

Mae Sot Education Project

www.maesot.ubishops.ca

Fall 2013



WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO

The Mae Sot Education Project (MSEP) is a community project based on the campus of Bishop's University and Champlain College – Lennoxville in Sherbrooke Quebec. Since 2004, we have provided assistance to six schools for migrant and refugee youth from Burma/Myanmar whose access to education depends on support from the international community. In recent years we have also worked with other schools. Each year we select a group of young people from our campus to go to Mae Sot for six months. While there, they provide practical assistance to teachers and enrichment activities for children in the schools. They learn about the situation of displacement experienced by the Burmese people in Thailand as well as about the challenges for the Thai community in coping with a large population of refugees and migrants. Finally, they share their experience with Canadians. The Project Committee is made up of members of the community, faculty from Bishop's and Champlain, and former youth volunteers with the project. Currently, members are: Avril Aitken, Carinne Bevan, Megan Irving, Catherine Isely, Bonnie Kay, Sunny Lau, Mary Purkey, Garry Retzleff, Marjorie Retzleff, and Barbara Rowell. For further information about the project, go to www.maesot.ubishops.ca or contact us at maesoteducationproject@gmail.com.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Contributions to the project are always welcome, and tax receipts will be issued. Donations may be made to either the Champlain College Foundation (specify Mae Sot Education Project) or to the Bishop's University Foundation (specify Mae Sot Education Project), Box 67, Champlain College, Sherbrooke, Quebec J1M 2A1.



Notes from the Border

First Impressions of the World of Burmese Migrants and Refugees from MSEP 2013 Volunteers

“HELLO TEACHER. CAN I GET YOU A TEA OR COFFEE, TEACHER?”

By Michelle Van Loon
2013 Volunteer

My first week of teaching in Mae Sot felt like a surreal blur. Between getting acquainted with the different customs, getting used to teaching and having the teacher title, it was a week full of new experiences. Prior to coming to Thailand, the only training I had received was a university TESL grammar course (Teaching English as a Second Language) and bi-weekly two hour meetings. Although the class and meetings have benefited me greatly, this training doesn't compare to what teachers in Canada receive, which made me feel as if I hadn't earned the teacher title. It took some time for me to become accustomed to this title, but there was also the special treatment of teachers in migrant schools that took a bit more time to get used to.

In Burmese culture teachers are highly respected individuals, right up there with the royal family and monks. Students express respect for their teachers in various ways. Students are never supposed to be taller than their teachers. If a teacher is sitting and a student walks by, the student must crouch down to make him or herself appear shorter than the teacher. Students are also expected to carry their teacher's books and bag to the next class. I had been informed that teachers in Thailand were highly respected; however, I was not expecting to be waited on hand and foot which is how I often felt at the beginning of June when we first arrived.

One incident that occurred a couple weeks into my time teaching at Moe Ma Kha took me by surprise. Upon arriving at my class, I was presented with a cup of tea which I drank while waiting for class to start. I decided to look over my lesson plan for the morning, which was stowed underneath the chair on which my tea was sitting. As I reached for it, I bumped the chair with my arm and my tea went flying. A student who heard the commotion came to investigate and noticing the puddles around my chair, disappeared before I was able to ask where the napkins were kept. Not even two minutes later, two students reappeared armed with a stack of napkins and a mop. As I reached for the napkins, I was shooed away by a smiling student who was cleaning up. A strange mix of feelings washed over me after not being allowed to help clean up a mess that I had made. Watching my students, I felt uncomfortable, as if I was doing something wrong by not cleaning the mess myself because I wasn't used to this kind of treatment.

I've gradually grown into the teacher role and lifestyle. The special treatment has taken me the longest to adjust to, but I've become familiar with the different ways students express their respect for their teachers. I find myself comparing Burmese and Western cultures by imagining the same situations in a Canadian elementary school, and it is the reactions of the migrant students that are often more respectful. Maybe if Western culture integrated some Burmese practices, school might be more enjoyable for both the students and the educators.



