



Mae Sot Education Project

Welcome to 2017

Reflections on a rewarding year on the Thai-Burmese border

www.maesot.ubishops.ca

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

*From all of us at MSEP, a warm wish for peace in 2017
& deepest thanks for your continued support.*

Some images and reflections by our volunteers on their experiences in Mae Sot this past year



On November 14th, volunteers shared in a celebration of Loi Krathong with school friends at Parami Learning Centre. This important Thai Buddhist festival is celebrated on the full moon night of the 12th month of the Thai lunar calendar. It is a festival of light in which “floating lanterns” are launched into the night sky, and people reflect on the need to let go of their hatreds, a most worthy goal in today’s world. As Thailand mourns its beloved King Bhumibol Adulyadej and begins a new era under the rule of his son, King Maha Vajiralongkorn, we at MSEP wish the Thai people a future of peace and prosperity.

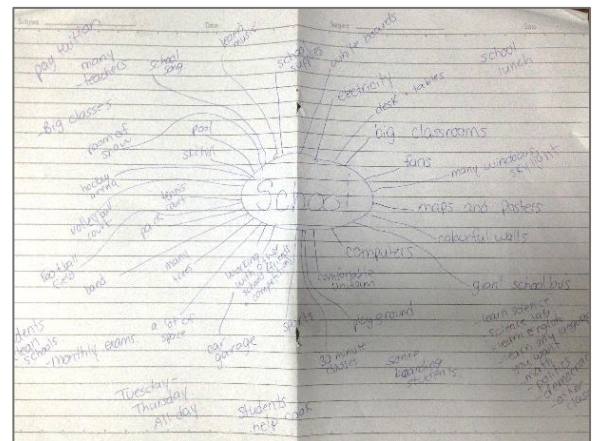


My Perfect School

By Amelia Martin, 2016-17 Volunteer

Growing up, I went to a typical Canadian elementary school. Short desks, miniature chairs and a monstrous playground. The lobby even came complete with a fish tank, and each classroom was decorated with bright posters and big windows. As I moved through grades, I moved through schools. I grew into a building old enough to have two entrances side by side, and indented stairs from the hundreds of kids who climbed them day after day. It had a musty smell and dimly lit classrooms, and has since been torn down. Eventually, I upgraded to a newly built high school, with shiny computer rooms and science labs. My classrooms had more than just desks and a board, they had projectors and smartboards, with a water fountain outside and enough hallways to get lost in.

These schools are not what I shared with my students in Mae Sot during their six months of questions and curiosities about Canadian schools. I told them about the snow, the classes we took, different school rules. Together, we decided that students having duties at school is beneficial, and that a classroom free of discrimination is important. I decided that their final assignment



would be to create a new school, the best school they could imagine. We started with a brainstorm, and the suggestions came slowly at first: electricity, running water, whiteboards in the classrooms, windows and a football field. As momentum picked up, the suggestions got more serious: air conditioning would be nice; we like our uniforms; a bigger classroom would be helpful.

As they got productive, I reflected on my younger years. Even when I was cursing the dust in my junior high, I cannot say we were without running water. In tenth grade, in my shiny new high school, I would have given us more computers, bigger classrooms, more spaces to hang out. I never would have included uniforms, and I probably would have swapped the air con for some extra heating. It is safe to say that my imagined school and theirs were more than a little different.

I urged my students to be creative: nothing is off limits. What about a swimming pool? We added skylights in all of the rooms, a tennis court, a hockey arena, and a room just full of snow. I reflected on my time at Bishop's University. We may not have had all of those things, but we were pretty close. How could it be that the schools I grew up in, even the one that was just torn down to be replaced by a modern new building, were their dream school? I suddenly found myself wishing I could pack my students in my suitcase and bring them home with me. I wanted to let them experience all of the things they were wishing for.

The suggestions kept rolling in. They wanted to learn every language and sciences and have big explosions in a chemistry lab. Maybe our school is in space! Or under water! At one school they only learned about animals, and at another the main focus was lunch. If you were to ask me as a child what a perfect school looks like, I would probably have added a larger playground, a cotton candy machine and a more regular pizza day in the cafeteria. If pressed, I would have included a giraffe and moved it to Mars.

In the end, our perfect schools were not so different. We all constructed spaces where our imagination was not limited by resources; our spaces let creativity grow and intellectual curiosities be explored. Maybe one school was on the moon, and another in a zoo, but they were all comforting, safe places that let students explore and be challenged. Even if we could not build our perfect schools we did craft an environment to confront priorities and envision possibilities, and took the opportunity to dream of a classroom full of snow.



Changing perspectives on education - and on myself

By Hannah Hornibrook, 2016 Volunteer

Going into this project, the question was not, "will I change?" Rather, it was, "how much and in what ways". Looking at who I was then and who I am now, I realize how much I've been altered by living a culturally different, simple, yet enormously satisfying life. I have been modified by the circumstances in which my two schools and over 150 students exist and by the chance to dwell among them, and learn from them the importance of relationships and when to take a rest. I see the accumulation of all the little changes in mannerisms, opinions, and passions that are only noticeable after the experience is finished.



