



Mae Sot Education Project

Newsletter

Late Summer, 2025

<https://maesoteducation.ca>

For more information, contact us at maesoteducationproject@gmail.com

MSEP – still celebrating our 21st year of partnership with the migrant education community in Mae Sot!

Volunteers, writing from Mae Sot, share experiences and reflections...

What follows in this first section of our newsletter are some stories and reflections written this month by our volunteers from Mae Sot. Their stories and observations bring home the nature of the community of people that our volunteers have been working with and the universality of their individual experiences interacting with partners. Read, learn and enjoy!

A community of people who give more than they receive

By Mary Evans, 2025 Volunteer

A usual day at BHSOH Learning Centre begins and ends with students and teachers united around the Thai flag to sing the national anthem. I remember witnessing this harmonious gathering for the first time, back at the beginning of June. It was magical and powerful. It blew me away. What I was witnessing - more than 500 people uniting under the hum of a single song - was a quick introduction to the values of community, resilience, and gratitude amongst the Burmese people. Fast forward almost three months, the effect remains the same. I would argue, even more powerful. This morning as we sing to honour Thailand, I feel myself getting teary. I am met with a wide range of emotions: Is it beautiful,

or is it heartbreaking that this community of Burmese migrants is singing the Thai anthem rather than Myanmar's?

Writing for this newsletter has proven to be quite a challenge. How can I accurately portray all that these people have suffered? How can I do justice to the heart-wrenching stories some students and teachers have told me? I can't. However, I can demonstrate how resilient,

appreciative, and giving this community is despite the incredible hardships they have faced and continue to face. Fleeing from Myanmar is, for most students and teachers, part of the ir "story".

Among the several difficulties that Burmese migrants have lived while in flight, life in Mae Sot comes



with its own challenges. The scorching hot sun, the culmination of water and flooding during the rainy season, the (incredibly) spicy food, and of course, the inability to obtain legal documentation.

Circumstances are not much easier in the learning centres, for both teachers and students. Classes of 45-55 students have become the standard. For teachers, adapting to the differences in language proficiency within a single classroom is more challenging than managing the large number of students. It makes lesson planning difficult, especially given that resources are limited.

Everyone makes an effort to ensure that nobody is lacking anything. If you happen to not have a lunch, nobody will let you go hungry. Everyone will take a small part of their dish and offer it to you. If you happen to not have a pen or paper, you will receive more than you need from other students and teachers. If your whiteboard marker stops working (it happens way too often), a student will always have a spare one waiting to be used. The generosity of this community is beyond measure. It is a place where no one gets left behind - an inclusive family that nurtures each other, and loves one another deeply.

This is an extremely attentive community - when I am teaching (and sweating because of how hot it is), I wipe my face with my hand to get the sweat off. I start hearing whispers "Sayama... sayama...". I remember thinking to myself, I hear that word so often! What does it mean? I ask my students, and they tell me that it means "girl teacher" in Burmese. Then, they look at me and say "Teacher, you have marker all over your face!" Sure enough, my blue stained sweaty hands came into contact with my face, and here I am. Students run to get me a tissue to wipe it off. Though slightly embarrassing, the situation shows the power of community. Being a part of this collectivist community means not letting anyone fall behind, or look silly with marker all over their face.

Sometimes, it is hard to grasp the reality of the Burmese migrants because they are so loving, so polite, and so easy to smile. They radiate happiness and their smiles are infectious. Their positivity demonstrates their resiliency, and impressive strength. They expect nothing from others, but are willing to give everything.

I came to Mae Sot thinking I would help the students learn English, but I realize that I am also the one learning. My students may have learned some English, but I have learned about true strength, generosity, and love. Despite the unfair challenges they face, they remain individuals with dreams and ambitions. They remain hopeful about their future. It is just so hard, at times, to understand or to accept that these dreams are harder for them to achieve



Mary in the classroom with students

than they should be. As the school day nears an end, I hear a teacher next to me say "It's a bad day, not a bad life" after her orange whiteboard marker explodes all over her belongings, staining everything in sight (apparently we are all struggling with these markers). I just pause and look at her - no words to describe the situation, other than as a true inspiration to me.

