



# The Mae Sot Education Project

Canadians working for Burmese migrant children in Thailand  
A newsletter to our supporters, Winter – Spring 2014

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

## Upcoming Events....

University Singers Sing for Mae Sot  
"INSPIRED BY DYLAN"

&

*Expression in Exile – Spring 2014*

Our exhibition of art by Burmese artists  
from Mae Sot continues for a second year

MSEP is thrilled to announce that Bishop's University Singers' spring concerts this year will be a benefit for our project. The concerts, held on April 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> at 20:00 in Centennial Theatre at Bishop's, will feature songs "INSPIRED BY DYLAN" – that's Bob in case you aren't sure. Tickets are \$25 general admission and \$15 for students. If you have heard the University Singers perform, you know what a positively electric choral experience their concerts are. Don't miss this chance to hear their take on Bob Dylan. The Saturday concert will be followed by a reception in the lobby. We at MSEP want to thank Jamie Crooks and the choir in advance for this wonderful initiative on our behalf.

## *Expression in Exile – Spring 2014*

An Exhibition of Art by Burmese Artists from Mae Sot, Thailand



In the Foyer, Centennial Theatre, Bishop's University, Lennoxville  
at the University Singers' Spring Concerts "Inspired by Dylan"

Saturday April 5th & Sunday April 6th, 20:00

Everyone is cordially invited to attend a reception following the concert on Saturday, April 5th.

The paintings may also be viewed  
on Saturday and Sunday from 11:00 am – 17:00 pm.

A second "Expression in Exile – Spring 2014" exhibition will take place at  
the Brome County Historical Society building, May 30<sup>th</sup> – June 1<sup>st</sup>.

By sharing the visions of these artists, the Mae Sot Education Project hopes to engage  
Canadians in continued support for the Burmese people as they struggle to create  
a free, inclusive and democratic society.

Inspired by Dylan:  
A concert in support of the  
Mae Sot Education Project

Bishop's  
University  
Singers

April 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> ~ 8 PM  
Centennial Theatre, Lennoxville

Adult / \$25  
Student / \$15  
Box Office / 819.822.9692

At the same time as the University Singers' concerts, MSEP will be holding **EXPRESSION IN EXILE – SPRING 2014**, an exhibition of 28 paintings by Burmese artists in the Centennial Theatre lobby. The exhibition will include an opportunity for viewers to bid on the paintings in a silent (or sealed bid) auction. All donations to the project above market value of the paintings will receive a tax receipt. The paintings may be viewed before and after the concerts and also during the day, from 11:00 – 5:00 on both Saturday, April 5<sup>th</sup> and Sunday, April 6<sup>th</sup>. We hope that you will stop by and take a look at these evocative works by artists who have used their art to convey images of their homeland and then return in the evening to enjoy the music!

Note also that the *Expression in Exile – Spring 2014* exhibition will travel to Knowlton, Quebec on May 31<sup>st</sup> – June 1<sup>st</sup>. There the paintings will be shown in the Brome County Historical Society Building. We will circulate more information about this exhibition in May.



### And now for our 2014 volunteer team...

*MSEP is pleased to announce the recruitment of four more bright and shining lights for our project. From left to right, Sevan Belleau, Bronwyn McIntyre, Lauren Cavanagh and Kathleen Bibeau, seen here with members of the Project Committee, Marjorie, Sunny, Garry, Carinne, Emily and Mary. The students will be heading for Mae Sot to volunteer in six partner schools in June.*

### ***Our annual Thai (or is it Burmese?) Benefit Dinner is on!***

Yes, for the fifth year, MSEP will be holding its Thai Dinner, this year on April 26<sup>th</sup> – with two differences. First, for the first time our “traditional” chef, Veronica Kaczmarowski will not be cooking for us. Veronica is now the proprietor of Restaurant Le Cartier in Sherbrooke and has her hands full with her new project. We want to thank Veronica for volunteering her time so generously for the last four years and encourage everyone to visit her – and sample the menu – at Le Cartier. In place of Veronica, this year, chef Billy Lidstone will be managing our kitchen, with Lucy Doheny and some of our own MSEP team working alongside him.