First, my opinions about education have become so much stronger after being a part of a system that does not allow its students to reach their maximum potential. I have witnessed how a government, overrun by the military, can control its population through its education system. The project has allowed me to experience the effects of rote learning and a memory-based curriculum first hand. Simultaneously, it has given me the chance to have the honour of assisting these wonderful students. I now understand that our role as volunteers extends far beyond the borders of our duty of simply helping students learn in the classroom. I've learnt that that same principle rings true for all teachers, for whom I have developed tremendous respect.

Secondly, this project has awakened a passion for aiding people, teens and children especially, who are in need. Throughout this process, I have come to better understand that relationships in life are far more important than material wealth. I went to Mae Sot thinking I had to find a job in the future that would give me enough money so that I would never need to worry. However, after living among people who live day to day, month to month, it is easy to see that money is not all that is needed. They have proven to me a fundamental truth that I previously knew but didn't fully comprehend: that relationships, our connections to others, are what matter most. Furthermore, this adventure has allowed me to be confident in what I want my future to look like and to have the will and perseverance to succeed in the work I am called to do.

I've had to learn how to take care of myself and make decisions concerning my health. I've had to be responsible with my time and money. I've had to think of 150 plus students before myself. The lesson that I have repeatedly learned from the project is that whatever you do or say has an impact. Whether good or bad, we have an effect on the lives of the people around us. When you have almost 180 students, there are a lot of eyes watching – not to mention the staff at our schools and people we meet in Mae Sot. I will always wonder if I did end up helping those I came to help. My guess is that I will never fully know.

“182 Days of Bliss”

By Valerie Cooper, 2016 Volunteer

I can't believe how quickly the last 6 months have gone by. It feels like just yesterday that I woke up at the crack of dawn to begin my 30+-hour journey to Mae Sot, a town that I would soon call home. Prior to the departure, my mission was straightforward: I was to help Burmese migrant youth learn English. Sounds simple, right? After all, English is my mother tongue. How hard could this be? Well, I soon realized that I may have underestimated the complexity of this assignment.

As my responsibilities kicked in, I began to understand that I had to consider the expectations and requests of the headmaster and headmistress at each school I was placed in. Lesson planning involved thinking about the topic I was focusing on, my students' level of English, the benefit of the lesson and how it tied into the students' previously acquired knowledge, and of course, I wanted to make the lessons as fun and engaging as possible. Slowly but surely, I got the hang of the whole teaching thing as I learned about my students, their abilities, and their limitations.

As I reflect on the time I spent in Thailand, I realize that I was given more than just an opportunity to teach English abroad. The Mae Sot Education Project forced me to develop skills such as independence, leadership, time management, problem solving, public speaking, self-confidence, and networking, among others. This project also served as an outlet to create awareness of the struggles of migrant people as well as understanding of migrant education, and it continues to do so year after year. It even helps the volunteers stay fit, since bicycles are our only mode of transportation! Though these are all important elements, the Mae Sot Education Project, above all, brings hope to disadvantaged youth by improving their English skills to hopefully give them an edge in a challenging world, aiming to enhance their future.

All in all, I have learned that volunteering with MSEP involves much more than simply helping children learn how to communicate through a variety of sounds. It's an opportunity to share my culture and my interests, as well as to learn abundantly about a new culture and meet different people. By the end of the project, I became more patient in dealing with the language barriers and the very different concept of time. I learned that it was best to “go with the flow” and not be so concerned about time.

In addition, I realized that my concept of ‘home’ had changed surprisingly quickly. As soon as I had arrived, I felt included in the local community. Teachers and students alike would make sure that I was never hungry; they would worry about my safety when I biked, and restaurants or stores that we visited regularly would recognize us and treat us like their usual customers. I felt at home living in a collectivist culture. I had presumed at the beginning of this adventure that I would learn a lot from the experience, but now I know that I will truly cherish the journey that I took this year not only because of the progress my students made in developing their English skills but because of the difference it has made in my life.



And now for some images...



A celebration at Hsa Thoo Ley Learning Centre



Our volunteer team working with a World Education trainer



Dining with three of our artist friends



Days of fulfillment among friends in Mae Sot

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, former faculty from Bishop's and Champlain and former project volunteers. Currently, members are: Catherine Isely, Judy Keenan, Mary Purkey, Garry Retzleff and former volunteers Barbara Rowell (2005), Emily Prangle-Desormeaux (2009), William Bryson (2014) and Laurence Michaud (2015).

Contributions to the project are always welcome and tax receipts are issued. To make a donation electronically, here are the links: <http://www.ubishops.ca/gift> or <http://www.crc-lennox.qc.ca/community/foundation>. Remember to indicate that your donation is for the Mae Sot Education Project. Or, donate by cheque at our project address: Box 67, Champlain College – Lennoxville, Sherbrooke, QC J1M 2A1. Be sure to include the name of the Foundation and MSEP on your cheque.

Special thanks to volunteer
Amelia Martin for her work on
the layout of this newsletter.