Michelle, at home in her classroom.

LATE AFTERNOON REFLECTIONS ON HUNGER

By Megan Irving
2013 Volunteer

“When I study, sometimes I don't want to do anything else,” says 17 year old Aye as she looks up from her school lessons and stares piercingly at the barren wall of her empty classroom. “Sometimes teacher, I don't even want to eat.”

I look up from the pile of worksheets I've been slowly correcting and watch as Aye turns her head towards the classroom's only open window. She gazes outside, and then returns back to reading her lessons. A swallow flies in from outside and rests for a few seconds on the wooden windowsill. Outside four girls gather their laundry, which they have been washing by hand using rain water collected in a large holding tank, and carry it towards a clothesline that runs between two mango trees. I can hear them telling one of the younger students to hurry up and take her bath. Beyond them, two students are playing jacks together, using small pebbles they've taken from the school's garden. Down the street, the district's intercom system is switched on and an authoritative male voice begins making announcements in Thai.



Someone nearby begins signing the chorus from a popular Burmese love song.

Aye turns a page in her book. The swallow takes off again, and in the distance, a bell rings.

It's dinner time, and from where I am sitting, I can catch glimpses of some of the 64 boarding students who live fulltime at Parami School as they each begin making their way towards the school's cafeteria building. Each student carries with him/her a shallow metal bowl and spoon which will soon be filled with a hearty serving of rice and bamboo shoots, food supplied by a local NGO and a meal they will all eat together at long tables made from sheets recycled house siding.

I watch as one of the school's smallest students, a petite 6 year old whom everyone has appropriately nicknamed "Mouse" walks hand-in-hand with her older sister. Some of the boys begin sauntering out of their dorm, passing a vibrant landscape drawing that one of the students has done in oil pastels given to him by a Japanese volunteer. Every day a different drawing is mounted on the bamboo wall.

Things are moving all around, but Aye doesn't budge. She knows the line for dinner will be long and slow moving, and if she stays here, she will avoid having to stand and wait. She also knows staying will give her a few more minutes in which she can keep reading. She is in no rush for dinner; an empty stomach creates a hunger she can easily satisfy. It is her appetite for knowledge which she has trouble abating.

Aye and I are sitting across from one another at a small wooden bench. At her side is a well-worn English-Myanmar dictionary, a gift from her father who works as a migrant farm labourer in a small remote village near Mae Sot. Her parents work for a Thai landowner, and they have sent Aye to Parami because their village doesn't offer any further education beyond Grade 6. Presently it is late July. This means that the hours their daughter was in class today, holding her pencil rather than a pickaxe, they spent combing through cornfields, tilling acres of Thai soil and seeding Thai crops by hand. A day's worth of hard labour will warrant her father somewhere between 80-100 bhat (2.60-3.30\$). Her dictionary still bears its price tag: 100 bhat. Having spent one year, the year she turned 14, out of school working side by side with her parents instead of attending grade 7, Aye is acutely aware of the value of the education she is receiving.

The hand-out I'm correcting is a series of exercises aimed at using adverbs of frequency. As Aye picks up her dictionary, my eyes wander to another student's paper. Under the heading "Write sentences about your life using the words 'always, rarely, and never'" I place a large red check mark next to the phrase "I rarely visit my village. I always do my homework. I never want to give up my life."

There are over 70 different migrant schools in existence in Mae Sot and its surrounding areas, 70 schools offering education to over 30,000 Burmese children and youth, many with the same aspirations as Aye. Yet only one in 300 make it past grade five. These statistics are difficult to swallow. A migrant school in Mae Sot will often lack funds and resources but never experiences a lack of need or promise. Changes inside Burma have not yet resulted in any decrease in the number of children looking for educational opportunities – for a better childhood, if not future – in Mae Sot. Here, in this small corner of the world, there often exists an immense hunger for something more, and migrant students are ravenous for all that their education has to offer.