The second difference is that we plan to introduce some Burmese accents into the menu this year. We will have some help from a young Burmese friend (who also has professional training). We promise to maintain the standard of past years while trying something new. As in the past, the dinner will take place at Oasis Christian Centre in Lennoxville. Tickets will once again be \$50 (with a tax receipt for a \$30 of this amount) and will be available along with the menu in March.

## ***News and Stories from our Volunteers in Mae Sot...***

### **A Picture of Uncertainty – A migrant school fights to continue its mission**

By Elizabeth Serra  
2013-14 MSEP Volunteer

[Note: A shortened version of this article appeared in *The Record* on December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013.]

A young student stands on tip-toes stretching his arm and outgrown uniform shirt as he moves the heavy sledgehammer in his hand closer and closer to its target. With the morning sun angled in his eyes, he gives one great swing and misses, followed by two sharp swings that pierce through the air, hitting the gong that serves as the school bell. It's 9:00am and the school day at BHSOH has begun. The school wakes up the same way each day. The boarding students begin their morning chores of sweeping, cleaning the grounds and preparing food for the day ahead. A curry of green beans, minced pork and chilies is scooped out of large, blue plastic bins onto plates overflowing with rice, a breakfast provided by an NGO. The sound of children running and playing starts to crescendo as the piles of backpacks grow. The girls crowd the single mirror in the dormitory and hurriedly apply the day's thanaka. The boys occupy themselves with drawings, last minute homework and a guitar. The morning routines of these students are fairly unchanging.



Nevertheless, there is a feeling of rapid change at the school. BHSOH opened in 1999, making it one of the oldest of the Burmese migrant schools in the area, and over the years it has earned a reputation for producing outstanding students. Each year, despite a lifetime of challenges, numerous BHSOH students go on to study in some of the few post-secondary programs open to migrant youth. However, these successes do not guarantee the school's security. Like all the migrant schools, BHSOH must look to donors to satisfy that need. For the past 5 years, the school has been generously provided with teachers' salaries, teaching materials, food, transportation costs, electricity, water and many other basic needs by a single donor. Sadly, the donor has announced that starting March 2014 this funding will stop.

As I walk through the school grounds, it's difficult to forget this fact. A large banner displaying a group photo of the students bears the donor's logo. After a closer look at the picture, I notice that each child's disheveled uniform is stamped with the donor's name. All

of the buildings and materials in sight have been donated. I am reminded that in Mae Sot's informal migrant school system, intended to provide education to any student who seeks it, money too often decides which schools survive and which do not. There are over 70 migrant schools in the area that compete for the limited pool of available funding. Each year these schools must face the reality that the funding available just isn't enough.

I take a closer look at the large group photo hung on the side of the school building, and my eyes sift through the crowd of students, meeting the eyes of the primary students first, then middle school and finally secondary students. Off at the far corners of the picture, there are people standing in the rear - a stern faced director watching over the children in front of him and a small row of teachers. Their faces fade into the background, and beneath the bright yellow logo of the donor organization, it's difficult to discern them. For those who know the school, it is the character of these educators with their bright faces - their optimism, perseverance and determination - that defines BHSOH. In the midst of their crisis and the uncertainty that clouds the future of the school, these traits shine through more strongly than ever before. Their confidence, hard work and tenacity encourage a cohesiveness that enables parents, teachers and students to put aside their worries and channel their energies into overcoming their obstacles. Despite the uncertain future, there is still a sense of strength and calm throughout the school.

Looking around BHSOH, it is plain to see the strength that is gained through struggle. Here, 308 students think about their future and the value of their education not out of luxury or a sense of entitlement but out of necessity. Khat Khat Soe is a Grade 9 student at BHSOH. This is her 6<sup>th</sup> year attending the school. Her leadership among the boarding students and her work ethic both in and out of the classroom truly exemplify the school's motto "Try hard every day". Khat Khat Soe says of her future, "I would like to be a doctor, because I want to save people life who are unknowledgeable in health. Especially children." Then, when questioned about the importance of BHSOH in her life, she answers, "This school is very important for me because there are no discrimination and the teachers are good at teaching." Students like Khat Soe remind me of the vast potential of this struggling community. And still the unavoidable questions remain: what will happen to this prized learning center when the money runs out in March? Where will the students go and what will they do if the school is forced to close?



