



Mae Sot Education Project

Newsletter

Spring 2016

www.maesot.ubishops.ca

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

Coming on April 23rd – MSEP's Annual Thai-Burmese Dinner

(See page 4 for details.)



Hsa Mu Htaw Learning Centre struggles to keep its doors open



While all of our partner schools in Mae Sot are facing financial challenges that threaten their existence, the school most at risk in the coming year is one of our oldest partners, Hsa Mu Htaw Learning Centre. Some of its donors stopped giving funding this last year, and the finances for the 2016 school year aren't looking good. Unfortunately, the parents can't afford to help very much, and the money our project gives the school covers only a small part of its needs. Hsa Mu Htaw will need to find new donors rapidly in order to cover the costs.

Like many migrant schools, Hsa Mu Htaw is much more than a school; it has created a safe environment for all its students and teachers. About 40 of the 270 children and some of the 14 teachers board there, living together like a big family. Thus it provides food and shelter as well as education for many. When children drop out, as they sometimes are forced to do, their absence is keenly felt. Volunteer Laurence Michaud observed, "During my time there, we lost some students who had to go work for their families. One of them was my grade 5 student. After the school break, he was gone. He had to work in town. On my way home, I would often see another student, working in a shop on the side of the road. He would call to me: 'Teacher!!' and I would wave at him. This is something that happens far too often in the migrant schools." Keeping Hsa Mu Htaw open and accessible for children such as these is essential to offering them and their families an alternative to child labour. Hopefully, they will return to the classroom.

The importance of the school to the migrant community it serves is highlighted effectively in a new short video made this winter to assist the school with its fundraising efforts. It can be seen at:

<https://youtu.be/AGVAInE4t7k>

We hope you will follow the link and take a look.

To cite Laurence: "Having completed the project now, I see how the fundraising part is so crucial. Not only does it support the volunteers but it also raises funds for the schools. Last spring, I did not see the complete impact of the money we raised, but now I can tell how significant it will be for all our schools in Mae Sot." If you would like to help, please go to our website (www.maesot.ubishops.ca) and make a donation through either the Bishop's or Champlain Foundation. Your donation may be earmarked for Hsa Mu Htaw. You may also contact us directly at maesoteducationproject@gmail.com.

Smiles on the border

By Emily Smith, 2015 Volunteer



The cow in the school's soccer field & the playground



A loving teacher encourages a student who is mute

When you tell people you taught refugees on the border of Thailand and Myanmar, some might picture a pretty somber scene. There was poverty, separated families and houses made of sheet metal, but in Mae Sot are some of the happiest kids you've ever met. The best example I can think of would be the games they play at recess. When you see the playground, it might not look like much. The slides and swings are squished together and well worn, and the small field outside is filled with goats, cows, car scraps and holes that might take you by surprise. It can be a little disheartening until the kids finish their lunch. Then the little field becomes a soccer stadium with a few extra obstacles (cows make excellent goalies!), each rock, string and leaf you find can be a new game. If you're stuck inside at lunchtime, you'll be greeted by little smiles bobbing up into view thanks to the seesaw outside the window. Outside, girls are using a long chain of elastic bands for skipping games, and younger kids show off their hand-eye coordination with a game of jacks, made out of pebbles. Laughter fills the school until the bell rings to return to class. The playground is only a gloomy scene when it's empty; as long as the kids are there it's the happiest place on Earth. Coming home to Canada, this is one of the most difficult things to explain to people; although these kids have so little, they are so happy to have it.

What I saw in the children's playtime I also saw in my classroom. My high school students at Hsa Thoo Lei Learning Centre love to learn, and are always looking for answers to bigger questions and ways to improve their English. They all have dreams of becoming teachers, doctors, nurses or translators to help their community in Mae Sot, or their villages in Myanmar. I try to remember what made me unhappy in school, like not being allowed on the monkey bars, homework, getting up early or having to share a computer at the lab. While I was complaining about these trivial things, these kids were getting every morning at 5:00am to help set up for school. They were jumping out of their seats to answer the teacher's questions, teachers who were often overworked and underpaid. They are happy because they love their school. "English is an international language," they told me. "It gives us more opportunity for the future." All the students' and teachers' eyes lit up when they saw the brand new computer they received from MSEP.

The children have teachers who care about them and a chance to learn something new every day. When you ask what would make them happier, their answers are unlike those you might find in Canadian schools: access to more schooling, passports or ID cards so that they can see another country one day, seeing their families again, or an end to fighting in their village so they can go home. These things are not always seen as possibilities for them, just things that would make them happier. At first glance you can see a lot of things these schools are lacking, but when you look closer you realize there are many valuable lessons they have to offer. I learned a lot from my students, and their positivity and resilience is something I will always aspire to.