Finally, I tell Aye that she has to stop. "Tummy sa mes naw" I say. "Let's go eat rice. You cannot eat words for dinner." However, watching her as she joins the other students, holding her empty bowl in her hands, I can't help but wonder: what if it were possible to subsist on words for dinner? How many of students around me would then quietly clear their plates...and ask for more?

SCHOOL DISCIPLINE – BURMESE STYLE

By Vanessa Laroche
2013 Volunteer

The question of how to discipline has been a big subject of conversation in some education classes I have taken over the course of my bachelor program. We often ask ourselves when to punish, how to punish, should positive or negative reinforcement be used instead and finally, what will the students learn from the punishment?



On my first week at Hsa Thoo Lei School I experienced first-hand the type of “reinforcements” that are used by the staff at my school: for example, physical punishment by hitting the hands with thin bamboo sticks. I was not sure how to react when faced with this type of punishment since I had only seen it in movies such as *Aurora l'Enfant Martyre*, and what I witnessed at Hsa Thoo Lei was far from being as bad as in that movie – and therefore a bit harder for me to process.

During my second week at Hsa Thoo Lei I walked into the teachers’ office and saw two boys hanging on the bars attached inside the office windows with one of the teachers teasing the students and others either laughing at the “silliness” or acting as if nothing was happening around them. The teachers could probably tell that I was feeling uncomfortable about what was happening to the students so they explained to me that the boys had been caught several times skipping and misbehaving in class. Even knowing that it is the “ultimate punishment” given to misbehaving students, I still do not know how I would react if I were to encounter this type of punishment again.

During a discussion with my associate teacher, I brought up the subject of hitting and how it was something that I was not accustomed to. She explained to me that in Myanmar if a child misbehaves by being disrespectful, he can be hit extremely hard; however if they were to do this in the school, the parents would come knocking at their door and that teacher would be in trouble. She explained that teachers do not need to give any punishment for the higher grades. She then giggled and asked about our system but seemed to think that we spent a large amount of time finding innovative ways to punish our students for small reasons like talking in class.

At Hsa Thoo Lei students somehow manage to always give the teacher the work requested and do their best to listen in class. Even if they do not always understand, they always genuinely seem to want to do their best in every subject. They do talk in class, but it is often to help a peer who has not understood the requested work because they know that some of their classmates struggle more than they do. During my second and third year practica, I received the same comment from my associate teachers and supervisors: your students talk

a lot, your classroom is very loud. The comment has resulted in me constantly asking the students to be more quiet in class and preventing them from collaborating during work time as they seem to do in all of their classes. I came to realize that asking a class to be quiet so much can be harmful to their learning experience.

We Canadian teachers are ready to dedicate not only an entire group of professionals in charge of punishing students who act out unwanted behavior, yet there seems to be very little change in the behavior of the students who frequently attend detention. At Hsa Thoo Lei, the fact that none of the children are ever kept after school or during lunch hour for detention and that the higher grades do not get punished demonstrates that possibly our “evolved” discipline methods may not be entirely effective and are not the only way. I am not saying that we should start hitting our students, but our school systems could definitely learn something from the teacher-student interactions in this migrant school.



At Hsa Thoo Lei, being well-behaved doesn't mean not having fun!

RIDING THE BUS – A JOURNEY INTO ANOTHER WORLD

By William Bryson
2013 Volunteer

As I looked at my watch after stuffing my change back into my wallet at the 7-Eleven, I began to get anxious. The other volunteers were still in line waiting to pay for their purchases. Our Songthaw was leaving for Mae Tan, three hours north of Mae Sot, in five minutes.

I went on ahead, pedalling like mad, and arrived at the bus station just in time to stall the Songthaw driver until the other volunteers arrived. A Songthaw is a truck, typically a Toyota, Nissan or Mitsubishi, converted into a bus by adding two rows of benches and a roof to the bed of the truck. Fortunately, I had not factored in the discrepancy between Thai time and Western time. Feeling a bit foolish for breaking into such a sweat, I waited with the other volunteers another 10 minutes for our bus to leave for Kha Tha Blay College, a rural school for young adults where we were scheduled to do some workshops.