### A postscript to Elizabeth's article on BHSOH: A Welcome Donation!

In February, one of MSEP's most constant and generous donors came forward with a proposal to contribute \$20,000 in funding each year for the next 2-3 years to BHSOH. While it is not sufficient to keep the school doors open, this offer has provided an incredible boost to the spirits of our partners in Mae Sot and a great start on raising the needed funds. It also represents a kind of challenge to all of the rest of us to reflect on the help that our small community can provide to these students and teachers – and how the fate of the school may still rest on the generosity of people like us. Migrant education in Mae Sot is rapidly changing, but one thing that isn't changing is the need for education and particularly the kind of long-standing education BHSOH provides. If you would be interested in contributing to a "matching grant" to help us double the amount already donated, please let us know.

Please check out this very short video about BHSOH Learning Centre, made this winter by Elizabeth Serra with footage by DVB photojournalist Nyan Soe and editing assistance from Elizabeth's brother.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1c9Gj9QR4uU>





## Garbage – an educational opportunity!

By William Bryson  
2013-14 MSEP Volunteer

Garbage – A Problem in Thailand? You bet. This winter my students at Hle Bee Primary School have begun to transform the culture (and the grounds) at their school by encouraging everyone to recycle all the litter that mars the school grounds. As a result, everyone at school is now making an effort to maintain a cleaner campus and be more environmentally conscious by recycling used juice bottles, purchased at the on-campus snack shop, and returning them once per week to the same facility where other waste pickers sell their scavenged material. What began as an introductory biology unit on plants in Grade 5, evolved into a unit on environmentalism which produced the idea to start our own recycling project which would positively impact our school community – and the Earth.

During a November staff meeting, I pitched the idea of the project to my fellow teachers and shortly after, was in front of the whole school delivering the same message. Luckily, my friend Win Naing Htway was beside me and able to remedy the looks of incomprehension from some members of the crowd by translating into Burmese. Blue bins were spray-painted with recycling symbols and put inside the school's classrooms where they are being used more and more frequently by students who are learning how to deal with their waste more responsibly. To remind students to keep their valuable bottles out of the garbage bins, several students, armed with dozens of crayons, stayed after school and charged for the blank sheets of cardstock I had

purchased to create colourful posters that were later hung on the walls of the school for everyone to admire.

There were initial hurdles in making sure that the plastic bottles made their way safely into the bins. With so much trash surrounding them in their everyday lives, it has surely not been obvious for some students why they should take any interest in properly disposing of waste, but the posters and encouragement from teachers have convinced many that there is a safer, cleaner and healthier solution than just dumping them. Gradually, the idea has been catching on among students, and it has been a gratifying process to watch.

So, I am very proud that my students at Hle Bee are learning a new concept that they can potentially take home to their own country one day. As Burma opens its gates to more foreign commerce and tourists, one can just imagine the inevitable wave of disposable materials that will soon hit. For now, however, excitement at Hle Bee about the project that is improving the school community and environment has reached an all-time high. Next week a special prize will be awarded to the grade that can recycle the most plastic in the ongoing two week-long competition that the Grade 2 students are currently leading. There is speculation, however, that they may have been recycling bottles too well – that is, out of other classes' bins.

NOTE: In the coming weeks, William will be releasing a very short video that he is making of his recycling and gardening projects at Hle Bee Learning Centre. We promise to send you the link to it!

## Parami Students Proclaim: *We have rights!*

By Megan Irving, 2013-14 MSEP Volunteer

In Mae Sot, educational institutions aren't simply changing lives; they're saving them. While in Mae Sot I have watched as students sat cross-legged on the floor and listened to morning discussions about the dangers of touring the market place on their own and the possible loitering of human traffickers. In these instances I am often made aware of the power and possible impact of the education these students are receiving. Human rights violations are not uncommon in this area and a general lack of knowledge regarding an individual's rights and freedoms can have devastating effects. When students are taught their rights in this context, it isn't just so they can run through a list and receive a passing grade, it is so when they or their family members are having those rights violated, they're armed with the skills and knowledge needed to protect themselves.