As I wrap this story up, I will be getting ready to sing the national anthem again. Something I notice is that music is powerful. My students love music. Our favourite lessons together are the ones that involve music because, as my students have told me, songs bring a sense of relatedness, and music has the power to change our moods. It also unites us, and reminds us that we are all human. Next week, my grade 12s will be performing their own songs that they have been creatively writing and rehearsing over the past weeks. There are a million other things I wish to write about. But for now, we gather to sing, and I am not only surrounded by strength, and generosity - I am surrounded by my new found family.

More than Refugees

By Sonia Ungur, 2025 Volunteer

My experience in Mae Sot has been, in many ways, an incredibly powerful, eye opening and altering one. It is challenging to put into words all of the feelings and emotions that have come upon me in the last few months since arriving here, but what is definitely clear for me is that the people that I have encountered here are truly special, beautiful and deserve attention, love, and so much more. The harsh reality of the Burmese refugees and migrant children living in Mae Sot deserves to be shared, each Burmese refugee should have the opportunity to have their stories heard, and I, myself, as a volunteer with the MSEP this year, knew nothing about the situation in Myanmar before learning about the project, and the countless refugees having to leave their homes, country and family in order to live a somewhat normal life.

The teachers, students and members of the migrant learning centers have demonstrated so much resilience, hope and bravery in the face of incredible hardships and adversity. For instance, I have spoken to numerous Burmese individuals who I now consider friends, and they have described the unfair treatment they sometimes receive simply because they are Burmese and do not have legal status in Thailand. Their bank accounts are frozen, they face many challenges if they want to work or attend Thai schools, etc. The migrant learning centers that have been founded in order to give migrant children from Myanmar an opportunity to get an education, receive no funding from the Thai government, and since “refugee status” does not exist for them in Thailand, they constantly have to worry about their safety and security. The teachers are also paid very little, just enough to eat and have a roof over their heads; many teachers sleep at the boarding houses at the schools.

One of my grade 8 students who is 14 years old and lives at the boarding house has told me that she left her family, home and country a year ago, at only 13 years old all alone to go to Thailand and get an education as her parents wanted her to have a chance at a better future. She told me that it was very difficult for her at first, and she cried all the time. Despite not having seen her family since she left Myanmar, she eventually adapted to the school, made friends and is one of the most motivated students I’ve seen, always participating and willing to learn new things. She is also incredibly emotionally intelligent and wise beyond her years. When I first arrived at the school and told the class that I was coming to help them work on their English for three months, she immediately asked me if I missed my family, something she probably experiences on a regular basis. This is just one story, but every student has one. Some are heartbreaking or inspiring, but all hopeful and resilient.

I came to Mae Sot, thinking I would help students learn English but did not expect to learn so much from them as well. They are incredibly grateful for the help and attention they receive; even though our presence might seem like a small gesture, the joy it brings to the students is immediate. Their faces light up with such genuine smiles, and it's truly heartwarming to witness.



Sonia helping some of her Parami students



Sonia, Maika, artist friend Maung Maung Tinn and students celebrate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Stuck in the mud – and rescued!

By Anabelle Villeneuve, 2025 Volunteer

It was starting to rain again, my shoes were covered with clay, the wheels of my bike were barely turning, and I was asking myself how I could've thought that this muddy road was a shortcut.

I was thinking of how to get myself out of this situation when I saw a local man walking towards me, a puppy in one arm and a small basket in the other. Without saying anything, he placed them in my bike basket, and started pushing my bike through the mud. When we finally reached the end of the road, he even cleared some of the mud stuck between my tires. I then told him “khop khun kha”, “kyeizu tin ba de” and “ta bluh”, all meaning “thank you” in Thai, Burmese and Karen hoping he would understand at least one. He simply smiled.

Before he left, I looked in my bag for something to give in return and found a bag of dog food for his puppy. He accepted it and said something I sadly didn't understand. Then he continued on his way, as if helping me was the most natural thing in the world.

