated to the enrichment of the quality of life, advancement of knowledge, and improvement of opportunities for deserving citizens of the Kingdom of Thailand. This facility was donated by Mr. Matthew Kelly Sr. and many of his close friends, together with his son Matthew and daughter-in-law Mary, to honor Matthew Sr. on his 90th birthday. Mr. Kelly was present last year for the laying of the foundation stone of the Kelly Lifelong Learning Center, which includes the main classroom for the students, as well as an 80-person conference center.

Apart from the significant contribution of the Kelly Lifelong Learning Center by the Kelly family and friends, the establishment of the Pattaya campus is also a result of the generosity of several groups, including the Birds and Bees Resort (owned by Khun Mechai's daughter, Sujima), IKEA, and other socially-minded individuals and organizations. The yearly operating costs during the first few years will be provided by the Birds & Bees Resort.

Two specific elements of this school stand out when compared with typical secondary schools around the region. At Pattaya, student representatives will be elected to sit on the school board as well as to become members of the purchasing and audit committees. There is also a surprise waiting for anyone wishing to become members of the teaching staff. These aspiring teachers have to first be interviewed and approved by the student committee prior to further interviews by a committee of teachers. Students hail mostly from the poor, mountainous regions of Northeast Thailand and will spend one entire year by the sea studying as well as experiencing the realities of the Eastern Seaboard of Thailand. The Mechai Pattana School/Kelly Lifelong Learning Center is situated on the grounds of Birds & Bees Resort off Pratamnak Road opposite the Asia Pattaya Hotel. For these 15-year old, Year 10 students, this will be the first time away from home living at a boarding school. The Pattaya Campus is an extension of the celebrated Mechai Pattana (Bamboo) School in Buriram for Grades 7, 8, and 9 students. At the end of this academic year, the Year 10 students will return to continue their studies for Grade 11 and 12 at Buriram.



Population & Community
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Both the Buriram and Pattaya schools, established by Mechai Viravaidya, exist as lifelong learning centers and springboards for the social and economic advancement for students as well as all members of the surrounding communities. The regular school week is from Thursday to Monday. Certain hours of Saturday and Sunday will be reserved for experienced external teachers and volunteers from the Eastern Seaboard area and Bangkok. The school's weekend will be Tuesday and Wednesday, which will be used for out-of-classroom activities in the provinces of Chonburi and Rayong, where important institutions and industrial estates are located. Students will also be organized in small groups to assist outlying schools and communities as part of their sharing experience.

Surprises are unending at this Pattaya school--students are required to write letters home once a week and mobile phones will be locked away except for one hour per week when phone calls are allowed. The school aims to make these students from the Northeast to be bilingual, as well as endeavor to create new young Thai citizens who are honest, caring, resourceful, and know how to manage life, as well as business enterprises.

Students will rise at 5 a.m. for beach cleaning and exercise followed by working in the vegetable garden and milling rice prior to a glass of milk. After that, they will take a shower and begin their first class at 7 a.m., one hour before breakfast. The in-class school day ends at 1:30 p.m. for a late lunch. The afternoon will be spent out of the classroom on music, practical science, workshops, business operations, in the fruit and vegetable gardens, or performing necessary chores at the school. This outward bound approach is in part based on the world-famous "Timbertop" campus in the Australian mountains operated by Geelong Grammar School, where over 300 Thais have attended over the last 60 years.

Visitors are always welcome to the school and to observe the distinct poverty eradication laboratory farm, which was established in partnership with the Kelly Lifelong Learning Center and land provided by the Birds & Bees Resort. So far, at least 500 people per month have visited the Center and the farm. Hands-on business skills will be provided to students and will initially be geared toward the farm's operation and management.