When teaching human rights at Parami School, the general concepts and philosophies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were never difficult for the students to understand, let alone relate to and empathize with. The biggest challenge we faced as a class was finding ways to communicate those ideas, feelings and experiences in English. Injustice, discrimination, lack of freedoms or access to some of our basic human rights are issues that prevail within many of the communities where my students live and from which they come. A need for change, a yearning for something better, a longing for equality, peace, security, education... these are very real and immediate desires for many of these students. When your *only* piece of formal identification is your grade 8 student ID card, the concept of "everyone has the right to an identity and freedom of movement" can have a profound resonance. As can "we all have labour rights" when your parents have been struggling for years working as illegal migrant workers in an unregistered garment factory.

The grade 8, 9 and 10 students who took part in our human rights photo project were each in charge of organizing ways to depict what each article of the Universal Declaration meant using minimal resources. We wanted to get at the heart of each article in a way that would be easy for people to understand. The result was a series of black and white photographs and short video clips shot in front of our classroom's whiteboard and around the Parami campus. Students holding hand written signs spelled out an article that we all felt needed to be shared with the world around us: *We have rights*.

Recently, as one of the closing writing assignments for our human rights unit, I asked my students to try to answer the following questions: Can one person change the world? How can one person change the world? Many students said that one person could lead others towards change, but a single individual was incapable of creating change alone. Here is what some of my students handed back to me:

*"One person can't change the world because when one person tries to change anything it's not finished. If you have organization and community, then everyone can help change the world. All people help the world move towards peace. With joint effort we can help. We need democracy, peace, rights, work, economics, education, imagination, diminish pollution, health, and ourselves to make a better world."*

*"Responsibility helps to get peace because our minds will be full with good will and helpfulness. So we can help each other and live with mutual understanding. This is also one way of getting peace. Responsibility also helps to get an outstanding leader because he can strive for the welfare of the people with diligence, intellect and perseverance. He can stimulate public knowledge, do public lectures about:*

*To compound in work  
To advise for change  
To improve education*

*The leader also has dedication, perseverance, encourages and even ventures his own life. The country will soon develop because of his management, dedication and leadership."*

It is estimated that of the approximate 2.5 million migrant workers currently living in Thailand, the majority are migrants from Burma. VSO also estimates that less than 20% of the more than 200, 000 migrant children go to school. For those children who do enter the migrant school system, they do so with the hope of gaining a better education and thus a better future for themselves. Parents, many of whom work long hours in any one of Mae Sot's 500 plus textile and garment factories, often turn to migrant school system and boarding houses for help in providing shelter, care and support for their children.

Education is an indispensable factor needed to ensure the development of any individual, any community, no matter where in the world they might be. Education is also one of the simplest and yet most crucial ingredients needed to create and maintain any type of developmental change. As one of my students astutely proclaimed in class last week: "education is life for me." I couldn't help but agree with her. "In fact," I added, "It's life for all of us."



## A Classroom Dissection: Getting to the Heart of the Matter!

By Elizabeth Serra  
2013-14 MSEP Volunteer

The school bell rang sharply three times with a sound that resonated across campus and marked the end of lunch hour and the beginning of afternoon classes. My students began to slowly make their way through the door labeled "GED" for their usual 1pm biology lesson. But today they were greeted not by me, but by a message on the whiteboard reminding them that we were doing an activity in the library. Our unit on the circulatory system was nearly finished, but it would take one more lesson to complete it.