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT - Looking backward and forward - Plans for the future

MSEP is looking to the future – which means considering new ways to increase its impact and sustain itself as a small but relevant project. Over the last 12 years, it has delivered over \$110,000 in funding assistance (excluding two substantial grants given through specific donations), and as of June 2016, it will have sent 52 volunteers to assist in nine different schools. They have interacted with virtually thousands of migrant and refugee youth. While its annual budget has remained relatively small, the project has had a cumulative impact in its partner schools as well as in the lives of its volunteers. We hope to continue, but are at a point when we need to expand our fundraising efforts and to develop a leadership model that will make our project more sustainable. We will be working to achieve these objectives over the next two years and will be happy to hear from any of you who have ideas that you would like to share with us.

First, some messages from some alumni volunteers with the project:



From Claudia Mercier, volunteer with MSEP in its first year (2004-05): Ten years after participating to the Mae Sot Education Program, I can still assert that this is one of the most important experience in my life. Of course, I've seen and learned so much more since. But the fact that this was early in my life (I was still an undergraduate at the time, just done with college), it was a real mind opener and confirmed my values and life goals. It influenced my choice of doing a BA degree in International studies and modern languages. Though I don't work in that field now, I need to feel that what I do is contributing to local development and social rights. I just can't imagine myself working in a not-caring-for-anything-but-maximising-profits-for-shareholders' company. Let me summarize: International experiences such as MSEP make us better human beings.



From Nisha Toomey (2004-05, and three time returnee to Mae Sot): The Mae Sot Education Project served as a launch pad for my life and career. After that initial experience of working with migrant and refugee youth along the border, I ended up spending another 4 years there, landing a job with World Education Thailand, and later with a local CBO (Youth Connect). I included my experiences teaching in the border region in my Master's in Education dissertation, and I am currently pursuing a PhD in Social Justice Education at OISE. I know that my experiences in Mae Sot contributed greatly to my acceptance (with a full scholarship) into the program. Aside for the incredibly rich experience of working there, I have made some of the greatest friends of my life through my work in the region, and have spent a decade giving

talks on human rights issues, the situation in Myanmar, and non-formal education. Last year, I ended up heading back to Myanmar to shoot a documentary about a variety of organizations there. I also met my fiancé through a mutual Mae Sot friend. It would not be an exaggeration to say that having the opportunity to go and work in Mae Sot gave me my whole life!



From Kristyne Houbraken (2007 – 2009 two times volunteer): Almost 10 years ago, I was coming to the end of my studies at Bishop's University. I had no plans for what I was going to do upon graduation, but had vague ideas of perhaps pursuing teaching as a career. I happened to walk by a poster on the wall in the student commons building advertising the Mae Sot Education Project. The thought of going to Thailand to giving teaching a try sounded really appealing at the time. Going to learn about another part of world while developing a new skill would be the perfect thing to do after graduating.

I was lucky enough to be one of five selected to go to Mae Sot. The project taught us everything we would need to know about the cultures we would encounter, the political realities of the people we would be working with, and we even did a little language training. They set us up with vaccinations and a clear set of instructions to follow once we hit the ground. Once we arrived in Mae Sot, we already had a network of support since the project is well known in the community. Our team could not have been more prepared

for our six month stint. The six months in Mae Sot flew by. It was a whirlwind of meeting incredible people, getting better at teaching and learning more about Thailand and Burma. At the end of it, I was not ready to go home, so I didn't. I ended up sticking around until the end of the school year, and then for a whole other school year. I was just learning so much that I didn't want it to end. I often tell people that these years in Thailand were a better learning experience than my time spent in any college or university.

After the two years volunteering with the project, I secured a job in Mae Sot working for the International NGO World Education. For that year I worked with 20 eager young adults in a refugee camp. This was to be another amazing year of growing and learning. I was only able to get this job because of my experience with the Mae Sot Education Project.

Finally, I returned to Canada and pursued formal teacher training. I am currently teaching in a First Nations community in Northern Quebec for the Cree School Board. It's a long ways away from Mae Sot, Thailand, but it's another incredibly rewarding teaching experience. I'm certain I never would have ended up where I am today if I hadn't walked by that poster on the wall at Bishop's University.

Our 2016 team is getting ready for Mae Sot



Calila Tardif, Amelia Martin, Valerie Cooper, Hannah Hornibrook and Felix Duplessis-LeClerc

You can help our volunteers raise funds at no cost to yourself:
[Sign up with FundScrip to support Mae Sot Education Project 2016](#)
 Link not working? Sign Up at FundScrip.com with invitation code: MZS3N7.