With wet wipes and my water bottle, I tried to clean my feet a little. That's when two women appeared. We nodded at each other, and they quickly noticed my unsuccessful attempt to get the mud off my shoes. One of them gestured for me to take off my shoes, then disappeared behind some bushes and a stream. When she returned, my shoes looked as clean as the day I bought them. She even brought water to wash my feet and then helped me put the shoes back on. I was speechless at such kind and generous help from people who did not know me. I thanked them in three languages. They just smiled, and kept on walking, without expecting anything in return.

I was finally ready to get to Hsa Mu Htaw Learning Centre and tell the Grade 6 and 7 about my muddy adventure. But my bike had other plans, the pedals were stuck. Here I was on the side of the highway with a broken bike. I saw some men loading trucks and I took a chance. As I got closer, one came over and after seeing the problem, he took out a garden hose. I could not talk Burmese and he could not talk English, but we laughed together at the amount of mud clogging my wheels. Once the pedals could turn again, I asked him “Thailand or Myanmar”? He quickly answered “Myanmar”, so I said “kyeizu tin ba de”. His face lit up and with a big smile replied “ya ba dae” (you're welcome).

That day was not an exception. Whether at school, in the market or at a small restaurant, we are always met with kindness, generosity, and a genuine love of sharing Burmese and other ethnic groups' culture. Their community spirit and mutual support are a true strength. No real words were exchanged during my adventure, yet, as soon as they saw me struggling, they helped me without hesitation. Sometimes, to say thank you, a smile says more than a conversation ever could.



Sonia joins Anabelle at Hsa Mu Htaw Learning Centre



Anabelle engaging with a very cheerful group at Pyo Khinn Learning Centre

Entering a Maze, Discovering Hope and Resilience

By Rebecca Bergeron, 2025 Volunteer

In Mae Sot, you wake up to the melodious sound of the rain cascading from its cloudy, grey sky. The rhythm of the water follows you as you bike through the streets; one after the other, they divide into paths and make this city a maze. Mazes are well-known for their unpredictable routes full of dead ends. For the youth community in Mae Sot, their journeys sure feel like walking in one of them. The uncertainty of their future follows them as they walk to school. The students carry heavy weights: their stories and resilience.

My students painted their mazes' walls with hope and passion. There is absolutely nothing that could have prevented me from falling in love with Mae Sot. Its people are hardworking and devoted to giving migrant children the education they deserve. Wandering in the halls of Hsa Thoo Lei, one of Mae Sot's learning centers, I hear endless giggles. The students are wearing their blue uniforms and their biggest smiles. As I enter the room, they whisper: "Sayama Sayama." They are eager to learn, curious, and marvelous. They excel in art; what cannot be communicated with words is drawn. They treat each other as family; everybody here is brother and sister.

The migrant community welcomed me in their family. I am in awe of their collectivism and empathy. On Wednesdays and Thursdays, if you pass by the grade 7's classroom, you can hear us chant "I have the right." My students and I engage with the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Equality, social security, and freedom are terms that become more and more familiar. They grow fond of their identity, of being Burmese, Karen, or Kachin. In class, the students learn how to speak up and embrace who they are. On the other side of the hallway are my two groups of grade 9 students. Their imagination is unlimited. In class, we listen to music and even create our own. We make rhymes and share our favorite songs. Singing together is an emotional charge; we are vulnerable but united. They explore and share their ambitions. Doctors, singers, teachers, and businessmen are samples of what they aspire to be. I listen, smile, and am optimistic because students here love to mimic "teacher", so we hold on to hope together.

From July to August, I had the opportunity to explore a new MSEP partnership: Youth Connect Foundation. Its purpose is to support migrant students during the transition from high school to employment. YC provides basic and vocational training in addition to offering three-month apprenticeships in local businesses. My group, English for hospitality, composed of only 16 students, was very small

and special. The first day, I learned all their names. They are now engraved in my mind and my heart. We explored our strengths and weaknesses together; I found 16 students, but also 16 friends. Their individual stories are puzzling. Some pieces were left behind in Burma, and others are now here in Mae Sot. I have to call myself privileged; my students offered me their trust and shared their challenges with me. Their being older and already further exposed to English made communication very easy between us. In any case, the language barrier would have never stopped us from connecting with one another.



