



Mae Sot Education Project

Newsletter

Late Summer 2017

www.maesot.ubishops.ca

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

MSEP's first ever golf tournament survives a rain forecast!

(See photo gallery on last page.)

The MSEP Project Committee and our 2017 Volunteer team thank you for supporting our golf tournament!



So we did it! With the leadership of very hardworking Emily Prangley Desormeaux, MSEP pulled off its first golf tournament fundraiser – albeit a small one – this summer. We are deeply grateful to the golfers (and nongolfers!) who made up our six teams. What promised to be a dimly rainy day turned out to be mostly sunny. Our golfers were a very good humoured and spirited group. The 5 à 7 at Uplands featured great music, delicious munchies and wine and of course, wonderful company. Former volunteer Megan Irving talked briefly about the importance of our project in the migrant community. Sonia and Eric provided music. We felt the positive vibes of a supportive and generous community.

Thanks to them and to our sponsors, we cleared \$4500 for which we are deeply grateful. However, we are learning from this experience about the challenges of summer schedules and uncertain weather as well as about the importance of knowing our donor community (many of whom are *not* golfers). Will we do it again? Ask us midwinter and feel free to send us your thoughts about this kind of fundraiser. For now, we want to emphasize our gratitude to all who made the tournament and our 5 à 7 possible.

Information sessions for project applicants: Sept. 20th (7:00 in H305) and 21st (12:30 in CRC 343) on campus

Fall is volunteer recruitment time for the Mae Sot Education Project!

A note to students: Do you know what an amazing volunteer opportunity MSEP is? Some students may be afraid of the idea of several months of preparation and a six-month overseas commitment. However, what sets MSEP apart from many volunteer projects is just that: the depth of the commitment it requires. Is it worth it? Former volunteers will tell you how fast six months passes by and how sad they are to leave Mae Sot when the time comes. Those who have gone on to get “real (i.e., paying) jobs” in international development will also tell you how the project has acted as a stepping stone to those jobs.

From the outset, MSEP has been committed to recruiting volunteers based on the talents they could bring to the project (as opposed to their financial resources). We have raised our funds collectively. We have also offered preparation to better equip volunteers and provided support during their time abroad. We have deliberately remained small.

We understand that for many students the commitment entails a bit of a leap, a re-envisioning of their education and planning for the future. Experiential learning does take time! Volunteers have included not only International Studies and Education students, but Science and Arts students. What they have had in common were an interest in working with marginalized youth and a realization that education – and *life* – are deepened and enriched when they move away from the safe confines of the campus and seek experience in the wider world. In this case, “experience of the wider world” draws them into caring and very memorable relationships with people of another culture.

Students: Reflect! Imagine! Apply!

A Volunteer's Task - Working Toward Sustainability

By Dania Paradis-Bouffard, 2017-2018 Volunteer

When I made a leap of faith into the *Mae Sot Education Project*, I had a very small idea of the migrant schools' realities. I genuinely thought that my role overseas would be limited to being a good English teacher to the students who would be assigned to me. I was wrong. As the characteristic rain falling on the streets of Mae Sot gradually became part of my routine, I started to doubt myself. The confidence I acquired through an effective teaching-English-as-a-second-language training started to change to hesitation. Every time I would ride my worn out bicycle away from school, I felt that I was missing something.

Fortunately, a young teacher from Hle Bee Learning Centre gave me the answer that I was looking for. As she was interpreting a speech that honored Bogyoke Aung San, the father of Aung San Suu Kyi, our conversation drifted to historical facts about him, and soon enough we were whispering about books in the corner of this assembly. Between her translations, she confessed to me that she wished she could read more texts in English. As a matter of fact, she had a hard time finding the right words to express the deeds of Aung San. When she mentioned that she wanted to learn more vocabulary, I felt my inner teacher bubble with excitement and proposed creating a reading circle with her.