A Burmese woman and her son were two of the first people to join us on the bus ride that overcast July morning. As we travelled down the highway in our Songthaw, sandwiched between enormous bright green rice paddies and lush corn fields on either side, out of the corner of my eye, I could see that the woman was looking for a place to store her empty bottle of BIG Cola that she had just finished.

I turned my head just in time to watch as the bottle soared out of the back of the bus, smacked the asphalt and rolled to the side of the road. Still feeling a little bit shocked and disappointed to see someone blatantly litter in such a pure and natural place, minutes later, I looked on as her son, who had evidently been watching, made a baseball-like pitch, looking like a miniature MLB player, sending his yellow



candy wrapper flying. This time, I could only sigh and chuckle to myself.

As the cool weather, brought on by the overcast skies, began to turn to light rain, the plastic awnings on the sides of the bus were unravelled to protect us from the heavy rains ahead. Views of the countryside ceased except for what could be seen through the small dirty transparent plastic windows.

From this point on, stops to pick up passengers began to be more frequent, and the bus became more and more crowded. I counted 19 people at one point, all Burmese (Karen to be specific), including those who were hanging off the back of the truck, holding on for dear life. One was a popular older woman, heavily built, who looked weathered and tough from having seen many years in a refugee camp. In her mouth, she had the most massive wad of beetle nut I have ever seen someone attempt to chew. Extending her bottom lip so to not drop any red bits, she tried her hardest to engage in conversation with other riders, but it was evident that everyone was having difficulty understanding her garbled gibberish. Luckily, we were all able to have a good laugh, even her.



A sudden nudge in my side from the volunteer sitting next to me meant there was something to see. I turned my head and caught my first glimpse of Mae La Refugee Camp through the blurry plastic window. The streaking rain made it hard to see the immense city of bamboo and broad leaf huts sitting at the foot of the stunning mountain range that divides Thailand and Karen State. Totally oblivious to the activity of the passengers getting on and off the bus, I patiently hoped to get a better view of it all, to see if it matched the images I had in my mind from the information I had been given. Sadly, a better view never came which made it difficult for me to develop my own understanding about the Camp.

Although it is now easier for me to conceive of the appalling conditions that refugees and migrants endure on the border

because I have seen some of these conditions first hand in and around Mae Sot, I reflected on how difficult it may be for Canadians to imagine the awful circumstances Burmese people endure each day in a place like Mae La where conditions are exceedingly cramped. There is no in-home running water or sewage facilities; garbage is piled in large mounds awaiting disposal, and people count down the days until they receive the most basic monthly food rations, oil, rice and fish paste.

In retrospect, I suppose I did get an inside glimpse of Mae La that day after all, as the bus ride provided a sample of the people one might encounter in the camp. Remembering the characters I encountered on the journey, I developed a new perspective about everyday life for those who are displaced.

Thinking back to the woman who chucked her garbage out of the back of the bus, I realized that she simply has many more pressing needs to attend to than spending time worrying about issues such as environmental conservation or global warming. I also figured that, in comparison, we Westerners consume far more and create far more waste. Perhaps when she is able to sufficiently nourish her family by her own means, ensure that living conditions in her own home are sanitary and live without fear of being in danger in her own country, she will take on the responsibility of recycling.

As for the burly Burmese woman, her easy manner provoked an interesting and ironic thought. Across Thai and Burmese culture, the pace of life is seemingly much slower in comparison to Western culture which I believe has to do with peoples' varying perceptions of time, much like our bus driver's. Here on the border, there seems to be less urgency when it comes to accomplishing everyday tasks since there will always be more time to do so later.

Ironically, many of those living slower paced lives here appear to age more quickly compared with Westerners living a fast paced life who feel like they must accomplish so much each day to compensate for having so many desires. Perhaps this more rapid aging process occurs because children growing up on the border experience much different childhoods than ones we would be familiar with.

