Innovation. It is a concept that is promoted from the world of business and technology to education.

Innovation is a word that is used so broadly and ascribed to so many things that its meaning has become vague at best, or meaningless at worst. And what makes someone an innovator? Definitions vary, from “the first to introduce into reality something better than before,” or “people who push boundaries of the known world,” or simply “change agents.” These concepts, these people, often seem to be far away, people who are flown in for a two hour lecture or people you see on Ted talks.

The truth is, you don’t have to look that far to meet people who are pushing boundaries, people who are creating real and profound change. And it doesn’t take a lot to contribute to innovations that make a real difference, in your community and around the world.

I would like to put a face to one of these innovators, a man named Payong. Payong, like many Thai in rural communities, was born into a farming family. Payong knew how farmers were caught in a cycle of debt, and when prices dropped too low, Payong and his brothers had to work as sharecroppers just to feed the family. Like many youth, Payong left the farm. He became trained as a political scientist at one of the most prestigious universities in Bangkok and was poised for a fruitful career in business or law. But Payong never forgot what the hardships of farmers were like, and he returned to his family’s farm to teach organic agriculture to small farmers. This approach would both help conserve Thailand’s natural resources and provide farmers with a higher and more sustainable income. Today, Payong works at refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border, teaching sustainable farming to the Karen ethnic minority.

Payong is one of dozens of innovators who has come to Montana as a participant in the State Department’s Professional Fellows Program, managed by the Mansfield Center at the University of Montana. While in Montana, Payong was partnered with another innovator, Josh Slotnick of Garden City Harvest. Together, they are blazing a path to connect American and Thai students and inspire a new generation to lead the movement for sustainable agriculture.

Phuong is an example of a person who is breaking new ground in her country of Vietnam. Phuong was born without the use of her right leg. Despite an increase of several hundred thousand children who were born with disabilities as a result of the Vietnam War, Vietnam does not have the infrastructure to
accommodate people with disabilities. It is expected that children with physical or developmental disabilities be kept at home. Phuong’s parents decided that their daughter would have a different future, and sent her to school. Phuong describes the challenges of maneuvering the city on crutches, saying, “In elementary school, I had to climb one flight of stairs to get to class. In high school, there were two flights of stairs. And in college, I had to climb three flights of stairs every day.” But Phuong never stopped and she went on to earn two university degrees. Based on her time in Montana, Phuong has adapted the YWCA’s Secret Seconds thrift store model to open the very first thrift store in Vietnam, the proceeds of which will benefit people with disabilities.

We look forward to welcoming our next group of Southeast Asian Fellows who arrive in May. One of these Fellows is a Cambodian social entrepreneur who is expanding his tourism business to train local people to keep tourism dollars within the local economy. Another is one of the few female tech entrepreneurs from Burma who launched a business that is now part of one of the largest software development companies in the country. And there is the social worker from Thailand, who is starting a business training program for orphaned girls, many of them who have HIV.

The Mansfield Center is proud to bring together leaders from around the world here in Montana. While we carry on Senator Mansfield’s legacy of promoting US-Asia relations and ethics in public affairs and leadership, we also look to the future. Partnering passionate and courageous leaders from the East and the West can result in meaningful change that truly impacts lives. Building these bridges is part of the mission of the Mansfield Center, and we invite you to join us. You can visit our website at www.umt.edu/mansfield to learn more.

On behalf of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center, I am Kelsey Stamm. Thank you for listening.