Two weeks later, this idea of a reading circle evolved into an English class. I found myself in front of a white board leading a class discussion between the teachers at my school. This English class filled the void that I had been experiencing. I needed to leave a small piece of me behind when I leave this beautiful and unique community.

The element that I had lost sight of was sustainable activities. Only through the concrete experience of working with the teachers and students could I understand their needs. As much as teaching the students directly gives them an opportunity to practice and gain



knowledge in the English language, teaching the teachers could lead to more sustainable results.

Most English teachers who I have encountered in migrant schools can barely express themselves in the language that they are teaching. With this in mind, one can more easily imagine the reality of these classes. The migrant English teachers, who have access to only very limited resources, mostly teach grammar. Since the teachers themselves struggle with oral communication in English and have flawed pronunciation, it is almost impossible for them to teach and grade their students' oral skills. With this problem in mind, I put into place lessons that cover discussions and grammatical refreshers for the teachers at Hle Bee. The short-term goal of this undertaking is to help the English teachers gain better

oral skills and also gain confidence in their capacity to help the students learn this language. The long-term goal is for the teachers to give more effective English classes to their students. It could empower them and make this small community less dependent on foreign interventions.

Being part of the *Mae Sot Education Project* has helped me discern how complex humanitarian work can be. It should always be about the needs of the community, but also about an end goal that enables the community to be self-sustaining. Before I decided to give my first class to the other teachers at Hle Bee, I made sure that these lessons were something that the teachers and headmistress wanted and thought would be useful in the long run.

Ultimately, I will have created a project of my own that will help this school take one more step towards sustainability. I will also have learnt an important lesson in humility. The best way to empower a community is not by solving all of their problems for them, but by helping them help themselves.

Privilege is a Relative Concept

By Loic Mercier, 2017 Volunteer

I was sitting on a sheet of plywood in a small bamboo dorm with the boarding students of Parami Learning Centre. I hadn't even been a volunteer at the school for one full week when I received the invitation to stay over at the boarding house. The students were drinking milk from empty two-liter bottles of *Coca-Cola*. I was trying with difficulty to make small talk. The language barrier was a problem that I was determined to overcome. One student stood out from the rest. He was a grade ten student, and his English was perfect. Our conversation started as I overheard a Martin Garrix song over his headphones. We realised we have similar taste in music, books and art, and we both share a passion for photography. The other students went to sleep on their small bamboo mats, but we continued talking. Our conversation shifted from small talk to something much more philosophical.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Albert Einstein introduced to physicists the concept of spatial relativity. The term was later borrowed by philosophers and sociologists to express the concept that it is impossible to attach an absolute value to things that are not tangible. Some of these "relative" or "immeasurable" concepts include pain, luck, love or privilege. The latter was the main subject of our discussion.

My new friend briefly described to me his life story. It wasn't exactly a fairy-tale. His father was violent; he had been involved with gangs in Hpa-An (in Myanmar) and was still struggling to fight the ghosts of his past. Rather than dwell on these dark aspects of his life, my friend showed me some of his photography projects, one of which was a depiction of the children forced to live in the dumpsters of Mae Sot (see photos below). "I'm so lucky to have what I have," he told me. I thought of my fluffy organic latex mattress and memory-foam pillow back in Canada and looked at his hard, pillowless cot. *I'm so lucky to have what I have. I am so lucky. Privilege is a relative concept. The President of the United States himself has claimed to feel very underprivileged to have started his business empire with only "a small loan of 1 million dollars."*

This idea stewed in my head long after the night of our conversation. The theory that emerged from my thinking is that the most fortunate people are often those who aren't aware of their good fortune while those who have truly experienced misery are able to find joy in the simplest things and feel privileged to have what little they have. The students in our partner schools do not have easy lives, but relative to some of the people that they have left behind, they feel privileged. To be a volunteer in migrant schools has helped me put my own values and experience into perspective. Mostly, it has helped me understand that our outlook on the environment around us is always dependent on our background, our relative perspective of the world.

