



Mae Sot Education Project

Newsletter

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www.maesot.ubishops.ca

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

We're not in Canada anymore

By Amelia Martin, MSEP Volunteer, June 12, 2016

Sometimes when experiencing something new or exciting, I go through a narration in my head. It's a bit weird, I will concede, to pretend your life is one big novel, but it is just something that I have grown used to doing. However, on our recent bus trip from Bangkok to Mae Sot the story I was mentally writing changed very abruptly.

This trip takes about eight hours, and the first half passed rather uneventfully although the Thai movie blaring in our ears was unexpectedly violent. At the halfway point in the journey, the bus stopped for lunch. Thanks to a friendly fellow passenger, we learned that lunch was actually included in the price of our \$15 tickets! Inside the restaurant, I used (for the first of many times) a key Thai phrase: *pom mai gin neua sad ka*, or I don't eat meat (okay, okay, I handed the servers my phone with the translator app, but it still counts!). Quickly we scarfed down our food before rushing back to the bus for the second half of our journey. Filled up with rice and fried eggs, I dozed back to sleep, hoping to wake up in Mae Sot.

My dreams, unfortunately, were interrupted by Thai police who were asking all of the passengers for identification. Thus I got my first glimpse of life on the border. Our group was taught before we left that Mae Sot is popular among migrants escaping the conflict in Burma/Myanmar, which results in many illegal migrants living there (the same people who are served by the schools where I will

be volunteering). Hearing about these issues in our pre-departure preparations and seeing their reality, however, are two very different things. When the bus stopped at the checkpoint, a realization passed over me that fear of deportation that many of my students and their families have experienced on a regular basis is very real.



My internal narrative on this bus journey started out as a whine about the long bus ride and loud Thai movies, but then evolved as the scenery changed from big city to lush trees, ending in this realization about the lives of the young people I would be encountering. I felt a bit somber as we waited for the police to check everyone's identification and carried on towards Mae Sot. However, when we arrived at the bus station, my story changed again.

Before leaving Canada, it had been arranged that one of our school partners would pick us up from the bus station and take us to our house, saving us from the pain of getting lost.

What we found at the bus station (or, rather, what found us) was so much more than a simple pick-up. A group of 5-10 teachers and students all excitedly greeted us, picking up our suitcases, holding up umbrellas (although with the excitement I hardly noticed the rain) and offering us a very warm welcome to Mae Sot. Their smiles and enthusiasm immediately energized the five tired travelers getting off the bus. A comment from another volunteer really summed up my feelings: "I think I'm going to like it here."

For a poignant 2-minute take on our volunteers' journey to Mae Sot, see "The Departure" at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwEgEpq6qQM&feature>

Project Developments - Looking ahead

This fall, Emily Prangle-Desormeaux, former MSEP volunteer and project committee member, will be rejoining our project after two years teaching in China. With her long experience in the [WUSC] Bishop's/Champlain Refugee-student Sponsorship Project and in local activism on refugee and other human rights issues, her International Studies degree from Bishop's and her history of involvement in MSEP, Emily will bring many talents to our project committee. She will receive training in some of the coordination tasks related to our project's functioning during the fall and winter. Our hope is gradually to create a second generation of leadership for MSEP that can define the direction the project should take as the situation in Myanmar/Burma continues to evolve.



Regarding our role in the Mae Sot migrant education community, two problem areas where we hope we can have a positive impact in the coming year involve educational opportunity for older youth. First, as conditions in Burma become more stable, some migrant teachers are opting to return to Burma to continue their own education or are simply leaving migrant learning centres (as the schools are called) because salaries are insufficient. Thus migrant learning centres providing secondary education are suffering from a lack of teachers qualified to teach at higher levels. Second, migrant youth seeking post-secondary education, even when successful in gaining admission to existing programs, need financial support. We at MSEP are reflecting on how we can contribute to solutions to these problems.

Notes from the Border - our volunteers reflect

Funny Football

Amelia Martin, MSEP Volunteer

For the past week or two my students have been very excited about an upcoming football game (aka soccer). It has taken me over a week to piece together clues as to what this game was, since nobody seemed to know the entire story. Here's what I found out (in order of discovery):

1. There will be a school-wide football game.
2. Everybody has to play.
3. That includes teachers.
4. Actually, not everybody plays.
5. It will be next month.
6. Actually it's this week.
7. Maybe on Saturday.
8. After school on Wednesday.
9. Actually it's during the last class on Friday.
10. Everybody is very excited.