Rebecca sharing a moment with Youth Connect students

Helping older students such as these has made me grow professionally and emotionally. As a future teacher, my greatest curse is getting easily attached. My 16 students from the YC's program have been no exception. I often say that humans are mosaics; we are each a collection of every individual who crosses our path. A piece of mine is now tinted with the colorful culture of Mae Sot.

Despite the adversity, the migrant community is strong. To the numerous educators I encountered, who fled their homeland and are now teaching in learning centers, and to the students who attended my classes every day, I have no words to express my gratitude. "Sayama" also hopes to mimic her students one day, to have the ability to overcome everything.

New Connections

By Maika Beland, 2024 Volunteer now back in Mae Sot for a second round

NOTE: Maika decided to return to Mae Sot this year to work with the Inclusive Education Foundation. She is shown here (top, centre) with students from INED's Youth Champions program. At the same time, she is acting as MSEP's on-site representative and LC volunteer.

As I walk down my apartment steps, I feel a sense of relief that I am back in Mae Sot, Thailand. It feels great to go back to the same places I discovered last summer and see the friends that I love so dearly. Although Mae Sot is a familiar place for me, my first week here was filled with

excitement and nervousness because I have come to help in a new organization that is extremely important in the migrant community, the *Inclusive Education Foundation (InEd)*.

According to INED, it is estimated that 200,000 migrants are out of school in Thailand, and the current enrollment of grade levels resembles a triangle-like figure (see www.inedfoundation.org/). Most migrant children enrolled in school are in the lower levels. As the grades move up, the number of students enrolled decreases (*Migrant Education Coordination Center and Government of Canada, 2023-2024*). The decrease in the number of older students is why the Inclusive Education Foundation (INED) is such an important organization in migrant education. INED works to close this gap and reshape the enrollment triangle into a square. I feel fortunate to be helping in the program of Youth Champions at INED.

The Youth Champions are a group of 24 students who have worked hard to get to where they are. Most of them are working towards scholarships to attend university, but the opportunities for these young people are very limited. Each student has a different story, and I will learn so much from all of them. I aim to raise awareness of mental health among these youth, with the goal of initiating a broader positive impact. I look forward to learning from this organization, which will hopefully lead to more opportunities unfolding. I believe the new connections in Mae Sot demonstrate the dedication of the *Mae Sot Education project* for migrant youth and our willingness to adapt.

I also have the honour of assisting the project committee in identifying the needs of our partner schools and strengthening our new connections with Youth Connect and the Inclusive Education Foundation, to figure out how the next years will go and how best we can support our partners. Being back in Mae Sot is a stark reminder of the importance of community and how it takes a village to support individual well-being – and a willing world to support a village. I am truly eager to continue my journey here, and I look forward to what's to come!



Maika joins the Inclusive Education Foundation Youth Champions on the football field



First days in Mae Sot - meeting partners in early June



A gathering as Sonia, Mary and Rebecca prepare to go home in late August

Our Evolving Project Committee and a Special Tribute

Over the 20 odd years of MSEP's existence, a great many community members have given considerable time and energy to our project by serving on our Project Committee or assisting us as TEFL trainers. The PC organizes our fundraisers, selects our volunteers, engages in various forms of community outreach and sustains our partnerships with educators in Mae Sot. Our TEFL trainers play the critical role of preparing our volunteers to go into classrooms and help Myanmar youth learn English and connect to the world. First, we want to name all those who have served over the years.

Here is a list of our members past and present(alphabetically by first name!) : Anabel Pinero, Andrew McCann, Angie Petitclerc, Avril Aitken, Barbara Rowell, Bonnie Kay, Calila Tardif, Carinne Bevan, Caroline Chabot Chartier, Catherine Isely, Charles Chevrier, Dania Paradis-Bouffard, Derek Heatherington, Emily Evans, Emily Prangley-Desormeaux, Felix Duplessis Marcotte, Garry Retzleff, Graham Moodie, Judy Keenan, Laurence Michaud, Lissa McRae, Loic Mercier, Marjorie Retzleff, Mary Purkey, Michelle Van Loon, Rina Kampeas, Ron Bishop, Sara Watson, Skylar LePoidevin, Stephen Sheeran, Sunny Lau, Susan Renaud, Tyler Gordon, William Bryson

We also want to pay a tribute to our longest serving member, Garry Retzleff who, much against our better judgment, thinks it is time for him (at age 85) to retire. Garry's wife, Marjorie, preceded him in being part of our Project Committee from its earliest days. Garry joined after his indispensable role as selector of wine for important fundraising events became evident at our first art auction in 2010. He has never left us. He and Marjorie hosted two garden parties on our behalf and were deeply involved in the numerous art auctions and sales we held over the years. Vacationing took them regularly to Thailand, and while there, they made a point of traveling to Mae Sot to visit our partners on a number of occasions.



