



Mae Sot Education Project Newsletter

Spring 2015

www.maesot.ubishops.ca

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

In This Issue: Learn about the new team and their preparation; find out more about BHSOH; read about supporters who paid a visit to our partner schools; see how previous volunteers have continued their work in Mae Sot; keep abreast of the experiences of returning volunteers; learn how your support is used; *and so much more!*



Get ready, get set, go!

MSEP's new volunteer team share their thoughts about project preparation

For the 10th year, a new team of MSEP volunteers is feverishly preparing for their June departure to Mae Sot. Preparation is multifaceted: it includes a mini-course in teaching English as a foreign language, taught by trainers Angie Petitclerc and Susan Renaud, and weekly meetings with Mary Purkey to discuss cultural and political issues related to Burma/Myanmar and the refugee/migrant community in Mae Sot. In their spare time, when not tending to their full course loads, volunteers work on fundraising projects. Dedicated? Well, not just a little!

Recently, the volunteers shared their thoughts about what they have learned and what lies ahead. Nova Scotian Emily Smith, a 21 year old Elementary Education student at Bishop's, gave an overview of preparations: "...we alternate between Monday night lessons in Teaching English as a Second

Pictured, back row: Susan Renaud, Emily Smith, Angie Petitclerc; front, Danielle Leblanc, Jonah Baldwin, Laurence Michaud.

Language and Wednesday night meetings that give us some cultural background on Mae Sot, Burma and our project. We have a lot of fun with the TESL training, and the sessions have given us insight on what it's like to be an ESL student and how we can reach students more effectively. The Wednesday night meetings have been really eye opening..."

Not all volunteers have the advantage of prior experience in the classroom. Laurence Michaud, a 19 year old Champlain Special Care Counselling student from Sherbrooke, expressed apprehension about teaching but added, "I am learning that teaching methods and skills have a great impact on students' learning. Therefore...you need to motivate your students to learn (grammar) through exercises, activities and fun...I am working on that!"

For Jonah Baldwin, another 19 year old local Champlain Social Science student, the TESL training has been instructive: "(It) has given me a lot of great ideas that I intend to use to make myself a better teacher...I was surprised to find out that my teaching philosophy coincides very well with the ones that we are being shown. I believe that teaching is all about engaging students and keeping the subject interesting. Our TESL teachers...constantly stress how important it is to get your students involved and to get them talking in English. With every lesson..., I get a better idea of just how much work teachers do for their students."

Continued on page 2



Get ready, get set, go! *continued*

“Every week I learn so much more about the enormous struggles these Burmese people have gone through, and how that affects the social and political environment in Mae Sot.”

Danielle Leblanc, a 20 year old Bishop’s International Studies student from New Brunswick, had additional concerns on her mind: “I can’t wait to experience the thrill of being immersed in a new culture... I’m a bit nervous about adjusting to the Thai/Burmese cuisine, but I’m confident that I’ll quickly adjust (and will be sure to bring some Kraft Dinner for when I’m really missing Canada...)”

Volunteers are developing a deeper understanding of the people and place to which they will be traveling. Laurence acknowledged that she was “very surprised about how the Burmese people have gone through difficult times and are still today fighting for basic services we take for granted here.” Emily added, “Every week I learn so much more about the enormous struggles these

Burmese people have gone through, and how that affects the social and political environment in Mae Sot.”

In addition to teacher training and cultural awareness activities, the new volunteers have benefited from the expertise of former volunteers. Michelle Vanloon helped them organize a “Battle of the Bands” fundraiser at the Golden Lion Pub in February. Other returned volunteers share their advice in informal meetings, on Facebook or by email. In addition, they are steeped in daily email exchanges with Mary Purkey about our upcoming raffle and Thai-Burmese dinner (Keep April 25th in mind!).

All are deeply appreciative of the efforts being made on their behalf – not only by our project committee and helpers, but also by the community. Danielle perfectly summarized these feelings: “I’m so grateful for all of the amazing donors and volunteers who make this amazing opportunity possible. Thank you all so very much!”