Save April 23rd!

The Mae Sot Education Project

invites you to attend its annual

**Gourmet Thai-Burmese
Benefit Supper**

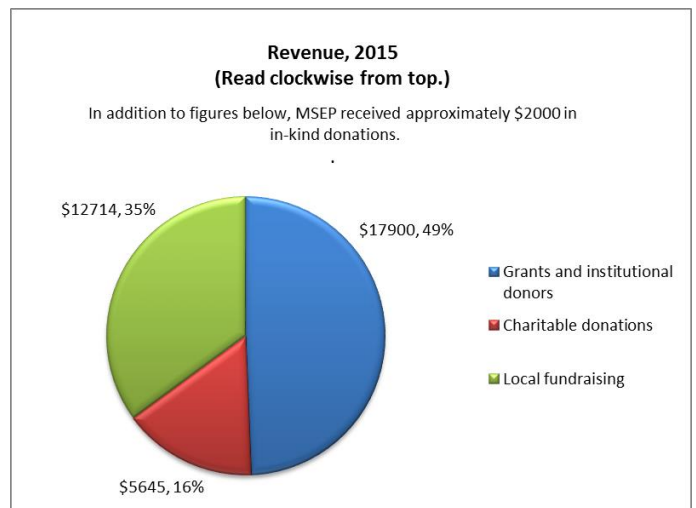
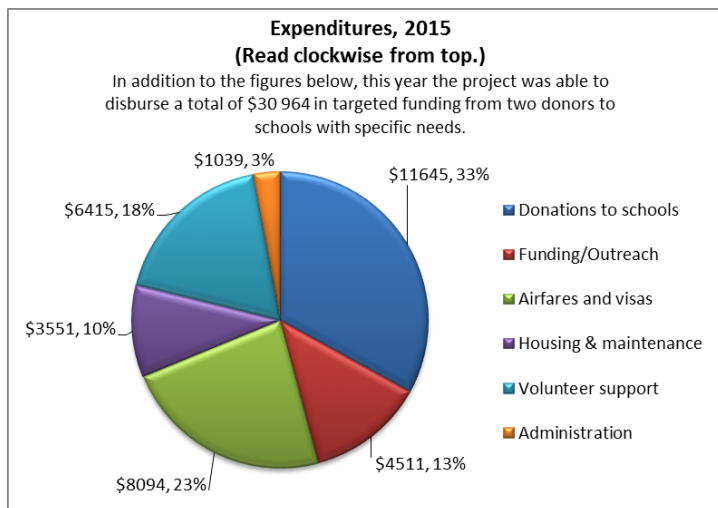
With music, silent auction, raffle &
talks by volunteers

Saturday, April 23rd, 6:30 p.m.
Oasis Christian Centre
219 Queen Street, Lennoxville
Tickets \$50

Contact project committee members for
tickets. A tax receipt for charitable donation
will be given for \$30.

A Look at our Financials for 2015

(Please contact us if you would like to see a more detailed financial report.)



Our Role: Supporting new initiatives underway in the migrant education community

Below, 2015 volunteer Danielle Leblanc-Cyr, explains some of the options available to Burmese youth as they navigate the migrant education “system”. As MSEP moves into the future, our role is increasingly to support students and learning centres trying to realize these options. Interestingly, both options (but especially the Myanmar option) call for the teaching of English.

For most Canadians, receiving a high school diploma is like a rite of passage. Not only is this simple piece of paper a symbol of years of tests, essays, exams and hard work, but it is also key to obtaining gainful employment and/or a post-secondary education.

One of the biggest struggles faced by students in the migrant learning centres in Mae Sot is the lack of formal recognition of the migrant education system. Many migrant students spend years studying for tests, writing essays and solving equations only to be told that their best just isn’t quite enough to allow them to attend, or even apply to, universities or colleges in Thailand or abroad. To help remedy this crucial problem, Burmese CBOs in Mae Sot have worked with both the Thai and Burmese ministries of education to implement programs that allow students to obtain some form of recognition for their studies.

An increasingly popular option for migrant students has been to matriculate back to Burmese schools. To matriculate back to Burma, students in grade 4, 8 and 10 must sit examinations (for which English is one requirement) to ensure that their current education levels are equal to their Burmese-schooled counterparts. Though the benefits of Burmese education are debated by some of our partner schools, many students, including at least three of my own students, are choosing to make the move back to Burma.