Often starting at a very young age, children must work in a multitude of ways to support their families. They will continue to work for the rest of their lives, inevitably encountering adversity and witnessing tragedies along the way. It has been fascinating and so impressive to learn just how mature my students can be and how much knowledge they possess about such things as edible and non-edible plants, catching food, butchering animals and cooking.

It seems to me that when these children become adults, a small portion of their souls always remains reserved for the childhood that they were somewhat deprived of. As a result, there is always time to play, to tell a story, to laugh and tell a joke or simply enjoy a smile.



TEACHING AND LEARNING AT KAW THA BLAY COLLEGE

By Elizabeth Serra
2013 Volunteer

We sat in silence in the back of our songthaw, each looking in a different direction for the 30 minutes it took to confirm that we were the only ones leaving the small town of Mae Tan. We had just finished a few days of workshops with a group of young adult students at Kaw Tha Blay College, a rural project for Karen youth two hours north of Mae Sot, funded by the Canadian NGO Project Umbrella Burma.

Around us, as we waited for the “bus” to Mae Sot, were familiar sights—a small market selling all of the essentials, with food in one half and an eclectic mix of clothes, machetes and rope in the other. There was the usual rambutan and mangosteen stand, and another dedicated to Burmese longyis, piled to the ceiling so that all we could see was a patchwork of vibrant reds, purples and greens. But despite the similarities to Mae Sot, this place was different. It had left a mark on all of us. And it was as if, in those last few minutes in the songthaw we were collectively trying to absorb the last memories from our excursion.

Being at Kaw Tha Blay College was my first experience in Thailand of learning outside the classroom. The small, close-knit, campus atmosphere gave me the push I needed and wanted to be involved with the students in a way that wasn’t scheduled and graded. We came to the school with a pile of lesson plans and activities ready to introduce the students to human rights and broaden our own view of teaching in the migrant school system. We came to Kaw Tha Blay ready to teach, but I don’t think any of us were truly ready to learn. As I watched the girls pour days of intricate work into their new Karen shirts, I began to understand the pride, value and dedication with which each one of these shirts is sewn.

Each day there was downtime, but only after a small adventure had tired us all out. The students took us on a small tour of the surrounding farmland, past cornfields, tapioca fields and long stretches of rice paddies. But no matter where our attention was focused, the towering mountains of Karen State could not be ignored. The size and beauty of the mountains was breathtaking and their presence was as immense as the adoration of Karen State that I felt from every student. The beauty of the mountains was a shield protecting us from the struggles on the other side. Looking at the mountains, I thought about the students’ happiness to be in Thailand combined with their ever-present longing for home.

As the engine of the songthaw fired up and we stored our last mental picture of Mae Tan, my thoughts turned to my students in Mae Sot. I thought of the stories they must have and their own mixtures of happiness and longing that I am only beginning to understand. Most of all I looked ahead to how much they will teach me outside the classroom.



Other Project News . . .