A Message from Khaing Oo Maung

Founder & Education programmer
BHSOH Learning Center

Dear kind supporters,
How are you? We, teachers and students at BHSOH, are well. We always keep you all in our hearts and minds as the unforgettable benefactors for our learning center. Due to your helps, educationally, financially and materially, new generation of Burma has being created to be scholars who will be architects in every arena for future federal Democratic Burma. In this academic year (2014-2015), 13 students passed vocational trainings sponsored by Youth Connect program, 1 student passed Wide Horizon, and students passed GED program sponsored by Min Ma Haw Higher Education. If you haven't been supporting educational struggle for our unfortunate children from military oppression in Burma, our school can't be able to create our students like this, as a result, we all congratulate your kind humanitarian spirit.

God bless you all!

With Best Wishes,

Regards,

Khaing Oo Maung

(On behalf of Teachers and students)

BHSOH Learning Center

Life at BHSOH



Our Future Capacity and the Changing Currency Exchange

Two years ago, a \$2000 donation to a school by MSEP was good for 60,000 Baht; last year, a \$2000 donation yielded 58,000 Baht; today on the currency exchange on-line, a \$2000 CAD donation bought 51,600 baht – or less actually after bank fees.

Last year, a 10,000 baht donation to BHSOH Learning Centre enabled the school to take out two walls of a closet-sized classroom, and transform it into a relatively spacious learning space for students. That donation cost MSEP about \$340.

Today, an exchange of \$340 would have bought 8,772 baht – very possibly not enough to get that job done. Last year, a remarkable \$20,000 donation to our project from a very generous donor bought food for 170 children at BHSOH for the entire school year. There is a promise of this same donation for 2015 – which is truly wonderful – cause for gratitude and celebration! Yet, it is troubling to think about how the school will need to stretch what will be a necessarily reduced donation to feed everyone.

You get the picture. The needs have not changed. Life costs as much in Mae Sot in 2015 as it did in 2014, but our Canadian dollar will not go as far. There is an abundance of good causes in the world, and donors everywhere are strapped for funds. We hope, nonetheless, that you will help us find a solution to this troubling problem. In the meantime, we want to express our gratitude to the many organizations and people in our community who have made small (or large) donations and/or given their time and energy to our project. **All** contributions are important and appreciated. We also want to thank Steve and Barbara Allatt and the Pathy Family Foundation. Without their substantial assistance over a number of years, MSEP would have had difficulty continuing to serve the migrant/refugee community in Mae Sot.

Contributions to the project are always welcome and tax receipts are issued:

It is now possible to donate to the Mae Sot Education Project on line. Here are the links: <http://www.ubishops.ca/gift> or <http://www.crc-lennox.qc.ca/community/foundation> Remember to indicate that your donation be used 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.

Lauren Cavanagh, 2014 volunteer, bids farewell to Mae Sot

new and beautiful in return. My heart is made up of the salty ocean smell of Atlantic Canada; the midnight sunsets of Fairbanks, Alaska; the sound of the train passing through Lennoxville, Quebec. And now, as I prepare to leave Mae Sot, I realize that there are pieces of my heart scattered here, too. In return, my heart is filled with pieces of Mae Sot that will forever be with me.

I am leaving a piece of my heart at BHSOH. I am leaving it with my students, who have probably taught me more than I have taught them; with the other teachers, who have

provided shelter from the relentless rainy season, fostered personal growth and friendship, housed tired teachers and avid explorers (depending on the day), was shared with a rat, some cockroaches, and an abundance of geckos, and gave us a place to call home.

There are other people and moments that have stolen my heart here, too. The woman who sells 2 baht popsicles in Mae Pa, the rice paddies that I watched grow, the twins who serve my favourite curry and naan at Lucky Tea Shop, the sound of prayers from the mosque at 5am and the chants from monks at 6:50am. My heart is forever



"I am leaving a piece of my heart at BHSOH. I am leaving it with my students, who have probably taught me more than I have taught them; with the other teachers, who have shown me kindness and generosity that I have never seen before." (Lauren is pictured central, behind the students).

I think that the hearts we come into the world with are not the same as those we leave with. I think that in life, by choice and by chance, we trade pieces of our hearts with places and people we meet along the way. What we gain from this tradeoff is a wealth of experiences and moments and by the end of our lives, I think we are made up of fragments of people, places, and times that have captured pieces of our hearts.

I am lucky to have left my heart in so many places. For every time I've left a piece of my heart with someone, or somewhere, I have gained something

shown me kindness and generosity that I have never seen before; with Khaing Oo Maung, the director of the school who has a lifetime of incredible stories and will be forever dedicated to the achievement of democracy in Myanmar. I am trading a piece of my heart with the view from the school's field – the view that looks most magnificent at 6:30 in the morning when the light is just right and the clouds part so rays of sunlight stream down over the expansive mountains in the perfect way.