Some of the photos taken by Loic's student friend at the Mae Sot dump



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. Over the last 14 years, MSEP has delivered over \$126,000 in funding assistance (excluding two substantial grants given through specific donations) and as of June 2017, will have sent 56 volunteers to assist the migrant education community in Mae Sot.

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: William Bryson (2013 volunteer), Randi Heatherington, Judy Keenan, Laurence Michaud (2015 volunteer), Mary Purkey, Garry Retzleff, and Barbara Rowell (2005 volunteer).

Contributions to the project are always welcome and tax receipts are issued. To make a donation electronically, go to our website at www.maesot.ubishops.ca and follow instructions for donating through the Bishop's University Foundation. Remember to indicate that your donation is for the *Mae Sot Education Project*. You may also 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.

An Ironic Reality

By Brianna Peterson, 2017-2018 Volunteer

At first glance, Mae Sot seems like a paradise. It enchants many newcomers like me. The streets are bubbling with liveliness, the surrounding landscape is breathtaking, and most importantly, the people whom one meets are incredibly warm-hearted. This warm atmosphere reassured me when I first arrived in this small city. I felt and thought that it was pleasant and safe. However, there is always more than what first meets the eye; Mae Sot is not safe for everyone.

On the weekends, I often go to my school's boarding house and spend time with the students. They always are great! However, certain of their comments have unsettled me. The first time I left Hsa Thoo Lei's boarding house, I was accompanied by a group of students. They led me to my bike that was only a four-minute walk on the school's grounds. As I was unlocking my bicycle, the girls asked me why I hadn't asked a friend to come pick me up. I casually replied that I didn't need someone to accompany me, especially since I was leaving in broad daylight. The girls then told me that it didn't matter that it was early in the afternoon: "it's not safe outside". I suddenly realized that their reality was quite different from mine.

The sad truth is that it's not really safe for Burmese children, and it is a bit worse for girls. As in so many places in the world, women often get a lot of undesired attention. Although the entire city is not rough or troubling, certain parts of it are. And the reality is that the areas in which the migrant learning centres and the places where the students live are located tend to be places at greater risk. Their surroundings aren't the most reassuring; they are often poor. There aren't always streetlights around the schools, the people hanging around the vicinities are sometimes unnerving and the dogs are sometimes aggressive. In addition, most migrant children lack legal status. The Thai police are not a source of protection for them due to their illegal residence in the country. Consequently, they are more susceptible to harassment as well as "predators", and for them, walking alone seems out the question.

Partially due to the lack of security, the boarding students are not allowed to leave the school grounds unaccompanied. Everyday, students at the migrant learning centres encounter uncertainties that often feel threatening, and many have to cross unsafe paths to go to school. Even though these students seem fortunate to have roofs over their heads, they still must live in these undesirable conditions. Leaving these areas of town is not an option for them because their families have no choice but to live there. It is ironic to think that many Burmese families left Myanmar due to the lack of security only to face more unsafe conditions in Thailand.



A typical street in a migrant neighbourhood



Katharine with students in the classroom...

I may move from this type of essay work into persuasive or argumentative essays and speeches. Public speaking is perhaps the only "hard skill" I have (besides swimming!) so being able to pass on a little bit of that would be nice; however, I'm still not sure if they'll be "there" after their October exam. We've been supplementing the intense essay prep work with weekly interviews; thus their speaking skills are also improving. They're pretty good debaters!! It's great having them for two hours a day; everything has improved so much even in the past few weeks. I'm really enjoying it; speaking and writing are the most enjoyable things to teach, I think. It's been fun.

Helping Students Learn...a Development Process!

An email note from Katharine McKenney, 2017-2018 Volunteer
on teaching essay writing to grade 11-12 students

As far as essay writing goes: it's actually going swimmingly. The students are at just the right level for lengthy essay work. They're all quite focused and intent on learning how to write essays, and it's been great brainstorming with them, teaching how to write a great thesis statement, etc. They've found the essay diagrams really helpful, as well! I printed off a bunch of them to use as examples and it's made the whole process a breeze. It's also great how creative they can be when they're thinking of reasons to support their argument.