For migrant students who make the decision to stay in Mae Sot, attending Thai school is the option that provides the most recognition of education, though it may not be the easiest. To



attend Thai school, students must be able to speak the language, a struggle for older students migrating across the border. Thus younger children are more likely to learn Thai and enroll in Thai school. Some students (mostly those who don’t wish to stay in Mae Sot and would rather return home or go abroad) also see Thai school as a permanent solution to a temporary problem, and see learning Thai rather than studying Burmese as less useful in the long run.

Students who wish to remain in a Burmese migrant schooling environment

without returning to Burma are also given a chance at recognition through the Kor Sor Nor Non-Formal Education program. In this program, a Thai teacher is employed at an MLC to teach and facilitate extra-curricular activities with migrant students. This program helps students to learn the Thai language, history and culture, which my students expressed made them feel more comfortable in a place they really would never call “home”. It is supposed to help them transition into the Thai system. Whether or not they do make this transition, NFE students are given the opportunity to learn more about the nation, while still practicing Burmese, Thai, English and often ethnic languages as well.

If my experiences in Mae Sot have taught me anything, it is to take nothing for granted, especially education and citizenship. It was my post-secondary education at Bishop’s that led me to Mae Sot, and my Canadian passport that allowed me to travel there. After seeing students working day-in, day-out in hopes of maybe someday obtaining a piece of paper that will allow them to follow their dreams, I can guarantee that never again will I complain about my student loan.



Parami students doing Karen dancing

Another school facing challenges By Jonah Baldwin, 2015 Volunteer

Parami Learning Centre was founded by dynamic Burmese migrants who were able to build and manage it with the help of outside donors. The school has grown from 60 students to an overwhelming 660 students. With multiple buildings, it occupies a large rural lot with a fish pond and garden that contribute to its sustainability. Its offerings include a Montessori pre-school program, a nonformal Thai education program and some vocational programs. Despite its size, the students and staff at Parami seem like one big happy family.

Teaching at Parami, my hardest task was to manage class sizes of over 35 students. I have never had a year in school where I learned as much as I did during my time at this school.

There were certainly days when I didn’t feel like getting up early to bike twenty minutes in the pouring rain to teach such unreasonably large classes, but after seeing the faces of my students light up upon my arrival, I knew that I didn’t want to be anywhere else. It was an amazing experience that left me feeling more in touch with the world and with myself than ever before. Sending student teachers from

our community also allows the migrant students an extraordinary opportunity to explore and connect with views and ideas that are quite different from their own. Compared to traditional Burmese teaching methods, our methods were certainly more effective and engaging. Although measuring the impact of a teacher on the lives of his/her students can sometimes seem impossible, by making English class fun and interactive, I believe that I was able to offer students the opportunity to learn English in a positive and effective manner

What does the future hold for Parami? Unfortunately, the school will experience a 30% cut in its core funding this year with the result that students will have to pay a fee to go to school, and teachers may not receive salaries. Many of the families in the area will have no choice but to keep their children at home to work. There are too few teachers, and the ones who are there will have a lot of work to do especially considering that they will be paid less than if they worked in the rice fields. Perhaps the most notable foreseeable cut to the school is the food budget. Parami serves hot lunches to all of its students as well as breakfast and supper for the 60 boarding students. It will not be able to continue to do so. Although sometimes we can offer only moral and volunteer support, MSEP's role will be to help the school find solutions to these problems.

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.

Donors and Supporters 2014 – 2015

We wish to thank **everyone** who has helped to make our project a success. Donations take many forms. Financial donations, donations of time and energy, in-kind donations of all sorts are all deeply appreciated. In addition to those people and organizations noted below are businesses who have contributed raffle prizes and the many others who have faithfully supported our fundraisers. **Thank you all!**

We wish to thank these

organizations

The Pathy Family Foundation	Sandra Besner	David Dutton	Elizabeth Kreuger	Evelyn Rose
St Mark's Chapel	Carinne Bevan	Jack & Pam Eby	Catherine Isley & Serge Dugas	Josée & Bill Rourke
SECCL (Champlain Teachers Union)	Lisa Binsse	Adele Ernstrom	Sunny Man Chu Lau & Fil Walker	Allan & Nancy Rowell
Oasis Christian Centre	Helen Black	Lewis & Cathy Evans	Anne Marie Laverdure	Barbara Rowell
Champlain Student Association	Susan Black	Pauline Ferrugia & Etienne de Medici	Naisi & Josephine LeBaron	Esther Saanum
Champlain College – Lennoxville	Brian Bost	Catherine Filteau	Jane Loiselle & Tim Belford	Sadler, Martin
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