I am leaving a piece of my heart at the project house. This building

changed by all these things and more, filled with everything that I've fallen in love with here.

In truth, Mae Sot has felt more like a home to me than any of the places I've lived in the past 5 years. I know I am lucky to have felt so at home in this community. I sincerely hope that anyone who passes through Mae Sot, be it a future volunteer or a reader of this article, will feel the same way I do about this unique and wonderful place.

Coming Home, Finding New Directions -

Kathleen Bibeau, 2014 Volunteer

"One's destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing things" (Compliments of Henry Miller).

All I can remember now is the green of rice paddies. The melodic *Min-ga-la-bas*. The Burmese market, where one could find anything from dictionaries to pigs' heads. The taste of my chickpea curry with naan bread and a really sweet Burmese tea. My heart beating too fast because I am screaming to dogs to go away. The smell of my full bodied orange raincoat. My hunger for fresh mangoes after a long and hot day at school. My students not listening



Kathleen playing a word game with her students at Pyo Khinn Learning Centre

The multiple plane connections, 36 hours later hugging my parents, feeling like Mae Sot was all gone.

This experience was wonderful in multiple ways. All that matters now is to transpose these new lessons into my life. Therefore, I have decided to give back in my own community by doing volunteer work with newly arrived immigrants, most of them being refugees. Moreover, I am

currently finishing my bachelor degree, and I will enter graduate school to increase my knowledge regarding inequalities in Canada. One of my career goals is to develop programs to empower people facing inequalities in order for them to better integrate into our society. Thus I could say that the Mae Sot Education Project offered me a wonderful experience, and the people I met inspired me to continue working on the development of positive social changes – even here at home.

...Explaining the rules of the game



Bishop's Palm Campaign

Two Mae Sot organizations that work to protect political prisoners in Burma, the **Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP)** and the **Former Political Prisoners Society (FPPS)**, are calling on supporters from across the world to take photographs of their participation in our **2015 Palm Campaign**.

Today political prisoners remain behind bars and activists continue to be

incarcerated, despite President U Thein Sein's promise that all political prisoners would be released by the end of 2013. As of January 2015, according to AAPP, there were 186 political prisoners in Burma's jails, over six times as many as in January 2014. This number looks set to increase with a further 222 political activists awaiting trial. The steady rise in the number of political prisoners in the last year makes clear that the government is increasingly cracking down on fundamental freedoms in the run-up to the 2015 election. 2015 marks a critical period for Burma's burgeoning democracy.

In February MSEP project committee member and former volunteer, **William Bryson**, pictured left, launched the **Bishop's Palm Campaign** to encourage students and faculty on our campus to join in showing the Government of Burma that the world stands in solidarity with Burma's political prisoners and demands lasting democratic reform. Participants in the campaign have been collecting

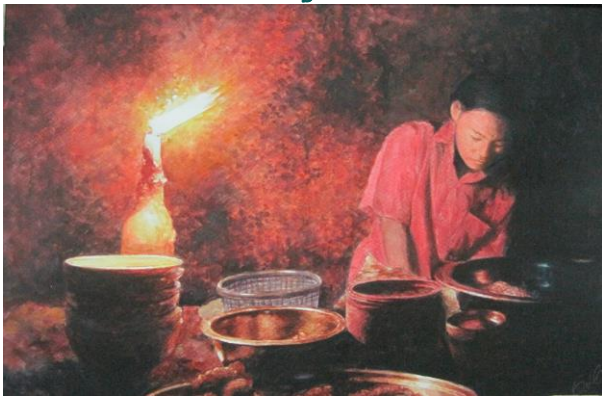
photographs of supporters displaying names of political prisoners on their right palms. If you would like to participate, **simply follow these steps:**

1. **Visit the campaign website:** <http://aappb.org/2015-political-prisoners-campaign>.
2. **Write the name of a political prisoner on your right palm, from the list of current political prisoners (Due to cultural reasons we cannot accept submissions with the writing on the left palm).**
3. **Take a photo of yourself with your right palm showing and email to campaigns@aappb.org.**
4. **Make your photo your profile picture, Tweet it @aapp_burma and share on Instagram using the #2015PalmCampaign.**

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. 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 active members include: Avril Aitken, William Bryson, Catherine Isely, Angie Petitclerc, Mary Purkey, Garry Retzleff, Marjorie Retzleff, Barbara Rowell, Michelle Vanloon. Read our newsletter to find out more of what we do!



