



# Mae Sot Education Project

## Newsletter

### Fall 2015

[www.maesot.ubishops.ca](http://www.maesot.ubishops.ca)

For more information, contact us at [maesoteducationproject@gmail.com](mailto:maesoteducationproject@gmail.com)

### MSEP'S SUMMER FUNDRAISER - A \$2200 SUCCESS!

As many of you know, MSEP celebrated summer by hosting a garden party and silent auction in the beautiful garden of Garry and Marjorie Retzleff on August 2<sup>nd</sup>. The Project Committee is especially grateful to Garry and Marjorie for sharing this elegant green space with us. We also want to thank all those who donated items for our auction and those who made bids and donations. Bubbly, trays of delicious hors d'oeuvres, Catherine Walker's cello, sunshine and about 50 enthusiastic guests made for a great social event. Raising funds is a constant challenge for a small project such as ours and we are very happy to have had this opportunity to engage our community on what turned out to be a glorious summer afternoon.



**In this issue, we want to highlight our volunteers' reflections on life in Mae Sot. Three months into their volunteer experience, here are some of their impressions....**

#### FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

Emily Smith, 2015 Volunteer

Three months into this project and it seems like every week I have the new best day of my life. We've found a market for every day of the week, gone exploring on our bicycles, and made so many amazing friends, but in the beginning there was a lot of adjustment.

My first day at Pyo Khin school was one I will never forget. Pyo Khin is a small elementary school in the Muslim district of Mae Sot where most of the students practice Islam. On my way there I think I asked twelve different people for directions. They were all smiling and certain they knew where I was going, and all pointing in a different direction. I was going to the school's opening ceremony, and I would be meeting my students for the first time. When I finally got there, I was greeted with warm smiles and welcomed to sit with the elder committee members. I was served coffee and tea leaf salad, and then the dancing began. The first dance

featured ten kindergarten girls dancing, somewhat provocatively, to Thai music, wearing tied t-shirts and plaid skirts (very Britney Spears). My jaw dropped, but all the parents around me were laughing and cheering, so I smiled and clapped along reluctantly. When in Rome. An older woman sitting next to me was going wild with excitement, and began throwing 20 baht bills at the young girls. I later found out that this money would support the school and the cost of the ceremonies. The dances that followed were fun and energetic, but beyond anything I would expect at an elementary school back home. It was obvious that the dance was not meant to be provocative, but fun. The kids all smiled or stared at me as if I was the main event at the show.

At lunch I ate everything they offered me. There were ten dishes of different foods on the table, and men were continually scooping up a spoonful of a new one to add to my plate of rice. One older man who spoke English at the ceremony was very interested in speaking with me and so excited to learn I was a teacher. He told me that he had been

teaching English in Bangkok, Thailand and Myanmar for over 20 years and insisted I visit him at his house down the street and read his grammar book. I went to see his book and he showed me many others, so excited that they interested me. He invited me to come have dinner with him and his wife once she returns from Myanmar. He seemed to be a very respected man, who instructed English at a university level. He was so kind and told me which road to take



*Emily with kids at a wedding*

to get home. I was feeling pretty good as I hopped back on my bike to go home, but it was a really bumpy road, and my chain got stuck. I had to half pedal forward with one leg and then pedal back with the other to move forward. Boys swimming in the water next to the road laughed and yelled, "Hello! Hello Teacher!", so excited to practice their English words. I kept biking through the Burmese market (pedal forward, pedal back, pedal forward, pedal back), and all eyes were on me. I was so embarrassed thinking all these people must be thinking, "This silly little blond girl can't even figure out a bicycle", so I kept pedaling and smiling on my way. When I got to the main intersection, my bike broke down

completely, so I pulled over to see where the chain was stuck. A Burmese man watched me struggle for a minute and then came over to help. I tried to explain the problem, but he didn't speak any English, so he just got to work. His three friends passed by and offered to help as well, and then a man across the street saw the commotion and ran over to help too. Eventually there were five or six Thai and Burmese men working out the kink in my bike chain in the middle of the main road. They fixed it and passed it back to me. I was beet red and tried to thank them in every language I knew. On my bike ride home, I thought about how kind these people were who would help a stranger who couldn't even pronounce "Korp-koon-kah" correctly.