LENNOXVILLE ELEMENTARY CHILDREN PRODUCE THEIR OWN BOOK: *DO IT RIGHT! THE ABCs OF CHILDREN’S RIGHTS*

By Megan Irving
2013 Volunteer

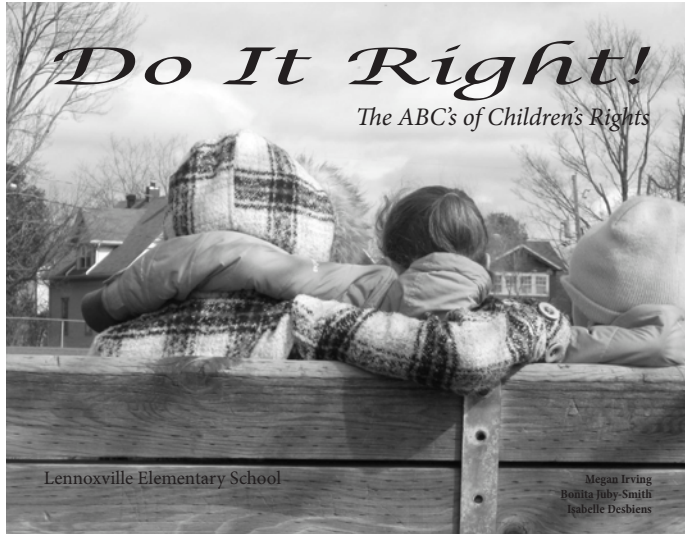
Earlier this year, I was invited to talk to the students at Lennoxville Elementary School because of my past experience with MSEP. One of the lessons I gained during my time on the Thai-Burma border, was the importance of a human rights education. Human rights violations are not uncommon in this area and a general lack of knowledge regarding an individual’s rights and freedoms can have devastating effects there.

That said, the power of human rights education is not limited to areas where human rights abuses run rampant. The importance of knowing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and being able to think critically about human rights issues is universal. Teaching children about the UDHR is one way of ensuring that those rights will be better protected and preserved. It also arms children with



the ability to think globally whilst also understanding that all humans share similar wants, needs, rights and freedoms. The children I worked with at L.E.S. were able to identify and differentiate between what they believed to be right and wrong, just and unjust. What injustice looks or feels like wasn't something these children needed to be taught. However, by being introduced to the UDHR, they were able to better identify and differentiate the types of injustice they were learning about and how to talk about them in a proactive manner.

Throughout the term the students in Lennoxville were involved in a pen-pal exchange with Grade 5 students in Mae Sot. Two of MSEP's past volunteers, Gabriella and Meaghan, paired their students at Hsa Mu Htaw with students in Lennoxville. The students in both schools wrote letters back and forth talking about their schools, their likes and dislikes, their families and friends and their culture. Gabriella and Meaghan were also able to present the students at L.E.S. with an ABC book the students at Parami School and BHSOH in Mae Sot had made about migrant life and Burmese culture. The grade three students at L.E.S. were so interested in this book that they eventually used it as their main source of inspiration while creating their own "abcedery" about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.



Many of the students in the Grade 3 classes in Lennoxville wrote repeatedly about the importance of education and how vital it is to ensure they might one day have a "good job" and "good future." As one student wrote in her journal, it also meant that she could learn math: "Then... when you will be old, you will know your doubles faster than a lion and even faster than a jaguar can run." A continuous education does mean that an individual is able to acquire progressively sophisticated skill sets. However, a child's education is also aimed at fostering such values as peace, compassion, and understanding of justice, equality, tolerance and respect. It is these values which lie at the heart of the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights.

The eventual conclusion of the students unit on human right's education resulted in the production and publication of *Do It Right! The ABC's of Children's Rights*. *Do It Right!* is a bilingual ABC book and anthology that includes writing, as well as drawings and photographs by the Grade 3 students at L.E.S. The book focuses on the theme of children's rights as seen and understood through a child's eyes. The book allowed the students to mirror the work done by their pen pals in Mae Sot, demonstrate their understanding of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. My experiences in Mae Sot taught me about the value of human rights education. My experiences with this project and the students at L.E.S. taught me about the importance of human rights education within all educational contexts – even at home in Lennoxville.

MSEP LAUNCHES *EXPRESSION IN EXILE* AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPERIENCE BURMESE ART IN OUR COMMUNITY

On May 25-26 this year, in the small community of Knowlton, MSEP launched what it hopes will be the first of a number of small exhibitions of art by Burmese artists who make their home in the Mae Sot area. We were fortunate to have funding for the exhibition from CIDA, a beautiful space (thanks to Peter Marsh) and the assistance of Margot Graham-Heyerhoff who came to Knowlton to mount the paintings for us. Unfortunately, the event was beset by a late May snowfall. Thus the turnout was less than hoped for.