#10 rang true during the entire process, but the rest of the information was very flexible. So, this past Friday the girls had their football game and the boys will play next week. The students like to call this "Funny Football" because it is the girls' game. While my inner feminist shuddered at the thought, after watching the first game I had to agree a bit. The girls were volleying the ball into play, a goalie scored on her own net, and on more than one occasion two players went for the ball and instead ran into each other.

The second game, however, was a whole other story. These players had their game faces on, and the crowd was going wild (although they were going wild for the first game as well). They



BHSOH students watch the action

sprinted up and down the field that some of my students had built that same morning (as in... had impressively dug in the field boundaries and muddied their new jerseys). There were many near misses on the net, a penalty kick and an entire school of kids screaming their personal advice at the players. Nothing like having 100 coaches to help you play.

All in all, everybody seemed to be having a great time. Needless to say I'm pretty pumped up for the rematch next week.

La générosité surprenante

Felix Duplessis-Marcotte, MSEP Volunteer

Although we do not have the capacity to provide a fully bilingual newsletter, MSEP has decided to encourage our francophone volunteers to express themselves en français in the interests of reaching out to more people in our community. We hope you enjoy this very special account of an experience of generosity by volunteer Felix.

On dit qu'une image vaut mille mots. C'est tout aussi vrai pour les gestes généreux. Avec une idée à la *Cowboys Fringants*, je m'étais imaginé que dans un pays où l'eau fraîche ne sort pas du robinet et où tout le monde n'a pas « un toit et puis quatre murs », ce ne serait pas la joie dans toutes les cours. La vérité m'a bercée à bras grands ouverts!

Dans les yeux des petits comme des grands, la clémence rayonne comme pour nous faire oublier la saison pluvieuse. Dès notre arrivée à Mae Sot, j'ai tout de suite été ébaubi par le dévouement que les enseignants et les étudiants de mon école avaient pour des personnes qui leurs étaient inconnues.

C'est difficile de choisir parmi tous les moments qui ont su laisser planer un sourire apaisant sur mon cœur. Je dois avouer que le bonheur naïf des élèves de mon école qui me perçoivent autant comme un enseignant qu'un ami me gagne quotidiennement et est encore plus réconfortant que le bon classique du café matinal.

Mon école, Parami, tout comme les autres centres d'apprentissage d'ici, n'a même pas accès à un budget nécessaire pour payer convenablement les enseignants. Cependant, avec l'entraide de tout le monde, en passant de l'équipe d'enseignants qui prépare le riz et la soupe jusqu'au plus jeune élève qui apporte les épices aux cuistots, tous les lundis les élèves ont droit à un dîner concocté avec une généreuse portion d'abnégation. La sueur au front et le cœur battant, c'est avec fierté que tous ceux qui ont mis la main au riz (hihi), depuis 4 heures du matin, servent les enfants affamés qui les entourent comme s'ils venaient de compter le but final de la coupe du monde de football (aussi connu sous le nom de soccer).

À l'heure du dîner, après avoir enseigné à la Patch Adams les neurones, je me retrouve à faire la file aux côtés de mes élèves, exténué. Cuillère en guise d'épée et bol pour bouclier, je les tiens devant moi comme un soldat sur le champ de bataille. Soudainement, l'un des plus vieux élèves me vole mon bol et le remplit.

Avec mon premier repas typiquement birman préparé à mon école, je me dirige vers mon nouveau passe-temps : le terrain de cane-ball. Sur le chemin, une de mes élèves m'arrête doucement avec un sourire gravé aux lèvres. Formulé comme un ordre, elle me demande gentiment si je voudrais avoir ses sardines sèches épicées (heum... après tout, ce serait impoli de refuser). Je lui



Felix avec ses jeunes à Parami

donne, en guise de remerciement, ma fameuse face drôle de poisson qui se fait pêcher avec la lèvre anormalement relevée. Elle est morte de rire et part en courant avec un sourire que je n'aurais pu croire plus grand encore.

Le cœur bombé de fierté et portant un sourire farceur, je marche d'un pas de clown jusqu'à un banc près du terrain de jeu. Je déguste ce repas qui fait découvrir à mes papilles gustatives des saveurs nouvelles. Un étudiant m'approche, un peu timide, avec un bol rempli de fèves vertes dans une sauce sucrée rouge foncé (oh oh très très épicée!!). Il me demande de goûter. C'est délicieux! Ensuite, il part et revient avec une sauce épicée. Il en met un peu dans le coin de mon bol. Encore une fois, le pauvre est foudroyé par mes yeux qui expriment le bonheur que ma bouche ne peut extérioriser. Alors il déverse le contenu du petit sachet au grand pouvoir inflammable. Ouf! Je touche le fond. Je bois dans ma bouteille d'eau. Zut! Je touche le fond...