The small group of 13 students apprehensively walked through the library doors and gathered around a large white table in the center of the room. On the table lay a box of white, latex gloves, a small, sharp scissor, an x-acto knife still in its packaging, two plastic Tupperware containers, and a white, plastic bag tied tightly. The lesson began with a short review of the structure of the heart we had been studying and the question, "How many of you have seen a real heart?" Twenty-six eyes immediately fell to the plastic bag at the end of the table and questioning looks fell across their faces, as they seemed to notice the materials for the first time. We put on the latex gloves, took the scissors out of the packaging and then the 26 eyes



turned back to me. I reached into the bag and took hold of the first of two pig hearts I

had purchased in the market the day before. As I pulled it out of the bag, the sight and smell sent a few of the girls back a step and diverted a few eyes that had up until now been peeled.

Suddenly, I became acutely aware that my bachelor's degree never covered heart dissections, and certainly not the dissection of a day-old heart in the library-turned-lab of a migrant school. The brave boys who had taken front row seats around the table stood their ground as I pointed to the structures they had become familiar with on paper and passed the heart to the first student.

As word of our lesson spread through school, curious students began to gather at a safe distance, peering through the windows and doors of the library. The heart was passed around, and curiosity seemed to overtake fear. A few girls inched closer to the table and timidly took the heart in—their hands. The other students leaned closer and closer to their Tupperware-turned-dissection pans, and before long, scissors were being passed in an excited effort to give each person the chance to open the heart a little more.

After the class was over and the hearts were returned to the plastic bag they came from, it seemed the lesson for me had just begun. While I converted our lab back into a library, a few students came back individually to thank me for the lesson, and I realized that in the course of an hour, their view of the heart had changed from fear to curiosity to perplexity and finally to gratitude. I left the class reminded of what teaching science is truly about.

# Thinking Critically about Burmese Education

By William Bryson  
2013-14 MSEP Volunteer

One of the most challenging parts about teaching Burmese migrant students in Mae Sot has been the task of encouraging them to use their imaginations to create their own work. Creativity is difficult for these students for a number of reasons and perhaps, for many more reasons, important for them to learn and practise.

I can remember writing my first story while in elementary school at the age of 6. It was a thrilling tale that my parents still hold onto and that gets pulled out from time to time, about a mad scientist experimenting with dangerous potions. It earned me the Grade 1 award for creative writing at the end of the year. Since then, I moved on to writing essays and articles in CEGEP which has brought me halfway around the world to where I make lesson plans nearly every day in a place where creativity is harder to come by in the classroom.



Prior to teaching in Mae Sot, I had not been aware of just how frequently students in Canada are encouraged to use their imaginations and be creative at all levels of education. It came as a shock to me to discover that my students at Hle Bee Primary School, on the Thai-Burma border, had so little experience using their imaginations in school. The task of writing a story independently and using their own ideas would have been mystifying for them, yet at a young age, we in the west are able to let our imaginations run.

Being creative by embracing one's imagination is vital in today's day and age. It is a skill that opens an important gateway to progress. For progress to occur, ideas that do not already exist must be formed. If it were not for the unique imaginations of others, I would not be writing this article using a computer, an incredible device when one analyzes its powers. It allows one to communicate with nearly everyone else in the world, anywhere in the world. Perhaps more importantly, it creates a link to the accumulated knowledge of mankind, the internet. Just a short time ago, the idea of a device that could perform in such ways must have seemed so fantastical but some dared to dream the idea and followed through.

In addition, imagination also goes hand in hand with the ability to think critically, what we may consider being able to analyze a problem and/or being able to form arguments. Students in Canada frequently practise these skills. Subjects such as History and Literature tell us stories that require interpretation which teaches us to think critically, not for the sake of simply doubting but for answering the questions we may have. Art and Athletics, meanwhile, exercise our creativity and allow us express our understanding of what it means to be human.

Unfortunately, Burmese students on the border do not have the same opportunities to develop their minds, though they may study some of the same subjects as Canadian students. Art classes are very rare among migrant schools and Physical Education classes are even more uncommon. As for subjects such as History, Geography and Language, students are rarely asked to interpret texts they read or to form ideas about them. Instead, parrot fashion teaching is commonly used to cover so much of the content, and it is general practice to have students memorize the texts or essays they read. Sadly, this form of education has been passed down for generations. As Pascal Khoo Thwe, a Padaung man who was resettled from Burma to London in the early 1990's, recalls in his memoir *From the land of green ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey* about his experience at Cambridge University: "nothing could have been more opposed to the whole pattern of my previous education, and the thought of writing essays on my own was as frightening to me as the experience of defusing a landmine. The excitement of that evening in Mandalay when we had been thrilled to learn that a professor might draw us out on an author, instead of dictating to us what to think now turned into the nightmare of having to cope intelligently with that very freedom."