Since then I have met so many of these wonderful people, who will go out of their way to help one another. I have had a chance to visit markets and waterfalls, feed pigeons and one-eyed kittens, eat pigs blood, chicken feet, un-laid eggs, and experience so many new and strange aspects of Thai and Burmese culture. In every experience, the people of Mae Sot amaze me with their kindness. They make it easy to be happy here.

## FROM HERE TO THERE - ON FEELING AT HOME IN MAE SOT

Danielle Leblanc-Cyr, 2015 Volunteer



*Danielle celebrating Canada Day with her BHSOH students*

home. Mae Sot might just be my favorite place in the world. Don't get me wrong - of course Canada has its perks too. I fantasize about Tim Hortons, Kraft dinner and going to sleep without a bug net pretty regularly. Despite this, there's just something about Mae Sot and its people that have so quickly given me the sense that although I'm on the other side of the world from my family and friends, I am somehow at

From the smiles on the faces beautifully smeared with thanaka (a yellowish white cosmetic paste made from tree bark) and the betel nut-stained grins to the kindergarten students who line up daily to give me a special handshake and a kiss on the cheek, the people of Mae Sot have been nothing but welcoming (save for that one person who stole my bike at the Mother's Day Market, but I don't dwell on that).

Things that would've astounded me before I came here have now become the fixed daily routine. My day really just wouldn't be complete without the five dogs, three chickens and two babies who wander in and out of the beautiful thatched-roof, wall-less hut that is my class every morning. My students' names, which I was once so sure that I would never master, have now become so common that I could list them in my sleep. And the Thai and Burmese national anthems, though still just a jumble of sounds to me, are now so familiar that I catch myself humming them.

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Though Canada and Mae Sot are on opposite sides of the globe and come complete with hugely different cultures (and languages), it is nonetheless not hard to draw parallels between Canadian and Burmese youth. Such as when my students convince me that on this particular night, they are just *too* lazy to do any more studying and would really like to watch a movie instead. Or when the girls crowd around the mirror in the morning to make sure that their thanaka is applied just right before heading to class. Or when I take notice of what appears to be a blossoming flirtation between two of my Pre-GED students, complete with playful teasing and stolen glances. And when one of my 16-year-old Pre-GED girls asked if I was able to do a trendy new dance move made famous by a Hollywood starlet (I was not), it was almost as if I wasn't thousands of kilometers away from home.

## THE WRIST-TYING CEREMONY A Chance to Participate in Karen Culture



*In August, Emily attended this celebration of a very traditional ceremony by her students at Hsa Thoo Ley Learning Centre.*

In Karen culture, wrist-tying is a tradition older than Buddhism and Christianity. Elders tie strings around the wrists of those who have not yet had the chance to grow old. The ceremony involves many symbols of health and unity (sticky rice, string, bananas, sugar cane, flowers and rice water) to highlight the importance of strength and unity in Karen culture. The first picture shows the young students bringing rice to the elders. The elders then feed sticky rice and bananas to them and tie string around their wrists to keep their spirit close and ensure a long healthy life. In both pictures the students are wearing traditional Karen dress.



## LOOKING AT THE WORLD THROUGH NEW EYES, SEEING THE BEAUTY!

Jonah Baldwin, 2015 Volunteer

Every place that I have been so far in Thailand seems to possess indescribable beauty. Whether you are taking a riverboat through Bangkok, visiting temples in Chang Mai, or simply biking to school, you are bound to see something breathtaking. Mae Sot is not

a very touristic destination because it doesn't have the sort of flashy sites that Westerners flock to see, but it has much more to offer than that. Mae Sot feels like a home. From the day that you get here until the day that you leave, you will feel a strong sense of community. When I first arrived, I felt that all the people here wanted something from me. I received many random greetings from strangers and I was sure that they were only interested in trying to sell me something. To my surprise, I have come to realize that the people are genuinely as nice as they seem.

As westerners, we are almost always the center of attention wherever we go. People are constantly staring at us and making comments to their friends that we cannot understand. This can make me feel like a local celebrity at times, but it can also be exhausting. The best random encounters are always when I run into students from one of my schools. Even if I don't teach them, they recognize me, and they let me know just how overjoyed they are to see me. The best example of

this that I have experienced so far was when a grade one boy from my school spotted me from a distance as I walked down the road. He took off running and screaming my name (my name is now “Teacher”), and the second that he reached me, he jumped into my arms expecting me to catch him. I felt like we had just been reunited after 20 long years of being apart. Even though these moments are just everyday experiences here, they never cease to make my day.