The art displayed was nonetheless amazing. The small collection displayed in May featured 26 paintings (watercolours, acrylic and mixed media) by thirteen artists in addition to a selection of drawings and paintings by Burmese migrant school children. Altogether, these works convey their creators' experience, anxieties, and hopes, as well as their visions of humanity, their homeland and the world. By sharing them, we hope to encourage reflection on both the perilousness and the opportunities inherent in the present situation in Burma and to create better understanding of the role that Canadians might play in helping this country find its place in the world as a free, inclusive and democratic society, one in which all its diverse peoples can flourish.

If you missed the May exhibition in Knowlton and would like to receive publicity for our next show of Burmese art, or if you would like to offer another venue for display of this art, please contact us at maesoteducationproject@gmail.com or contact Mary Purkey at marypurkey@gmail.com. We are looking for opportunities to share it in and beyond our community.



Volunteer Will walking a viewer through this Spring's Burmese art exhibit.



RETURN TO NARNIA

By Emily Prangley Desormeaux
2009 – 2010 MSEP Volunteer – upon return to Mae Sot last May

As childish as it sounds, the first time I went to Mae Sot, I frequently referred to it as Thai Narnia (the fantasy world from C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*) because walking through the doors of the Bangkok airport was like walking into an entirely other realm where even time seemed to move differently. I returned to Canada feeling utterly changed, but at home it was like no one had moved since I left ten months earlier. I felt like I had experienced an entire lifetime in Thailand with so much personal growth and more adventures and details than I could ever explain to everyone. Meanwhile, time in Canada seemed to have been at a standstill in my absence. Returning to Mae Sot in May of this year to do some project development for MSEP, I naively imagined that I would find everything exactly as I had left it.



2013 Volunteers Elizabeth, Vanessa and Michelle with returner Emily and long-time partner Tha Zin.

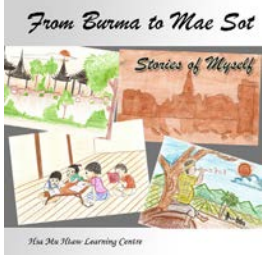
As I rode the tuk-tuk from the bus station to our project house, I scanned the streets of Mae Sot for familiar faces, just as I had in my dreams over the last three years.

At 5:00am, the day was still cool and a light misting of rain touched my face as I leaned out the side of the noisy, rickety little taxi in a dazed dreamlike state of mind. I felt the exhilaration you feel in those few moments after waking from an impossibly amazing dream. Your eyes are still squeezed shut as you try in vain to hold on to every detail. You're left with the lingering thrill of your adventure and the hope that when you open your eyes, it will have been real life all along. Every time I recognized another landmark out the back of the tuk-tuk, it sent a bolt of excitement through me and filled me with anticipation to finally be back in this place I loved and had visited in my mind so many times since 2010.

Ironically, the first face I recognized was that of "Canadian Dave" the Quebec-born, Ontario-raised owner of the Krua Canadian Restaurant we had frequented when we needed a taste of home. Dave hadn't changed a bit and a few other things had remained more or less the same, but over the next two and a half months, I had to come to terms with the fact that time had not stood still while I was away, and Mae Sot life had gone on without me.

I discovered the bittersweet news that my beloved school headmaster and headmistress had been resettled to the U.S. with their young family. Every day my eyes searched for Win Ma, one of my sweetest and most vulnerable students, who I had heard was married (at sixteen) with a child already. Every time I rode my bicycle through the crowded, chaotic market, I hoped—in vain—to hear a voice shout "Teachal!" and come face to face with one of the many students who had touched my heart years before. Yet despite the disappointment of not seeing them, happily, I did bump into other friends and students I had forgotten. I walked into a coffee shop one day and recognized Aye Thandar Win, one of my Say Ta Nar students, working the cash, now a beautiful, confident young woman. I visited Hsa Thoo Lei School and saw Htee Moo, the live-in cook who had been like a mother to me. I even saw people I assumed had forgotten me, like the guy who used to fix our bicycles, who actually recognized me in traffic and pulled over to ask how I was. I got my favorite fried chicken from the same woman in front of the Tesco Lotus grocery store, and I was even greeted by the same two neighborhood dogs, Taya and Talo, as I arrived on the doorstep of the project house at 5:30am.