Coming soon!



Preparing Dinner, by Maung Maung Tinn

The Mae Sot Education Project

Gourmet Thai-Burmese
Benefit Supper

With music, a silent auction & talks by volunteers

Saturday, April 25, 6:30 p.m.

Oasis Christian Centre
219 Queen Street, Lennoxville

Tickets \$50

A tax receipt for charitable donation will be given for \$30.

Menu created and prepared by
Veronica Kaczmarowski, Chef and owner, Restaurant Le Cartier
And Tala Rod, Chef and owner, Restaurant Dagon

**Friends of MSEP
Visit Schools in Mae Sot**

Carinne Bevan, former Project Committee member toured all six partner schools in November.



To the left, she is chatting with Yawla, School Manager at BHSOH. Above she is pictured with Daw Htet Htet Aung

In January, Violaine Desrosiers, Executive Director of the Pathy Family Foundation paid visits to BHSOH and Hsa Mu Htw Learning Centres, both of which received some special emergency assistance from the PFF this year.



Former volunteer, Megan Irving who now works at Parami Learning Centre introduced her to our partners.



NOTE: Some MSEP volunteers have been drawn back to Mae Sot to work in various capacities for other organizations. Recently, Meaghan Moniz (2012) and Elizabeth Serra (2013) returned. Here they share some recent experiences which provide testimony to the deeper and more lasting impacts of our project on volunteers and of our volunteers' commitment to our Burmese friends.

Return to Mae Sot – A view from inside Umphiem Refugee Camp By Meaghan Moniz, 2012 Volunteer

As I was finishing my degree and thinking about what my next step was, Mae Sot kept coming back to my mind. The community of Mae Sot is so unique and special, and it is so easy to become a part of that community and create a life there. Development work is something I knew I always wanted to do, and strived towards while completing my studies. The time I spent working with the Burmese people in Mae Sot, just cemented this idea. I really felt at this time that I was not finished working in this environment and that I needed to return.

I was hired to work as a teacher training, translation/interpretation, and English teacher in the English Immersion Program (EIP), a project of World Education, located in Umphiem Refugee Camp, a three hour drive from Mae Sot. I was expected to live with the students in camp 5 days a week, teaching and being involved in every aspect of school life. Additionally, there was a very large curriculum building component to this job.

My students came from all different backgrounds. There are 24 students at EIP, and half of them are chosen directly from Umphiem camp. The majority of these students were Karen and had lived in the camp their whole life. The remaining 12 students were taken from other refugee locations and were ethnically diverse. We had Karenni, Shan, and Rhakine students in this group. Many of them had been working for several years and living on their own; some were married with children already, and some came directly from school.

It is hard to explain day-to-day life in camp, as it is just entirely different from anything we would experience or know to be "normal" here in Canada. Often I found myself hungry and tired as my body was just not used to



Meaghan (centre) with her students

lack of nutrients available to me at camp. All of the small things that might have looked challenging on the surface, however, were unimportant once I was in camp with my students laughing and sharing with each other. The family environment created at EIP, especially due to the fact that we all lived and worked together, brought so much happiness every day.

A memory that stands out very clearly always makes me smile is one particular movie night (we did these every Wednesday, followed by great discussions). I brought pancakes and maple syrup to share with the students. As we only had large woks, we cooked one pancake at a time. I and a small group of students stood over the fire, cooking, telling stories, laughing, and joking. It took way longer than it should have to make enough pancakes for everyone; however, no one even noticed because we were having such a good time. They also loved having a taste (no pun intended) of something Canadian, and I remember all the pancakes had a slight chili taste to them due to all the frying of chilies in the pan over the years! They were delicious with the maple syrup, and one of the students made the great connection that they were like a symbolic mix of themselves and me, Canada and Burma all in one!

During the time I spent at camp, I began to see effects that some of the changes that have started to take place in Burma are having on the people. Almost as soon as I arrived, an agreement was struck between the Thai and Burmese military to start the process of repatriation for the

migrant/refugee populations in Thailand. Authorities began conducting "head counts" in all of the nine camps along the border, offering very little including foreign workers, within the camps. This had obvious repercussions for myself as I was working and living within the camp and was unable to continue my work for over 1 month. However, the effect that I saw it have on my students was much greater.