Life here seems much simpler, and this has given me a new perspective. I met a boy outside a store who kept repeating the word “hungry” to me. He was around eight years old, he had no shoes and he was completely alone. I gave him some bread and he seemed quite content. To my surprise I saw the same kid again the following week, only this time he was at my school. He tapped me on the shoulder and said “hungry”. It all seemed quite funny to him, but I was speechless. I would have expected him to feel embarrassed about it, but for him it seems to just be a way of life. Such experiences have truly opened my eyes to how fortunate we are in Canada.

The best part of the experience is, of course, the students. The longer I stay here, the more I realize how important my job is, not just as an English teacher but outside of the classroom as well. My students are so busy working that they don’t always have time to enjoy themselves. My weekends would not be complete if I didn’t take the time to go to my schools. I think that teaching guitar and playing games with the students is almost as important as teaching them English. I feel that they are trying to learn too many things at once and that many of them just need a break. I grew up as an English speaker in Quebec and I found it very frustrating to learn a second language. I can imagine how difficult it must be for them to learn Burmese, Thai, English and Karen all at the same time. I am sure that they are learning a lot of important things but I find it hard to believe that they will be able to retain such vast amounts of information. Above all, I feel that they deserve to have time to just be kids.

I don’t remember exactly what sort of expectations I had before going on this adventure, but I know that have definitely been shattered. It’s very difficult to describe this experience to someone who has never been to this place. It’s a whole new world where countless discoveries are waiting to be had. There are so many people here whose stories inspire me. I will be forever thankful to the Mae Sot Education Project for granting me this amazing opportunity.



BHSOH students doing a science project



A young artist developing his talents

### Aspects of life in Mae Sot Learning Centres....



Laurence enjoying lunch with teachers



Students learning about the political situation in Burma

### *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: Catherine Isely, Judy Keenan, Angie Petitclerc, Mary Purkey, Garry Retzleff, and Marjorie Retzleff, as well as former volunteers Barbara Rowell (2005) and William Bryson (2014).

**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.



## Pen Pals!

An excerpt from a Blog by volunteer, Laurence Michaud on September 4, 2015

If you would like to read more of Laurence's colourful blog, go to: <http://laurenceinmaesot.blogspot.ca/>

It was a big week for me. What really brightened it was my new project: *Pen Pals*. I started to do this exchange with my grade 5 class at Hsa Mu Htaw School and my Grade 6 class at Hle Bee School. They are so crazy about the project. I still can't believe it. The students have written only one letter to their penpals, and already want to meet them and send them pictures! I am happy to have found a project that they like so much. I am planning on having them write one letter every 2-3 weeks. It's an excellent English exercise as they practice their writing and reading. Moreover, they are obsessed with asking me questions about their friend. "Is he tall? Short? How old is he?". They are very curious and it's absolutely wonderful to see that.

### A NEW CHALLENGE:

#### Volunteering at a Community-based Organization

Danielle Leblanc-Cyr, 2015 Volunteer

Working with the Burmese Migrant Workers' Education Committee (BMWEC) has been an interesting experience to say the least. At the beginning, my excitement over doing international volunteering and adjusting to Mae Sot made me really eager to get to work. After the initial excitement wore off, the challenges of working with a foreign, community based organization (CBO) have become more and more apparent.

Over the past three months I've learned that the Burmese Migrant Workers Education Committee, an organization responsible for the education of about 4,000 students, faces huge challenges in its efforts to execute the tasks related to providing administration for migrant learning centres. The staff at BMWEC are clearly dedicated to the educational success of the learning centres and students; yet they themselves have been educated through this patchwork system, and many lack the basic know-how to work independently or to keep proper records of schools' information. They have had no opportunity to learn about concepts such as professionalism that are important to interactions with school heads and donors. Judging by some

of the more senior staff of the organization, this lack of knowledge seems to be made up for eventually through experience, or what we might call "on-the-job training". Yet by western standards, it is easy to judge them as lacking.