It is my speculation about Burmese education that there exists a cycle where new teachers adopt the same teaching styles and techniques as their predecessors because they have never before been exposed to any other form of teaching. These teaching methods date far back and were prevalent prior to General Ne Win's military takeover of the country in 1962 and subsequent closure of the country from the rest of the world for the next 50 years. Having this system of education in place made it much easier for such a conquest and domination of the Burmese people to happen; people in the society were discouraged from thinking for themselves.

If Burma and Burmese people truly want to improve the state of their country and make a stand for democracy, they first need to acquire freedom of thought to envision exactly what democracy entails. If freedom of thought is the key to turning around Burma's history that has been plagued with so much sorrow, one must look for it in schools along the border and inside the country where the future potential creative thought of a nation surely waits to be unleashed.

# A Birthday Celebration

By Megan Irving, 2013-14 MSEP Volunteer

It is mid-February and the sun is shining brilliantly throughout the Thai border town of Mae Sot. The air is heavy, the dust is thick, and the constant sunlight serves as a great contrast to some of the darker realities at work in this small corner of the world. As I sit on the porch of a traditional Thai house, I watch the road, waiting for Mu Eh to arrive. It is Saturday, mid-morning, and today is her son's seventh birthday. Today is a day to celebrate.

When she arrives, she is alone. She comes carrying an array of different plastic bags and containers each holding the many ingredients needed to prepare a traditional Burmese dish called mohinga (a soup dish made from fish, noodles, banana stems, fried bean cakes, and other herbs). She has spent all morning cooking in the small room which she rents in another part of town. Mu Eh is Karen, one of the major ethnic groups of Burma, originally from a village near Pathin. Presently she works as a domestic worker in three different homes within Mae Sot and the surrounding district. She has been living in Thailand for a few years now, having come here to earn a living so that she can better support her family. What little money she manages to save she remits back to Burma. She has three sons, all under the age of 10, all living with her mother and her ailing grandmother in their natal village.

Burmese migrants often leave more than just their villages behind when they cross from Burma into Thailand. As with Mu Eh, migrants sometimes have families – children, husbands, friends, grandparents, and parent – who they must leave in order to try and find better means of supporting their loved ones. Similarly, migrant children sometimes find themselves living at a great distance from their parents even when they do accompany them to Thailand.

Mu Eh's English is broken, minimal at best, but she is quick to share pictures of her children whenever I am with her. These photographs show each of her sons dressed in their bright green Myanmar school uniforms, standing on a makeshift stage, unsmiling, their arms outstretched and holding beautifully wrapped gift boxes (prizes received for attaining top marks in each of their respective grades). Such photos procure a great sense of pride and hopefulness. "Taw des nor" I tell her, "Aren't they clever!" and she laughs in agreement. But these photos also serve to remind us both that the ceremonies and milestones they depict are ones Mu Eh has not been able to attend.

However, today is a day to celebrate, and the distance which presently exists between her and her family will in no way circumscribe the significant import this day holds for her. Even if they cannot celebrate together, Mu Eh is still bearing witness on this day, to a life and love which is important to her, and she is doing so in typical Burmese fashion...by giving gifts to others. Tomorrow she will bring mohinga to one of the local churches, enough to feed the entire congregation. But today, today we celebrate alone, together, sitting across from each other in the shade of the canopied porch of a traditional Thai home, untouched by the sunlight falling all around us.