...and on the soccer field

Migrant Education Update

By Mary Purkey in collaboration with Megan Irving

We are often asked how the migrant education situation in Mae Sot is changing, particularly in view of changes occurring in Myanmar. I recently sat down with Megan Irving, a former MSEP volunteer who has worked as both a teacher and administration at Parami Learning Centre for the last five years. She provided helpful answers to our questions.

First, with regard to the status of migrant workers, understandably, the Thai government has always wanted both employers and workers to be legal, i.e., to submit to regulations that control pay and registration documents for migrants. Because the legal path is expensive, most often employers operate and workers work outside the law. The government is now drafting a new law aimed at stopping illegal migration and trafficking that will impose more severe fines for those living and working in Thailand without documents. Legal status would at least theoretically help to stop agencies (or brokers) involved in tricking workers by having them pay fees and sign contracts for jobs that they discover upon arrival in Thailand do not actually exist or that involve yet more fees. Many workers do not receive copies of contracts they have signed and if they do, cannot read them.

In June, Burmese people in the Mae Sot area experienced an “overwhelming sense of fear that drove some temporarily back across the border”, to quote Megan. “With check points and raids going on, parents without documents were afraid to pick up their kids from school. Many just stayed inside.” This kind of situation has existed at times in the past as well but is harrowing every time it happens.

What about the developments in migrant education? While educational reform and curriculum modernization are still greatly needed in Myanmar, the Myanmar government is definitely more involved and supportive of migrant education than during the years of military rule. Among the recent changes is the development of “Non-formal Education Programs” for primary schools. “Non-formal” in this context refers to programs for students with fractured educational experiences: children who have “fallen through the cracks”, child labourers, drop-outs, those from villages with no access to education, etc.

The NFPE (Non-formal Primary Education) program has been going for a few years now, with UNICEF providing bright and colourful materials in partnership with the Myanmar government. Not all parents choose to enroll their children in it, and not all

migrant schools can participate. For the schools, there are some challenges: NFPE levels do not correspond exactly to the grades used normally to organize learning groups. Individual assessments of children’s abilities must be done. Another challenge is teacher recruitment and training. The Myanmar government offers specialized training in Myanmar. Finally, the NFPE adds some workload for teachers and new benchmarks (i.e., lots of testing). All that said, Parami Learning Centre and some others have been able to meet these challenges. “In reality, the positives outweigh most of these smaller details,” according to Megan. “Effectively every child could benefit from the program.” Perhaps most importantly, children who complete a level receive an official certificate that can help them transition into regular schools upon return to Myanmar. The Myanmar government is now also providing “transfer certificates” for students moving from migrant learning centers to Myanmar schools.

Some migrant schools take a different path. They follow the regular Burmese school curriculum which means preparing students to take Myanmar school exams after grades 4 and 9. Officials come from Myawaddy, across the border, to administer these exams. The students enrolled receive a code (much like the permanent code Quebec students have) and if they succeed, an official certificate for the grade passed. For the equivalent of a “high school leaving” certificate, they must take a tougher exam following grade 10 which so far very few migrant students have been able to pass. It is worth noting that the exam is notorious for student failures *in* Myanmar as well.

Finally, a few migrant schools offer a Thai non-formal education program, originally developed for ethnic or tribal people in Thailand and similar to the Myanmar program. It enables students to transition into Thai schools. This path seems more challenging, if only because it requires Thai language, and is less popular with migrant parents. Of these different paths, Megan said: “We don’t know where the kids are headed, so if we can open as many doors as possible, that will lend more hope for their future.” Ultimately, it is this mission that drives the programming at Parami Learning Centre and at other schools trying to offer these different options to marginalized children who continue to face socio-economic hardships. It is those children and the need for that hope that motivate Megan to return to Parami each year and help to open those doors.

Scenes from migrant school life...



MSEP's First Ever Golf Tournament Photo Gallery