C'est alors qu'un enfant (probablement à la maternelle) vient à ma rescousse comme un pompier. Il me tend un morceau de mangue sucrée et salée. Je le remercie avec un sourire (comme si ici c'était la meilleure monnaie d'échange). Je mange ce petit morceau et ça me soulage. Je porte attention à ce petit bonhomme. Il vient d'aller dépenser ses quelques bahts qu'il possède pour ces tranches de mangue. Il est maintenant en train de donner toutes ses tranches de mangue aux autres élèves. Il finit par s'asseoir, tout près de moi avec, dans son sac, plus qu'une seule tranche de mangue et une ou deux miettes. Mais il a des yeux pétillants face à cette dernière tranche qui sera si bien méritée après avoir partagé, sans rien demander, avec des amis et des inconnus, parce qu'après tout, nous sommes tous dans le même bateau. Vaut donc mieux s'entraider que s'embrouiller.

De telles expériences remettent en question la valeur que j'attribue à l'argent. Comme dans la chanson *How Much a Dollar Costs*, écrite par Kendrick Lamar, la réalité et la valeur de l'argent varient grandement en fonction des yeux qui la voient. Après tout, pour un dollar canadien, en Thaïlande, il est possible d'avoir un très bon repas complet! Alors, combien coûtent réellement un dollar? Pour l'instant, je sais que ça me mène beaucoup moins loin qu'un simple sourire soupçonné de générosité. Pour finir, j'ai lu quelque part (mais je ne me rappelle pas de la source) qu'« une âme peut se dire généreuse lorsqu'elle prend plus de plaisir à donner qu'à recevoir »...

Giving Peace a Chance

Burmese youth speak about peace

Calila Tardif, MSEP Volunteer

After studying John Lennon's inspiring song "Imagine" and singing the song innumerable times, the students in grade 10 (B) at Hsa Thoo Lei wrote their own definition of peace as well



as the means they could take in order to reach peace. I found in these students inspiring poets with the desire to make this world a better one. Shouts from the heart reached my soul as I read what they had to tell to the world, and I wanted to share their inspiring messages about peace. Here they are...

What is peace for you?

"When I pray to God, I can get a peaceful heart."

"Peace for me is giving love to each other. And helping each other.

Always give a sweet smile to others, friends and neighbors."

"Peace is freedom for me."

"My family is peace for me."

"I think peace is a wonderful melody."

What could we do to reach peace?

"Give other people mercy and love.

We have to make many friends."

"We must help each other."

"We don't need to give up."

"If someone needs help, we will support."

"All the world people will be as one."

"We have to stop war, it's how we make peace. We need the best government for our country and no discrimination.

"We must hold our hands and work together."

"We should not fight and be humble. Be kind always."

"We should have compromise. We have to stop war. A state or period of mutual concord between governments."

"Some children don't have a father and a mother, so we can help them. When we help them they get peace."

"If we think all religions are equal and we have equal minds, we will get peace."

Some excerpts from letters to family and friends...

Hanna Hornibrooke, MSEP Volunteer

This last week has not been without its struggles, from managing my money so that I had enough without having to go to the bank to struggling to teach the grade 9 students. The latter was in itself way more frustrating. The Myanmar English curriculum is so specific about what students need to learn, down to the specific words, and what stories they need to know. Although Félix and I wish to help them with this task, it is quite impossible to do exactly like they want us to. Trust me, we tried. We read a story about short stories all together; we went over every single question; we tried to explain what they needed to do as well as we could... Their comprehension of individual words, mostly nouns and verbs, is great, but once put together, it seems as if they cannot understand. Because they have only had to memorize and recopy in the past, their listening, speaking and their comprehension of meaning are lacking. By the end of the second week, they had worked on a set of 20 questions about a reading which we asked them to answer in their own words, after giving many examples on how to do this. Without knowing their language, we cannot possibly explain when they can't even understand one single sentence of the story we had gone over and over. I am asking myself: what now? We are stuck. Do not, however, think that we will not come up with a solution! I am determined to find a way to help these students.