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## Farewell to Mae Sot

By Michelle Vanloon  
2013-14 MSEP Volunteer

Thursday December 5<sup>th</sup> 2013 was a day that would often come up in conversation with close friends and family back in Canada and was widely anticipated with excitement. To me it was a day that would be forever stuck in the future and a day I would never have to face, yet it arrived right on time and I did have to face the day with my suitcases packed and plane ticket in hand. Thursday December 5<sup>th</sup> 2013 was the day I left Mae Sot to come back to Canada. I left a place that over six months had become my home with people who had become my friends and part of my family as well. Returning to Canada was very surreal. There was so much that had changed, but there was still a lot that was the same. After the initial shock of being back in Canada wore off, I found it fairly easy to fall back into a routine. Now, weeks have passed since my return, and the thought of Thailand seems so distant that sometimes I feel as if my time there was just a dream. Being back in Canada with old friends and family is nice, but there isn't a day that goes by that I don't think about my students, fellow



*Michelle with Hsa Mu Htaw School Headmistress, Daw Htet Htet Aung*  
teachers and volunteers. One of my colleagues at Hsa Mu Htaw said something that I will never forget. She said that she wouldn't say good bye to me, only "see you later" because we will meet again one day. It's something I think about often – as well as the day I will return to Mae Sot.





## Mae Sot's Charms What keeps drawing us back...

By Garry Retzleff  
Member of the MSEP Project Committee,  
written while in Mae Sot in February

Mae Sot does not immediately strike one as a charming town. It is a rather shabby, often littered, and rather chaotic border town with almost no sidewalks. But Marjorie and I are back here for the fourth time. Why are we here? What keeps drawing us back to Mae Sot?

Mae Sot's appeal is very real but it is not visual. It is the focus of a truly impressive number of humanitarian projects dealing with the human rights, health and education of the thousands of displaced Burmese who live here to escape persecution in their homeland. Staying at one of the innumerable guesthouses means encountering volunteers from all over the world who have been in Mae Sot for weeks, months or years. They often have fascinating stories to tell. One of the signs one sees in Mae Sot is "giving 100% is living 100%." Whatever the intended message may be, it does express at least the ideal of the volunteer community here.

Our focus, as members of the MSEP committee, is the schools for the children of "migrant workers." Since many of these children are either unable or unqualified to attend Thai schools, there has developed a huge network of private day and boarding schools to provide them with the education of which they would otherwise be deprived. Our project helps support six schools with modest contributions to their financial needs. For us, one of the rewards of visiting Mae Sot is meeting the heads and teachers at these schools. They are most often displaced Burmese themselves who have devoted their lives to helping these otherwise underprivileged students. They receive very little salary, but their vision, dedication, and seemingly endless optimism are truly inspiring. When we visit, their welcome and hospitality and expressed gratitude for our support

makes us realize that our small project really does make a difference.

Our project does, of course also send four or five volunteers each year to teach at the schools we support. Although they are only required to stay for six months, several of them opt to stay for the full academic year; thus there have always been MSEP volunteers here when we visit. This year Megan Irving, Elizabeth Serra and Will Bryson have all stayed on. We are able to visit their schools, watch them teach, and share dinners and excursions with them. Their energy, commitment and enthusiasm for the project form a significant part of Mae Sot's charm for us. They are truly amazing young people.

And finally there are the children. Just visiting the schools we support means we encounter over a thousand students, but we really only interact with those in our volunteers' classes. It may be true that most children are lovable, but these children really are something special. They are so well behaved, albeit occasionally loud



and rambunctious, so keen on learning, and so spontaneously appreciative of our volunteers that one is simply overwhelmed. The first time we visited Hsa Mu Htaw Learning Centre we were surrounded by kindergarten students hugging our knees and saying "Thank you for helping us." It was the moment that really sealed our commitment to the project; we came away with a profound sense of the human importance of what we are doing here.

So we really do recommend Mae Sot as a travel destination, particularly for anyone associated with our project in any way. It may not have the visual beauty of Venice, the cultural richness of Paris or the historical significance of Sukhothai, but Mae Sot has charms which touch the heart.