This situation has caused me some frustration. Many staff who've worked with the organization much longer than I have don't know what to do on a daily basis without guidance. With my background in International Studies, as



well as past work with fund raising and working with donors, there is much that I

could or should be doing to help. The challenge for a western student such as myself is how to intervene in a way that is both genuinely helpful to and at the same time respectful of colleagues who may seem to have much to learn.

On the other hand, my time at BMWEC has also given me the opportunity to develop some important skills that are, happily, really valued by the office manager. My main tasks have recently been to help him complete reports and proposals for World Education Thailand. Though this work began as interpretation [helping to explain the questions, which are all written in English], my ideas and contributions are always added to the question responses. Thus, I have helped to formulate objectives for the yearly project proposal, as well as implementation strategies. It has been sometimes surprising to me the extent to which my opinions

have been included in these plans and documents – given my limited experience.

It is clear that the young management team at BMWEC needs some help to build skills essential for its work. It faces a gargantuan task with very limited training and resources. Perhaps the lesson learned from my own experience is that foreign NGOs who want to contribute to

migrant education need to bring expertise that can help CBOs develop these administrative skills and that young volunteers need to be prepared to be open to the challenges of working in an unfamiliar cultural and organizational environment, with an understanding of and an appreciation for the life experience that their partners have to draw on in trying to build their organizations' capacity.

### **MY MUAY THAI EXPERIENCE or... Yet Another Reality of Our Students' Lives**

Laurence Michaud, 2015 Volunteer

It's a Saturday night in Mae Sot. There is a special market for Mother's Day and the volunteers and I decide to go see some Muay Thai, a popular combat sport in Thailand. We hop on our bikes. It's 9 PM and the streets are already empty. The street dogs are out and I remain vigilant. They are always a bit more aggressive at night.

On our arrival at the market, we see the ring, and it's completely circled by a big crowd. I observe a lot of men, children and some women cheering for their favorite fighter. It's a very interesting scene, and we are the only white people present. As we get closer, I notice that the fighters are pretty young. Actually, very young, no more than 14 years old.

It's at that moment that I see him. In the left corner of the ring, getting ready for the fight, is a Grade 3 student from Hsa Mu Htaw school. It's hard for me to believe what my eyes are witnessing. My heart beats faster as the crowd's energy rises. The fight begins. After many hits and kicks, my student wins. I am relieved that both fighters are not too hurt. They leave the ring, and I search for my student in the crowd. I finally see him. As I am walking towards him, he notices me and smiles. I meet his little sister and say goodbye to him. I left the market a little in shock. I could not believe what had just happened. It definitely took me a few days to process this event and make meaning out of it. For me, it was a great cross-cultural moment which made me realize how the Burmese and Western cultures are different. I now accept the fact that he is engaged in such an extreme sport and I also embrace the fact that this brought us closer.

Mae Sot is full of moments where we get to experience the Burmese/Thai culture. This was one of them. Of course, some of them bring joy while others make us feel out of our comfort zone or even disturbed. However, these are all experiences I am accepting as part of this journey. Ultimately, they are making this adventure memorable in all kinds of ways. This Muay Thai match is one experience that I will definitely never forget.

### **A CELEBRATION!**

A short email to the Project Committee from Danielle Leblanc-Cyr, August, 2015

I really want to share with you a truly surprising experience I've had here this past week with my students.

Sunday was my birthday and I went to my school in the afternoon and stayed for dinner, but didn't stay the night because I was feeling sick. On Monday and Tuesday I was quite sick (fever and vomiting, etc.) so I was unable to attend school. Tuesday morning, I had just gotten out of bed and walked out into the kitchen area when I saw a truck that I recognized from BHSOH (my school) drive by and stop. All of my Pre-GED students got out of the back and came up into the house. I was really confused about why they were there until they all started singing Happy Birthday and pulled out a really, really beautiful cake they had all chipped in together to buy for me! It was really such an amazing experience and I still can't believe they actually did all that for me and brought it to my house because they got tired of waiting for me to come back to school.

Honestly, every day I feel so lucky to be at this school. My students are all so sweet and kind, and all of the teachers are really friendly to me. I really couldn't imagine being in a better place. Hope all is well in Canada!