For my students, whose futures are already - and for many have always been- fraught with uncertainty, this was a very fearful time. Many had left their jobs, loved ones, and everything they had to attend the EIP program, and for a time we were faced with the possibility that the program would be shut down. Furthermore, many of my students who had travelled so far to get to Umphiem, were forced to leave and return to their camps not knowing when or if they would be able to return. This time had a really big impact on their morale, and even though school was able to continue, left them unconvinced that they would be able to finish the year.

During this time I also met several people who were forced to leave their jobs outside in order to return for the head count, leaving them jobless, homeless and (having been refused rations) living off the hospitality of friends within the camp. Additionally, over the course of 1 month over 500 people were forced back inside Burma, proving that changes really are taking place.

The mental toll of facing so much uncertainty in their already tumultuous lives was the biggest impact I saw on the people in the camp during this time. The way the whole process was undertaken seemed very secretive and unfair and did not give me much hope that the repatriation process will be carried out in a respectful and humane way. It is not necessarily a bad thing in itself that this process is beginning, but with no sustainable peace agreement between the Karen and the Burmese government on the horizon, it is hard to see clearly how the future will unfold.

What I brought home from Mae Sot

By Elizabeth Serra, 2013 volunteer

Recently, and quite unexpectedly I found myself in my home in Mae Sot, hurriedly throwing clothes and my passport into a bag and handing my keys over to a couple of trusted friends as they helped me box up the few things I had used to build my life there. I flew back to the place I always called home, but now with the image of Mae Sot also bound to that word, "home". Now in the States, I find myself often thinking about the lives that continue to grow and change in these two parallel universes that I feel inextricably belonging to.

When I think about Mae Sot, it's hard to put my finger on what exactly makes it such a unique and heart-warming place. I think that's because it isn't one thing; it's everything that makes up life there. It's the hopeful spirit and generosity of people you've never known, the way new friends embrace you as if you've always been family, the way colleagues so readily offer their help and their knowledge, the way the whole town seems to wake up all at once and fall asleep the same way, as if each day is one collective breath. There is a comfort in the chaos we all belong to that I can only describe as being *at home*.

Last year, as my commitment to MSEP drew to a close, I felt in many ways that my time in Mae Sot was unfinished. For one, it was a particularly interesting time to be involved in the Burmese community

as the anticipation of the 2015 elections began, and discussions about social and political change in Burma started to heat up. At school, the combination of this hopefulness and uncertainty in Burma's future gave a unique energy to these discussions, and I wanted to remain a part of them. Another reason I wanted to stay was that I felt there was still a great deal I had to learn about education along the border, and the more I knew, the better use I would be to the community. I was lucky to be offered a job teaching Math and Science at one of the four higher education programs on the Thai-Burma border, Minmahaw Higher Education Program (MHEP).

"Looking back on my experience with these students, what I miss the most and what my memories remind me of is the success we all share when humility, humor, tolerance and love become the lessons we live by."

MHEP is a post-secondary program in Mae Sot that prepares students to take the GED high school equivalency exam, which gives them a certification equal to an American high school diploma. The students at MHEP are all young adults from migrant areas and refugee camps inside Thailand. These students have very few opportunities to continue their education beyond high school, and even fewer resources to attend university programs. One of the only options for Burmese students in Thailand is to go

back to Burma and sit their standardized university entrance exam, known as the Matriculation Exam. However, the pass rate for this exam is typically between 10-12%, and the university system in Burma is not internationally recognized.

By contrast, with the GED certification, the students are able to apply to study in international programs at a number of universities in Thailand and abroad. MHEP is one of the only higher education programs in Thailand that offers Burmese students this opportunity to gain the accreditation needed to continue their education at the university level.

The students selected to attend the one-year program at MHEP, are competitive, and often have academic successes and practical experiences that defy the odds they have faced growing up in the migrant communities and refugee camps along the border. But as impressive as these young adults are on paper, as people they become inspirational. What fills the classroom with memorable moments isn't their intellect, it's their modesty, their enthusiasm, the humor they find in the most trying situations, and the strength they derive from one another. And these are the moments when lessons are truly learned.

Looking back on my experience with these students, what I miss the most and what my memories remind me of is the success we all share when humility, humor, tolerance and love become the lessons we live by.

Financial Report - 2014

Revenue: \$38844 Expenditures: \$39707