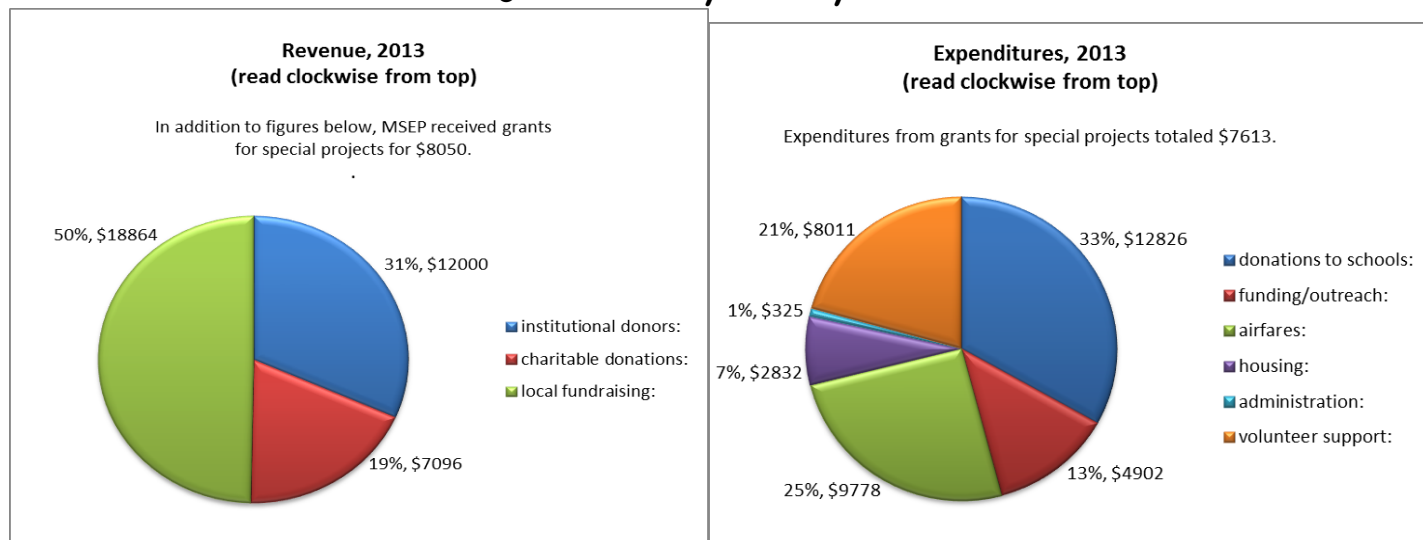
***Thanks for coming...and please don't forget us!***



## *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. We have also occasionally 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: Avril Aitken, Carinne Bevan, Catherine Isely, Bonnie Kay, Sunny Lau, Emily Prangley-Desormeaux, Mary Purkey, Garry Retzleff, Marjorie Retzleff, and Barbara Rowell

## *A look at our finances for 2013*



If you would like to receive a more complete financial report for 2013, please contact us.

### *Some Good News:*

#### *Our supporters can now donate to MSEP on line!*

Contributions to the project are always welcome, and tax receipts will be issued. It is now possible to donate to the *Mae Sot Education Project* on line. If you prefer to donate to MSEP through Bishop's University, the link below will take you to the Bishop's University Foundation's site for making donations. Click on the link. For the designation, choose "other" from the list of options and then manually type in "MaeSot". You can then complete the rest of the form. Your donation to MSEP will be processed through the Bishop's Foundation. You will automatically receive an e-receipt and then the Foundation will send a thank you card in the mail.

Here is the link: <http://www.ubishops.ca/gift>

If you prefer to donate to MSEP through the Champlain College Foundation, click on the link below. A form will for donating will appear. Follow the instructions for donating. Your donation will be processed through the Champlain Foundation. However, in this instance, you must email Daniel Poitras, the Foundation manager, at [dpoitras@crc-lennox.qc.ca](mailto:dpoitras@crc-lennox.qc.ca) and request that your donation be used for the Mae Sot Education Project.

Here is the link: <http://www.crc-lennox.qc.ca/community/foundation>

*Of course we are still happy to receive donations 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.*

*Thank you very much for your support.*

For more information, contact us at [maesoteducationproject@gmail.com](mailto:maesoteducationproject@gmail.com) or see [www.maesot.ubishops.ca](http://www.maesot.ubishops.ca).