Hannah playing a game with students

Monday was a Burmese, traditional Buddhist holiday. It is a day of dressing up, much food and good time with the monks. Upon my arrival at the temple at 9 am, I was brought to sit near the front, close to the stage, where many gifts were stacked. These gifts, mostly "monk care packages", are donated to the monks by the school and students' families. Apparently, while they walk around villages asking for food during the rainy season, they lack clothing to change into. I sat through the first two hours and then proceeded to leave by the back of the stage. My legs had cramped, not used to sitting for that long without showing my feet, and I felt awkward, not knowing what they were saying. Many teachers and students were coming and going; either taking pictures or simply peeking in to see the three monks who had come. I tried to make myself useful by helping prepare the food or by sitting on a bench and swatting the flies away. The rest of the morning passed with many parents wanting to meet me and take a picture. I could tell, when I first walked in, that the adults were the parents of the school's students by the knowing looks they gave me as they assumed I was the white volunteer teacher.

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Today, I attended a graduation ceremony with Felix and Calila at the Ray of Youth Centre, a *Help without Frontiers* (HWF) project. Twenty student representatives of Burmese learning centres were “graduating” from a two year leadership and/or music program. They have learnt a great deal about global human rights issues and improved their Thai and English. As a team, they have traveled, camped and made visits to local houses and schools to share their knowledge and create awareness about what is going on in the world. I was definitely impressed and inspired by this teen leadership and community development project. Although I couldn't understand most of what they were saying, through the pictures and videos they shared, I was able to see what these teens have accomplished.

Photo Gallery - first days in Mae Sot



Amelia - having (after some mishaps) mastered the roads



The bike ride to BHSOH - arduous but beautiful!



Calila - living in Mae Sot involves lugging water!



A walk through the Mae Sot market



Hannah enjoying a laugh with new friends at Hsa Mu Htaw



Canada Day in Mae Sot!



That “funny football” game again



The BHSOH and Parami school communities - in case you thought there might not be enough migrant kids in Mae Sot



Burmese high achievers hold hopes for university



In July five precocious BHSOH students (pictured here) were notified by the CDC scholarship committee, a Mae Sot migrant school body, that they had been awarded scholarships to attend Rajamangala University Technology Lanna (RMUTL) Tak. All recipients would receive tuition fees (around 7,000 – 9,000 baht per semester) and on-campus accommodation. A huge opportunity seemed to present itself. Donors were sought to help cover the cost of meals, living expenses, uniforms, travel, health needs and a monthly stipend.



But here's the catch-22: the university offers scholarships for the migrant students, but migrant school certificates are not recognized by the university. Given the migrant school's lack of legal status in Thailand, this problem seems insurmountable – even when students have demonstrated their ability. At present, only by obtaining the American GED (General Education Diploma) official certificate can students qualify. Only one small program (MHEP) in Mae Sot offers the opportunity for about 25 students to prepare for that. Even when students have GED official certificates, only those who have both Thai and English skills will be eligible. Increasingly, the most viable path to higher education seems to be for students to learn Thai early and transfer into the Thai secondary school system...or to return to Burma/Myanmar and try there. The economic, political, linguistic and cultural complexities that make these choices so daunting leave many talented young people STUCK on the border!

Burmese Refugees in Thailand: Is it time for repatriation?

MSEP does not send volunteers to schools in refugee camps. However, if you are interested in this question and want to learn more about the challenges refugees living in camps on the border currently face, take a look at these resources:

Myanmar Refugees: 'No Repatriation Without Peace' Newsdeeply, March 30, 2016

<https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/articles/2016/03/30/myanmar-refugees-no-repatriation-without-peace>

Should I stay or should I go, IRIN News, By [David Doyle](#), MAE LA/THAILAND, 20 June 2016

<https://www.irinnews.org/news/2016/06/20/should-i-stay-or-should-i-go>

Senior Thai official puts Burma's refugee repatriation back on the agenda – refugees concerned about cuts to rations and essential services, S'Phan Shaung, Karen News, May 2, 2016

<http://karennews.org/2016/05/senior-thai-official-puts-burmas-refugee-repatriation-back-on-the-agenda-refugees-concerned-about-cuts-to-rations-and-essential-services.html>

Repatriation of Refugees, Burmalink, March 2016

<http://www.burmalink.org/background/recent-developments/repatriation-of-refugees>

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, Mary Purkey, Garry Retzleff, and Marjorie Retzleff, as well as former volunteers Barbara Rowell (2005), Laurence Michaud (2015) 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.