Like life inside the wardrobe, time in Mae Sot does seem to pass much more quickly than time back home, and it certainly does not wait for us foreigners to return to carry on. I eventually embraced the changes as an opportunity to discover the place anew and make my time there another unique and special experience. I will always hold on to the lingering, indescribable feeling of being in Mae Sot for the first time, but having returned once to rediscover it, I have come to accept and look forward to whatever my next visit has in store.



From Burma to Mae Sot – Stories of Myself

A unique art project by Burmese children...

...reaching out to Canadians

If you would like a copy of our book of migrant school children's art and commentaries, please let us know.



MIGRANT SCHOOLS FACE CLOSURE AMID FUNDING CUTS

By Naw Noreen
12 July 2013

Reproduced from Democratic Voice of Burma website
www.dvb.no/news/migrant-schools-face-closure-amid-funding-cuts/29659

More than two dozen migrant schools in western Thailand face closure as international donors continue to slash funding for groups on the Thai-Burma border, a local NGO has warned. Twenty-five schools, teaching as many as 5,000 students in Thailand's Tak province, have been left without financial assistance for the year 2013-2014, raising concerns that they will be forced to shut down, according to a local migrant group. "Funding for migrant organisations this year has decreased as most of the donors have moved inside Burma," Naw Paw Ray, chairperson from the Burmese Migrant Workers' Education Committee, told DVB. "About 25 of 74 migrant schools in Tak are yet to receive any assistance and they are unable to pay the teachers, their rent, electricity and water bills. Some of the schools have lost students as they could not provide transportation for them."



Funding for border groups, including schools and health care facilities, has seen a significant decline since the start of last year. In late June, The Border Consortium (TBC) – which coordinates humanitarian assistance for Burmese refugees living on the border — announced that it would cut food rations to some 128,000 people across nine camps under its care. Dozens of other groups, including the renowned Mae Tao clinic, which offers free medical care to Burmese migrants and refugees, have also been forced to cut back crucial services.

Burma, which is slowly emerging from nearly five decades of military rule, has become a new hotspot for aid groups and has attracted a massive influx of humanitarian funding. But NGOs working on the border say they have been short-changed in the process. Naw Paw Ray said the Burmese government had previously pledged to donate textbooks for the underfunded migrant schools, but their offer had yet to materialise. She added that nearly 200 teachers still needed to be paid. "If they can't pay the teachers decently, then the teachers will go and find other jobs. This makes us concerned about the schools' survival."

According to the International Labour Organization, over 200,000 Burmese children under the age of 17 live in Thailand. Less than 20 percent are estimated to attend school, mostly through specialist programmes set up by local NGOs. Although Thai law stipulates that all children, regardless of their immigration status, are allowed to attend school, migrant children are often excluded for practical reasons, such as financial or language barriers, and forced to start working instead.

NOTE: There are 74 Burmese migrant schools providing free education to some 10,000 students in Tak province in western Burma. All of these migrant schools rely on humanitarian organizations for funding.

ARE YOU A BISHOP'S OR CHAMPLAIN STUDENT OR RECENT GRAD INTERESTED IN DOING INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEER WORK?

The Mae Sot  *Education Project*

offers a deeply meaningful, 6 month, overseas volunteer opportunity working with Burmese refugee and migrant kids in Thailand.

Application deadline: November 1st, 2013

For application information and forms go to www.maesot.ubishops.ca or see teachers Sunny Man Chu Lau (Bishop's) or Catherine Isely (Champlain).

NOTE: Information Meetings will be held on campus during the fall:
Tuesday, Sept 24, 12:30 in CRC 343
Wednesday, Sept 25, 7:00 in N 312





Photo Gallery

