

## Royal roots of Simmons: the Princess Mother of Thailand

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By Ellen Garnett

Staff Writer

Last week, the King of Thailand, Bhumibol Adulyadej, passed away after his 70-year reign. Simmons College joins Thailand in mourning the loss of King Adulyadej, whose mother was an alumna of Simmons. The Princess Mother of Thailand studied healthcare, nutrition, chemistry, and childcare between 1921 and 1927.

Although she never graduated from Simmons, Princess Srinagarindra née Sangwan Talapat received an Honorary Degree from Simmons in 1989 for her humanitarian work in Thailand, which focused on improving access to education and health care. She is especially known for having established the Flying Doctors Foundation, an organization that provided medical services to remote villages by helicopter.

According to the Simmons College Archives, this was the only honorary degree that the Princess Mother ever accepted.

Before she was the Princess Mother, Sangwan Talapat was a commoner. She came to the U.S. in 1918 after finishing nursing school in Siam (later renamed Thailand) at the age of 17.

She was one of several students to receive scholarships from the Queen of Siam. The group of scholarship recipients traveled to the U.S. to meet Prince Mahidol of Songkla at South Station in Boston, where the prince began to court Talapat as his future princess.

Prince Mahidol studied at Harvard School of Public Health and Harvard Medical School and would come to be known as the "Father of Modern Thai Medicine." Princess Srinagarindra would also be known as "Mother of Rural Medicine in Thailand." The two were married in 1920 in Bangkok, Siam. The prince continued his studies at Harvard and his wife took classes in nursing and household economics.

In 1923, the royal couple had their first child, Princess Galyani Vadhana in London. Only a few years later, in 1925, they welcomed their second child, Prince Ananda Mahidol, who would become king in 1934. Prince Bhumibol Adulyadej, their third child, was born in 1927 when the couple returned to live in Cambridge.



The Princess Mother of Thailand receives her Honorary Degree from Simmons College in 1989 for her humanitarian work in education and healthcare. Source: Simmons College Archives

Prince Mahidol graduated from Harvard in 1927 and brought his family home to Thailand to practice medicine the following year. Sadly, the Prince died unexpectedly from kidney complications in 1929, leaving Princess Srinagarindra a young widow. She decided to move her family to Switzerland in 1932, when a governmental coup established a constitutional monarchy in Thailand.

Princess Srinagarindra's eldest son, Prince Ananda, was elected to the throne in 1934, when King Rama VII abdicated his throne without any male heir. Prince Ananda was 9 years old when he accepted his position and reigned until the end of World War II, when he was shot and killed in the royal palace in 1946. Prince Bhumibol, his younger brother, took the throne and would become the world's longest-reigning living monarch. The Princess Mother passed away in 1995, leaving behind a legacy of social and institutional change for her home country of Thailand.

In 2000, Simmons celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Princess Mother's birthday, becoming the only site in the U.S. with the honor of hosting Princess Galyani Vadhana for the commemoration. Neither the Princess Mother nor King Bhumibol will be forgotten, for they will always be revered in Thailand and at Simmons.

It is important to reflect on Simmons' connection with the rest of the world, as it is easy for the community to only focus on the local bubble the College occupies. Currently, students at Simmons represent 53 countries, which opens up Simmons to further diversify its student body. As the College works towards building a more culturally competent community, it will continue to celebrate the unique identities of its members.

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