Garry and Marjorie in Mae Sot with our volunteer team in 2014



Garry with friend of our project Paul visiting Mae Sot learning centres in 2023

After Marjorie's death in 2022, and the end of Covid, in 2023 Garry again visited with another friend of the project, Paul Sperison. Together, they renewed relationships with all of our partners and brought back important post-Covid updates. Garry's enthusiasm and steadfast commitment to MSEP over all these years has been hard for any of the rest of us to match. While in Mae Sot, Garry became especially attached to one of our learning centre partners (to which he gave some extra support) and it is noteworthy that describing the children's warm welcome still brings him to tears (really!). He is an emotional guy and his care for the people we serve on the border is very real. We are not sure what we will do without him – or why he needs more time to "tend his garden". We are truly grateful for all of his contributions and trust that we can still count on him to help us select and serve the wine when needed.

While we are paying tribute, we want also to draw attention to the many former volunteers who have joined our Project Committee for varying periods of time, some long and some short, depending on where their plans for their future have taken them. On the next page are photos of these amazing young contributors – without whom our project would not exist!

Contributions to the project are always welcome, and tax receipts are issued. To make a donation electronically, you may do so through the Bishop's University Foundation on our web site at: <https://maesoteducation.ca/donate-now>.

Remember to indicate that your donation is for the *Mae Sot Education Project*. Or, donate by cheque through the Bishop's Foundation and send your cheque to our project address: Box 67, Champlain College – Lennoxville, 2580 College St, Sherbrooke, QC J1M 2K3. **Be sure to include the name of the Foundation and MSEP on your cheque.**

Here they are (in no particular order) – Volunteers who have served on our PC!

Barbara Rowell, Bonnie Kay, Calila Tardif, Caroline Chabot Chartier, Charles Chevrier, Dania Paradis-Bouffard, Emily Prangley-Desormeaux, Felix Duplessis Marcotte, Laurence Michaud, Loic Mercier, Michelle Van Loon, Sara Watson, Skylar LePoidevin, Tyler Gordon, William Bryson and our newest member, Maika Beland!



Laurence



Bonnie



Michelle



Emily



Tyler



Skylar



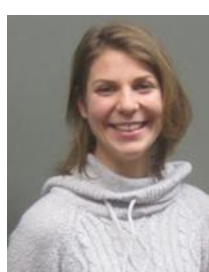
Barbara



William



Caroline



Dania



and Danielle Leblanc-Cyr who has stayed with us from afar since 2016 and assisted us in Mae Sot in recent years...

Below are those former volunteers who are *currently* members of our Project Committee.



Calila and Felix (with us for 10 years now), Loic, Sara, Charles, and finally, our newest member, Maika who just joined our Project Committee and is representing us in Mae Sot this year

Who we are and what we do

The *Mae Sot Education Project (MSEP)* is a community project based in the Lennoxville borough of 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 the Bishop's University and Champlain College – Lennoxville campus to go to Mae Sot for three to 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. Over the last 20 years, MSEP has delivered well over \$200,000 in funding assistance (excluding two substantial grants given through specific donations) and as of June 2025, has sent 73 volunteers to assist the migrant education community in Mae Sot.

The Project Committee is made up of members of the community, former faculty from Bishop's and Champlain, and former youth volunteers with the project. Currently, members are: Maika Beland (2024 volunteer), Charles Chevrier (2023 volunteer), Felix Duplessis-Marcotte (2016 volunteer), Judy Keenan, Loic Arguin-Mercier (2017 volunteer), Graham Moodie, Mary Purkey, Angie Petitclerc, Calila Tardif (2016 volunteer) and Sara Watson (2022 volunteer).